

Unheard Voices - Listening to Adolescents

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Abstract

Schools, like other formal institutions, have many stakeholders. Concerns of school children are often put through the lens of these stakeholders, viz. teachers, parents, and community at large. An in-between stage of adolescence is often as unheard as childhood. Voices of adolescents is dismissed as immature and thus, unimportant. In this paper, the attempt is to document the voices of adolescents from different schools, with the specific purpose of highlighting the need to hear those who are often unheard. The purpose is to only collate the voices without analysing them from a framework designed by adults.

Ageism is the stereotyping of or discrimination against people on grounds of their age (Butler, 1969). Referring to the kind of ignorance, aggression and disrespectful practices towards the elderly, the field of gerontology has advocated for the rights of the elderly and the need to treat them with respect and compassion. However, it is not just the elderly who are stereotyped on grounds of age. On the other end of the age spectrum, children and adolescents, are also equally stereotyped as immature, insensible, disrespectful, and rebellious. “*Bade hog aye ho magar bachpana nahi gaya (You have grown up but childishness has not left you)*”, “*tumhe abhi samajh nahi hai (You don't have wisdom yet)*”, are commonly heard statements. This attitude of dismissing the words, thoughts, ideas, and opinions of adolescents as irrelevant can have a lasting impact on them. They are likely to feel unwelcome, misunderstood and unimportant. It further enhances inter-generational gaps sometimes leading to broken communication channels between caregivers and adolescents. Research literature also points

towards an adult notion of what adolescents are undergoing. These are based on theories, field observations or anecdotes from teachers and/or parents. When talking to adolescents, they are given a theme to talk about specific issues such as problems in school, aspirations, preferences, etc. Here, the attempt is to understand the concerns of adolescents through what they think of themselves and their experiences. The following paragraphs will provide write-ups of adolescents. Adolescents were asked to write about dilemmas and concerns that they are facing. Permission was taken to publish their details (Name, Age and School). The excerpts have been only been edited for grammar and spellings so that authenticity of expression and thought can be maintained.

The problems that might have haunted my father or his father during their teens, are usually not the ones we are facing. In a boarding school, specially, we have less knowledge of the outside world and are unaware of the happenings around us. We tend to only pay heed to the things that

happen to us inside the walls of the school. Inside the school walls as well, we face problems. Things like racism and verbal abuse. Maybe it's usual, but they keep haunting us deep in our brains and sometimes even leads to lack of concentration elsewhere. These things that happen between peers are then discussed with the older people and in some situations, things get worse, and that, later, leads to depression and exclusion from the peer group. Maybe what happens with us should SOMETIMES be left with us to solve. If not, the whole purpose of being independent is lost.

~Shreya Neogi, 17 years, Selaqui International, New Delhi

They try to read my mind. They try to act like they know all about the endless river of hormones flowing inside of my brain, all about the reckless mood swings and all about the teenage politics these days. Life, they say, is for studying right now. You have an entire lifetime left to enjoy, haven't you? And then, they would say do all your work today. Who knows if tomorrow exists or not? So basically, when they tell me about what paradox is, they illustrate it with being one too.

Tell me about being a paradox though. Life of an adolescent seems like a simple simile to them, god knows how much of a oxymoron shaped nightmare it is. By now you can probably see how much I adore English, but adults, they are too naive to see. Science is something that will set your life and language? It's a time pass craze. Science is like god, reference goods are our bible and teachers? They are satan without the horns. When it comes to teachers, they never probably understand what it is to be a teenager, with a brain of an adult which throws tantrums every second. I mean come on, they never understand the craving we have for food while they teach. Inhumane at times, aren't they?

When it comes to parents, all they say is, "beta

baaki sab moh-maya hai, padhai par dhyan do". But what if I want to be a guitarist and not learn about the physics involved in the strings of a guitar, what if I want to be a scuba diver and not learn about how the mixture of gases in the scuba tank work? Who understands? No one really.

Maybe it's the generation, I feel. Sometimes I can see the elders running behind us to catch up as we fly off with the latest trends. I can see the struggle, probably sense it. But when the teachers give us 0 marks on the paper, no marks for trying, then why should we give them credit if they are just trying to catch up but can't?

As soon as the school day ends, all of us retreat to the room, whispering on phone calls hoping the walls are sound proof. Because parents won't understand and honestly, we can't make them understand.

~ Snigdha Ghai, Delhi Public School, 16 years, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi

There are signs of confinement as we are used to the comforts and discomforts given to us in the boundaries of a boarding school. We do not know what is happening outsider our school premises as we are not connected to the outside world. Sometimes people face social interaction problems as we are not used to interacting with people outside the school boundaries.

In simple words, we get used to living our lives inside a cocoon not wanting to break it because we don't want to know the conditions outside.

~ Vikramjeet Singh Mehta, 17 years, Selaqui International, Dehradun

When I turned 13, it was the beginning of many new things in my life. I didn't know that. It is the in between state of adult and child. During this stage, I really had to cooperate with society and I look for the way, way of my roots. I am trapped

into the feeling of depression, shyness and fear. Every damn thing is getting fluctuated, my body, my relationships with people and my feeling. I am feeling confident but still, I am insecure and it is the flash of contradictions... contradictions between lots of indescribable things. And surprisingly I realised one thing, and that it people are not letting me grow. "No one understands me" that what I feel. But this is not true.

It is the age where people want you to learn lot of things. If someone discourages you, then show them how to be encouraged by the things you do. Don't search for the hand, a helping hand of support and love, because you have the skills and capabilities to learn from your personal experiences. As if you want to be the best at something then you need to fall and this period is your falling period. After this stage will pass, you would be laughing and having fun. The phase of teenage is the crucial stage in which you grow and understand the difference between sadness and happiness, love and develop an attitude and ego, genuine and fake so on... This phase is a challenge for you and you are supposed to handle it with care. Trust me, this age and this period of your life is worth living and live it the way you want to live, because your loved ones would definitely support you, no matter what.

~ Akansha Dua, 16 years, Government Girls School, Rani Bagh, Delhi

To you, My future Self: Life of a Teen

*Tears well up.
Eyes flood.
Anger rises,
And there is blood.*

*Muffled cries,
Stifled shouts;
And silent screams*

That the pain brings about.

*There is silence,
Yet, chaos inside.
Thoughts tormenting,
Everything is chosen to hide.*

*Sleepless nights,
Long-soothing showers,
Alongside depressed thoughts,
Last for hours.*

*Frustrated sighs,
Annoying headaches.
Confidence built slowly,
Again and again, breaks.*

*The need to let go,
Becomes an urge.
Reality with fantasies.
Start to merge.*

*Obnoxious voices,
That eerie sound.
Those repetitive memories,
Hold you bound.*

*You feel the rush,
It becomes too great.
Mind is clouded,
Blinded with hate.*

*When you think you need an escape
Somehow, at least one may.
The pent up feelings,
Grow day by day.*

*You know where to find me,
I will always be there
I know what you go through,
What you have to bare.*

*I'll take your hand,
Hold you close.
Maybe only because
I need you too, I suppose.*

*Those dreams and nightmares.
The horrors you can see
That insanity, still
Prevails over me.*

*We may have different paths,
Buts it's the same ride.
I am you, you are me,
Two different coins but the same side.*

~ Gayatri Ahuja, 16 years, Delhi Public School,
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi

From a small baby to an old person, a human passes many stages of life. In which there is adolescence which has a very different impression in a learner's life. Adolescence teaches us that what are our responsibilities, rights etc. in adolescence, a teenager has too much pressure of school, friends, parents, relatives. Due to pressure of school, friends etc., a human (teenager) forgets himself, who is he, what are his responsibilities and rights and also dreams or fantasies.

Study, School and Students

We hear since childhood that studying will make us a rich person, give us a big house (mainly parents tell us that), etc. But when we go to school for studying, initially we love our school, but during teenage, our view of school starts changing. Now we understand that if we want to achieve something in future, we need to rank first in class, school, state, world anywhere. But in field of education, the teacher, parents, everyone is also a challenge for us. We need to prove ourselves in front of them. Due to this, students forget about their dreams. Now, they have to work for dreams, their parents

envision them as a scientist, a teacher, an engineer etc. Teenagers have to sacrifice their dreams.

Friends

In teenage, we meet many people, although for short periods of time. At that stage of life when we face too much pressure, our key to happiness is a friend. A good or best friend always helps us. But there are also fake friends who break our trust and only force us for their pleasure. They pull us towards bad habits like smoking etc. but good friends teach us to prevent that kind of stuff. But due to peer pressure, same teenagers thin that this kind of stuff reduces their tension. This leads them to destroy their dreams, families, rights, life and everything.

Parents

Teenage is an age when our parents start thinking too much for us. Due to that they start doubting on us, whenever we use mobile or going outside, they try to know with whom we are talking or meeting. But that is not their mistake. They always think about our good and bright future and that we achieve something in life that they haven't been able to get. In this we forget about ourselves and go ahead with parents' advice about studying. So, in any case study becomes important. If we lose and don't achieve then we will expect it from our children and the cycle will never end because of that competition. Because of competition, many teenagers commit suicide for no reason. They just get disturbed from their lives and think that suicide is an easy way to defend themselves. So we need to change the way of education. Parents need to change their self and understand their children, and also what their children want to become, what are their fantasies.

~Gagandeep Singh, 15 years, Sarvodaya Vidyayala,
Pitampura

The adolescents who have shared their thoughts are not just aware of their feelings but also show insights into the life stage that they are experiencing. Across write ups, there is an acknowledgement of the pressures of this phase and the changes that they are experiencing. (Shreya, Akansha, Gayatri, Gagandeep).

They are aware of the reasons for the pressure that parents have created and are also thinking in terms of what this pressure can do to them or their friends (Snigdha, Gayatri, Akansha, Gagandeep). The feeling of being sheltered in a “cocoon” is shared by Vikramjeet who reflects on the distinctiveness of growing up in a residential school. This is a far cry from the immaturity that they are often ascribed with. They are aware of the efforts made by adults, albeit fruitless, in trying to understand them. This reflects perspective taking abilities and insights into the way the world perceives them.

Further, their writings reveal the awareness of adolescence being a transient stage. They are writings are filled with hope for a future that will be free of the stress that they are experiencing now (Akansha, Gayatri, Gagandeep).

Although the reasons, magnitude and nature of stress that they are experiencing are different, what is most significant is that all adolescents are experiencing stress. Probably much more than many adults are able to understand (Shreya, Snigdha).

Another recurrent theme is the futility of sharing or discussing issues with adults. Based on their own experiences, adolescents write that sometimes discussions with adults lead to greater problems (Shreya). The need for independence and taking responsibility also figures in. They also mention how even when they try, adults are seldom able to understand their problems (Snigdha).

The write ups here are from adolescents in their late teens. Early adolescents may not be as expressive and may not have the linguistic skills to voice what they are experiencing. What these write ups highlight is that adolescents are reflective and aware of their own life experiences and thoughts. Respecting their voices is important without attaching any adult frameworks for what is right and appropriate. Attaching notions of immaturity and irrationality to their opinions can be disrespectful towards adolescents and be detrimental to the parent-child bond. It can create obstacles in the development of self concept and providing a positive sense of self.

References:

- Butler, R. N. (1969). Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry. *Gerontologist*, 9(4, Part-1): 243-246.