

Mental health is socio political

Analysis and reflections on school counselling through a socio-political-psychological lens

The personal is political. These lines were predominantly associated with the feminist movement. However, in my work as a counsellor, its relevance to the lives of the students and the issues that they present remains relevant. For many, the idea that mental health and politics can co-exist simultaneously raises eyebrows. That was my experience as I interviewed people for the purpose of this article. However, in the context of individual lives it continues to hold its ground.

Politics isn't simply an argument between two political parties, a question of votes contemporary political theory, elections or democracy versus dictatorship. It also applies to matters involving love, family, relationships and schooling, vis., everyday life. In the context of mental health within the schooling system, it also means that a child isn't a passive recipient of the curriculum which he or she subsequently has to produce on paper. That the teacher isn't merely a figure that understands and then disseminates the syllabus. She/he/they is/are also political subjects. This article briefly attempts to encapsulates my observations as an early career therapist within The Indian School to connect the themes of politics and mental health in the specific context of student lives.

As a counsellor, getting to hear about the public imagination of our work opens up all kinds of interesting scenarios. Some people think that when a child comes to me, the transformation will be immediate, others think that even before any words are uttered, we (counsellors/therapists) magically know what the issue is, that there is a label for every behavior and so on. In the context of a school and adolescents specifically, my work however focuses on understanding the child's inner world. Of holding him or her in body and mind so that he or she can gradually begin to hold emotions independently. To sometimes bear the unbearable with them. Often more than words, rely on their play since children communicate more in actions than words.

However, working merely with the child's inner world isn't enough because though minors, they're also inhabitants of a social world. Caste, class, gender, privilege – it's lack or excess...all these factors which seem so disconnected from the daily grind of homework and tuitions, shapes them fundamentally. In this article, I am drawing the reader's attention to the fact that mental health in general and more specifically in the context of school, also calls for reflection on the socio-political structures which coloured the child's emotional-verse equally.

To take a concrete example, one has to only think of the question of homework. Here at The Indian School, we are now preventing wastage of resources which promotes using recycled material instead of new things. This in some ways also benefits students who don't always have the means to access glossy paper to subsequently get a coloured print out on it. Therapists working in other schools have often shared with me that there are many spaces where children who submit horrifically done work are often admonished and labelled. Beautifully done work is celebrated. It is also an understandable human response. We all like beauty and aesthetic. My article doesn't intend to vilify a specific school or teacher but merely highlights how these other

factors are not taken into account when we're contextualising the child's performance. What is often neglected is the fact that the resources which are needed to obtain the same (exemplar) outcomes are often absent in the lives of many children. These moments often reveal a lack of something more than laziness, which is what it is often dismissed as.

A child studying in a socio-political environment filled with daily violence, fighting and a lack of proper structure will experience difficulty in concentration (mental health in politically unstable climate). Of course, interventions can be deployed. Counselling and therapeutic work can be undertaken. However, we must go beyond biology and psychological theories. Utilising the lens of mental health as a political phenomenon would also allow us to view the child's symptom not as something that needs to be done away with but one that exposes systemic difficulties. Distraction would be a necessary way for them to block out the structural violence that they may be exposed to if they belong to a state filled with political unrest. So, how will their mind rest/ground itself sufficiently to learn? We're quick to point out deficits in learning but does the child have a supportive learning environment? What are its constituents? A counsellor/therapist using this lens would not only understand the child's behaviour in the context of the individual story but also take these additional factors into account instead of looking for biological/medical remedies to socio-political realities/dilemmas. Distraction isn't in this situation, only calling for a behavioural intervention to improve the child's academic performance but is also a plea for a more grounding environment. Children are also influenced by these structures that play a crucial role in constructing their subjectivities.

We use words such as motivation, discipline, drive etc., to make sense of them within the schooling context. However, that closes off more associations than opening them. If we were to take an example of homework from this kind of a lens, sometimes which child can afford to be careless about academics? It is more than just childlike mischief or disobedience. It's also a reflection of the child's privilege. Who can afford lower grades and a less than stellar performance is also structured by our position in society. Students who have had to endure a lot of struggles or witnessed a lot of parental struggles to access basic education will experience schooling, the responsibility towards themselves, the teachers and their future in a very different way. Then, these are not simple questions of motivation and positivity. It's not only inner drive. They're also structured by caste, class and our socio-political reality.

My work has shown me that these are not 'adult' issues, because from a very early age children are attuned to the social phenomena that surrounds them. Who has enough pocket money to go to the canteen daily, whose dad drives the bigger car, which child has a chauffeur versus one who has to take a bus, who is fluent in English, who has a fancier tiffin, who gets to go to Dear Donna with friends and post a picture on Instagram with a INR 600 bucks worth of coffee. Versus one who cannot. These questions are already operating in the back of the psyche of such children. It's only a question of how, when and in what form it is expressed.

Sometimes, a fear about not being able to speak up confidently in class is also a question of 'class'. Not social anxiety which is how it will be categorised initially. Confidence, to be able to articulate oneself freely in English or use slang often comes easily to those students who already have a lot to be confident about. As teachers and facilitators, creating a facilitative classroom also calls for a sensitisation towards these social divisions from which classrooms are also not always free, no matter how much we try for inclusivity. The purpose of this article is to not paint a black and white narrative of the student's subjectivity but to render some complexity to it.

Looking at mental health from this perspective (a psycho-social lens) then complicates the notion of mental health and recovery. It does so, by not consolidating the burden of emotional difficulty (as well as recovery) on the individual only. It also holds the various systems that structure one's existence as equally responsible. This then means that sometimes recovery is also more political in nature. That interventions don't always have to be purely psychological but also be systemic. Mental health in schools call for a systemic lens as well. A child's disturbance with a particular issue in math, in some rare situations, could be a difficulty tied to learning or some other confusion. It may however, also be a reflection of a confusing teaching pedagogy. Which student can take further help from an excellent tutor then takes our attention to which families can afford that extra learning and which child is purely dependent on the teacher.

At the level of schooling, I encourage the reader to think about teachers' mental health too. The emotional and psycho-social well-being of the various stakeholders that are responsible for the well-being of the students.

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Additional references for the reader :

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/20/opinion/us-mental-health-politics.html><https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/news/mental-health-political-1811812>