USING THE CONCEPT OF THIRD SPACES TO TEACH UNDER-SERVED CHILDREN THE CRITICAL SKILLS NEEDED FOR UPWARD SOCIO-ECONOMIC MOBILITY

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Abstract

Context: Students coming from under-served homes and studying in schools serving populations at the bottom of the pyramid typically do not learn the critical soft skills, knowledge and behaviors that could enable them to confidently move beyond the environments that they are born into. Critical skills that are not always related to academics, but essential for upward socio-economic mobility; skills that are unconsciously picked up at home and in communities by their more affluent peers.

Without these skills, under-served children encounter a huge and ever-widening 'social chasm' as they try and integrate into a world of opportunities once they graduate. Without timely intervention, this chasm can become almost impossible to cross.

Application: This paper presents findings from a project that attempts to use the sociological concept of `Third Space' to address this lacuna. The impoverished homes from which these children come, which are their First Space, are incapable of providing those critical soft skills that they need. Similarly, the schools which such under-served children attend, and which comprise their Second Space, provide them with academics of variable quality, and little else.

Thus, the Third Space, defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg as "a place that is outside home (First Space) and school (Second Space) ….neutral places with few formal obligations" offers possibilities for teaching underserved children the critical life-skills that they cannot learn anywhere else.

The authors believe that Third Spaces present an innovative way to solving this problem. Spaces outside school hours, managed by instructors who are not school employees, and using methods that are fun and interactive, represent a viable and sustainable option for teaching critical skills to children who would otherwise not learn them at all; in a way that is enjoyable and easily sustainable in under-resourced schools. This innovation could pragmatically address critical learning gaps in developing countries like India.

This paper will present findings from an exploratory project implemented at the four K-12 schools run by the Parikrma Humanity Foundation; a Bangalore based non-profit. These schools are completely free, catering to about 1500 children coming from 105 slums in the city.

Results: Initial data from the study clearly indicates that critical skills not taught in schools due to scarcity of resources, and because they are not even recognized as being critical, can be taught effectively in the Third Space environment – more effectively even than if they were taught in the traditional setting of the school.

Moreover, with the increasing availability and quality of distance education tools, engaging multimedia content and the ubiquity of mobile phones, distance and physical presence are no longer constraints. Indeed, third spaces that leverage technology can allow 3 fundamental step-jumps in learning outcomes:

1 Informal access to learners; unmoored from the constraints of their First & Second spaces.

2 Access to the best local content providers, who can teach empathetically in the local dialect and idiom.

3 All this, achieved at a fraction of traditional out-of-school-learning costs.

The authors hope that the paper will help build a model which can be replicated in schools everywhere that cater to children from Bottom of the Pyramid homes. The model aims at building awareness of the criticality of these skills, teaching them without straining the infrastructure and teachers at poor and under-resourced public schools, while ensuring that students enjoy the process and come back to these sessions on their own.

Keywords: Third space, Parikrma, social chasm, critical life-skills, under-served populations.

1 INTRODUCTION

Homi Bhabha (1994)[1] conceptualized the `Third Space' in the context of colonialism and the hybridity theory; he observed that the essence of two opposing spaces (in his case the colonizers and the colonized) can combine to create a new spatial entity which goes beyond the original space to celebrate diversity and multicultural influences. Over the last few decades, this concept of Third Space has been used in many contexts, notably in the field of education. Plenty of research[2][3] has been carried out in order to understand how best to combine the home and school spaces, and create a Third Space which utilizes students' existing and diverse `funds of knowledge' to foster learning that is broad-based, brings together multi-cultural discourses and is relevant to today's pluralistic world.

Building on this base of knowledge, the authors attempt, in this paper, to address the lacuna that exists within both the First and Second spaces of students coming from under-served homes, and studying in schools that serve populations at the bottom of the pyramid. These students typically do not learn the critical soft skills, knowledge and behaviors that might enable them to confidently move beyond the milieu that they are born into; critical skills that are not necessarily related to academics, but essential for upward socio-economic mobility; skills that are unconsciously picked up at home and in communities by their more affluent peers. The impoverished homes from which these children come, which are their First Space, are usually incapable of providing such skills. Similarly, the schools which such under-served children attend, and which comprise their Second Space, provide them with academics of varying quality and little else. Teachers at such schools, are often themselves incapable of teaching such skills, even assuming they are able to overcome the pressures imposed by the need for timely completion of the academic curriculum. Without these skills, under-served children encounter a huge social chasm as they try and integrate into the aspirational world of opportunities, upon graduation. This chasm is one that only grows wider over time until it finally becomes unbridgeable, relegating such children to lives that struggle to go beyond the limits imposed by their native environments.

In this research, the authors attempted to create a Third Space that offers possibilities for teaching underserved children those critical life-skills that they cannot learn anywhere else. In his `Location of Culture', Homi Bhabha argues that Third Spaces are places where colonized or oppressed groups might imagine their liberation. In the context of education too, Third Spaces can be created to allow under-served students to discover the skills they need to overcome the gravitational pull enforced by their circumstances, in a way that is both enjoyable and sustainable.

For the purpose of this research, the Third Space was designed as an environment:

- That offered a skill identified as one that is critical for the targeted students to have, in order to bridge the social chasm that they face in their attempts to scale the socio-economic ladder
- That was outside of school hours, while being inside the school campus (for safety & controllability reasons)
- That used instructors not otherwise associated with school
- That implemented the required teaching in fun and interactive ways
- That was kept non-competitive and non-stressful with no formal emphasis at all on assessment
- That was not designated as mandatory, with students welcome to return only if they felt that the sessions were enjoyable and useful to them in some way

At a broader level, the Third Space was designed to be inherently easy to implement and scale up, since the objective of the researchers is to create a model that is replicable in India's vast public school system. For the same reason, the sessions were online - this would allow such schools to source quality content and instructors from anywhere in the country at minimum cost. While it is true that many Government run schools do not yet have internet access, the system as a whole is moving in that direction. Further, the internet connectivity required for the purposes of this project were minimal and not greatly demanding in terms of financial or other resources required for implementation.

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2 PARIKRMA HUMANITY FOUNDATION: THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

The Parikrma Humanity Foundation is a Bangalore based non-profit which runs 4 K-12 schools for about 1500 children coming from 105 slums in the city. The schools cater to the same target group as the Government run public schools i.e. children coming from impoverished communities with little or no access to critical resources, including quality education. The school has, over the years, been recognized for the quality of education that it provides to its students. Even at Parikrma, however, with all its emphasis on holistic personality development through extra-curricular activities and non-academic exposure, there has been no formal attempt to teach the kind of focused and critical gravity-defying skills identified by the authors. The reasons for this lacuna are similar to those discussed above – a paucity of time and resources which are felt to be better utilized for teaching the curriculum.

Since Parikrma management has always been meticulous about maintaining strict parity across the 4 schools in terms of resources made available to students, the schools presented an ideal environment for implementing an experimental design that would enable the authors to study the impact of the created Third Space. The research was carried out among children of Grade 8, since they were judged to be at that critical life-stage when imbibing the imparted skills could be done easily, almost unconsciously, while resulting in a significant improvement in their ability to negotiate the social and cultural barriers that these children typically face upon graduation.

2.1 Experimental Design

	Experimental group 1	***Experimental group 2***	***Control group***
Students	60 students of Class 8 across Parikrma schools 1 & 2	30 students of Class 8 from Parikrma school 3	30 students of Class 8 from Parikrma school 4
Nature of Intervention	Outside school hours: Taught by a non-Parikrma instructor Online: Fun and engaging instructional method; online 4 days a week	Within School hours: Taught by a Parikrma teacher Offline: Conventional instruction method – same as used for teaching other subjects in curriculum; offline 4 days a week	None

2.2 The Interventions (what & why)

In order to ascertain which skills to focus on in this experiment, 8 alumni of Parikrma who had graduated in the last five years were interviewed. They were asked about challenges they had faced after graduating from Parikrma, and the skills they felt would have been useful to have as they attempted to navigate a world of opportunities beyond school. An analysis of their responses allowed the authors to zero in on a core area that they perceived as the biggest barrier while attempting to integration into their aspirational worlds:

- Self-autonomy (to confidently regulate their activities to drive personal progress). Articulated in different ways, this was a lacuna mentioned by all 8 of the alumni

  "Though Parikrma equipped me with social skills and confidence, the initial adjustment period in college was tough for me. We were very spoon-fed and very protected in Parikrma which made the world outside scarier. What I studied in PUC was much more basic than what I studied in college, and especially learning to study on my own was very difficult" – 2016 alumnus, Physiotherapist

  "The confidence I learned at Parikrma was very helpful for my placements during my engineering days, but I still felt like I was constantly spoon-fed. We were given a lot of exceptions and allowances with exams, and all the notes and materials were just given to us, meaning we didn't feel self-sufficient. This hurt our basics, and we felt like we could not cope with college work initially." - 2018 alumnus, Engineer

- Ability to speak confidently in English – the language of colleges, business and larger opportunities.

Conversations with the alumni's mentors at college or their workplace revealed that another area which merited intervention was the ability to speak English with greater facility and a more neutral/polished accent.

Experimental Group 1: 60 students of Grade 8 from Parikrma Schools 1 & 2 given the Third Space intervention

Basis the findings from the depth interviews with alumni, the authors identified and recruited best-in-class third party partners who not only possessed the required content but could deliver it in line with the requirements of a Third Space intervention. Thus, the content needed to be:

- Digitally driven, cost-effective and scalable by design
- Very relatable, putting the children at ease even as it aimed to build their skills.
- Fun, engaging and memorable every step of the way.
- Delivered in a friendly manner, using the best audio-video stimulus.

Details on the intervention partners are provided in Appendix A.

Based on discussions held with the two content partners, it was determined that each intervention would be delivered twice a week for at least eight weeks, with each student going through sixteen sessions of each subject. This was felt by both partners to be the minimum duration of time required for the interventions to result in a significant and positive change among the target students. Attendance was not mandatory for students in the group; it was clearly indicated to them that they could choose to skip the sessions if they did not enjoy them or if they felt they were not learning anything useful.

In order to ensure that each session was effective, external observers were used to unobtrusively observe the sessions and provide constructive feedback to partners, on areas ranging from content stickiness to relatability and participation. These informal yet structured feedback points enabled the partners to improve design and delivery in an agile manner during the course of the interventions.

Experimental Group 2: 30 students of Grade 8 from Parikrma School 3 - given the same content as Experimental Group 1, but in a traditional Second Space format rather than a Third Space format

The students in this group were provided the same content as those in Experimental Group 1. However, the content was delivered offline, during school hours and by a Parikrma teacher who also teaches these students other subjects. The duration and intensity of the intervention was kept the same as in Experimental group 1 i.e. 16 sessions across eight weeks. Attendance was compulsory for all students in the class.

2.3 Measurement of Impact

Pre and post measurements were taken among all the three experimental groups in order to understand the impact of the interventions.

- For the first intervention on self-autonomy, a well-validated set of scales that the partner has been using for several years in the field across thousands of students in the state.
- For spoken English, an independent educationalist was used to measure students' proficiency in spoken English before and after the intervention. Proficiency was measured using a 10 point Likert-type scale on the dimensions of Accent, Comprehension and Fluency.

2.4 Analysis & Results

Table 1. Pre-post differences across experimental groups: Spoken English

Experimental Group	***1***		***2***		***3***		***Min.***	***Max.***
Evaluation Parameters	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**		
Accent	6.2	6.4	7.3	7.4	6.4	6.5	1	10
Comprehension	6.1	6.3	7.3	7.5	6.7	6.5	1	10
Fluency	6.4	7.0	6.8	6.8	6.9	6.8	1	10
TOTAL	18.6	19.7	21.4	21.7	20.0	19.8	1	10

Statistical significance between pre-post differences was tested using a Paired t-test. Differences observed at a 95% confidence level have been highlighted in the table above.

Table 2. Pre-post differences across experimental groups: Self Autonomy

Experimental Group	*1*		*2*		*3*		Min.	Max.
Evaluation Parameters	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**	**Pre**	**Post**		
Behavioural Parameters								
Self-control	13.8	17.4	12.5	13.4	13.3	14.8	5	25
Persistence	14.7	18.1	16.7	18.8	18.9	17.9	5	25
Mindset	13.0	17.0	11.2	11.2	12.3	14.4	5	25
Concentration	13.9	16.8	11.3	12.4	12.2	13.2	5	25
Self-confidence	14.6	17.1	15.7	16.0	17.7	17.2	5	25
Responsibility	15.1	17.0	13.6	16.6	15.2	14.7	5	25
Achievement Orientation	14.6	17.5	14.7	17.0	17.4	15.8	5	25
Overall Success attitudes	99.7	120.8	95.7	105.4	107.0	108.1	35	175
Addictive Behaviour	19.7	21.6	13.5	17.0	19.9	16.1	6	30
Study Skills								
Reading Text Books	17.0	17.8	16.6	17.1	17.1	16.5	5	25
Taking Notes	15.1	16.1	14.6	15.9	15.3	15.8	5	25
Studying	16.2	17.7	15.2	16.8	16.1	16.7	5	25
Memorizing	16.5	17.5	16.2	16.7	16.4	15.8	5	25
Preparing For Tests	16.4	17.4	15.2	16.3	16.1	15.1	5	25
Managing Your Time	16.9	19.7	14.7	16.8	16.5	16.0	5	25
Overall study skills	16.4	17.7	15.4	16.6	16.3	16.4	5	25
Stress parameters								
Exam anxiety	5.0	5.4	5.4	4.8	5.0	4.7	3	15
Exam worry	5.9	6.7	6.6	6.3	6.1	6.4	3	15
Academic pressure	6.7	7.3	7.2	6.8	6.6	7.2	3	15
Expectations	7.4	7.9	7.9	7.8	7.0	8.0	3	15
Self-expectations	7.8	8.6	8.7	8.8	7.7	8.4	3	15
Helplessness	8.4	9.1	9.3	9.4	8.4	9.0	3	15
Time stress	9.0	9.6	9.9	9.8	9.1	9.8	3	15
Results worry	9.7	10.3	10.4	10.7	10.0	10.5	3	15
Peer pressure	10.6	10.9	11.3	11.8	10.6	11.4	3	15
Stress tolerance	82.4	88.1	88.9	89.1	82.4	88.1	30	150
Emotional health								
Life satisfaction	43.0	47.3	40.5	46.9	48.5	47.2	12	60
Subjective	10.0	26.0	10.3	9.0	9.3	13.4	6	35
Total emotional wellbeing	53.0	73.0	51.0	56.0	58.0	64.0	18	95

Statistical significance between pre-post differences was tested using a Paired t-test. Differences observed at a 95% confidence level have been highlighted in the table above.

The results seen in the two tables above clearly indicate that Experimental group 1 has seen the largest movement between the pre and post intervention measurements. The 60 students who went through the two Third space interventions have benefited significantly, showing large improvements on most dimensions. Between the two interventions, the one teaching students Self-Autonomy has clearly had greater impact than the one seeking to improve students' spoken English. This is probably because the former intervention taught students definite skills such as time-management and self-control techniques which were quickly learnt and implemented by students. In fact, the instructor of this course felt that if the students had had a series of tests or examinations around the time of the intervention, we would have seen greater improvement on the stress parameters as well, since students would have an opportunity to actually practice and implement their newly learnt skills in a real life situation. It is possible

that if these sessions are continued until the end of the academic year when students come up against their year-end assessments, significant gains would be shown on the study skills and stress parameters too. However, it remains to be seen whether the strong gains seen as a result of the Self-Autonomy intervention will endure over time, and if so, for how long.

On the other hand, improving spoken English is a task that requires intense and protracted practice and reinforcement; for accents to be neutralized or show a greater polish, and for students to speak the language with greater fluency and felicity, a longer time period is required than what was available in this study, especially given that these students are exposed to more of the `wrong' English than the `right' English both at home and school.

Results from Experimental Group 2 show that while there was some directional improvement, especially from the Self Autonomy intervention, they were not statistically significant for the most part. Since the content delivered to students in Experimental Groups 1 and 2 was the same, it is likely that the differences seen are mainly attributable to the environmental differences of the Second Space versus the Third Space. The verbatim quotes given below exemplify the enthusiasm felt by students experiencing the Third Space environment, which seems to have driven the significant improvements seen among them; that is clearly lacking among those in Experimental Group 2 who were exposed to the same content, albeit within a Second Space environment.

> *"I'll do the homework of this class before I do my schoolwork because it makes me motivated and happy" – Exptal Group 1*
>
> *"We are excited to come to class Akka – we wonder what new things we will learn that day. Even though I have to leave one hour later and take two buses home, I still look forward to class" - Exptal Group 1*
>
> *"It's nice to reflect on our mistakes in the journal that Akka makes us write; it lets us see what we need to correct in ourselves" – Exptal Group 1*
>
> *'No different from our normal classes; topic is different that's all" - Exptal Group 2*
>
> *"It's ok; I am learning something new but it's nothing great" - Exptal Group 2*

Among the students in Experimental Group 3, there is little change seen, given that they were the control group and did not experience any intervention at all. Any small changes seen are random and driven by chance rather than any real change.

3 CONCLUSIONS

It might be argued that traditional and voluntary after-school activities such as Science clubs or Sports team practices have always functioned as Third Spaces, where children learn important life skills, while having fun and enjoying themselves. While this is true, the reality in a developing economy such as India is that such after-school activities are almost non-existent in schools catering to children at the bottom of the pyramid, whether Government run or in private hands. Thus, in such schools, where even academic learning can often be compromised, the recent increased usage of after-school hours has been more focused on augmenting academic learning for better educational outcomes[4], rather than for teaching life-skills.

Fortunately, the recent National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 of the Ministry of Education, India highlights the importance of teaching all students those life-skills that are so imperative for their successful negotiation of the future and the challenges that it will bring. The last few years have seen some attempts to bring life-skill education in varied formats to children studying in Government schools[5] across different states of India. These interventions have mainly focused on the holistic development of children, aiming to go beyond a purely academic curriculum to building within them qualities such as confidence, resilience and responsibility to name a few. These projects have been scaled up to reach thousands of under-served children in India and have produced significant and positive result wherever implemented.

The authors acknowledge the immense contribution of such projects, while simultaneously arguing for more focused interventions that teach children targeted and culturally relevant skills which can help them defy the traditional handicaps that weigh them down. Notwithstanding the recent attempts at

[4] Björkman-Nyqvist,Martina; Guariso,Andrea (2022). Supporting learning in and out of school: experimental evidence from India
[5] Happiness Curriculum in Delhi, Project Sampoorna in Jharkand, Project Anandam in Uttarkhand

improving the education available in Indian Government schools, students still graduate from these institutions unable to seize those opportunities that they can see their affluent peers accessing, while being unable to reach out to such opportunities themselves, as a result of the limitations imposed by their backgrounds.

The authors believe that this limited, yet focused experiment goes beyond just holistic personality development, to revealing the potential of using the Third Space for imparting gravity-defying skills to students that will help them overcome some of the innate disadvantages their circumstances impose on them, and help them 'orbit-shift' into lives of new possibilities.

By systematically identifying these life-critical skills in each socio-cultural context, and by designing focused interventions that leverage the best in technology, content and pedagogy, schools can make a material difference to these underserved students, helping them change their trajectories in life substantially. Great content, delivered through experts these students cannot otherwise ever access, and in an environment stripped of any academic pressure or obligation, can liberate learning in newer ways. In today's tech enabled world, this means that students can be given access to the most inspiring learning anytime, anywhere. This can not just help address some of the systematic disadvantages identified earlier, but can also potentially set them on exciting paths of learning for life.

The authors believe that the model, given tentative shape in this study, can use the concept of the Third Space to create an environment that combines:

- Low-cost technology (broadband in one room at participating schools)
- Content specifically tailored to address the lacunae faced by the target students (the online model allows the most appropriate content to be accessed cheaply from anywhere and amortized over larger numbers of students too
- An environment that is non-stressful and non-competitive and enables learning in a manner that is both enjoyable and sustained

Going forward, there are many design elements of the model that still need to be considered and experimented with in more objective ways.

- Different kinds of intervention may warrant different time treatments. While skills such as time-management can be taught in more compressed time frames, other such as language felicity clearly require deeper, more drawn-out interventions.
- Context and relatability are key in helping students embrace the learning. Vernacular content becomes important. As does the empathy and personality of the partners. Softer aspects of what inspires better learning need to be studied more thoroughly before scaling efforts.

The authors consider this small experimental effort not as a standalone project, but rather as the first step in a staircase of skill-building that needs to be urgently constructed in order to ensure that students from the most under-served backgrounds make the most of their school-going years; the school-going years may be used to develop specific skills that help them leap over those social chasms which are an inevitable result of their original environment and which hold them down, notwithstanding their academic achievements. The work begun in this study will continue in the form of more research that will examine the impact of variables such as the duration of interventions required for long-term skills retention, the nature of content that results in the highest gains and so on.

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APPENDIX: THE INTERVENTION PARTNERS

- NSmiles India is a Bangalore based organization working in the space of mental health and wellbeing for students. The organization's self-care tools and solutions are aligned to W.H.O. Sustainability Development Goals 2018 – 2030. NSmiles' team of experts in psychology, psychometry and deep tech have developed evidence based self-assessment, self-care tools and graded support powered by Mobile & AI technologies, and validated across thousands of children studying in Government schools in the state of Karnataka, India.
- Hurray Edutech is a Bangalore based organization set up with the aim of ensuring that a lack of English communication skills does not stand in the way of professional success. The company offers well-validated courses that result in accent neutralization and greater fluency in spoken English.