

Preparing students with robust life skills, including social-emotional skills, is of paramount importance in today's world, particularly for children growing up in adversity.

# REIMAGINING EDUCATION IN INDIA WITH DREAM A DREAM

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*Dream a Dream*

**DREAM A DREAM** was founded by 11 young people who wanted to engage with children who were terminally ill, abandoned, or HIV infected. The idea was to organize activities and games that would provide hope and happiness for these children. Over time, the team realized mere engagement could never be the solution for deep-rooted adversities. Real change would only be possible when young people coming from adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are equipped to meet the challenges and demands of an uncertain world. They came to believe the solution lay in life skill interventions and social-emotional learning (SEL). This was the beginning of Dream a Dream's journey ([www.dreamadream.org](http://www.dreamadream.org)).



Twenty-one years later, we are pioneering the mainstreaming of life skill interventions in the education ecosystem. In the last two decades, the organization has helped over a million children overcome adversity and develop the skills needed to thrive in the 21st century. We have been recognized and awarded for innovation, transparency, and accountability by Ashoka, Global Development





Images courtesy of Dream a Dream

Network, Harvard, Rockefeller Foundation, Resource Alliance, WISE Awards, HundrED, and Guidestar India—among others.

### **Dream a Dream's Approach**

At the center of our approach<sup>1</sup> is the child and the ecosystem around the child. This ecosystem includes the child's closest influencers—parents, teachers, and other

role models. Also part of the ecosystem are schools, community centers, and social groups, which need to provide the right infrastructure to help the child flourish. Decisions within the education system about policy, funding, training, assessment, and the child's overall experience also must be considered. Focusing on these elements has guided all our interventions through the years.



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Through direct intervention with 10,000 young people a year, we demonstrate the importance of life skills and SEL for young people growing up in adversity. Our After School Life Skills Programme (ASLSP), launched in 2002, provides innovative, non-traditional educational opportunities through sports and arts to allow children from the age of 8 to 14 to build important life skills such as teamwork, decision-making, problem solving, and critical thinking. To ensure that young people are life ready, we introduced the Career Connect Programme (CCP) in 2010. CCP caters to young people from ages 15-23, providing high-impact life skills in computer education, spoken English, communication skills, money management, and workplace

readiness to help young people develop resilience, adaptability, and confidence, which will help them make a meaningful transition to adulthood.

### Setting Up Teachers for Success

Teachers are among the most prominent influencers in a child's life, and this makes them a powerful lever to ensure systemic change. A caring, compassionate adult can transform a young person's life like no other. We introduced the Teacher Development Programme (TDP) in 2012 to help teachers





shift their approach away from deliverers of knowledge to be facilitators of learning using our signature empathy-based pedagogies. Through role-modeling and developing skills around facilitation, listening, authentic speaking, experiential learning design, and creating emotional safety and reflection, teachers learn to integrate life skills into the classroom environment. The Arc of Transformation methodology developed by Dream a Dream and adopted by Partners for Youth Empowerment<sup>2</sup> helped transform teachers from their traditional defined roles into more authentic, non-judgmental, and empathic educators. Having expanded from training 80 educators in 2012-13 to training 21,139 educators in 2020-21, we have significantly impacted the ecosystem via collaborations with other organizations and schools across India. According to our recent impact study,<sup>3</sup> the program showed significant improvement in the quality of life for 94% of the teachers who underwent the program.

### **Contextualizing Life Skills Assessment for Children Coming From Adversity**

In 2006, as Dream a Dream was struggling to measure the impact of its life skills programs, we realized that most assessments measured specific life skills or were not contextual to disadvantaged communities. Hence, we explored the idea of developing an assessment scale of our own. We worked with clinical psychologists from the UK, Dr. Fiona Kennedy and Dr. Dave Pearson, to develop the Life Skills Assessment Scale (LSAS)<sup>4</sup> in 2008, and the research pertaining to the scale was published in 2014. The scale assesses five core skills, which are ability to take initiative, ability to interact with one another, ability to solve problems, ability to manage conflict, and ability to understand and follow instructions. Currently, the LSAS is extensively used by NGOs, donors, researchers, clinicians, carers, vocational



trainers, educational institutions, and employers across the globe.

### **Move Toward Strategic Partnerships**

In time, the organization also realized the urgent need to look beyond mere direct interventions to consider impact at scale. Partnering with local governments of different Indian states was a definite path that could help us create change at the ecosystem level. Today, through our strategic partnerships with state governments in Delhi, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Telangana, and Karnataka, we have impacted over 1 million children in India.

### **Delhi's Happiness Curriculum**

Delhi's Happiness Curriculum was one of our first steps toward partnering with state governments and other not-for-profit partners to ensure policy reform in the education ecosystem. The state government introduced a curriculum focused on well-being across 1,024 public schools, reaching over 800,000 students from kindergarten to grade 12. The curriculum dedicated 40 minutes every day for sessions on mindfulness, storytelling, critical thinking, reflection, and more. With its strong child-centered pedagogy, the curriculum has helped bring awareness of a child's thoughts and feelings. The Brookings Institution report "Development of Student and Teacher Measures of Happiness Curriculum Factors"<sup>5</sup> showed evidence of increased levels of self-awareness,





reflection, and communication among students in the Happiness Curriculum and has demonstrated positive improvements in relationships among students, both in and outside classrooms.

Continuing our partnership with the Delhi Government on education reforms, we have been part of high-level strategic committees to build a new education board, redesign the assessment system, and complete curriculum reforms focused on the holistic development of every child. We are also helping the government develop an

International Cell of Happiness for continued innovation in research, policy, and practice, while also supporting them with teacher training.

After the successful partnership with the Delhi Government, we are currently also working with the states of Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Telangana, and Karnataka:

- In the North Indian state of Uttarakhand, we have introduced an SEL-based curriculum in government schools, which resulted in the





implementation of the Anandam Pathyacharya program. The program goals are to ensure that children at school understand their emotions, can express their emotions, and learn the skills to respond to emotions in a healthy way. The project also aims at capacity building and advocating for the importance of life skills among teachers and other stakeholders.

- In Jharkhand, Dream a Dream is an integral part of two initiatives—Gyan Setu<sup>6</sup> and Project Sampoorna.<sup>7</sup> The

Gyan Setu program consists of a team of volunteers who conduct joyful science-based workshops and camps for middle school students. Project Sampoorna aims to apply a whole child development lens in public education in India and is centered around the School Health and Wellness Programme (SHWP), a new curriculum being introduced by the central and state governments in public schools.

- In the south Indian state of Telangana, Dream a Dream has partnered with the Telangana Social Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TSWREIS), under the Ministry of Scheduled Caste Development, Government of Telangana, and our aim is to introduce our signature life skills approach in all TSWREIS schools. Our focus is on providing training for teachers to build empathic, creative, and highly engaged classrooms for children coming from severe adversity and to be able to integrate life skills in academic and non-academic sessions.
- In Karnataka, we have been involved in the Nali Kali curriculum (Nali Kali was an initiative introduced in Karnataka in 1995 by teachers in the Mysore district with an intention to make learning fun and encourage children to come to school) to incorporate SEL in the curriculum. We are also working on the Happiness Curriculum translation and contextualization for the state of Karnataka.

### Thriving as the Purpose of Education

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities and has shown us that this is an opportune time to rethink the way we educate future generations, question what we need to teach, and consider what we are preparing our students for. It is time to focus on approaches that take every child along. It is time to pause and, above all, experiment with new forms of collective organization and action. The opportunities are immense. Home and family are now the child's school. There is an opportunity to embed these in

education with a focus on empathy, culture, and history and to rewrite children's relationship with nature. After over two decades of integrating life skills and SEL-based curriculums in schools across India, we have learned that empowering children with life skills is just one side of the coin. Unless we change the conditions of adversity around the child and shift the core purpose of education, our work will have only limited impact.

After closely working, engaging, and learning with young

people, Dream a Dream has a new vision based on our own understanding and a nuanced lens of the life of young people in India—For Every Child, A Thriving Life. This vision can only be achieved when we invest in developing and nurturing learning ecosystems while also shifting our own societal lens to focus on thriving as the purpose of education.<sup>8</sup> But what does “thriving” look like among young people? How does it manifest, specifically in the context of adversity? We have been exploring this within

our programs and know that more study is needed beyond academic realms to understand real-world ramifications of the intersections of social identities (religion, caste, class, gender, sexual orientations) to truly arrive at thriving at an individual level for all young people.

We believe that change cannot be about just one individual but begins when there is a mindset shift in the ecosystem. This also means we in the education ecosystem need to understand bias better and learn how the ecosystem needs to evolve and change to be an inclusive, equitable, and dignified place for all young people. While our partnerships have proven to be impactful, we are still on a journey to create a different kind of a learning ecosystem where thriving is the core purpose of education and we can redefine the parameters of success. When every child learns to thrive in a safe, nurturing society, they will also help their families, communities, and the planet to thrive.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> <https://dreamadream.org/strategy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://partnersforyouth.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Impact-Study-by-60-Decibels-on-Teacher-Development-Programme.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Life-Skills-Assessment-Scale\\_LSAS.pdf](https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Life-Skills-Assessment-Scale_LSAS.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Development-of-Student-and-Teacher-Measures-of-Happiness-Curriculum-Factors.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://jepc.jharkhand.gov.in/program/gyan-setu>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHSuxOnGkvHSV4-K7IUbnvA/featured>

<sup>8</sup> [https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dream\\_a\\_Dreams\\_Report\\_on\\_Thriving\\_2020.pdf](https://dreamadream.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Dream_a_Dreams_Report_on_Thriving_2020.pdf)

