Child Development: Learning in Adolescence

“Is adolescence a myth or a reality?”

“Adolescence” is widely recognized by scholars as a socially and culturally constructed period of the life course. UN defines adolescence as the period of age group between 10-19 years. In India, there are about 243 million adolescents. According to the Institute of Applied Manpower Research 2000, there are about 300 million adolescents between the age group of 10 and 24. Adolescence is a period that requires special attention with respect to health, needs and rights. It is considered as the period between childhood and adulthood. However, the transition from adolescents to adulthood varies between different cultures. Age, as mentioned above, is a convenient way to define adolescence but there is no clear demarcation of how to put one bracket to this age group. However, it still exists and is not a myth. This is the crucial period where adolescents develop new knowledge, understand the regulation of their emotions, and acquire abilities that prepare them for adulthood.

With the help of the focus group discussion that I had in my school practicum I will further explain how different aspects takes shape in the age group of 11-19 years:

1. Family Relations – Despite the change in the social structure of families from joint to nuclear, families still play a dominant role in the life of their children. In conversation with almost 16 children, it was seen that even though almost all stayed in nuclear families but either the mother or the father had quite a dominant role in the life of a child. The decisions about playtime, study time, watching TV was all decided by the parents. There was hardly any autonomy to make their own decisions. Out of both the parents mostly fathers were the bread earners. So, children spent most of their time with mothers or siblings. A few of them mentioned that their fathers also spend time with them as and when they are free. However, no matter how disappointing it could be children seemed to have accepted and understood how negotiations work. Since most of the children continue to depend on their parents even after 18 unlike in other foreign countries the transition to adulthood takes time.
2. Peer Relations – In India, most families continue to play a dominant role in the life of a child. Often, parents impose their influence on who the child becomes friends with. Except for children meeting in school or intuitions hardly, there is any great exposure of peers in the lives of the adolescents. Especially, when it comes to girls they usually spend most of their time at home whereas boys are given some time to go out and meet friends. On one hand, where boys go out and play, girls stay back at home either helping their mother or spending time indoors. Going back to my adolescence, my brother often was not questioned about his whereabouts but for me, there were multiple questions asked. Any nearby spot was comfortable but beyond that like spending time at a friend’s place was a strict no. The given opportunity further shapes the difference in how gendered adolescence is.
3. Role of media – Media plays a huge role in the life of an adolescent. The movies, daily soaps, their admiration towards love, actor and actress comes from media. In our discussion with children in the school, we found out that media exposure is mostly been restricted in households. Either due to the elder sibling or generally, they do not show

interest in the television. On the other hand, they are exposed to YouTube which more or less is the new era replacement to the television. Adolescents nowadays are mostly addicted to the online game especially boys. Some of the boys mentioned a game that involved shooting and they liked it because it was thrilling.

Nowadays, our cultures, traditions, nutrition intake, and new-era of technology have brought in these changes. There are more nuclear and separated families, technology becomes pass and parcel of the lives of the adolescent at a very early age, earlier only father was the bread earner now both go to work and our diet patterns have changed towards more junk food. All these things have led to earlier maturation of the child due to which it becomes difficult to clearly specify the age group. This is what is majorly seen in urban society. Similarly, in villages or slums where children also become bread-earner very early in life gets exposed to different things in life. Therefore, children in rural areas lose their childhood and adolescence at a very early age.

Schools role in shaping adolescents' evolving sense of self and identity

Adolescents in this stage are undergoing a biological as well as an equal shift of social behaviour and expectations. According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial model of personality development, human life goes through eight stages of development from birth to old age. At every stage, the child develops certain virtues depending upon the exposure and culture the child gets. The psychosocial crises that the child undergoes during adolescence are Identity vs Role Confusion. In this, the child starts to form opinions and association of themselves in different roles as students, children, friends and as citizens. The culture and the exposure the child gets determines if the child will be able to understand his beliefs, opinions and hence, form an identity. In case of confusion where they feel their voices are not being heard they form subculture groups in order to form an identity. However, if the apt space is not given to the child there is a sense of confusion in the child which might end up conforming to other peoples' views, opinions and beliefs. The virtues the child forms in the early year of his life are evaluated at this stage. The major influence during this period is of peers and role models.

In this, schools are seen as one of the institutions which address the requirement of the adolescent requires to form their identity. Through giving exposure to the child to explore one's interest, letting them question their belief and helping them find answers to the same is something schools can help with. Children lookout for opportunities to grow socially, cognitively and emotionally for which schools need to ask a few basic questions of what to teach, how to teach and when to teach. For this, the school has to provide a learner-friendly environment. For instance, at this stage when virtues are revisited and re-evaluated by adolescents, with the help of value education courses and otherwise schools can help their virtues give direction. Schools also need to learn about the fear or stress the child faces during the examination. At this stage few words of comfort and reiterating the reason for examination may help in reducing the exam fear. Similarly, children are taught what to think and not how to think because of which they lack the ability to question their teachers and elders. The inquisitive nature of adolescents can form if enough freedom is given to them to raise questions. Schools and teachers play a huge role in helping children come out of their setbacks of failures. The response of the teacher to the child's failure will determine whether the child will spend time proving himself or will take challenges for learning. For example, I was an average child in my school, I never used to ask questions but once I was engrossed in the subject so much that I asked a question to the teacher which resulted in her ignoring me and other peers laughing. I could never understand if

my question was wrong or was it stupid. Slowly and gradually, I started to compare myself with my elder brother and suddenly the urge to learn was taken over by the challenge to prove my worth to the family and teachers.

The school that I visit is a private school that is much disciplined and everything has to be done in order; very typical to a bureaucratic structure. Most children come from upper-middle and middle-class family. In an activity with the children of “Who am I?” children notes reflect the kind of expectations that their family and teachers have from them. The reason why adolescents want to keep fulfilling expectations is for the belongingness that they desire. Mostly, in the group discussion, it came out that children ultimately look up to their family for emotional support. Exam fever was the highest in the children. They were pressured about giving two exams in a day. Schools mostly fail to address the issue of making children understand that emotional well-being is an end in itself which cannot be determined by the score of their tests. Teachers themselves have got into the race of proving their worth to the higher authority because of which they stick to the point and make this process impersonal and routinized.

Most of them shared their emotional attachments with the schools, peers, family and country. This is a stage where adolescents learn to develop emotional maturity. The maturity also comes depending upon how one believe in himself/herself in terms of their own personality and abilities. Interestingly, in the group discussions when children were asked about their ability to manage conflicts between their peers and family. For them, it was like as good as no fight at all. They would say sorry or the matter would be solved on its own in some time or maximum in a day. As per J. Krishnamurti, this may be the right stage to make adolescents understand that to handle true emotional security one need not have an identity at all.

To look at it in a wide spectrum from a socio-economic perspective of adolescents in India there are much wider gaps. In rural areas where the number of schools has increased yet access, retention and quality in school becomes a challenge for adolescents. Especially for a girl child, schools become a dream after they attain puberty. During my field visit, I observed that the mid-day meal was served by a girl child to the teachers. Thus, strictly adhering to the beliefs of the people. A place where I worked in the adolescent girls residential camp most of the girls after the 12th got married. The circumstances that force them to confine emotionally to the idea and beliefs of their parents are unmatched.

In my opinion, schools all across India irrespective of the location need to move from a conventional mode of schooling to a much broader scope where adolescents are made to explore new opportunities, given appropriate skills which help them to transition into adulthood successfully.