

Happy hour: No textbooks, grades in this class

NEW DELHI: The first period at Kautilya Government Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya in south Delhi's Chirag Enclave has just begun. The class teacher in seventh grade, Umesh Kumar, asks students to keep their hands straight and close their eyes.



Students during a happiness class at Kautilya Government Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya in Chirag Enclave, Delhi

“Now try to hear the sounds around you,” says the teacher.

The class of about 50 immediately goes into a meditation.

“I heard the whir of the fan,” comes the reply from a boy. “I heard the sound of my breathing,” says a girl.

This is how a ‘happiness class’ begins in most Delhi schools. With a different topic every day, students meditate, read a story and have a discussion on topics of kindness and joy.

In a class for happiness

BEING HAPPY HT attended a happiness class in a Delhi government school. Here is an account of what the children were taught — and what they learnt

NEW DELHI: The first period—happiness class — at Kautilya Government Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya in south Delhi's Chirag Enclave has just begun. The teacher, Umesh Kumar, writes on the chalkboard in neat, cursive letters: ‘Happiness Class’.



Principal CS Verma (blue shirt) and teacher Suresh Kumar during a happiness class at Kautilya Government Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya.

The walls have several colourful posters made by the students, including one that lists '12 ways to happiness.' The teacher and the children, with yellow smiley badges pinned to their ties, look fresh, cheerful and jovial — the perfect atmosphere for a happiness class, which has no grades, no textbooks, no homework.

For the uninitiated, happiness classes were introduced by the Delhi government in its schools for children up to Class 8 for enhancing their mental and emotional well-being.

It is Class 7 and Kumar asks his wards to keep their hands straight and close their eyes.

Everyone obeys.

"Now try to hear the sounds around you," says the teacher.

The class of about 50 immediately goes into the meditation mode.

After a few minutes, the teacher tells them to open their eyes and asks, 'What sounds did you hear?'

A boy says, "I heard the whir of the fan."

Another tells the teacher, "I heard the fan, as well as the sound of your movements."

Then a girl stands up, "I heard the sound of my breathing."

This makes the teacher happy and he is all praise for her 'concentration.'

Happiness class has a different topic every day and today, a Tuesday, is a storytelling and discussion day. So, the teacher next asks the students to attentively listen to the story he is going to tell.

The story, titled Bada Aadmi (a big man), is about a father and his son. The son asks his father to buy a motorcycle for him.

The father does not have money and says no. The son leaves his home in anger. Towards the end of the story, the son realises that the father was trying to sell his scooter to buy a motorcycle for him. "I do not want the motorcycle; I want to be a big man, like you."

The children listen with rapt attention as the teacher tells the story.

After the story, the teachers ask the class, “Who is a big man?”

Drishti is one of the few students who raises her hands, “A person, who has a big house, a car, a good job, is the big man,” she says.

Sandhya, another student, sitting close to her does not agree. “No”, she says, “Someone who is kind-hearted and cares for others is a big man.” Everyone in the class seems to agree. The discussion based on the story goes on for 25 minutes.

The girls of the class get a majority of answers right.

The Happiness Curriculum was rolled out by the Delhi government on July 2 in the presence of the Dalai Lama at an event attended by chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia.

Sisodia, the deputy chief minister, who is also the education minister, in a tweet later that day said, “Happy kids show up more able to learn as they tend to sleep better and may have healthier immune systems. Happy kids learn faster, think more creatively, tend to be more resilient in the face of failures...have stronger relationships & make friends easily.”

Happiness Curriculum, is, in fact, a passion project of Sisodia. Designed by a team of Delhi government teachers, educators, psychologists, volunteers, among others, the curriculum is being taught to about 10 lakh students in over 1,000 Delhi government schools across Delhi, where there is a 45-minute “happiness class”, usually the first period in most schools, daily for children in classes 1 to 8. Kindergarten children have the classes twice a week.

About 18,000 government teachers, including Suresh Kumar, have gone through a three-day orientation programme to learn how to teach the new curriculum. He, like all other teachers, has been provided with a ‘handbook’, which has the curriculum with clearly defined learning objectives and guiding principles.

The handbook for happiness for Class 6 to 8 is divided into four sections: ‘Mindfulness’, which includes mindful listening, sensory awareness, among others ; ‘Storytelling’, which includes 20 stories, each story with its objective clearly spelt out on top of the page; ‘Activities’ aimed at teaching the meaning of happiness, competence; and ‘expression.’

About 1,000 students at Kautilya Bal Vidyalaya in Chirag Enclave have been attending the class since it was introduced in the school on July 12.

CS Verma — the principal of the school, who was also a member of the core team that contributed to the curriculum — is pretty excited about the course and the result it has produced so far. “We are creating fine doctors, engineers, chartered accountants. But is our education system producing fine human beings too? That is what we want to achieve through the happiness class,” he says.

A smiley is pinned to a small flagpost on the desk of his grand, high-ceilinged office. “A majority of children in our school come from underprivileged sections of the society. These children are vulnerable to stress,” he says.

So, has he seen any change? “Yes, indeed. They are more focused on studies and unlike in the past, they are more willing to accept their mistakes,” says an ever-smiling Verma, who at times sits in on the happiness classes in his school.

So, what is it that stresses the students the most?

Hitesh, 11, says that a few days ago he had asked his father to buy him a cycle. His father said he had lost his job and will buy a cycle for him once he finds another one.

"I am very sad, but not because I cannot get the cycle. I am sad because my father has lost his job," says the 11-year old, his eyes welling up.

And what have they learnt in the happiness class in the past 6 weeks? Almost all hands go up this time.

"We should see things in a positive light," says Asif, 13,

"No work is small," adds Simarpreet Singh, 14.

"We should not be envious of others and be happy with what we have," says Sahil, 12.

"We should be happy at others' happiness," says Dileep, 12.

Kumar, who otherwise teaches English, is a picture of pride. "It was hard to get the children interested in the happiness class initially, but now they actively participate in the class," says Kumar. "I enjoy the class as much as my students because this is one class where I get to interact with them at a personal level and get to know them better as individuals."

Many students say their parents are skeptical about what they are learning in the happiness classes. "One day my father came home late and looked stressed out. When I offered to teach him the techniques of mediation that I have learnt in our happiness class to make him feel happy, he rejected the idea saying, 'your school is organising these classes so that you do not make noise and create mischief in class'," says Raj Kumar Jain, 13.

"My parents feel the same," adds Rishu, 12, sitting next to him in the front row. "My father says I am not changing, but I don't agree," he adds.