"When children feel less anxious, they tend to learn better": Richa Gupta of Labhya on integrating wellbeing into India's public education system

Jessica Kantor
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Jessica Kantor: Can you introduce yourself, and tell me what is distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health?

Richa Gupta: I'm Richa Gupta. I'm the CEO at Labhya and one of the co-founders. I am a teacher turned entrepreneur. I spent about a decade teaching in low-income classrooms across India. I realized there's a huge difference between me teaching, and children actually learning, mainly because a lot of my kids came from low-income backgrounds. They had very difficult circumstances at home and in their communities. When they were in the classroom, they were too stressed to learn.

I realized, over time, that I needed to do more as an educator for my students. A turning point for me was, unfortunately, in my journey, I lost two of my students. One was because of community violence, another to a disease that I had recovered from when I was a child. Beyond how I felt about it, I saw how the rest of my students in the classroom, their parents, and the community had to deal with that, and live with that fear and grief. In the classroom, we didn't really have a space to talk about that.

This pushed me to think more deeply about my purpose as an educator, and what more could be done, and made me question a lot of what being an educator really involved. During that time, I got lucky. I met with my co-founders, Vedant and Malika, to start what is now Labhya. Currently, I oversee programs and overall organizational development.

In this journey, I received my master's in education at Harvard on a full scholarship so that I could come back and deepen our work. I also currently work with the United Nations Youth Office as one of the 17 young leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals to bring youth mental health to the forefront globally.

Labhya is an India-based wellbeing and education nonprofit. We partner with Indian state governments and help them implement a daily 30-minute wellbeing class across all public schools in that state. Just like our children have a math, science, or English class, they now have a daily 30-minute wellbeing class, which is facilitated by a regular public school teacher. We currently do this in partnership with three states, a total of 2.4 million children, and we've just expanded to our fourth state, which will bring our impact to 9.4 million children across 62,000 schools in the next year.

Jessica Kantor: What might others find surprising about your work?

Richa Gupta: One thing is that when we started working, we were all really young. My co-founders, Vedant, Malika and I were all in our early 20s when we started working with the government, collaborating with them and learning from the system to build scalable programs.

Now it seems like second nature to work with larger complex systems, but back then, it was a big learning journey. For us as young people, to take ourselves seriously in a system that's not necessarily built for young people, and to be in decision-making spaces, can be really hard. We've learned by doing.

The other thing is that we co-create every single part of our program with public school teachers, everything from a collective framework. Each state we work with has a localized curriculum in the local language. It's co-created by us and a group of public school teachers with whom we work very deeply in the design phase of one and a half school years. We call them master trainers, and we work with them so deeply that by the end of it, we get a contextualized, localized curriculum that is age-appropriate, that's really coming from the roots of each of the districts, and is well represented. It then goes on to become the daily wellbeing class curriculum.

Jessica Kantor: Are you only in cities, or are you also working in rural areas?

Richa Gupta: Yes, rural also. When we partner with the state, we work across all public schools, both rural, urban, and semi-urban. Currently, we work in one urban city. The rest of the three [states] are almost 50% to 70% rural, and 20% to 30% urban.

Jessica Kantor: Many regions of the world, India as well, face the issue of teacher turnover. How do you deal with a high teacher turnover rate? Are you constantly using resources to train new teachers, or is there someone in the community, a master trainer, who does that training if you can't?

Richa Gupta: In India, the challenge is less teacher turnover, and more teacher transfers, because it's a government job. It's a permanent job for most teachers. They don't leave jobs, but they get moved from one school to another, one district to another, and that can cause the same kind of unevenness in implementation. When we partner with the government, it helps mandate trainings for teachers across all public schools to facilitate this class. Usually, this training is three to four times a year, and every teacher per school is trained through the train-the-trainer kind of model. That's where we try to make up for the missing pieces.

If there's a teacher who's learned the curriculum and done it in school A, even if they get transferred to school B, they are continuously part of the training and do it in their schools. Even new teachers who have joined school A get to be a part of the training. This continuous loop of localized training at the district level, quarter-on-quarter, helps us make sure that no teacher is left with a knowledge gap on what to do.

Jessica Kantor: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience; giving young people agency; and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. Which area does your work mainly focus on, and what contribution does it make?

Richa Gupta: In some ways, we do all three. They all connect to our framework. If I had to pick one, it would definitely be the resilience part. Through our programs, we've seen so many of our children build a higher level of grit. Whenever they're faced with challenges in life, which are many, they're at least trying to solve those problems without giving up too soon. That's something we've seen in our data, and on the ground as well.

A big part of building resilience is also building social networks. We've seen that when a child has a trusted adult as their teacher who is now facilitating a warm emotional space in the classroom, and their peers who are now being vulnerable and sharing in the classrooms, that also makes them feel that they're not so fragile, they can face problems, and they have people in community.

The third way is also through building learning motivation. We've seen that when children feel less anxious, they tend to learn better, and learning better gives them more confidence about continuing their education despite all odds. That's the three ways we build resilience.

Jessica Kantor: Do you collaborate with organizations who are also working in the same focus area, or others?

Richa Gupta: Our main partner organization is the government, to make sure that these programs are not only run at scale, but also funded by the government and are also done with high fidelity. We also partner with research organizations like J-PAL and IDinsight to strengthen the evidence base. We've seen that it's hard to collaborate in the mental health field, especially the youth mental health space, because the tools are not super standardized across all the geographies. It needs to be highly contextual.

You can't do multi-geography collaborations until it's very synergistic. What we can do is facilitate more evidence and more rigorous research, so that we can all be on the same page around what works, what doesn't, and how to enhance what works.

Jessica Kantor: How does your work also contribute to the two other areas?

Richa Gupta: Over the last two years, in partnership with J-PAL, an MIT-based research lab, we are conducting the world's largest research study on children's mental health and wellbeing. It's a randomized control trial [RCT], so essentially, half the kids are getting the program, half of them are not in the sample. It's happening with 30,000

children, which is huge. It will be a milestone study when it gets published next year, and we're already seeing incredible early results.

Without revealing too much, which I'm not allowed to, thanks to our researchers we're seeing great results. Girls in rural areas are the most profoundly and positively impacted by our work. A lot of that has to do with agency and voice, and being able to articulate what you need in the moment. That's where our work quite directly connects with girls, specifically. We're also seeing that boys feel more comfortable sharing their feelings more openly and in a nonjudgmental way in the classrooms because of our program. Those are two insights that convince us that we are working [well] on agency.

Regarding community, building social networks is a big part of our program. In the design, every class requires children to sit in a small group and share how they're feeling, reflect on a question, and then share back out loud in the large group. There's a lot of peer-work, and then also at home, talking to your parents about non-transactional things, like asking your mother what she feared as a child, and building a strong, trusted adult network around you. That's how we try to make sure that wellbeing in India is community-driven. It's a big factor in a child's wellbeing. How do we strengthen the community around them?

Jessica Kantor: Can you share an example to illustrate the impact of your work?

Richa Gupta: First, one of the teachers facilitating our program used to be a regular subject teacher, and then she started teaching the wellbeing class. She saw a very big shift in how much she learned about children through the class. For example, the kid sitting at the back of the class usually is tagged as the problem creator or the person who doesn't want to listen. Then, through the class, she found out about problems at their home, and this is why they're so distracted in the classroom.

There are so many girls who are distracted or seem uninterested, but actually, it's just because they're tired. Back home, they have to do chores and take care of their siblings even before walking into school at 7:00 AM. That context helped her build a beautiful connection with her students, but more importantly, helped her teach well, now that she knew what every child needed and why they were being the way they were.

Of course, she was always empathetic, but the teacher also became more considerate about what a child wants to talk about, and what their parents might need. That helped her build a strong network and help kids in her class just generally learn better. In fact, as an extension to something similar that happened in another classroom, a teacher found out that child marriage is a big issue in her community, and that girls are stressed because of that. She ended up talking to parents, mobilizing the community, and making sure that her students stayed in school till 12th grade, so that they were not threatened to leave school, or feel the fear of leaving school.

That's something that we've seen time and time again, as well as the kids' willingness to come to school and their excitement to learn. For example, one of our kids' parents gave them cattle and told them to rear the cattle instead of going to school, but the child

really wanted to come to school for the wellbeing class. So he came and tied the cow in the school compound, and ran inside to attend the class. The teacher also let him in, with no uniform or anything else, just so he could learn and access this program. There've been dozens, or maybe hundreds, of stories where both teachers and students have found meaning in the program this way.

Jessica Kantor: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Can you describe something you tried that didn't work, but you learned from it?

Richa Gupta: One thing we realized quite early is that we would really have to root our capacity building with teachers in their context, versus dumping what we know on them. We learned that in two ways. One was when we started co-creating programs with our master trainers, and saw the value of master trainers themselves training teachers and building that community. When training comes from a peer of yours who you've seen leading programs over the decades, and they are telling you they've created this and you should try it, there's a high trust factor.

Secondly, a big part of our capacity building over the years has become less about how to do the mindfulness, the story, or the lesson, versus why we think this is important, and how to build a common vocabulary for children's wellbeing in this state.

For example, a big failure, or learning, from our side was that in our very first state, we did a very pedagogically heavy training for all the teachers, very scientific. When we went back to the classrooms afterwards, we saw that the training was not engaging enough, because they had confused mindfulness with meditation. This mindfulness is specifically a secular practice that helps children be in the present, to make sure that it would include all children in the classroom. We had to then course correct and do another batch of trainings to establish the 'why' before getting into the 'how'.

Jessica Kantor: Many people doing workshops and trainings have learned you have to engage people to make sure they fully understand. You can give information, and they can take notes, but that's not how humans learn to practice. What is one challenge you haven't been able to solve, outside of funding?

Richa Gupta: One thing we're now building out is a bouquet of evidence to prove that when children feel less stress and have a wellbeing space, they learn better, and this can be implemented at scale with governments. No such evidence has existed [until now]. There's been a lot of research in bits and pieces about how mindfulness works for a specific age group of kids, or how this particular type of storytelling helps children feel less stressed in other parts of the world, but nothing at scale is systemic in India, specifically, or just in the global south generally. For a preventive program like ours, anybody who believes that children need safe spaces in schools should be able to support us.

Of course, evidence gathering is a very long, expensive process. We have begun that with the RCT, and hopefully there will be more. A big challenge for us has been not just

creating that evidence, but also communicating simply why this work is important. For example, when I tell you an eighth grader can't read a second-grade text, you can immediately understand what that means for children, but when I say we saw a 25% decrease in anxiety, what does that really mean for a child? How can I help visualize that for the person who maybe doesn't understand what anxiety looks or feels like? That's a challenge that we and other doers in the space generally face when we work on mental health.

Jessica Kantor: You're doing the world's largest study on youth mental health. Before you embarked on this study, how were you tracking outcomes?

Richa Gupta: We track our progress in three ways. The first is on the process side. We track how many teachers were trained and what shifted in their skills of facilitating the classroom, as well as in their own mindset and their understanding of social-emotional learning and wellbeing.

The second way is how much did the class actually happen in the field, and what support teachers need. That's something we are still building. We generally track that through occasional classroom visits to understand the quality and frequency of the class, the challenges that teachers face, and how to use those feedback loops to manage and inform our trainings.

The third is the actual impact on teachers. Before the RCT, we did some internal assessments, but a global body of evidence from across the space helped us understand the larger impact of working on children's wellbeing. The RCT will help us not only establish the outcomes, but also help us understand the tools that can be best deployed to measure something so qualitative.

Jessica Kantor: Would the government collect that information, or would you collect it state by state? How often would you have people report that? Is it just the teachers reporting it, or are students also reporting how they're feeling at the beginning of a class and then the end?

Richa Gupta: For the teacher training, it's a pre and a post, before and after the training. Teachers share information in a simple Google Form format. For classroom observations, it's a combination of visiting government officials. They already have a system in India where the education department usually visits schools on a random basis to understand the progress and the challenges. They also collect observation data, but we also have a field team that goes around collecting data in a more objective and technical way.

The RCT was basically an external study where children were surveyed one-on-one before the program started, then through the program, and also two years after the program, both the kids who didn't receive the program and those who did.

Jessica Kantor: How often are you updating your curriculum, and do you include the voices of youth to help shape your work?

Richa Gupta: We work in the curriculum space in two ways. First, every two to three years we work with each of our state partners to update the curriculum. This is based on data from the ground, and also feedback from teachers and children around what works, what doesn't, and which activities helped them share more, versus those that didn't click.

Relevance is a very big part of our feedback mechanism. All our content is co-created with public school teachers and vetted by children. Every time we pre-launched a curriculum, we'd pilot the classes with a small group of students, and they'd give us candid feedback about what worked and what didn't, and then we'd incorporate that.

Second, we also do a lot of rapid iteration directly in a few schools where we have our own team members supporting the teachers to test more rapid solutions. This is working within the system, which has a specific cycle, because the government funds this program, the teacher training, and the books being printed. For them, that cycle is really important to set. For constant innovation, we have something called a learning lab in Labhya, where we do A/B tests and different experiments in a small number of schools more rapidly to see what works, and what doesn't, with kids. Kids' feedback is a very big part of the learning lab as well.

Jessica Kantor: How do you define current attitudes towards youth mental health, not only in the general public, the government and the teachers, but also among the kids themselves?

Richa Gupta: From what we have seen, children really value the classes they have. It's honestly a surprise to them when they realize that this is a space they needed in order to share. They don't come programmed with the understanding that this is a basic expectation of school. Some schools are doing this for the very first time. Discovering they can share their feelings there makes them feel better. A lot of those 'aha' moments happen in the classroom.

It also depends on age group. We work from ages 5 to 15. The older age groups really appreciate the peer sharing and reflection time, because they're becoming more isolated and thinking about themselves, and they're understanding what that word really means. Having that space with their peers to talk about their own thoughts and feelings is something they've appreciated.

Jessica Kantor: Have you seen attitudes towards youth mental health shift in the community since you began your work?

Richa Gupta: We realized when we started Labhya, and went around talking to governments, teachers, parents, children, that to our surprise, everyone wanted kids to be happy and to learn better. Whomever you ask about aspirations for kids, they'd say they should be successful, learn better, and be happy. Everyone knew that something non-cognitive was stopping kids from being happier or learning better.

In India, because mental health is so taboo and no one really talks about it, there's just no shared vocabulary. Everyone in their own way articulated that they knew this is a

problem, and wanted to be there for their students or children, but the 'how' is not well-aligned for everyone. That's where we identified a role to play in figuring out the 'how' in a scalable way together with the government. That's what our model became.

The attitude has always been supportive, but nobody calls it mental health. Even today, if you walk into a public school in a rural part of northeast India where we work, kids won't know what anxiety means, but if you ask them in the local language if their heart feels heavy, if their stomach aches, or if they feel worried, they will say yes. It's also about the language we use to talk about mental health.

Jessica Kantor: Are there still barriers that exist to scale what you're doing in getting youth mental health to be taken seriously outside of school?

Richa Gupta: Yes. Three things are a barrier to making mental health a normal part of a child's day in life. One is the general non-conversation about it. It's not even a conversation, especially in households where income is a challenge, and the talk is all about money, labor, and making ends meet. Even in schools, it's usually about getting good grades and making sure you pass to the next grade. That larger conversation and vocabulary doesn't exist in our society to even talk about something like this, and that's a big barrier.

The second is the lack of evidence. This is more from a policy point of view. Just in India, for example, there is a big wave focusing on children being able to learn, to read and do math. That's also because for years, decades almost, there has been a bouquet of evidence created to show that children succeed better in life if they can do math and read at grade level. They succeed better in life and employability, and they stick it out in school more often. We don't have that similar quality and quantity of evidence in our context for mental health. That becomes a barrier to decision-making, which is fair enough, from a policy point of view.

The third is capital. Mental health is globally underfunded, and everyone will say this. Less than 2% of global philanthropy goes to mental health, much less so in the global south or India, or towards children. Because there is lack of capital, there's also lack of innovation in the way we approach the problem.

Jessica Kantor: Are any particular resources, guides, or tools been especially helpful in advancing your work?

Richa Gupta: It's not a physical guide, but partnering with governments has taught us a lot, and the way we do that is massive. It's a non-financial partnership. They fund the program course, the teachers being trained, the books being printed, the teacher allowance, et cetera. Labhya provides its people free to the government, and we raise our capital through philanthropy.

We place our team members across all levels of the education department. It's a massive way to understand how the system works, and how we can slowly integrate wellbeing into each phase of the program. One of the biggest learnings has been to co-create with the government, because we also understand their constraints, how

people think, and how sometimes, as outsider nonprofits, we come in with so much baggage of solution and evidence, when, in fact, the problems they need to be solved are much different. That's helped us balance our model to work at scale, and come from a more systems change lens that can build something from ground up.

Jessica Kantor: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others could use? You've shared a lot about the government partnership, specifically, but for someone wanting to work in India or another country and do something similar, what advice would you give them?

Richa Gupta: Three things have really helped us grow and scale through the years. One has been to focus on wellbeing, even when we are tempted to do something else. That is really important because when we work on mental health and wellbeing, there's always another parallel track which tries to catch on with us, like either art or training teachers on numeracy and literacy. Just keeping steadfast on track, even if there's a lack of resources, and avoiding mission drift, is something that has helped us.

The second thing is to transfer ownership to the governments we work with. There's no other way, especially working in a system like India's, where the government is the biggest change maker.

The third thing has been just finding the community that trusts us and supports us. For example, when we started our journey at Labhya, we did not find a lot of funders, champions or even board members early on in our journey. We were mainly focused on India, but over the years, we found champions and supporters outside of India who care about this work, who love the scale, who like us as founders and have taken a bet. That's been a big lesson. If you are not finding people who care about your work, maybe you're looking in the wrong place. There's always going to be a group of champions who would be willing to take a bet, no matter how crazy the idea is.

Jessica Kantor: At a global meeting of changemakers in Brazil, one of the key lessons was that if your current allies, their missions and their values have changed, or you can't find the right people with missions and values that align with yours, there are so many other people, governments, organizations, funders who do have those, and you just need to keep looking for them.

Richa Gupta: If I could, I'd add one more thing around scarcity and abundance. When we couldn't find supporters in the early stages for the work we do, we also inherently became competitive. We felt that there's only so many resources, but when we actually found a community, we saw and experienced what abundant resources really looked like, and as a result of that, we then unlearned our scarcity mindset.

We learned how to decolonize and understand that, actually, the more of us doers that work in this space, the better it is for all of us. Even the thought behind doing the RCT was just that this will open up the pie for funding for literally anyone who's working at the intersection of education and wellbeing, because they can cite the paper. They can say that when you work on mental health, learning outcomes also increase, it's not just a

hypothesis. That would open up the pie not just for Labhya, but for everyone else. That shift in mindset was really helpful for us as we found our community.

Jessica Kantor: How did you secure the partnership with the government?

Richa Gupta: This is an interesting story. We were almost just 11 months old, and we were partnering individually with a few schools as a pilot program, when we saw a public advertisement by one of the state governments in India, which said they were looking for practitioners, individuals, nonprofits, companies, anyone who wanted to build something for children's wellbeing. It was really big.

We thought there's no way we'd get selected, but we thought it would be a good way to articulate what we're doing, so we applied. It turned out we were one of the 13 organizations shortlisted to present to the minister and the education department. So we went, and it was funny because we were, of course, the youngest individuals and also the youngest organization. We thought, what are we doing here? There were all these 30-year-old nonprofits who've been working in education for the longest time, stalwarts whom we've always looked up to.

We just simply pitched what we did, and why we would love to co-create something. We were really honest about how we were still figuring things out, but said we'd be all-hands-on-deck. I think that's what they saw in us, because they agreed to work with us. We became part of a small consortium of nonprofits that actually co-created that program with the government, and this has been going on till now. That experience of working with the government became a model, and what we ended up scaling to all the other states as well.

Jessica Kantor: What's the most important question looking ahead that you think Co-Lab should be asking right now?

Richa Gupta: How do we bring the skeptics into this conversation? When we talk about mental health, especially the Co-Lab, it's a great example of funders and champions who already believe in mental health, who are part of the choir. There are other folks who are a 'maybe' and want to know more. They think it's too fluffy. They still think mental health is too fuzzy, and that's stopping them from bringing in capital, bringing in support, and growing the field.

Perhaps the most important question for the Co-Lab is how do we, as doers, and also funders, come together to bring in the folks who don't necessarily agree with us, or who may need more evidence and more convincing. If they're part of our community, the pie gets bigger for everybody. That's my thought process right now.

Jessica Kantor: Is there anything we didn't cover that you think is important not only for Co-Lab, but for other potential audiences to know about your work, the industry or strategy?

Richa Gupta: We didn't cover what kind of team it takes to implement these things.

Jessica Kantor: Is there anything you do want to share about teams?

Richa Gupta: Two things come to mind. As we built a team, we realized how important it's been to have proximate leaders work at Labhya. People who have experienced mental illness or mental illness-related challenges, or have had a loved one with this, or witnessed something with somebody in their home, or maybe worked with kids with these challenges. That keeps us grounded in what we do.

We're three co-founders, Malika Taneja, myself, and Vedant Jain. Vedant himself comes from a really troubled childhood. He experienced a lot of childhood adversity, and ended up being the person who broke that cycle. He did very well in a startup early in his career, but then it brought him back to who he was as a child, and he wanted to solve for that. He left his for-profit career to do this work. Having the right people who are proximate, who have lived experience, has been very interesting and very important to our journey as we scale, because that's the value system that usually gets lost when you professionalize a large organization. We now have almost 250 people full-time at Labhya. It's a huge team.

The second thing is probably not team-related. It's the role of technology in the work that we do. While we don't work in a system where every stakeholder is very savvy with technology, has access to it, and will use an app, we're trying now to test out ways that we can support teachers through chatbots and figuring out a safe way they can ask simple questions like, "Today I saw some bullying in my classroom. Is there a lesson plan I can do from this book that can help me solve or address that?" Then the chatbot helps. We are trying to figure out authentic, interesting, and meaningful use cases for tech in our work, and how the government can also own that.

Jessica Kantor: Thank you so much for talking with me today.

Jessica Kantor is an independent journalist specializing in health, human rights, and social impact. Her work can be found in Fast Company, Healthcare Quarterly, Innately Science, and others, and she has been a Solutions Insights Lab interviewer since 2023. Additionally, she provides communications strategy to nonprofits and INGOs who are working on the Sustainable Development Goals. She is a living kidney donor based in Los Angeles.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.