



CHILD PROTECTION



2.1 Sampark: Reaching out through school student helpline in Odisha

Odisha's school student helpline service, Sampark, has helped in timely and efficient redressal of complaints lodged by students related to education and schools under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE). Besides addressing issues like corporal punishment, the helpline has helped improve discipline in the education system by reducing teacher absenteeism and increasing sensitisation towards children's issues and their rights. In doing so, it has increased mobilisation among field officers, established an effective feedback mechanism while simultaneously opening a channel of communication between the students and education authorities, thereby helping provide solutions to students in distress. The helpline centre receives 200-300 calls daily where people clarify their doubts as well as register complaints. The helpline not only registers complaints but also provides counselling to distressed callers.

Rationale

Prior to the deployment of the Sampark Helpline, avenues of redressal were limited with respect to increased cases of dropouts, cases of negligence and violation of rules or the non-availability of entitlements as per the mandate of the RTE Act. Similarly, issues related to the needs of special and disadvantaged children, complaints of corporal punishment and incidents of sexual abuse of students needed redressal. It was primarily due to the fact that no direct contact mechanism existed between the officials and citizens to address their complaints, that issues seldom reached higher authorities, and suitable action was rarely taken.

Against this background, a 12-hour student helpline, Sampark, was started by the Department of School and Mass Education in Odisha. The helpline service was initiated to provide relief to the students in distress through timely action. It allows any individual or students (between the classes of I and IX) to call up the toll free number 1800 345 6722 to seek information or voice concerns, views and ideas on school education. The project is innovative as it covers almost all issues ranging from sexual abuse to education and the management system. Importantly, the identity of the caller is kept confidential. This case study aims to highlight the working design and impact of the Sampark helpline in Odisha.

Objectives

The student helpline is an attempt by the Department towards timely and efficient redressal of complaints lodged by students related to education and schools under the RTE Act. The specific objectives of the helpline are to listen to the concerns of students, ensure a safe and child-friendly environment that is free from punishment and exploitation and to understand the perspective of students

on the school education and management system. The helpline has, therefore, provided a mechanism for the protection of students' rights. Besides, the helpline has also been sensitising parents, students and teachers about their rights and duties under the RTE Act. This has also resulted in highlighting issues of concern in schooling and education that require urgent attention of the state.

Key Stakeholders

The key stakeholders involved in the programme are School and Mass Education Department at Odisha, school-going children and drop outs (6-16 years), parents, guardians, community members and teachers.

Figure 1: Key stakeholders

Implementing Agency

- ❖ The school student's helpline is operated by the Grievance Redressal Cell of School and Mass Education Department, at Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority, Bhubaneswar.

Funding Agency

- ❖ The programme is funded by the School and Mass Education Department, Government of Odisha under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

Beneficiaries

- ❖ The programme covers all the students going to school of age 6-16 years; (classes I – X) and who are in or out of school, parents, guardians, community members and teachers.

Implementation Strategy

The student helpline is based on the principle of freedom of expression where any student whose right to education is violated or who wants to share a suggestion or lodge a complaint can dial the toll free number 1800 345 6722. Students can also send an e-mail to schoolstudenthelplinesme@gmail.com to place their concerns before the authorities. The helpline has a well-defined functioning grievance redressal mechanism. The cell has a designated person who listens to phone calls and enters call details in a register. The identity of the caller is kept confidential to avoid any harm to the caller, especially if the complaint or suggestion is sensitive in nature. The information obtained is written down in a register for record keeping. The information is then entered into the computerised database under a suitable category. Letters received through the helpline are also scanned and sent through an e-mail to the concerned authority for further investigation and verification within a deadline.

The case is then investigated by the concerned officer or Headmaster, Block Resource Person or District Project Coordinator, depending upon the nature of the case. Cases which need urgent attention are given priority and are presented to the Commissioner-cum-Secretary for immediate redressal and action. He reviews the action taken on all calls in weekly meetings. The action taken reports are submitted to the helpline cell by the investigating officer through e-mail and in cases of emergencies, a direct message is sent to the concerned field level officer over phone call. Nodal officers in charge, who are senior officers, make a visit to each district once a month to follow-up and monitor activities and the action taken on cases registered. Disciplinary proceedings are then initiated against teachers and officials who are found at fault under the Odisha Civil Services Classifications, Control and Appeal Rules (OCSCCA).



Image 1: Helpline number displayed on school building in Jhumpura village, Keonjhar district

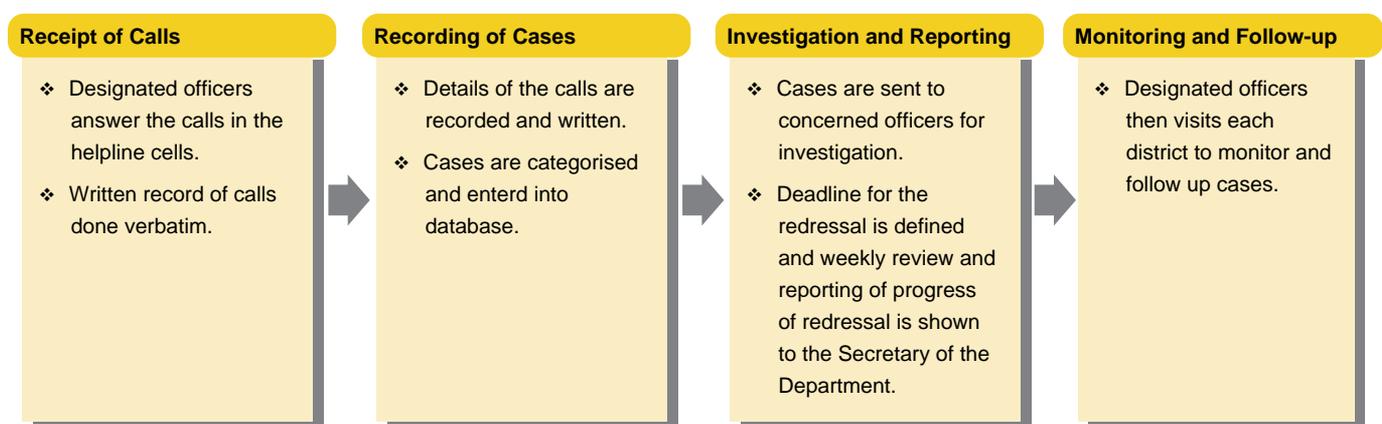
Resources Utilised

The Helpline Cell started with two call attendants-cum-counsellors, one data entry operator and one official assistant. At present the helpline team has 18 members.

The programme is funded by the School and Mass Education Department, Government of Odisha. The Budget provision has been made in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (2013-2014) to make the system sustainable.

To spread awareness among students and parents about the helpline, schools have been instructed to display the toll free number and e-mail address on their school walls and buildings. All schools, including government and private schools, as well as schools run by the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) Development

Figure 2: Process flow for addressing calls received at the Sampark helpline



Source: OneWorld Foundation India, 2014

Department, have to host this information for wider dissemination and awareness. Information is also disseminated through printed brochures and sent across to people to encourage them to use the helpline. The toll free number is also printed on students' diaries, *Sathi*.

Many schools and officers of the Department are involved in information dissemination and awareness generation about the helpline within the community, amongst parents, guardians and children through various mediums.

The helpline also demonstrates convergence with other departments for an integrated and holistic redressal of complaints. For instance, the helpline facility is also available to students in about 1,500 schools and hostels run by the SC and ST Development Department across the state. Accordingly, cases from these schools are referred to the concerned departments to address.

Impact

The helpline utilises existing resources to offer an effective state-level service for the protection of students' rights. The programme involves the participation of students, their parents and state level officers to address grievances on time, ensuring appropriate action.

The Sampark student helpline is the only helpline in Odisha to help children in distress by counseling and by providing accurate information over telephone about their rights and entitlements. From 2010-2011, the helpline received a total of 5,054 calls whereas the number of calls in 2013 reached 13,037. This shows the popularity of the helpline as a redressal mechanism among students and parents.

People speak...

Birendra Pradhan, Jhumpura, Keonjhar

"My daughter, Gayatri (Class-II) met with severe burn injuries in school by falling in hot gruel. I was away from home. My younger brother called the helpline. Thanks to the helpline's immediate intervention my daughter got the best treatment at Keonjhar and Cuttack. She is going to school now."

Khan Mohavvar Alam, Std. VIII, Gopinathpada, Cuttack

"My mother tongue is Urdu. I didn't have Urdu text books to read. The students' helpline made those available to me. I go to school every day. Thank you, helpline!"

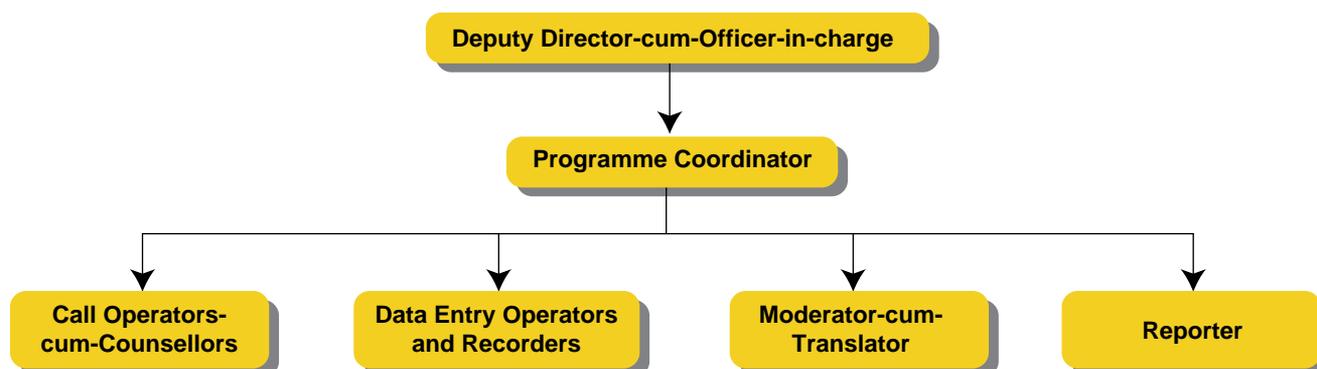
Mamatarani Dwibedi (Rachana's mother) Sambalpur

"My daughter, Rachana, could gain admission to the school due to the student's helpline's timely support. I'm grateful!"

Priyanka Swain, Std. VI, Nehru Bidyapitha, Kendrapara

"Two of my fingers on my right hand were lost in an accident at school. Thanks to the helpline's immediate help and medical care, I am able to write again!"

Figure 3: Organisational structure of the Sampark school student helpline team



Source: OneWorld Foundation India, 2014, and Sampark Helpline, Odisha

The helpline has:

1. Brought accountability in the education system
2. Reduced teacher absenteeism
3. Sensitised school authorities to issues concerning children's rights
4. Facilitated provision of solutions to children in distress
5. Increased mobilisation among field officers
6. Established an effective redressal and feedback mechanism

The school student helpline has been able to open a channel of communication between the students and education authorities, changing the way the system has been functioning till now. The helpline has proved effective in reducing the incidence of corporal punishment. Special provisions have been made for complaints relating to sexual harassment by employing women employees to address grievances from girl students and help them out with other concerns. After the installation of the helpline, significant improvement in the teacher-student relationship has been observed in schools. The helpline centre receives 200-300 calls daily where people clarify their doubts as well as register complaints. The helpline not only registers complaints but also provides counseling to distressed callers.

Key Challenges

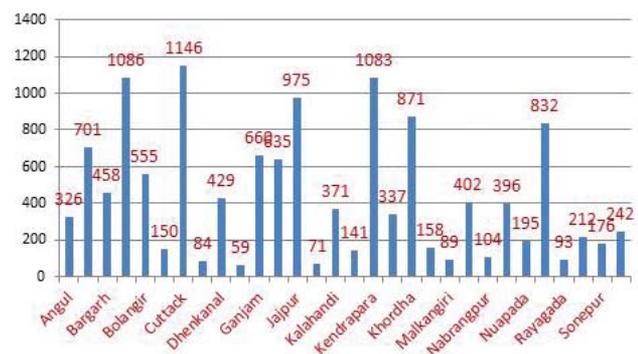
The project implementers faced challenges during the initial stage, but with the passage of time they overcame these to enhance the effectiveness of the helpline. Some of the challenges that the helpline faced includes the use of unparliamentary language by callers, which makes the attendants uncomfortable, and the misuse of the helpline by people making false calls and arguing with call attendants. Also, scores of cases have been found to be false after verification, resulting in loss of government resources. Due to the growing number of cases, field level officers are overburdened with the enquiry and reporting of cases.

Similarly, some of the callers expect higher authorities, such as state level officers, to resolve their matters which may not be possible in each case. On the other hand, there are challenges which have to be dealt with carefully such as cases of sexual abuse or corporal punishment. At the same time, collecting accurate details and verification from people is difficult as officials face resentment and opposition in such situations. A lot of the above challenges were dealt with through training and capacity building of teachers and counselors who have to attend the calls and resolve cases. They were trained to be patient and deal with complainants in a very friendly manner, and assure them of speedy and appropriate resolution of cases.

Broad categories of cases reported:

- Infrastructure related (additional classrooms, construction of school building etc)
- Children with special needs
- Teacher related (absenteeism, shortage of teachers, and negligence in duty)
- Fake enrolment of students
- Corporal punishment
- Clean environment and sanitation (drinking water, clean toilet)
- Mid-Day Meal

Figure 4: District wise calls received at the Sampark helpline between 2010-2013



Source: Sampark Helpline, Odisha, 2013

Replicability and Sustainability

By empowering students and providing them with accurate information while addressing their grievances, the Sampark school student helpline has proved to be a successful redressal mechanism. The helpline has been introduced across the state, in all schools including private and government-run schools.

The strength of this initiative lies in its ability to deliver assistance and counseling to students in distress, to improve the existing school education system through the use of better technology and to address the concerns of students on time. The introduction of the helpline has resulted in unearthing many cases of corporal punishment with students and parents coming forward to lodge complaints. This provides the Sampark helpline with the potential for replication not just in Odisha but

in other states as well. Other states could also adopt this approach of providing help to students and their parents as well as providing them with a chance to participate in improving the school education system.

The increased number of genuine calls at the centre indicates that students are using this service to communicate their concerns which proves that the initiative is sustainable. The project is unique in its ability to sustain itself, covering almost all concerns of students ranging from education to the management system.

Conclusion

The Sampark helpline provides a unique service as it provides children with a mechanism to express their concerns over email and through telephone in anonymity. In Odisha, the helpline has managed to create a positive impact on students and parents by restoring their faith in the school education system. Active feedback and redressal mechanisms by government officials have played an important role in this. The helpline has made a mark beyond the education system as well, by raising the issues of students for open discussion in the community.

Fact Sheet

Theme	Child Protection
Nodal Implementing Agency	Department of School and Mass Education, Government of Odisha
Geographical Coverage	All districts of Odisha State
Target Groups	School students
Years of Implementation	2010 - Present