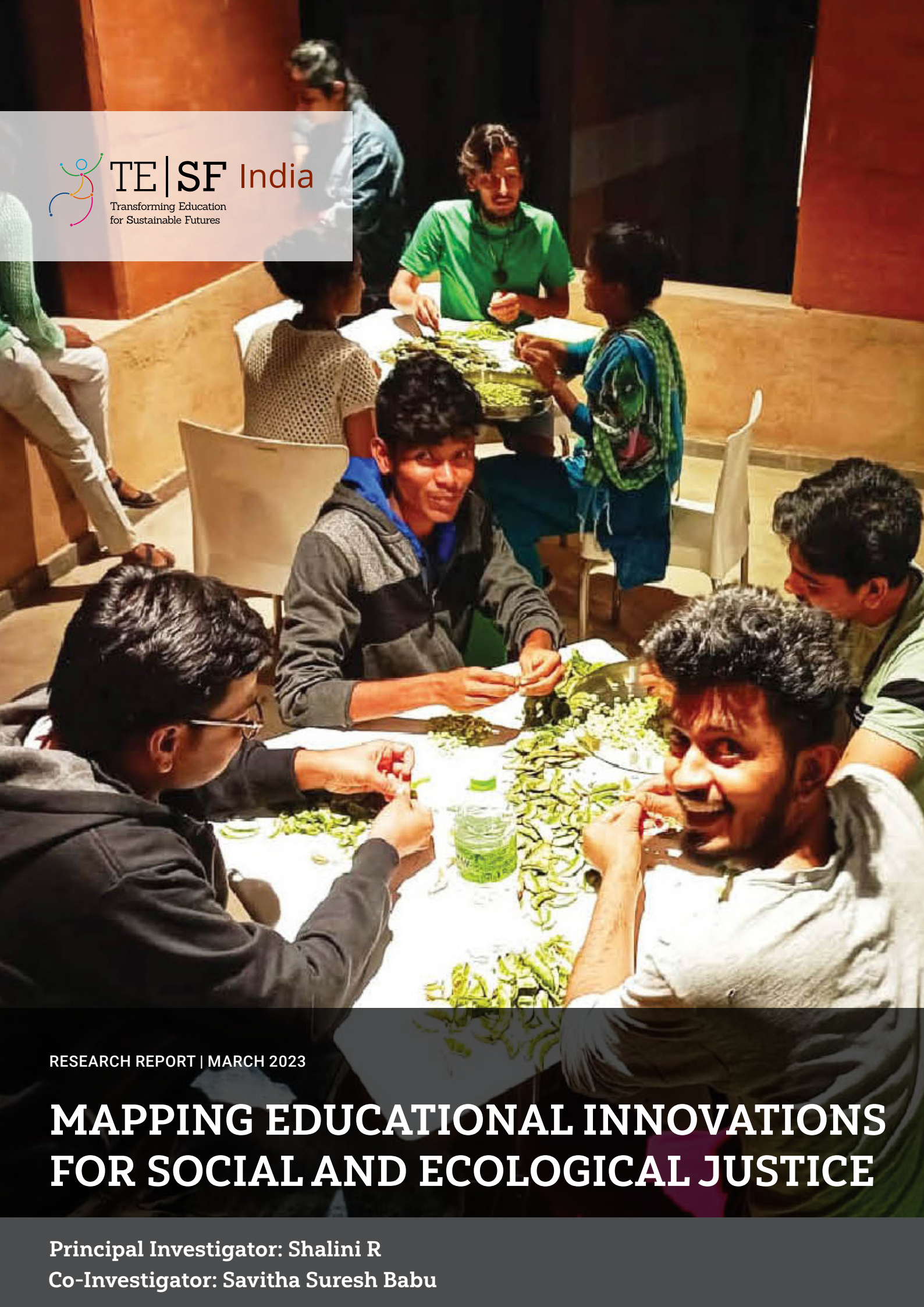TE|SF India
Transforming Education
for Sustainable Futures

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MAPPING EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS FOR SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Mapping the academic, administrative and cultural design of two alternative educational institutions, this study offers a glimpse into what critical education in practice can mean in contemporary India. Based on interviews with learners and educators, and field-based observations at Baduku Centre for Livelihoods Learning, Samvada and Visthar Academy of Peace and Justice, the report tracks the nature of curriculum, pedagogies deployed, leisure spaces and times, and administrative features that foreground socio-ecological justice. The authors argue that an education that links individual biographies and larger socio-political realities can be liberatory for learners and educators alike. Pedagogic activities that compel one to think rather than deliver content can be empowering. Socio-ecological justice is not a given, even when ideological commitments are clear and sharp, but requires constant work. Administrative procedures, design of buildings and informal spaces, and food choices all need to be thought through. While pragmatic concerns might sometimes mean that a commitment to diversity and inclusion is derailed, institutions that commit to socio-ecological journeys work through slippages, and correct course along the way. The work towards socio-ecological justice in education contexts is always ongoing. Offering individuals a framework to view their lives structurally enables building resilience and collective movement towards transformative societies. With researchers being "critical insiders" to one of the spaces being researched, the study also presents important insights into how feminist participatory action research can be done and its limits.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This study maps two educational interventions based in Karnataka to understand how their academic, administrative and cultural designs foster social and ecological justice: Baduku Centre for Livelihoods Learning, which is under the larger organisation Samvada, and Visthar. Both institutions vary in nature—while the former institution began as an effort to create meaningful livelihoods for marginalised youth, the latter originated to enhance the capacities of workers within civil society organisations. Nevertheless, they share a commitment towards critical enquiry, problem-posing learning modes, and social transformation.

Although India has a variety of such interventions, their histories have not yet been sufficiently documented and examined to produce guidelines for future design and practice in the area of transformative education. By outlining these two interventions on a theoretical grid of administrative, academic, and cultural design in education, the current research project aims to fill this gap and offer pathways for collective reflection and learning. Theoretically, the study draws upon critical pedagogy to understand these interventions. This framing is ground-up since many educators have framed themselves as critical educators, seeing the classroom as being linked to "the lived experiences outside the classroom, in which bodies, identities and societal norms" (Giroux & Giroux, 2006 as cited in Carr, 2011) all shape learning processes. Paulo Freire, to whom critical pedagogy can be traced back, criticised the oppressive practice of "banking education," which regards people as passive depositories of information, and proposed "problem-posing" and "thematic" inquiry as ways to examine and disclose repressive life conditions. He questioned education as a depositing act, in which the students serve as depositories and the teacher serves as the depositor (Freire, 1996). Instead, he emphasised a dialogic education that enabled social transformation. We will review the literature relevant to this project further on in this introduction, but it is worth noting here that educators in the institutions under study framed their work as critical pedagogy in practice—a framing useful to understand their everyday activities. Across the two sites, learning was seen as connected not just to learning particular facts or perspectives but as a fundamental re-examination of how one relates to and lives in this world. Re-examining one's own journey and understanding connections between the self and society was integral to what education meant in these two organisations.

Research Context and Background

This project emerges from our practice as educators and our investment in creating empathetic and critical learning spaces for socially marginalised youth in Karnataka, India. Both the principal investigator and co-principal investigator for this project work at Baduku Centre for Livelihoods Learning, Samvada, Bengaluru (one of the interventions we studied)[1]. For more than a decade now, Baduku has striven to create meaningful and sustainable livelihood opportunities for young people, through an education that combines self-reflexivity, technical skills and an in-depth understanding of the social worlds we inhabit. Our learners are equipped to reflect upon and question social hierarchies of caste, class, gender, religion and region, while also learning professional skills. Our reflections as faculty who teach courses to prepare journalists, peer counsellors, and college lecturers through courses at Baduku have shaped the contours of this research project and have influenced its unfolding.

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[1] https://samvadabaduku.org/baduku/

At the start of the project, we aimed to map five other interventions that crossed the boundaries between formal and informal and offered innovative educational opportunities. But due to practical constraints, we could only cover one other organisation along with Baduku—Visthar: A Non-Formal Academy of Peace and Justice.

Visthar is a broad umbrella under which many different courses and training programmes are held. Direct work with communities is undertaken in the Koppal branch of the organisation, while different types of training for civil society groups are taken up in Bengaluru. Within the wide ambit of pedagogic interventions undertaken by Visthar, this research project focused on one programme in particular: GDST (gender diversity and social transformation). The choice was partly pragmatic, given the access to educators, alumni and course curricula. It also turned out, however, to be an apt choice. The one-month residential GDST course, as recalled by learners and facilitators alike, offered possibilities for personal–political transformation.

At the start of the project, we had aimed to understand how educational interventions can be transformative by mapping their educational designs on a grid of academic, administrative and cultural components. We have tried to work with this formulation, even as we recognise that the distinctions between these categories are not watertight, and that they influence each other.

Table 1: Institutional details | Source: Compiled by the author

Institution	Description	Course(s) focused on in this research
Visthar: A Non-Formal Academy of Justice and Peace	Two sites of work: Bengaluru and Koppal. In Bengaluru, there are training programs to enhance the capacities of civil society organisations, particularly on gender issues. In Koppal, there are various direct community initiatives including a shelter for girl children in distress, and Visthar Rangashala, a theatre school	GDST, a one-month intensive residential course
Baduku Centre for Livelihoods Learning, Samvada	They increase opportunities for socially marginalised youth to find meaningful livelihood opportunities, while also equipping them with critical social justice perspectives	Feminist counselling, mass media, learning lenses (to prepare learners to teach in higher education), waste management, and career guidance. Courses in Baduku vary in duration from 1–9 months.

The report is divided into four chapters: the first chapter is this introduction which will lay out the relevant

literature, the research questions and methodology, and provide a brief summary of the other chapters. In the second chapter, learnings in the classroom, curricula, and methodologies adopted will be focused upon. The third chapter will map the cultural and administrative components of education that interest us and discuss how outreach and learner admissions work, what it means to mentor a young person and how a pluralistic ethos is maintained in everyday practices. The fourth chapter will examine some specific narratives from the two sites studied, to unpack how the work towards socio-ecological justice within education is always ongoing. The concluding chapter will offer a brief summary and some takeaways for all of us invested in creating transformative educational spaces.

Social and Ecological Justice: Educational Contexts

Social justice is an oft-used phrase in relation to higher education to refer to equitable distribution of resources, undoing historical disadvantages of the socially marginalised, and the creation of a more democratic "public sphere" within educational contexts (Gundimeda, 2009). Social justice in education is a very broad domain which includes policy frameworks, institutional logics and finances. However, it can also be seen at a more micro level of institutional workings; usually in these discussions, the stress is on the necessity of inclusion (of the most marginalised) and moving "beyond inclusion" (Deshpande & Zacharias, 2013), to create systems and processes that ensure that marginalised students and faculty have equal opportunities to sustain and grow.

While this is of crucial importance, what we also need to acknowledge is how the very presence of marginalised students enriches learning for all. Rege (2010) has written of how diverse classrooms ensure a richness of discussion and debate. When texts authored by Dalit-identifying authors are included, and marginalised youth are part of conversations, simple constructions—English seen as colonial hangover or alien, for instance—come to be challenged. Social justice, when conceptualised this way, takes the conversation beyond representation of the marginalised. It includes representation of voices, imaginations, and practices from the margins.

In seeking to conceptualise social justice within education, Gewirtz (1998) offered a broad framework of analysis. She suggested considering the extent to which, and how, education policies "support, interrupt or subvert":

1. Exploitative relationships (capitalist, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, disablist, etc.) within and beyond educational institutions? 2. Processes of marginalisation and inclusion within and beyond the education system? 3. The promotion of relationships based on recognition, respect, care and mutuality or produce powerlessness (for education workers and students)? 4. Practices of cultural imperialism? And which cultural differences should be affirmed, which should be universalized and which rejected? 5. Violent practices within and beyond the education system? (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 482).

This broad framework offers us useful pointers. In our context, we could see social justice in education as learning-teaching processes that question exploitative relations of patriarchy, caste and capitalism. An affirmation of marginalised voices, and the questioning of caste hegemonies are important to questioning power, and violence in the everyday. As we will elaborate further down, critical pedagogy, an education

that compels learners to think through, rather than deliver ready-made content and fosters care and nourishment for learners and educators alike, is also important to social justice.

We have added the phrase ecological justice to how we set out to understand these interventions. How do we see this term and its connection to social justice in education? Justice for the environment has been seen in two ways—environmental justice and ecological justice. Environmental justice concerns the distribution of environmental resources among human beings. Ecological justice has been understood as the relation between humans and nature (Low & Gleeson, 1998). Rather than look at ecological crises as only concerning human and non-human relations, the environmental justice movement fights for fair distribution of clean air, water, land and food security across all sections of human society. Simultaneously, it questions the prevalence of structured social, economic and cultural prejudice in the disposal of hazardous toxic wastes, installations of incinerators and resource depletion. Given the realities of the climate crisis and vulnerabilities that the human species as a whole faces, ecological–environmental justice must concern us all. However, we believe a political ecology view is necessary to understand ecological crises and resolutions encompassing both human and non-human worlds, and the complex connections between the two. The need for critical pedagogues to take environmental–ecological crises more substantially into account has been pointed out:

> Critical pedagogy, a major discourse in education is based in the root metaphors of progress anthropocentrism, and subjectively centred individualism – the same metaphors that underlie modernism, the Industrial Revolution, and capitalism – and has ignored the environmental crisis (Bowers, 2001 as cited in Furman & Gruenewald, 2004, 53).

Taking this critique on board, we realise the need to integrate issues of inequality based on caste, religion, class, gender and disability, with concerns of nourishing the earth, reducing waste and ensuring a hospitable global world for all including both humans and non-humans. We are in agreement with scholars (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004) who urge critical educators to develop a broader perspective, incorporating ecological, environmental and social justice concerns. We have termed this broader perspective socio-ecological justice, and we hope to understand what it translates to within institutional practices. Let us now revisit the research questions that have driven this research project.

Research Questions

1. What are the ways in which the specific interventions aim to create transformative educational spaces and sustainable livelihood possibilities for youth?
2. What are the academic, administrative and cultural designs and processes that allow them to meet their goals? What challenges have organisations faced in designing and implementing these?
3. What are the contests within these field sites? How do we understand these field sites from the perspective of learners?
4. How can learnings from across the two sites be brought together, to evolve collaborative road maps for transformative educational futures?

Research Methodology

We adopted a Feminist Participatory Action Research framework (FPAR) in this study, believing that this will allow us to centre our participant/co-educator voices, and remain reflexive of our place as creators of

knowledge. Broadly the FPAR has four significant processes in research, including: "coalescing into a group, encouraging the shared ownership of research process and its outcomes, developing multiple centres of power and promoting interdependency" (Shimei & Ajayi 2022, p. 1). The ideological underpinnings of the approach challenge social power hierarchies within research, including the language and practices of traditional knowledge production. The ways in which social relations are structured, questions are framed, methods and roles are allocated, and field research is conducted within the research team are all embedded within larger social power relations.

Our commitment to FPAR remains undeterred. However, in keeping with the feminist research ethos, we need to reflect upon the extent to which we have been able to diffuse power in the research process. Two faculty members each, from both Baduku and Visthar, have been part of the research reflection process at different stages and to different degrees. However, the research team, primarily the PI (principal investigator), Co-PI and the RA (research assistant), have driven the data collection and analysis processes. Also, in keeping with the participatory commitments, we had field researchers undertake classroom observations in both sites. The field assistants already had linkages with the respective educational institution they were based in. Due to a range of pragmatic factors, however, they could not participate in the analysis and reflection to the extent we would have hoped.

We adopted a wide range of methods in data collection (see Table 1). Different social power dynamics were at play across these ways of collecting information. In one of the focus group discussions (FGDs), the presence of very senior faculty members alongside junior faculty members meant that some voices were louder and others feeble. In individual interviews with Baduku students, despite conscious efforts by the research team to ensure that their teachers do not interview students, a sense of gratitude towards the organisation was sensed at times. Whether this sense of gratitude could be the reason for enthusiastic participation in the research was a question we had to ask and reflect upon.

As against this, in interviews with Visthar GDST alumni, the power relations were almost reversed—with the alumni setting the terms of interviews, including time, format and duration. We wondered if the language of these interviews (with the Baduku alumni it was in Kannada, and with the Visthar alumni it was in English) also represented this distinction, with English in the Indian context having a social power and currency that regional languages rarely do. These brief reflections are intended to point towards the subjectivity and power hierarchies inherent to knowledge production enterprises. We believe acknowledging them in this writing process is an important element of the feminist research ethos we have hoped to practice.

Table 2: Data collection across the two sites | Source: Compiled by the author

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION	BADUKU	VISTHAR
Autoethnography	6	2
In-depth interviews • Founder's interview • Alumni interview • Educators' (teaching and non-teaching) interview	1 10 4	1 6 2
FGD	2	1
Field observation	20 days	

At the beginning of the research, we elicited autoethnographic accounts of their journeys within Baduku/ Visthar by educators. These form a valuable resource in themselves, as teacher- reflections on practice, and offer important insights to this project. Interviews with founders of both interventions, alumni, teaching and non-teaching staff offered a range of different perspectives on learning-teaching and everyday life in these institutions. FGDs elaborated on these, and on contestation within the sites. Finally, classroom observations (conducted for a total duration of 20 days, with both sites combined) offered an in-depth understanding of pedagogy and everyday learnings.

Locating the Study: A Brief Review of Literature

Mercy Kappen, from Visthar, wrote as part of her auto-ethnographic reflections, of how she was deeply influenced by Paulo Freire and the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in her work with communities. She wrote:

> *However, for the uninitiated, it was not that easy to convert his dense text into methods and tools for the grass-root communities. The Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel came at the right time…These handbooks, published in the '80s, served as a guide/manual for awareness-building and community mobilisation programs. I had developed a great admiration for Sally and Anne, for the way they translated the philosophy and approaches of Paulo Freire into simple, manageable concepts, methods, and tools for training.*

In a similar vein, we find that our learnings from Baduku and Visthar offer productive resources for translating critical pedagogy into practice. In his work, Freire criticises the oppressive practice of "banking education", which regards people as passive depositories of information, and proposes problem posing and thematic inquiry as ways to examine and disclose repressive life conditions. Traditional education for him was a depositing act, in which the students serve as depositories and the teacher serves as the depositor (Freire, 1996) thus furthering socially oppressive ways of being. Critical pedagogy, or problem-`posing education, is the antithesis of the banking model of education. It emphasises a questioning

of oppressive social relations and questions the figure of the teacher as all-knowing. A willingness to dialogue collectively and learn from each other is important to a critical pedagogue. For Paulo Freire, epistemological curiosity—the never-ending questioning, awareness of our "unfinishedness," and the ability of the beginner's mind—is an essential component of critical pedagogy (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008). For Peter McLaren, critical pedagogy is concerned with both the specifics of what students and others could do to work together to effect change, and the cultural politics that enable such practices (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Antonia Darder argues that practising critical pedagogy necessitates educators working collaboratively with their students, colleagues and the greater school community. For educators to "go beyond the bounds of prescribed educational practice" and design classroom pedagogy that meets their students' context-specific requirements, they must collaborate linguistically, socially, culturally, economically and politically (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Across these understandings, one sees an emphasis on the need to ensure "as much coherence as possible between the type of society we hope for, and the way we work towards that future" (Hope et al., 1995). If one wants to work towards a more just society then, our classrooms have to become more just, and emancipatory spaces.

Creating such spaces is not easy, and comes with a range of practical challenges, especially when larger educational systems are embedded within systemic hierarchies of class, caste, gender and other axes of inequality. Critical teachers in Kerala (Kareepadath, 2018), influenced by the Kerala Science Literature Movement (KSSP), attempted to create dialogic classrooms, despite the challenge of standardised curriculums and mechanically regimented school environments they had to work with. Several educators, across the world, have attempted different ways of enacting critical pedagogy through problem solving, dialogue and action. These efforts and their challenges have to be understood in context-specific ways. We believe the current study offers important insights for educationists and practitioners alike, especially in the Indian context where there has been limited exploration of critical pedagogy in practice, especially in the context of young adult learners (Belliappa's [2018] analysis of the use of "cascading pedagogy" in the gender classroom which equips learners to run workshops on gender equity themselves, and learn through the process, is an important exception). We are concerned with the *how* or the *doing* of critical pedagogy. In this *doing*, we bring together the curriculum and pedagogic practices with administrative set-up, food and culture.

To map what "doing" critical pedagogy means in our context, we found educational design a useful lens. Educational design research has been characterised as interventionist, iterative, process oriented, utility oriented and theory oriented (Van den Akkere al, 2013). It is based on a real-world educational intervention but is not characterised by an input-output manner of understanding educational outcomes. Rather, the focus is on understanding various processes and their utility in an iterative manner within educational interventions. The research is also marked by theoretical underpinnings, i.e., it aims to develop "empirically grounded theories through combined study of both the process of learning and the means that support that process" while being conducted "in collaboration with, not solely for or on, practice" (McKenney & Reeves, 2018, p. 14). This "collaboration with" allows us to see both teachers and learners as intellectuals and co-creators of the knowledge being generated in this project. And at the same time, it hopes to offer useful insights for practice as well.

Bringing together educational design with critical pedagogy practically means understanding what curricula were adopted in classrooms, what methods worked and what did not, what learnings lasted, how educators and learners reflect on the classroom, and how overall environments were made as just and equitable as they could be. Further, it explores and points towards the work that needs to be done, collectively, to continue the path towards socio-ecologically just learning spaces.

CHAPTER 2. LESSONS AND LEARNING: EXPLORING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Scene 1: Eleven women farmers had spent the day learning vermicomposting, different methods to cultivate honey and in a demonstration of vermicasting on a farmland. They had discussed multi-crop farming, the problems with pesticides, and a few other concerns throughout the day. As they took a break, with teacups in hand, they gathered around the facilitator. A new session began with a simple question—should women own land? If yes, why don't they? What are the barriers?

Scene 2: A group of learners are asked to imagine different scenarios or stills like a tableau: one, where men occupy space reserved for women in a metro compartment and "eve teasing" occurs. Two, women passing by an area crowded with men. The learners were asked to think about what they really see and were asked to take up spots in the scenarios. Long conversations ensued on what being in a role made them feel.

Scene 3: A group of young people are discussing significant moments in their life. In the process, a young man shares how he sold flower garlands made by his mother. Selling these garlands required him to travel to another village and involved a long walk. Sometimes, his sister accompanied him. As they went together, they played and joked. He shared how, one time, he told his sister his pant-pocket had a hole. His sister laughed, and said, his pant pocket had one hole but her entire dress was filled with pockets—meaning that her dress was torn. He said this and burst into tears. He repeatedly said, "*But we are not poor*". The whole group wept with him. After a while, the facilitator asks a question, "*Why must we be ashamed of poverty*"?

Each of these scenes is an instance of a classroom activity undertaken across the two sites of study. They are extracted from observations, interviews and auto-ethnographic writings from learners and educators across the two institutions. Across these scenes, note that the sessions begin with a question or a problem, encouraging dialogue and conversation. This was at the crux of the pedagogic process across Baduku and Visthar. As one of the educators wrote in her reflections,

> We basically follow Paulo Friere's problem posing method. So it has some 5-6 steps and one is the presentation of a quote. It has come out of an experience which the participants can feel with and asking participants, do you have similar experiences? And encouraging them to share those experiences… and if this happens, what are the consequences of that? If there is domestic violence, what are the consequences of that on the woman, on men, children, family and then—"Why does this happen, what are the root causes of this"? And the last stage will be, what can we do about it?

Not all our educators reference Freire in how they think of their methods, but the impulse is the same as this educator, to enable learners to think and arrive at an understanding, rather than offer it to them as a ready-made understanding of the world. Sessions, on a wide variety of topics, begin with questions and problems posed, which are then fleshed out together to lead to some shared understandings. This is not to say input sessions/lectures are not needed or used, but they have a secondary role when the focus is on "teaching to think" rather than merely transferring information. Some patterns can be gleaned from the scenes described above—problem posing/questioning is important but so is empathising or literally being in the place of someone experiencing a situation. Many times, our own life journeys become important as texts for learning. As another one of our educator-respondents writes: "We use incidents from the life-journeys of our participants to build songs and stories to reflect on pressing social realities-many have felt this has transformed their lives".

For the student in the third scene described earlier, the crying with his classmates offers an avenue of empathy and support, but for learning to occur, it must also eventually enable him to question and reject the shame associated with poverty. The links between the self and social, individual biographies and historical-social realities are crucial to the framing of curricular content, methods of teaching, and assessment of learning planned across the institutions. In this chapter, we will consider each of these stages of learning: curriculum making, classroom pedagogy, and evolution of assessments/learning outcomes.

On Curriculum

We are looking at a diverse set of courses across the two institutions. Overall, courses considered (in interviewing educators, learners and curricular analysis) have related to feminist counselling, mass media, waste management, sustainable agriculture, career guidance, early childhood care and education, coaching for competitive examinations, preparation of teachers in higher education, and gender development and sustainability.

In Baduku, three pillars are used to delineate a curriculum—self, skills and perspectives. Course content is divided across these three pillars. The separation is not water-tight, but a useful division to account for diverse curricular content that Baduku courses aim to cover. Let us consider a couple of examples of how these pillars translate into curricula: In a course for reporters conducted online, the self pillar includes two core chapters: "Me as a person" (covering concerns of who I am, and my caste, class and gender) and "Me as a journalist" (includes considerations of journalists as citizens, activists, and workers). Under the pillar of perspective, papers related to social justice (caste, class, gender, disability and LGBTQ issues) and ecological sustainability are included. In the skills section, along with reporting skills, papers on digital technology important for journalists, basic English and translation, and media entrepreneurship are included. Links between these pillars are sometimes made, and important to the overall educational philosophy of Baduku. In a media start-up course, English language learning is listed in the skill pillar, but the description makes clear that a certain perspective to the learning is important. After elaborating that the paper on English will include grammar, syntax, conversational skill development, the curriculum states the following:

> Importantly, the paper will also discuss the politics of language and the history of how English came to be the language of global communication. This is so that the students understand that

language is not a neutral aspect of our lives, and they remain alert to the hierarchies/relationships between languages during their careers as journalists.

This connection between what we need to know to be successful professionals, and at the same time, retaining the ability to critically analyse our own social worlds can be seen across different course curricula. In a course on sustainable agriculture, learners not only understand the agricultural crisis of our times, and sustainable agricultural practices, but also reflect on whether they want to identify as farmers, and what about our social structure makes them want to claim/reject the farmer identity. The three pillars—self, skills and perspective—are interconnected in many ways, and in conversations with educators, this interconnection was emphasised. What was also recognised was the challenge in bringing these interconnections to fruition. An educator shared her frustration about not finding resource persons who could teach English language skills while retaining a critical perspective towards the language, for instance. So, while intentions are always clear, pragmatic implementation remained a real challenge, she said.

While these frustrations at finding the right mix of faculty/resource persons remained a larger question faced by Baduku, what was also reiterated was that the curriculum was not considered set in stone and was always evolving. This need to constantly be alert to change and evolve curriculum was also shared by educators at Visthar. In an FGD, one of the educators said: "*The process of evolving a curriculum is not common, it cannot be common because it is very much participant-determined and context-determined*". There is of course a starting point: the curriculum and the ideological standpoints that the facilitator brings in. But modifications are possible, keeping in mind the needs of the participants. A Visthar educator shared how conflict and disaster management was not initially included, but participants who came from conflict-zones asked for components related to the same. This willingness to incorporate new content also keeps the course dynamic; when the MeToo movement (a social movement against sexual abuse) happened, the gender-course had space to incorporate it into the classroom, he said. One of the educators at Baduku captured the approach to curriculum that we notice, to varying degrees, across the two institutions:

> Though we have some framework in place, it has been evolving depending on the needs of the learner. Sometimes we would have incorporated a skill component in our curriculum for a certain course, and by the end of the course, that skill might be outdated in the concerned field. Sometimes we might have added something since the field would demand learners to have that skill set. So, I consider these instant changes, meeting the learner requirements as the major difference from the mainstream.

Through reflections on previous cohorts, pedagogy and curriculum are changed and adapted. A faculty member shared in an FGD that the agriculture course in Baduku was reworked keeping seasons in mind:

> We have made modules season-wise—when to sow seeds, where we can get things, how to mix ingredients, etc. We also consider the practice time in agriculture. So, we've revised the curriculum based on what we perceived as a need.

An acknowledgement that curricular content is not set in stone, and a willingness to update and refine it as per the needs of learners or changes in a particular field, mark the approach to curriculum making in these

institutions. These processes are not always easy. In an FGD, one educator reflected on the ways in which he and his team have made the curriculum, and said he wonders if they "*try to make students run when they are learning to walk*". By this, he meant that for students coming from marginalised communities, for whom even basic technological exposure is limited, being taught advanced skills (that are required by the job market) can pose a challenge. Learners also recognised this challenge. One of Baduku's alumni from the Mass Media course had this to say:

> Before the course, I didn't know how to even handle an android phone. All I knew was to receive and make calls. Because of my family commitments (single mother dealing with domestic violence and family issues), I could not travel to Bangalore… but some of the faculty from Baduku came to Hassan… they taught us in a very friendly manner. Now we have a YouTube channel… from not knowing how to join zoom classrooms, I went on to learn Adobe Photoshop and InDesign.

This brings us to the question of how the wide varieties of material that are handled in these two institutions are taught. The clear objectives of the sessions, materials required, and methodology to be followed in the training manuals developed by Visthar give us an inkling. The training manuals, across topics, suggest various ways of making complex topics accessible to learners through a range of different activities. To help learners understand the "gender differentiated impact of disasters and conflicts on men, women and transgender people in South Asia", for instance, one method suggested is to divide participants into groups based on country/state of origin, and the nature of conflict/disaster in a region. The groups are then asked to discuss the impact of the disaster/conflict on specific individuals. These include the "impact of conflict in Sri Lanka on a woman of ethnic Tamil origin in a temporary camp in Vavuniya and a Sinhalese male Jawan based in Vavanuiya" , the "impact of floods in Orissa on a pregnant woman from a Dalit community", and the "impact of flood on a transgender male to female and female to male in Maldives". (Murthy & Kappen, 2012, p. 39) In the discussions that follow after small group discussions, the facilitator helps learners think about how women, transgendered people and marginalised men have fewer resources to prepare for the onset of disasters and have lesser representation in the relief efforts. These discussions, through considerations of individual life stories, brings to the fore interlocking oppressions that come into play when conflicts/disasters occur. Connecting individual experience to larger socio-political realities is important in "engaged pedagogy", as we discuss further on.

Engaged Pedagogy

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed how a question or problem is posed at the beginning of sessions to initiate conversations and learning. An effort to move beyond the lecture mode and use a variety of different methods that can engage the learners actively marked the pedagogy in both institutions. The web exercise was another useful pedagogical tool discussed by educators and learners, particularly in Visthar. An educator described this process:

> A case study of a Dalit woman, Nagavalli's life are presented: her caste location, her being paid less than her husband for the same work and so on. Some positive components are also included; for instance, that she got a piece of land through a government scheme. One of the participants plays the role of Nagavalli and is made to sit in the centre of a circle with a ball of thread. Different participants hold placards related to identity (gender, age, ethnicity) and institutions impacting her

life (family, education, religion, State). As the story of Nagavalli is narrated, the person in the centre throws the thread towards the appropriate placard. For instance, if the story states how she is paid less than her husband for the same work, the thread goes to the person holding the gender placard. The entire group is then asked why gender matters in that particular situation. Potentially, they answer that there is a social norm that men should be paid more. As the story progresses, the person in the centre throws the thread to the person holding the related placard; if there is land acquired through a government policy, the thread goes to the person holding the placard of the State. Linkages are made between identities, institutions and the life of the person in the centre of the circle in this manner. A particular crisis in her life is presented and participants are asked to reflect on how she can be helped and the crisis resolved. Eventually, someone will suggest asking Nagavalli or the character in the centre herself, to pass the thread to her, so she stands up and sees what is happening around her, and is supported in finding a solution.

This web exercise, one of our educators writes, enables learners to see that, quoting Audre Lorde, "there is nothing like a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives". She represented this understanding visually:
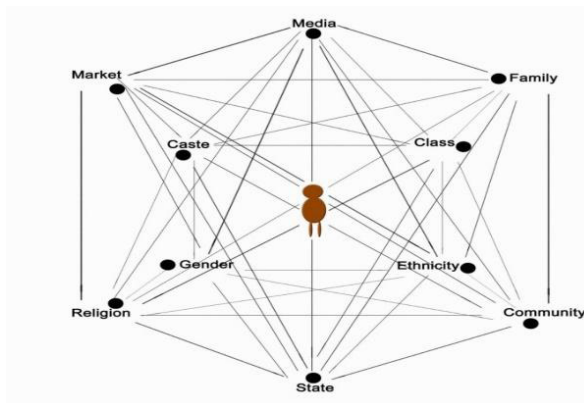

Image 1: The web of social relations drawn by an educator from Visthar | Source: Research Team, 2023

Interestingly, the web activity had been used across both institutions we studied and was recalled by learners in both Visthar and Baduku as a methodology that had stayed with them, enabling them to see themselves and the worlds they inhabited as interconnected. Learners also spoke about how they were actively involved in their own learning. An alumnus from the Baduku career guidance course had this to say:

In a formal college classroom, we see that everything is centred around the lecturer. She/he delivers and the learners receive. But the atmosphere in Baduku was entirely different... I mean, right in the beginning we had the opportunity to talk about ourselves, our life journeys at length... all participants were comfortable sharing in the classroom, throughout the course. Because students came from different backgrounds, we learnt many things from each other.

Educators at both institutions spoke of experimenting with a variety of methods to engage learners and make sessions interesting. Methods that use the learners' embodied selves seemed important in recollections of learners and educators. An alumni learner from the waste management course recalled

how they were asked to collect all the waste they generated from the start-date of the course until the finish date. On the last day of the course, all participants brought in their waste and poured it into the centre of the room. Collectively, they brainstormed what they had really needed, and how best the waste generated could be disposed of. The learner said this helped him think more thoroughly about waste as not something out there, but as something that he generates on an everyday basis.

Guerilla theatre techniques used in the classroom was another interesting experiment. Educators recalled how amongst a group of participants, the men constantly interrupted women as they spoke. Wondering how to tackle the situation, they decided to reverse roles. In the lunch break, they told the women that in the discussion after a movie screening, they were to consciously talk over men. When this was done, the dynamic within the classroom changed. But it was not enough to leave it at that, they went on to discuss what was happening. The Visthar educator said:

> It was not that the men were doing it deliberately, but patriarchal conditioning had taught them to occupy space in ways that women did not. So, it was important to have it pointed out, and have conversations around the incident.

On somewhat similar lines, an educator from Baduku shared how he sought to challenge the gendered ideas of a course participant. The course had young rural women students, who had just been exposed to urban metropolitan modes of living and were experimenting with clothing choices. Wearing jeans, for them, was an assertion of this experimentation. At such a time, a male classmate said women wearing jeans was not respectable. To challenge these ideas, the course facilitators (two men) decided to employ an experiment: they wore shorts to class, to question the idea of "respectable" clothing. Since they were held in esteem by the male participant, he was struck by their attire, as were the other participants. A long conversation ensued on what is considered respectable for men, and women and for teachers and students and where our notions of dignity and respectability come from. While they were not sure whether the male student changed their attitudes, *"the experiment impacted several other students in the classroom"*, recalled the educator, in conversation with the research team.

So far, we have discussed how educators strive to move beyond the lecture method and find other ways to engage and steer students towards complex topics. But this is not always easy and comes with its own set of challenges. One of our educators shared how in talking about the different waves of the feminist movement, she was trying to present to a class of young people how the sex-gender binary came to be questioned. She writes,

> I remember that one of the classes I took as part of this course was a major flop. I was trying to give an account of the women's movement in three waves, talking specifically about how the gender binary came to be questioned, but noticed that the class was increasingly distracted or bored. It was early days. When I asked the course whether they were bored, and they said yes, I felt a sense of confusion. The co-convener took over, and asked students to do a simple task, write what they like about being a boy or a girl, and facilitated a discussion about it. While this enabled an easier engagement and a lively classroom, I felt a little uncomfortable that we were not really able to move beyond the gender binary. In a later class, again, we sought to bring in the idea of

gender as a construction and talk about being cis gendered (this was also a consequence of the admission forms of Baduku), but the idea of cis and trans took sometime to register (despite there being one transwoman in the class).

In this case, the topic was complex and the educator noticed that the class was distracted. A simple distinction between sex as biology and gender as socio-cultural has marked gender training for a long time, and she was trying to present how this has come to be questioned. Realising that the class was grappling with the complexity of the idea, her co-facilitator stepped in and asked students to write out what they like about being men/women, and then facilitated a discussion around how what we can do/ like need not be limited by gender-ed identities. The educator shared with us how this facilitated a lively engaged classroom, but that the class "flopped" since the gender binary was not sufficiently shaken up. How to balance lecture inputs that lay out certain ideas or information, while retaining the conversational dialogic mode as the primary mode of classroom transaction, is a question to think about as we consider how learners are assessed or how it is determined that learning has occurred.

Outcomes and Assessment

Both institutions had the scope of innovative experimental assessments since they were not tied down by institutional academic modes of evaluation. Several educators talked about a person-to-person connection with learners and spoke of how assessment occurs on an everyday basis through the duration of the course. Formal assessments exist, but there was an emphasis on how learning, assessment and outcomes are a continuous process.

In a course on gender, for instance, an attitude survey was administered at the start of the course and after completion, to see if a learner has come to challenge stereotypes they held previously. But more interesting observations occur in the everyday practice of individuals. An educator from Visthar wrote about a senior male official from a human rights organisation who, in the first few days of training, expected the junior female staff to clean up his plate after meals. As the course progressed, he began the practice of washing his own plate. This was a change he noticed himself, and shared in class, she said. Changes such as these are important in understanding the outcome of learning.

Several learners spoke about personal transformation. These encompass ways of looking at the world, along with actual practices. An alumnus from Baduku's sustainable agriculture course shared:

> Although I come from an agricultural family, and had seen my mother do a lot of work, I never thought of women as farmers before the course... I did a project on organic farming with women farmers. Some of my male colleagues would say, "Doing farming with men is only difficult—what will they do with women?" But I was able to overcome this [attitude]. The women I work with are now practising natural farming and selling their produce locally, trying natural farming in land that was unutilised, and collecting local seeds and increasing the production.

Several educators in Baduku spoke about how youth from marginalised locations come to embody greater confidence as they move towards the completion of the course. One of our educators shared important shifts she noticed in a student as she took part in a theatre workshop, conducted as part of the course

to prepare lecturers for higher education. The learner comes from a conservative family and had told the educator there were strict penalties for even talking to a boy in her family. She had learned all her life to keep her head down and walk. Married at a young age, the student is described by the educator in these words:

> Duly dressed in the traditional attire of a south Indian married woman. Her voice is soft, hardly audible when she speaks. But you can see a sparkling curiosity in her manner, and exposure to new ideas of gender and social justice are taken in like a sponge.

The theatre workshop involved two days of physical activities and games, team building and so on. On the last day, students are asked to rehearse a story and come prepared for a performance. The educator recalls how the class played out when the young woman set out to perform:

> Our young woman comes on stage. She begins slowly, "*Onduralli obbaru (a person in a city)*" and the facilitator interrupts her. He says, "*Imagine you are a village landlord and tell the story*". She laughs, wrinkles her nose, hesitates but he is unrelenting. He asks a couple of young men to carry her up like in a *palank* (chariot). When she is carried, she straightens her back and tries to restart the story louder, he says, "*Louder*", and then she starts laughing and shuts up again. He is testing, exploring and she is also testing her limits. He gives her a prop—an umbrella, I think—asks her to stand absolutely straight. Tells her that all of us in the audience are her subjects, and now tell the story she begins again, she bursts out laughing. He maintains a steadied silence, intense stare, and asks her to try again. The audience is restless. He hushes us down with a baritone voice (later, he explains how powerful and fearful voices can be, using his own deep male baritone as an example) he prods her gently to go on. She asks for a minute, steps away and takes a breath. And then suddenly, we hear her voice roar—roar like we have never heard it before. She stands straight, her arms stretched open—a dramatic change from the folded-in shy self and says, "*Onduralli obba raitha idda...avanu (there was a farmer in a village...he...)*". The story is irrelevant. The audience applauds, cheers and hoots. We have heard her loudest, clearest voice. We have seen her body open up, herself finding a space long denied. She steps down, and weeps. She later tells us how she felt her life changed in those moments with sir prodding her on. She felt she could be anything, do anything: "*taggi baggi nadiyo abyasa bidbahudu*" (the habit of walking in confined ways, looking down, deferential, can be left behind).

The young woman's assessment of change that occurred for her, as recalled by the educator, is the power of the pedagogic processes that connect the self and social, and compels us to learn in embodied ways. Such learning does not happen in a day. Perhaps the theatre workshop, where we witnessed a learner claim her voice in the incident above, was preceded by several informal support sessions. We will explore the importance of mentoring in the next section.

Before that, however, it is pertinent to note some "assessments" offered by learners about their experiences. While the majority of responses were overwhelmingly positive, and in particular emphasised their learning journeys as transformative, a note of caution was made by two alumni, across different courses of Baduku. One of them was vocal about how his societal perspectives changed after the course. He said: "Earlier, I had the impression that when I marry, my wife should support me, help me fulfil my needs and desires. After the

course, I realised that was wrong—we must be equal partners and support each other."

The same learner, however, felt he did not learn enough in terms of technical skills related to this profession: "Since I had already worked in the field before the course, my expectations were high. I had hoped to scale up some of what I was doing—this was not really possible."

A slightly different, but related critical reflection related to some learners is their feeling that educators did not always "practise what they advocated for". The learner who shared this was very hesitant to express this and did not want to be identified in any way; hence, we refrain from naming the course/institution. He said, "I have learnt so much from this educator... But sometimes, I wonder why they don't practise what they suggest we do?" This hesitation, on the part of learners, to express critical opinions about their experience was partly a limitation of the research design (a challenge of researching as "insiders"). Yet, noting these concerns and also highlighting how it was difficult for students to express these issues is important to think about "critical education in practice". How can there be greater space for critical feedback from learners, is a question to think about, as we move to the next section on mentorship.

Mentorship

More than the course itself, mentoring sessions truly help a lot of young people attain their life goals, one of our educators said during an interview. "*Our goal is not only about preparation or training for employment, but laying a solid foundation for them to understand their own lives*", she said. Another educator from Baduku shared how specific students are able to open up in the classroom only after several mentoring sessions. She specifically wrote in her account of a woman student from a rural Dalit background who had experienced multiple forms of trauma. In any discussions around class or caste, she would shut herself up or sometimes leave the classroom and cry. It was only after several one-to-one mentoring sessions, understanding her life journey and offering her solidarity and support, that she began to open up in the classroom, the educator writes.

Mentorship involves education and career choices, but also personal life choices at the vulnerable life stage of youth. Several young people grapple with dilemmas related to their families, sexualities, and relationships, and mentoring opens up a non-judgemental space to share, if they so choose. An alumnus from the mass media course of Baduku shared how the *ola nota* (looking within) and mentoring sessions at Baduku changed how she saw herself. She shared:

> I come from a traditional conservative family, and was married at an early age. There was a lot of domestic violence in the marriage, and I had to move back to my parents. There was a lot of generation gap between them and me, and several conflicts. I was struggling with personal issues, thinking, how I can care for my child by myself? My mentor filled me with courage, like a mother would do. She assured me that I could be independent.

Being at institutions such as Baduku/Visthar means a mentoring role is part of what one does as a teacher. In an FGD, one of our educators shared how "*It's not like going to the classroom, teaching Shakespeare and leaving*". An educator from Visthar summed up the approach to education by recalling her earlier experience as a science teacher in a mainstream institution and contrasting it with her current approach.

I don't go into a classroom and teach respiration... Do students know where the lungs are located in the human body, how it works... if there are a few students of mine who are struggling with chronic diseases in terms of lungs and respiration, their experiences are worth sharing.

Such sharing and conversation cannot be limited to the space of the classroom and moves beyond it. Relationships with learners change, when you go on long walks with students, discuss films or books. At the same time, some boundaries are necessary. As an educator said, "*We can have long walks and conversations, but we also need to act like conventional lecturers in the classroom sometimes*", to to ensure curricular material is covered. During the FGD, educators shared how mentoring as a process is very rewarding, especially when they see their mentees flourish in a chosen career. At the same time, it can be taxing, and sometimes educators worry about whether learners come to over rely on them as mentors.

Another educator said, "*We need to guard against becoming patrons—we need to offer support but retain a small caution throughout*". Respecting the autonomy of learners, while offering them a space to converse and seek support is necessary. At the same time, the pressure on the educators is high when learners feel their mentors will always be available to them. This, many educators have shared, becomes a challenge. Clear delineation of boundaries is perhaps the way forward, but it is not always easy to do, especially when catering to the vulnerable and marginalised.

These challenges aside, mentorship is extremely important as a support structure for students from marginalised backgrounds. Yet, it is important to note that mentoring and informal conversations with mentees sometimes merged into one another. This, one faculty member pointed out, could become a problem:

Sometimes when informal engagements are considered mentoring, the mentoring space might become gendered. I have noticed how, for instance, young women sometimes don't get enough mentoring time with male educators because young men students tend to "hang out" informally more.

Unintended social hierarchies can come in the way of mentoring as a space of learning being equally available to all. This needs to be reflected upon as we move to the next chapter which will consider how a range of aspects outside of the formal classroom are designed with the intent to further socio-ecological justice.

CHAPTER 3. BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL DESIGN

Questions of socio-ecological justice for marginalised young people in education encompass more than formal classroom learning. Administrative processes including how courses are conceived and outreach processes undertaken, admission protocols, fee structure and forms of support for overall well-being matter. In the section on administrative design, we will consider how these institutions have evolved systems and processes that further justice. Alongside, we will consider the cultural designs within the institutions being studied. According to Kuh and Whitt (1988, p. 12), institutional culture is "the collective, mutual shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behaviour

of individuals and groups in higher education and provide a frame for reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions". We understand cultural patterns as explicitly or tacitly recognised patterns within the working of institutions.

A daily routine marked by assemblies, breaks, designated study and leisure times are part of the basic fabric of most educational institutions. Each institution might modify this according to its own ethos, but a basic pattern often remains. Scholars have shown how the ethos and design of educational institutions (schools) or their "social aesthetic" can play a significant role in forming an individual's ideas about law, authority and personal responsibility (MacDougal, 1999). Only when educational institutions seek to challenge social hegemonies and "given" hierarchies, do they make space for questioning these ideas and patterns. What new patterns emerge then?

This chapter begins with the administrative processes necessary to bring students in, including outreach of courses, selection process, fixing of fees etc. In the second part of the chapter, we consider the cultural fabric students encounter after they enter by paying attention to ways in which traditional classroom learning is interrupted, the nature of food and celebrations, and the relationships carved with educator–mentors.

Outreach

Ensuring wide circulation of courses available is the first step to reach out to large masses of youth. Given the differences in the nature of the courses we are considering, outreach processes were different, but a commitment to making information about a course widely available and accessible to those interested was the fundamental approach. Keeping fees subsidised and ensuring that scholarships were available when necessary were crucial elements. Entry barriers were kept at a minimum. And from amongst applicants, the most marginalised are given priority (based on caste, religion, region, family status and other axes of social difference). An official from Baduku said:

> … the focus always was on how if we get 100 applicants for a particular course, we will give them first priority because we will take only 20 students who are the most marginalised among those who qualified for the course. And I have often found myself saying to my colleagues that amongst those who have the minimum qualifications that we require, take the ones who are most needy. So, it's a bottom-up approach…We constantly monitor the intake in every course, how many students are valid, how many students are girls, how many students are Muslims, how many students are from ST background, how many students are children of farmers, how many children come from single-parent families, how many students are sexual minorities.

In Visthar, with the GDST course, the nature of diversity considered includes international candidates. The staff explained:

> It is 50 per cent international and it is a very interesting combination: white, black, brown, different age groups. We had one batch where we had an 18-year-old and a 60-year-old. So, we had different age groups and different educational qualifications. We have people who have finished college, PhD, and those who have not done higher studies but worked… so that has worked in the GDST context because we are bringing on those experiences.

The other important element to ensure effective outreach is to maintain good networks with civil society groups, and progressive organisations to reach out to young people from marginalised groups, interested in socio-economic mobility and growth. One of the Baduku faculty members writes, "ensuring good networks and relationships with progressive *sangha−sanghatanes* (organisations-associations) are crucial for our outreach". Different faculty members also discussed the need to take up "targeted outreach" strategies, such as conducting special workshops for women students to enrol into mass-media courses. This process of prioritising certain students over others could sometimes bring in unique challenges, in a larger social world where meritocracy is understood simplistically as giving everyone equal opportunity (without recognising that starting points are never equal). One Baduku faculty member shared the difficulties she had in having conversations around caste, as part of the outreach process. She writes in her auto-ethnographic account:

> I remember, in the process of outreach, talking to a lecturer from Chikamagalur district. I asked her what caste she was, after conversing about the course, and she said OBC. Since we had then been having conversations about the need to differentiate between powerful OBC castes, and marginalised OBC castes, I pressed on (must admit, with some hesitation) and said we need to know which caste group. She got mad at me, saying "What is this? Are you a college that gives admission by seeing caste. I don't want to do your course". Prior to this, I had explained to her that the logic was to prioritise individuals from marginalised caste groups. I repeated this, and clarified we did not have anything against any caste group. She didn't want to listen. Her response was fairly typical; by talking about caste, she insisted, we were creating caste. I spoke to senior colleagues about this experience and was told these incidents do happen occasionally and not to worry too much about it. But it has stayed with me.

Despite these occasional hurdles, all the Baduku faculty members emphasised how social backgrounds are factored in and prioritised in the process of outreach and student selection. In Visthar's GDST course, the nature of diversity became different with the inclusion of international students, and as a consequence, some cultural differences needed attending to.

Process of Selection

In interviews with students, facilitators and management, the emphasis was on ensuring students from Dalit and OBC backgrounds, from North Karnataka and rural upbringing entered the courses. Personal life situations such as being raised by single mothers were also factored in. Detailing the process of selection, a faculty member said:

> Conducting entrance tests in dozens of districts of Karnataka, and personally talking to them in detail will help in understanding the socialisation of the youth of the respective towns. This becomes the main criterion for us today to chart our course. When we formulate the course selection criteria, we base our selection on the core values of dialogue and the majority of young people who are selected for the course are young people who are at risk. For example, those who have been sexually assaulted by their family members, those who are responsible for paying off the debts made by their family members, and those who have been subjected to injustice and humiliation due to caste, gender, language, etc. since childhood and are suffering

the consequences. Those whose father, mother or family members are responsible for those suffering from physical or mental diseases. Those who are married at a young age and have experienced the death of a partner or divorce.

Apart from student selection, ways in which faculty members were chosen was also thought through. A senior member of the management had this to say:

> A lot of the selection of faculty is around values, and not just around academic qualifications or how many PhDs and postdocs etc they have. While knowledge is definitely a criterion, more than the knowledge we choose faculty who understand that Baduku is not just a college of excellence, but a college that is committed to social inclusion and social justice in terms of who we teach, what we teach and where we send them after they finish their courses here. So, the faculty's value systems, the faculty's orientation and the faculty's understanding of social justice are critical.

Fees Structure: Learning Cost-effectively

Keeping the course fee affordable, while retaining the quality of education, is a key concern. A faculty member at Baduku said, "*Half of our students pay 1,000 rupees a month, another quarter of our students pay 500 rupees a month, and another quarter of Baduku students pay nothing*". Apart from course costs, students are provided with nutritious food, a value based education and accommodation.

In the GDST course offered by Visthar, about 50 per cent of students are supported through scholarships. The organisation subsidises the costs for Indian students by charging more from international participants. A representative from Visthar said:

> We charge more from international people, we try to subsidise Indian participants, there are many who will ask for scholarships. So, we have given up to 50 per cent scholarship to 3–4 people in the batch. So, they are managing the fees.

Additionally, both Baduku and Visthar are able to generate resources beyond the course fees through other institutional forms of funding and thus are able to stay committed to their social justice goals by offering subsidised fees and scholarships.

Infrastructure

By infrastructure, we do not only mean the physical background within which educational activities occur, but spaces infused with social meaning. Learners and faculty called Visthar an "eco sanctuary", indicating it to be a green campus, but also a safe space to occupy, for those coming from diverse social locations.

How buildings can be constructed keeping in mind environmental protection was a concern expressed by both institutional managements. In Baduku, the founder said:

> The kind of materials we used, the kind of process that was used for the construction, the kind of finishes that we have, with no paints, no toxic chemicals, maximum use of local soil… the building itself almost looks like it emerges from the mud.

In a similar vein, in Visthar, the founder emphasised thinking about buildings through,

> The principles of energy, efficiency, of looking at resource intensity of the building, keeping the building as less resource intensive as possible and promoting the dying crafts that are there in construction.

An emphasis on minimum utilisation of resources, and safety was highlighted across the institutions. But physical spaces were not always as egalitarian as the institutions hoped to be. Aesthetically pleasing spaces were not necessarily child and disability friendly, and this was a concern that staff across the institutions expressed. Sometimes implicit hierarchies that went against institutional value-commitments came to operate in informal areas, such as dining spaces.

When programmatic and non-programmatic staff ate lunch at different times or different spaces, for instance, some of our interviewees wondered if egalitarian commitments were being diluted. Such informal hierarchies were not accepted as a given, but actively questioned by staff and students as part of the work that institutions had to do on an everyday basis, in practising their commitment to socio-ecological justice in the everyday. Questions and concerns around egalitarianism were raised in a similar manner, with respect to cultural practices of the educational institutions, including in the classroom, food, and relationships.

Interrupting the Traditional Classroom

In a traditional classroom, the role of an educator is to deliver a conventional curriculum to an arrangement where the learners are seated on desks that are directly facing the teacher. The structural arrangement does not facilitate easy interaction. Here, learners are expected to develop knowledge through homework exercises and standardised tests that are administered at regular intervals. For Ira Shor, a critical pedagogue, traditional education suppresses rather than develops skills and intellectual interests. It places students in powerless positions, preparing them to accept powerlessness as adults. It fails to acknowledge the strengths, cultures, and prior knowledge of students and gives teachers the ultimate authority. It causes students and teachers to become disengaged with the curriculum and education. Traditional education fails substantial sections of the population by not recognising their cognitive abilities and leads to social and cultural reproduction (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). But from the accounts of many learners and educators from Baduku and Visthar, we know that these traditional patterns were broken. With this, discussions that began in the classroom continued onto other spaces—in the dining area, dormitories, tea-drinking spaces etc. A career guidance course alumnus from Baduku had this to say:

> What we see in colleges is that a lecturer or teacher is presenting a particular topic-everything is centred around that teacher and others are simply receiving information. The classroom environment in Baduku was completely different… early in the course, we had the opportunity to talk in detail about ourselves and our backgrounds. We were interested in each other… Also, the course convener and co-convener would not really lecture. They would present some ideas and there would be discussions.

A learner who was trained in Visthar said,

> It was not like the discussions would happen only in the class. Our days would start at 9 and end by 5 o'clock: which is good. The facilitators had a sense that they'd have to end the sessions but that doesn't mean that the conversations had to end there, the conversations would come to the dining hall, and the conversations happened even in the evening. So not having the restriction of space was good.

Another learner who was trained in Visthar recalled:

> Throughout the training, the facilitators always sat in circles along with the trainees, making us feel like we weren't in class being taught. And we were asked to think for ourselves whenever a topic was presented to us, this made us feel heard. Even though the participants didn't always agree with each other or with the facilitators, it was brought up for discussion and thoughtfully dealt with. As I remember, there was a verbal clash with one of the participants who came from a conservative religious background on grounds of "abortion" and "premarital sex" since they were both considered deadly sins in a religious context. Differences of opinion such as these were not overlooked; they were discussed with sensitivity, without being ridiculed, and very well handled.

A change in seating arrangement might seem like a minor detail, but it appears to have altered the learner–educator dynamics. Learners feeling like they were not "being taught" but "being made to think" changes the power dynamic inherent to the traditional classroom, where the teacher is seen as all-knowing and then delivers knowledge to learners. Nonetheless, a circular setting is not an end in itself; being able to deal with divergent opinions and differences where the voices of each individual are provided with a space to be heard is an important part of learning. In the incident discussed above, the facilitator's dealing with religious, conservative views sensitively and without ridicule is an important part of engaging the whole class.

Food and Celebrations

The public sphere within educational institutions is far from equal—dominant religious and caste practices often pass off as "Indian" across schools and colleges in India. Serving only vegetarian food, or meat being considered acceptable only for upper caste Hindu communities, or celebrating Hindu festivals in ostensibly secular spaces are just some of the everyday ways in which certain cultures are decentred. Within such a context, recognition and respect for marginalised food cultures and celebrations have been written about as part of "democratising the public sphere" of universities (Gundimeda, 2009). In the institutions being studied, there was serious thought given to food and cultural practices, even as some concerns and challenges remained.

The founders of one of the institutions said,

> The kind of festivities we have on campus, whether it is on Ambedkar Jayanti, or on Earth day or Ugadi or Diwali or someone's birthday or anything—all these which would be seen as extracurricular to us are also part of the curriculum. And in all those festivities and activities, the ways in which

we decorate the place, the ways in which we sing certain kinds of songs, the ways in which we invite certain kinds of people, the ways in which we subvert the idea of ritual, all these are teaching young people that social justice is not just a lofty ideal but something that we can practise in everyday life in terms of what we wear, what we eat, how we relate to each other, how we travel. All these are to us a part of the social justice learning.

Both institutions grapple with food practices—being sensitive to diverse food practices while challenging hegemonic practices is a matter of concern. One of the institutions spoke about how usually, neither pork nor beef is cooked so that sensitivities of believing Muslims/Hindus can be respected but when some trainees specifically articulate food as part of their politics, such as a Dalit Christian group, then they cook the preferred meat. One staff member said:

> We try to get a sense of who the groups are and what they are requesting (in terms of food menu when they are on Visthar campus) … so we always keep veg and non-veg items. And also, they don't have any questions about that, but sometimes food is part of your politics, then we try to respond to that…sometimes, it is difficult balancing differences. I remember in one of our festival celebrations, a group refused to participate if we would not have a beef stall…but that would have impacted others (also from marginalised social locations/other progressive politics).

Another senior staff spoke of the need to serve a wide variety of foods so that the people of all communities, castes and religions enjoy the food:

> So, it could be North Karnataka people wanting to eat certain kinds of food, South Karnataka people wanting to eat certain types of food, giving food that is not just vegetarian or you know, "upper caste", but giving a wide variety of foods so that people of all communities, all castes, and all regions of Karnataka feel that they can eat and enjoy the food.

Apart from diversity, several young people spoke about the extremely nutritious and tasty food served across the two educational institutions. For some youth, having access to healthy food was an important highlight of their educational journeys. Educators also stressed the need for nutrient-dense foods, and how crucial it was for the overall wellbeing of learners within the educational institutions.

One important element in learner reflections was on how eating together in shared spaces was a highlight of their journeys. A learner shared: "*Initially it was surprising for me to see that men and women, teachers and students would eat together… I had not seen it elsewhere*".

In the course of a workshop, a Muslim woman student shared how she had been used to people frowning or turning their faces away from her lunch box, and how it felt very different that nobody was doing it at Baduku. Another young woman shared,

> Eating together with students, learners and conveners—everyone sat together—a lot of discussions would come up during lunch, would mingle with other course students, I mean opportunities to mingle existed. And even though we were in a hostel, there were no restrictions, so we could make new friends. Sometimes, in the kitchen, in the evenings, we could make chapatis and talk alongside.

Apart from sensitivities towards diversity, one concern raised by young people was about accounting for food; while they understood the commitment to ensure no wastage occurred, they also felt sometimes the food calculations were too rigid. These would make it difficult to accommodate an occasional visitor, something one young person felt an organisation committed to social justice should be willing to do.

Also, while the commitment to food diversity remained, pragmatic limitations remained. South Karnataka cuisines were offered more often, with jolada rotti was rarely on offer. Similarly, balancing differential preferences meant beef, the preferred food of some, could not always be served.

Relationships with Educators and Mentors

In the course of interviews and conversations, several educators, non-teaching staff and students shared how the nature of relationships forged in these institutional settings are different- often, less rigidly formal. A staff in charge of student welfare shared with us,

> Learning continues outside the classroom. After the class, they shared the discussion during our dinner in the dining hall. As a caretaker here, I'm even included in their debates and conversations. Often, their discussions are unending. It is evident to see the student's engagement with new learning. Students have a favourite spot on campus. After dinner they gather there to continue the discussion, you can see them either writing, discussing helping each other out during this time… students have heated debates. When they see me around, they involve me in their discussion.

Learners constantly spoke of how educators and resource persons were easy to approach and talk to. A special mention was made of mentors, who made time for them individually. One of the mass communication course alumnus from Baduku had this to say about her relationship with her mentor:

> I was very happy that my mentor was a woman. I felt at ease because I could share things with her and she would understand…. [it] was a big help to me; even today my own parents and brother aren't bothered about my wellbeing, but she asks about me and my children. She gives me courage like a mother. I struggled without a mother but she has been of great help… she filled me with confidence that after a divorce, due to domestic violence, I am capable of taking care of my children on my own.

An alumnus from the feminist counselling course echoed these sentiments, saying her mentors were always there for her:

> From my student life and later on as a married woman and as a professional I never felt like there isn't a solution. My mentors always respond to me in an empathetic manner, supporting me through difficult personal and professional negotiations.

An alumnus from the agriculture course shared how his mentor was still in touch with him, calling to find out what interests him, and what follow up programmes could be pursued. A sense of deep gratitude for the time and energy invested by mentors was pervasive. While mentoring was a critical part of learning experiences for students, we also need to think anew about what the toll of mentoring might be on the

mentors, and how, as we discussed previously, mentors can "*avoid becoming patrons*", as one of the educators put it.

In an FGD with Baduku faculty, several senior staff expressed the need for caution in the extent of engagement. Even as faculty want to support and scaffold learners' professional and personal journeys, they recognise the need for some subtle boundaries. One of the educators said,

> In the beginning, we were very enthusiastic. At some point, burnout begins… that is what we need to be watchful about. We need to maintain a certain distance right from the beginning to ensure the mentoring relationship does not become a relationship of dependence.

Faculty members also discussed how the mentoring process, in which students often require socio-emotional support, can come in the way of their own abilities to balance personal-professional lives. One of the faculty members said in an FGD that they were dealing with vulnerable youth who faced many challenges and that there is a need to be deeply sensitive and empathetic to their issues. However, it was important for faculty to also take a step back sometimes and ensure that they are balancing their personal and professional lives.

Another sensitive aspect of informal nurturing relationships with students, was the need for educators to account for each other and their own social positionality. Informal relations, for instance, were easier for educators with people of their own gender, as discussed in the previous chapter, and such relations could impact the learning space for students (when young men get more time with male mentors or young women with female mentors). Also, the need for informal social setups needed to account for power relations between educators, and how the space for them could be gendered. One of our educators wrote, in her auto-ethnographic reflections,

> There are times I feel powerful as… a senior facilitator… However, recognition for my contribution does not automatically come to me. It is as if people believe that "behind every successful woman there is a man" who deserves all the affirmation and appreciation. The bouquet "naturally" goes to the man in the team while you are 'honored' with a single rose. These dynamics of gender-based hierarchies and power relations affect me and leave me wondering whether things will ever change if we ignore these as inconsequential.

We believe this reflection deserves attention, and these informal workings of power have to be considered consequential in our journeys towards educational designs that further socio-ecological justice.

This chapter has striven to cover a wide ambit ranging from how student intake within educational institutions occur, onto how institutional cultures are configured in ways that foster socio-ecological justice.What we have hoped to capture is that working towards inclusive spaces, and thus socio-ecological justice is a constant journey. Even when the commitment is to forge egalitarian spaces, challenges remain—pragmatic constraints and unintended slips—and we offer these slippages as important spaces to reflect with, and take action upon, rather than only critique. As laid out at the outset, we see ourselves as critical insiders to this effort at forging socio-ecologically just education spaces, and this research endeavour as a possibility for strengthening our journeys. In keeping with this, the final chapter

"Unlearnings and Re-learnings" will reflect upon some personal journeys shared by our respondents and our own reflections as we bring this report to a close.

CHAPTER 4. UNLEARNING AND RELEARNING

Karthik (name changed) completed the learning lenses course from Baduku in 2021. In a learner workshop conducted as part of this research project, he mapped his learning journey.

Image 2: Karthik mapping his educational journey | Research Team, 2023

As he explained his journey, he spoke of how he had dropped out of school after 9th standard. "*I did all kinds of work- gaare (plaster) work, cement work, plumbing work…I had a colourful life, I felt I could do as I pleased. But after a while, I felt I wanted the respect that was given to those who pursued an education. I went back to school*". Karthik spoke of studying well in school, of mugging up his lessons well, and of often being designated as a leader. He said:

> I learnt in 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th and degree. I scored well in exams and thought I was doing well. But it was only on reaching my masters that I realised there were other aspects to education… Our sir would say, you can score not sixty but seventy per cent. But have you thought about the purpose of education? I began to see education in a broader perspective.

Karthik said the journey that began with his masters continued through the learning lenses course he did with Baduku.

> I needed a platform to think through the meaning of education, and the LL course offered me that… Now I work as an educator and question taken-for-granted routines such as children singing good-morning in a *raga* as I step in. It becomes very difficult for me to accept this routine now… I feel I want to enable them to think about education beyond following these set routines.

Veena (name changed), who pursued the GDST course in 2021 shared how her one-month stay in Visthar for the course was the first time she had stayed out of the house, and that by itself was an enormous learning opportunity. She said she could afford the course only because of the scholarship provided. Recalling her overall educational experience, she said:

> My father was an auto driver and mother worked as a domestic help. Schooling went on as usual until 7th standard, but it was when I reached puberty, there were questions about whether I should continue my education. That is when one of my teachers, Anne Mary from my high school came and spoke to my parents and said, "if you are spending so much on a puberty function, you can spend on your daughter's education".

She was sent to a girls' high school as it was considered safer. For her father, education was an avenue for social and economic mobility. She spoke of having little guidance from home as to what courses to pursue since nobody had pursued a formal education previously. "*I just mugged up and got good marks until 10th standard. Papa didn't care about marks, but I could see he was happy when I scored well*", she said. She learnt English well and while the language might have contested history, fluency in English for a Dalit family "*meant something else*", she said. She too spoke of how her master's program became the space where she began to see the world in a broader perspective. She said she had been fortunate even in mainstream educational institutions to find teachers with a critical understanding of the social world. However, when she came to Visthar in 2021, she felt she knew some things about the social world "*but did not have the vocabulary to articulate her understanding*" and this is what the GDST course offered her.
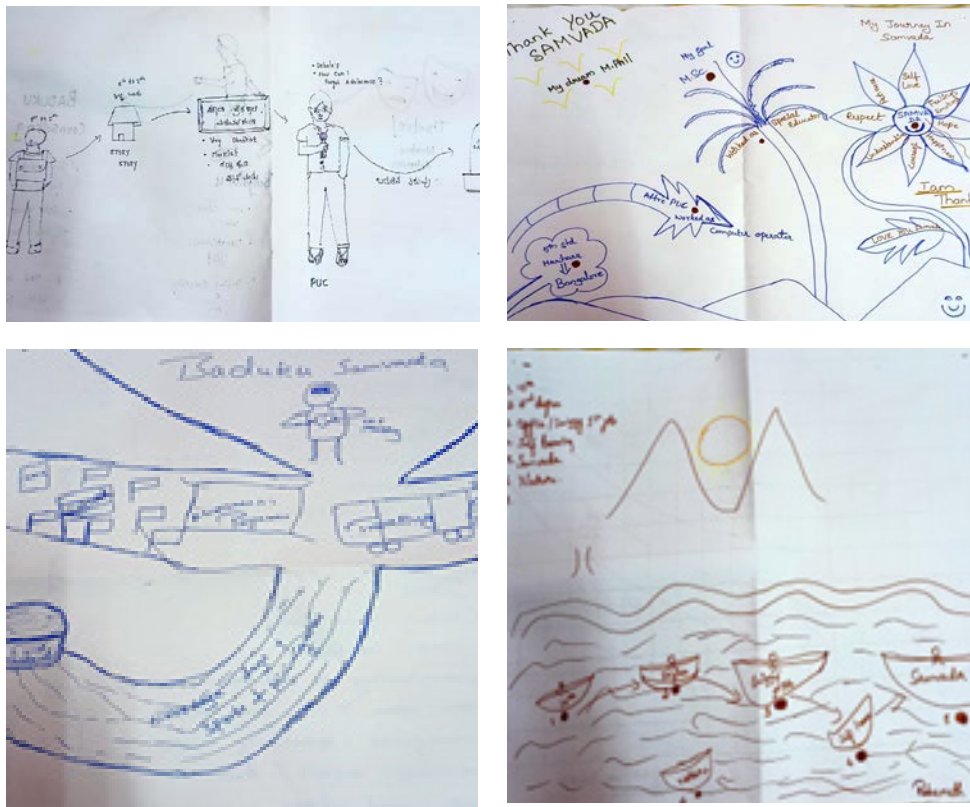

Image 3: A sample of the learning journeys shared | Source: Research Team, 2023

Also, she suddenly did not feel like she had to represent Dalit students in the way she conducted herself. In her masters' program in English, she was the only Dalit student, creating a sense of pressure to perform.

Towards Social Justice: Voices and Journeys

For Veena, not being the only voice of Dalit students, but one of many, offered up a space to find her own. For Kiran, the journey of re-examining the ways in which education systems are structured is ongoing. Across the narratives of students, spaces such as Baduku and Visthar are offered up as spaces that affirm new ways of thinking and re-learning how one relates to the social world. Often, this also involves unlearning how one had been socialised. A faculty member at Baduku who was earlier associated with Samvada as a student said:

> As a girl brought up in a rural agrarian community, I had completely bought into the restrictions placed on women. I thought it was the norm, and hardly questioned it... it was through a course I pursued at Baduku that many of my fundamental beliefs about gender came to be questioned.

She shared how, after a successful professional career as a media professional, she had the opportunity to return to her alma mater as a faculty member at Baduku. This was at a time when she was a young mother, which had its own set of challenges. "*Even as I juggled leaving a 1.5-year-old in day-care, and managing work, the encouragement and support from colleagues saw me through*", she wrote. In her auto-ethnographic recollections, she writes how working with young people, who come from a similar social background as she did, enables her to connect with their aspirations and anxieties easily. However, working with disadvantaged young people comes with unique challenges that can sometimes frustrate educators.

She recalls a 28-year-old female student from Raichur who joined the journalism course in 2018. The student struggled to learn to write in ways necessary for a media job. Despite several individual-focused classes and mentoring sessions, at the end of the 9 month course, she was not in a position to find a job. Her teachers focused on improving her skills for 2 additional months, with individual attention. After that, they tried to use their social networks to get her a job in the media where she could learn while working. But despite these efforts, she could not find a job and eventually returned to her hometown. The faculty writes of this as a frustrating experience, which left her feeling helpless:

> Sometimes in the process of working towards inclusion, there are moments such as this where one feels like one's hands are tied... I wonder if we had a little more time with her, or financial resources, if one could have done more.

The process of working towards social justice with youth can be frustrating, but it can also create moments of great satisfaction, she writes. She recalled the time of COVID-19 when students found innovative ways to make all their peers feel included, when online classes were inevitable. One student only had a key-pad mobile, and so when classes were held online, a friend would call her in, and keep the class on speaker so that she could hear the class through the call. "This process made us happy despite the frustrations of the moment, because youth were finding ways to work towards inclusion in their everyday life", she wrote.

Unlearning Privilege, Refusing Shame

Everyday life struggles were an important part of the recollection of faculty members at Visthar also. A male-identifying gender trainer (and former student) at Visthar, wrote that in his life prior to associating with Visthar, his views of the world were "formed in the crucible of conservative capitalism" as an IT professional. He had not questioned gender roles or hierarchies, and at first wondered if as a man, he could work as a gender trainer since most gender trainers he saw were women. Encouragement from the Visthar founder who often emphasised the need for men to speak up for gender equality along with facilitating gender training for over 15 years now has fundamentally changed him, he writes. However, he remains deeply reflective of his own social positionality:

> As a dominant class, dominant caste, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied male, I have been living with unearned privileges all my life. At times I worry if it is hypocritical of me to question and challenge patriarchy, class, caste, ableism, etc. when I have been an unquestioning beneficiary of this structure for more than half my life. I also worry about the violence I am causing for others even now. Though I am far more conscious of these injustices now than 15 years ago, there are patterns of behaviour that I replay which suggests that I have not been able to fully remove those abuses of power. For example, my occasional expressions of anger, both within and outside the classroom, reflect the power I have not been able to let go.

Even as this educator is deeply sensitive and reflective about his own positionality, he writes about the difficult task as an educator to enable the privileged to understand and reflect on their privileges, but not shame them and thus obstruct their growth. This ability to respond sensitively to privileged learners requires that privileged educators find a way to acknowledge and accept, but also work with their privilege. The Visthar educator's reflections offer an important way forward:

> I am trying not to abuse the power I have as a dominant class/caste, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied man. This is a work in progress. I make mistakes. I can be open to criticism and recognize when I am abusing power. I have come to accept that I can never be fully rid of those marks of privilege. I can try to change myself; but it will never be enough. And that is okay.

Working towards social justice is hard work. This necessarily requires the privileged to own up unearned privileges, and for the deprivileged to realise their perceived lack is often a product of the lack of opportunities. However, as we work to build a more socially just world for all, classrooms catering to diverse students need to find a space for all voices and to find empathy and care for each other. The need for such care work has been emphasised across Baduku and Visthar. This emphasis has been something that the institutions have arrived at, especially by realising the extent of mental health support youth require. Despite mentoring, professional counselling and psychiatric interventions in some cases, students have succumbed to depression that has been hard to pull out of. Increasingly, within both Baduku and Visthar, mental health has become an important part of the agenda. The need to build resilience among young people, especially young people from marginalised communities, has been emphasised across conversations. In keeping with this recognition, one of the outputs of this project has also been to develop a training manual to enable youth educators to build life skills among young people.

In the beginning of this report, we had spoken of the need to understand the educational design systems within which critical education comes to be practised. We have laid out different aspects related to this across chapters,

but in this chapter, we have sought to show that education in these institutions does not occur in a vacuum. Through the elaboration of individual narratives, of both teachers and learners, we have sought to show how an educational ecosystem that enables an understanding of connections between individual biographies and socio-political histories can be empowering.

CONCLUSION

With this project, we have sought to unpack how critical education comes to fruition, across diverse spaces. As laid out in the first chapter, we sought to do this in participatory ways, and as "critical insiders" to one of the sites researched. Our positioning offered us certain important insights, but it also came with its limitations. Yet, we believe this process of research has helped us reflect on what education means, and how educational designs can be made more inclusive.

In the second chapter, we focused on classroom learning. In reflections on curriculum design, we find that integrating individual biographies with social histories, or selves with the social were critical. Engaged forms of pedagogy required that the teacher be decentralised. Yet, the teacher remains important as a facilitator who holds diverse voices in classrooms with both compassion and a sense of justice. Learning that engages the embodied self of the learner is crucial to the nature of self-transformation many learners, across the two institutions, described. Understandings of outcome and evaluation as continuous and ongoing processes were clear. Individual support from mentors was a crucial part of the growth trajectories for learners. In the third chapter, we discussed outreach processes and how they are undertaken, selection, fee structure, infrastructure as social spaces inhabited by students, and the many relationships within educational institutions. From the design of courses to the design of buildings, we see that concerns of socio-ecological justice have been factored in by managements of the two institutions. Be it in the nature of food served or celebrations marked, a commitment to fostering social equity and justice remained. Creation of non-hierarchical supportive mentoring relationships between educators and learners was crucial to the overall educational design.

In this chapter, we have noted some critical concerns. Despite a commitment to diverse food practices, and non-hierarchical set-ups, there were limitations in practice. For pragmatic reasons, sometimes non-teaching and teaching staff ate at different spaces/times (this was noted by some educators and learners, across sites), creating unintended social hierarchies. Similarly, despite a commitment to diverse food being on offer, pragmatic concerns might lead to choosing food that might be acceptable to the majority. We noted in the chapter that slippages are an important space to reflect with and self-correct. In the final chapter, we have tried to capture some individual journeys. As the final section of the chapter shows, education that enables us to unlearn privilege without shame is what "critical pedagogy" looks like in practice.

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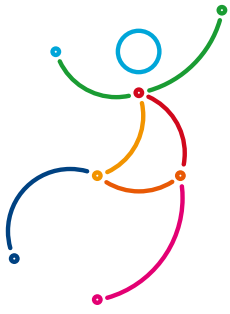
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