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# A Socio-historical Study of the BElEd Programme

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## ABSTRACT

The link between education and sustainable livelihoods in this research gains importance specifically in the context of teachers and teacher education. This research captures the multiple journeys of Bachelor's in Elementary Education (BElEd) alumni in an evolving socio-historical-educational context and policy frameworks. It collates individual narratives of the alumni to examine the curricular and pedagogic elements that characterise the BElEd programme. Specifically, it examines how students negotiate their professional and personal agency while doing the programme and its manifestations in their later career trajectories. The research offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into the successes and struggles of developing teachers as they navigate hierarchal school structures and contend with their increasingly marginalised role, status and identity within the larger policy discourse. Yet, there is a sense of hopefulness as they nurture self-reflexivity, experiment with new ideas and continue to work for social justice.

*Keywords*: Teacher education, self-reflexivity, teacher agency, school teaching, sustainable futures

# INTRODUCTION

This research study examines the impact of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed), a four-year teacher education programme, on the personal and professional development of its alumni using a socio-historical and policy framework. It aims to capture the lived experiences of its alumni through individual narratives of their journeys through the B.El.Ed, current work profiles and career trajectories in education and non-education sectors.

The study attempts to understand the ways in which BElEd alumni are able to create, negotiate and exercise their intellectual and creative agency, especially as elementary schoolteachers working in highly hegemonic and structured school systems. In an era of capitalist values where they are expected to work as agents of a corporatised world, how do they enable pedagogical attitudes and practices that promote and support reflexive and critical thinking? This becomes critical to investigate in a context where policy narrative, constructed around quality and knowledge in recent years, has created the logic of marginalising the teacher and undermining her epistemic agency (Batra, 2021).

Schools as social institutions are critical spaces that have the potential to transform the lives and futures of children who study in them. It is common knowledge that any learning, especially structured learning in the formal environment of a school, cannot be complete without teachers. There is an inextricable link between schools and teachers, who in Giroux's view are responsible for supporting children's construction of knowledge in their capacity as "transformative intellectuals" (1986). Giroux and several other theorists promote the idea of schools as democratic spaces where teachers as "transformative intellectuals" have the capacity to empower their students to read the world critically and take action against injustices, exploitation and oppression.

Ironically, teachers have occupied an internally contradictory position in Indian society, where on the one hand, their role is regarded as sacred and on the other hand, they are often ridiculed. This is almost directly proportional to the level at which they teach: the lower the grades they teach, the lower is their income and social status. School teaching across all levels has long been considered a non-specialised activity, requiring nurturing attributes such as love and care rather than intellectual capabilities. It is in this context that it becomes important to understand the need for intensive preparation of teachers that can serve to change the perception of teachers as mere "nurturers" to practitioners of critical pedagogy, making them "enablers" of social transformation for sustainable futures.

Major education commissions, committees and policies in India have consistently emphasised the centrality of teachers and teacher education as a significant determinant of "quality education". The Education Commission (1964–66) recommended the professionalisation of teacher education and the Commission on Teachers and Society (1983–85) recommended measures that can enable teachers to play a critical role in social transformation. While the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 recommended the overhaul of teacher education, the NPE Review Committee (1990) and the National Advisory Committee on Learning without Burden (1993) also drew attention to the need for qualitative

reforms in the education of teachers. It recommended the involvement of teachers in curriculum and textbook preparation as significant stakeholders. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009) emphasises the symbiotic relationship between teacher education and school education, underscoring the need to qualitatively improve both sectors. In response, state governments institute educational reforms towards quality education. With the help of World Bank funds, in the 1990s, an attempt was made to enhance the capacity and role of teachers, though very little was achieved.

The latest National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 underscores the importance of teachers as shaping the future of children and of our nation. Yet, it threatens to curtail their autonomy to merely "choosing aspects of pedagogy" in their teaching and improving "learning outcomes in their classrooms" (p. 20). It focuses on preparing teachers for foundational literacy and numeracy and promoting online professional development programmes through Swayam and Diksha online platforms. With a focus on flexible pre-service integrated teacher education programme (ITEP) to be introduced nationally by 2030, with a choice of Bachelor of Arts (BA) + Bachelor's of Education (B.Ed), or Bachelor's of Science (B.Sc) + B.Ed, it remains to be seen what consequences this is likely to have on the quality of elementary school education.

Neo-liberal policies and reforms geared towards fulfilling market interests have seen the promotion of privatisation of education at all levels. With state investment being low in teachers and teacher education, the sector attracted a proliferation of private, self-financed teacher education institutes (TEIs) that have typically been isolated from centres of higher education. As noted by the Justice Verma Commission,[1] teacher education has been highly commercialised as "teaching shops", that have been instrumental in implementing substandard curricula and pedagogy in preparing teachers throughout the country. By the 2010s, while close to 80 per cent of children studied in state schools, over 90 per cent of their teachers came from a substandard teacher education system that was in private hands (Government of India [GoI], 2012). The Justice Verma Commission on teacher education unveiled the stark reality of teachers and their education, noting that the system failed to fulfil the pedagogic needs of diverse Indian classrooms and to address issues of equitable quality education.

Globally, the predominant discourse on "the learning crisis" has been dismissive of the agency of teachers. A recent report, *The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery* (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, 2022) problematises the crisis of learning as that of learning poverty. It notes how the pandemic and resultant school closure has aggravated the crisis. What becomes significant to note is the primacy it gives to "structured instruction and targeted instruction" that can solve the learning crisis over teachers whose role is only that of implementing that structured instruction, devoid of any intellectual capabilities and agency of their own. In such a socio-political environment, teachers have themselves become objects of reform rather than partners and key actors in enhancing the quality of education (Batra, 2023). Teachers are constantly being stripped of their worth and dignity. A relentless force is pushing them to adopt an educational vision and philosophy that has little respect for education as a transformative process and their role as "transformative intellectuals". Scholars have argued that the neoliberal standardised curriculum is redefining the goals of education with school teaching and teacher education largely becoming "detheorised, technicised and deintellectualized" (Hill, 2004, p. 517).

[1] The Justice Verma Commission was constituted by the Supreme Court in June 2011 to address complaints of widespread malpractice, policy distortions and regulatory conflicts in the sector of teacher education.

This study focuses on capturing the voices of BElEd alumni who are practicing teachers. The study begins with the assumption that the BElEd programme cultivates in developing teachers a sense of intellectualand political agency that drives them to become critical educators. How has their own education in the BElEd programme shaped their identities and cultivated notions of "self", "agency" and "self-reflexivity"? How do they protect their agency when the whole world has drawn a curtain on the intellectual role of teachers? The study attempts to examine aspects of school and teacher education in general and components of the BElEd programme in particular through the lens and experiences of its alumni. It foregrounds the collective voices of BElEd alumni who have the potential, as a community of practitioners, to "teach to transgress- education as the practice of freedom" (Hooks, 2022).

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Following are the aims and objectives of this study:

1. To capture some of the critical aspects of the BElEd programme through an in-depth study of the learning experiences of alumni who are working in schools and higher education institutes as practitioners and researchers, and other professions related or unrelated to education.
2. To collate, analyse and categorise the career trajectories of the BElEd alumni with the aim to understand how the programme has unfolded over the last 30 years and the kind of opportunities it has provided in the field of education.
3. To locate the impact of the BElEd programme on individual teacher practitioners as well as on the evolving discourse of elementary education and its influence in the policy space.
4. To develop a database of BElEd alumni from the eight constituent colleges of Delhi University that offer the programme.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the critical components of the BElEd programme that impact the personal and professional development of graduates?
2. What insights can be gained from collating and analysing alumni data on the career trajectories and shifts across the eight colleges offering the BElEd programme?
3. What has been the impact of the BElEd programme on the professional and personal lives of alumni working in diverse spheres of education and outside the domain of education?
4. How has the policy discourse on elementary education and teacher education evolved over the last few years? How has this discourse impacted the perception, role and identity of schoolteachers?
5. What implications do the research findings have that can be used for policy recommendations?

# METHODOLOGY: SAMPLE AND RESEARCH DESIGN

## Sample

This study has generated a database of over 2,300 alumni from eight Delhi University colleges that offer the BElEd programme. The sample includes 1,100 responses to a questionnaire from this database that aimed to understand their professional journeys. The study examines narratives of 28 BElEd alumni who were selected to represent the diverse categories of work profiles and trajectories within and across education and non-education sectors.

## Research Design

A mixed methods research design was used for the study.

- **Quantitative and qualitative methods:** A Google form with both close-ended and open-ended questions was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The form elicited information about the current work profiles of alumni, reasons for joining the BElEd programme, the nature of higher education, career trajectories, struggles and challenges, and future goals.

- **Qualitative methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 alumni from eight colleges to collate personal narratives. The purpose was to interpret the insights that the alumni offered based on their journeys, career trajectories and aspirations, challenges of working, and self-perception about their role, identity and agency as teachers, given the larger discourse on teachers and teacher education.

## Tools of Data Collection

This research study used the following tools for data collection:

- **Phase 1:** We created a database of over 2,300 alumni from eight constituent colleges of the Delhi University with the help of select faculty members from each college and a lead alumna from each batch. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and LinkedIn were used to reach out to alumni.

- **Phase 2:** A detailed Google form was rolled out in a phased manner to elicit responses to both close-ended and open-ended questions. Out of the total number of alumni in our database, we received 1,100 responses.

- **Phase 3:** We carried out semi-structured interviews with 28 alumni to enable a deeper and nuanced understanding of the impact of the BElEd programme, find patterns in their career trajectories, and capture perceptions of their own role, identity and agency in their respective sectors.

The process of data collection involved brainstorming with co-investigators and researchers to frame possible questions for the Google form, in keeping with the objectives of the study. The first questionnaire

was piloted with 40 alumni who were batchmates of the researchers. The results and deliberation gave critical insights into how much time participants were willing to spend on filling the form, which questions needed to be tweaked and why, and the necessity to keep it short and simple in the second iteration.

Once we had a sufficiently large database, we began to identify alumni for conducting individual interviews with the purpose of collating narratives. Their responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire guided our selection. We began with collating narratives of Gargi College alumni. Since the principal investigator knew each one of them personally, no time was required on building rapport. It was also easier to fix a schedule of interviews as compared to alumni of other colleges. The interviews were conducted with relative ease, and in the process learn more about the possibilities that could be tried out the next time. All interviews except one were video and audio recorded with the consent of the alumni. It is significant to note that while the alumni working in non-education sectors shared their work experiences and their journeys very openly, it is the elementary schoolteachers, working in both government-run and private schools, who were more cautious, conscious and careful with their choice of words in talking about their role, identity and agency in their school environments. Yet, they conveyed subtly what they needed to.

## DATA ANALYSIS: QUANTITATIVE DATA AND QUALITATIVE DATA

The quantitative data collected through a questionnaire was analysed using R- a free software for statistical computing and graphics. The Google form had 18 close-ended questions and 8 open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were mapped into visuals for clear interpretation and the open-ended questions were carefully documented in spreadsheets for each individual and then categorised and analysed. These included information about their higher education, work profiles and shifts, and broad future goals.

Narratives were collated using individual interviews with a select number of alumni. Analysis of the narratives helped identify themes and sub-themes to understand their journeys before joining the programme, their perspectives about the programme, and its impact on their professional and personal selves. Finally, a synthesis was done based on the findings that emerged from the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

The research team included Shivani and Sheetal Rajput, who transcribed and coded each interview. As BElEd alumni themselves, they offered interesting insights, opinions and anecdotes from their personal journeys as well. They also shared aspects of the programme that they felt had shaped their identities and aspirations over the last few years. Their perspectives, along with those of the 28 alumni who were interviewed, helped in building a cohesive understanding of the BElEd programme, career trajectories and the evolving nature of their professional role and agency. The in-depth interviews helped to understand nuanced points of view in terms of how the larger discourse on education is impacting their professional lives and what concrete measures they take to bring about educational change at their own level. Data analysis helped to understand the diverse work profiles of alumni and shifts in career trajectories. It is for the first time that such information has been documented and analysed to shed light on where they are currently placed, and the career trajectories they have followed.

This study underscores the importance of nurturing networks and relationships amongst alumni for deliberation and action. Only then will they be able to sustain their collective agency and resist the onslaught of neoliberal policies in the education sector. It also reimposes faith in the BElEd programme as an empowering teacher education programme that has a lasting impact on developing teachers and their potential to change the lives of children.

## THE BELED PROGRAMME

The BElEd programme came into existence in 1994, much before the Right to Education Act, 2009 mandated the right of every child between 6-14 years of age to free and compulsory "quality" education. It was the first long-duration intensive teacher education programme in our country with a vision to professionalise teacher education and strengthen elementary education. The BElED programme is at present offered in eight constituent colleges of Delhi University. The following table presents information about the inception years and the number of batches that have graduated from each college.

Table 1: BElEd– Inception and number of batches

| Colleges | Year of Inception | First Batch | Number of Batches till 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jesus and Mary College | 1994 | 1998 | 23 |
| Aditi Mahavidyalaya | 1995 | 1999 | 22 |
| Shyama Prasad Mukherji College | 1996 | 2000 | 21 |
| Gargi College | 1997 | 2001 | 20 |
| Lady Shri Ram College | 1998 | 2002 | 19 |
| Institute of Home Economics | 2004 | 2008 | 13 |
| Miranda House | 2006 | 2010 | 11 |
| Mata Sundri College | 2007 | 2011 | 10 |

Source: Compiled by author

This research study has been able to collate a large database of 2,300 BElEd alumni and its findings rely on Google form responses of 1,105 and narrative analysis of 28 of the total database.

Table 2: BElEd database and sample

| Colleges | Database | Google Form Responses |
|---|---|---|
| Jesus and Mary College | 208 | 73 |
| Aditi Mahavidyalaya | 213 | 126 |
| Shyama Prasad Mukherji College | 247 | 112 |
| Gargi College | 560 | 293 |
| Lady Shri Ram College | 318 | 94 |
| Institute of Home Economics | 207 | 155 |
| Miranda House | 310 | 134 |
| Mata Sundri College | 217 | 105 |
| **Total** | 2293 | 1105 |

Source: Compiled by author

## ALUMNI NARRATIVES

The principal investigator interviewed alumni who are currently working in diverse fields of education and in non-education sectors, as professionals in corporates, banks and law firms. Irrespective of the sector, they spoke about the transformative impact of the BElEd programme on them, personally and professionally. Many of them describe the programme as *empowering*, *enlightening*, *powerful*, *radical*, *critical* and *thought-provoking*. Each of these responses point towards how learning experiences through several courses have shaped their personalities and the people they are today.

The programme helped them to develop an epistemic understanding of the realities around them, make connections between theory and practice, and develop critical interdisciplinary perspectives. Their narratives demonstrate that the programme gave them space to explore and express their ideas, and think independently and reflexively.

### Developing Perspective and Cross-linkages

KS began to reflect on her own schooling and BElEd experiences, and realised the power of co-creating knowledge in classrooms. The BElEd experience provided her with opportunities to go beyond the culture of textbooks, packaged as the primary source of knowledge. She began going through several readings for one topic, which helped her build multiple perspectives while discovering her own latent passion for reading.

> *The most amazing thing about the programme, for me personally, was the ethos we followed as a team [teachers and students]. Coming from a traditional government school, I had never tasted 'freedom' in a system. Knowledge always came in the form of a textbook, and there was absolutely no scope to engage with what I thought. In this programme, I experienced 'democracy', 'dialogue', 'forming opinion'. I completely transformed as a person. From a person who hated books, to someone who knew all the books in the library, I transformed. When I saw my teachers not getting insecure during the long discussions their students demanded, accepting that they may not know every answer, I learned that being a teacher is actually quite simple. I, as a teacher, should not expect myself to 'know it all'; rather, me and my students can figure out things together. Even our assessment papers were full of questions like 'based on your experiences, reflect on the theory of…'. It forced me to actually think about my life experiences in a new light. Be it gender, caste, educational discourse or any learning theory, I learned to give a new meaning to my life. This continues till date. Whenever I face a new situation, I can reflect on it deeply drawing upon my understanding of the various texts I have read.*

Another respondent, AT, emphasised the criticality of examining issues through an interdisciplinary lens. This is what the BElEd programme had encouraged her to do. As a language teacher, she tries to develop this skill in her students as well.

> *The strength of the BElEd programme lies in its multidisciplinarity. The realisation that exposure to so many disciplines can be empowering comes much later in life, when one has the maturity to make connections with relative ease. As potential teachers, while boundaries between different disciplines are natural, it becomes important to also investigate certain issues from multiple perspectives. It is here that cross-connections become relevant. As a language teacher, I have been able to bring in many discussions related to language as a tool of power and often link it to the chapters I am teaching. For example, while teaching 'The Last Lesson' [a short story], my students could infer how German was imposed in classrooms when Germany invaded France, and how language as a tool of power is used to oppress people and support or reject opinions. Such discussions help my students to become reflective and responsive and realize that language is closely related to the politics of power.*

A third respondent, UG, found close cross-linkages between courses on "Contemporary India" and "Gender and Schooling".

> *I think that was the first time we read and learnt about Kamala Bhasin in Contemporary India, and that completely changed my worldview. Because I think until that time, I hadn't thought about my place in society as a woman. Also, we looked at patriarchy as a whole and how it can shape not just family dynamics, but also politics, or explain violence that we see around us. So, it again provided me with a new lens to view the world around me.*

Another respondent, DC, said,

> *The courses on Child Development and Cognition and Learning made me realise how structured*

*learning is as you pass through different learning stages. The course set the foundation for understanding how learning actually happens. When we talk about the zone of proximal development, I think scaffolding is such an important concept that applies right from the first class that you're teaching to whatever the highest level of education is. I teach Hindi as a heritage language to undergraduates and I find mediation and scaffolding are such powerful concepts that I apply when I teach. Of course, my knowledge of linguistics plays a role too as I focus on designing my language curriculum at the start of the year.*

## Developing a Moral Compass

SS spoke about several courses in social sciences, education, psychology and language that helped her develop a sense of consciousness towards children and where they came from.

*Initially, even though I was not a great teacher, my heart was in the right place. I knew my role was to understand my students, their backgrounds and how best I could provide experiences in my classroom that would enable them to think independently. I was conscious about treating them with respect, dignity and making my classroom processes engaging and meaningful for them.*

## Being and Becoming Reflective

DC valued the power of reflection that she learnt as a student-teacher in the BElEd programme. It continues to guide her personal and professional decisions. She felt it has helped open her mind to several possibilities.

*I think one of the ways that the BElEd has completely changed how I approach life and my professional career is the constant emphasis on reflection. Right from the first year, whether it was school observations, assignments or theatre, reflection as a skill was honed multiple times. And because we were doing it all the time, it became a way of life. And I think that has just led to so much more awareness about my choices today, whether it is in my personal or professional life, it has made me more intentional.*

## Dialogical Practice

DC talks about discussions that were a hallmark of all BElEd classes, something that she was not used to in school. She came from a traditional school culture where silence was promoted, and knowledge generation was meant to happen unidirectionally. From being a passive listener in school to being an active participant in BElEd classrooms where teachers promoted dialogical practices, she experienced the freedom to constantly make connections between classroom interactions and her lived experiences. She discovered the confidence to voice her opinions and develop as a critical thinker over the four years and beyond. She recalled Rosanblatt's (1994) transactional theory and said that in her own teaching, she ensures that she develops the aesthetic stance in her students, for meaning-making must depend on making connections with one's lived experiences. To enable that, she provides opportunities to her students to reflect on their language learning.

*When I joined a graduate program in the United States also, one of the things that my advisor in pointed out was, 'Oh, you're surprisingly talkative in class, you have an opinion, that is not something*

*we see a lot in international students, like raising their hands and sharing an opinion, we don't generally see that'. But I think that was something that was cultivated through BElEd. In my high school experience, you only raised your hand if you had a question about what you were seeing on the blackboard. But that's really it, you were not necessarily encouraged to think differently, you were not necessarily encouraged to bring outside information to class or make connections to lived experiences. BElEd really prodded us to think, to critically question what we were reading, to reflect on our own experiences, to try to make connections of what we were reading in class with what we were experiencing outside class in real life.*

## Exploring Gender, Caste and Sexuality

According to Manjrekar (2020), gender has predominantly been viewed as a binary and the prevailing wisdom of setting it as such has proved to be extremely limiting and positively harmful to many who do not identify with these fixed categories.

Z's narrative displays resilience against many odds. While being a BElEd student, he was constantly struggling with his own sexuality as a queer person and his caste identity as a Dalit. He laments that while the course on gender and schooling examined many patriarchal notions, the teacher's own notion of gender was very restrictive, confined to a binary distinction of male and female. There seems to be an implicit appeal in Z's dialogue where he expects the curriculum, teaching practices and the educational experiences to embed and acknowledge the interconnections between gender and other dimensions of social reality such as caste, class and religion.

*I know I am living a dual life at home and outside. Fear of abandonment is real. I have to choose my battles carefully because I don't want to lose my peace of mind and my parents. When it has taken me several years to accept who I am, I can't expect my parents to accept my queer identity readily. It's a journey; it requires training of the mind to think and accept identities that are different from those considered 'normal'. While my mom certainly has an idea that I am different, she ignores my identity or subtly discourages it. I also feel that the 'Gender and Schooling' course needs to integrate discussions around gender and sexuality. I feel such discussions should begin early in primary classrooms. What happens to such children in India? How do they grow? Where do they go? I don't find any statistics on children growing up with different sexual orientations.*

Z had the additional challenge of proclaiming his Dalit identity in college. It is not uncommon to find how caste politics in educational institutions rob them of their self-worth and ridicule, demean and invisibilise the existence of these students. This is evident from Z's comment below:

*For the longest time, I had never reclaimed my caste identity, which is Dalit. But I realised, this is very important for me, and to also talk about my queer feminism from that caste lens. We keep talking about 'inclusion' but hardly ever initiate discussions around gender and sexuality. We look at it in binaries and ignore that 'others' are as much a reality— transgenders, queer communities. Such discussions need to begin early on in schools so that some of our children grow up to understand that it is 'normal' to feel this way and be different.*

## Teacher Voice and Agency

*Questioning patriarchal values and other dominant values*

Several BElEd alumni appreciated the course on "Gender and Schooling" for it helped them to examine and question inherent hierarchies and unequal power relations that manifest in their own homes. They found the course to be critical, thought-provoking and powerful. The course generated a discourse in the classroom and beyond that, it helped them listen to each other's stories, reflect on their lived experiences and reshape their identities. They got opportunities to examine notions and ideologies around gender that are very often enforced and normalised at home or in public domains of schools, colleges and workplaces. These learnings had a deep impact on them and gave them the confidence to question entrenched patriarchal values that they had grown up with to "accept as given". They examined their own socialisation and corresponding beliefs and assumptions. It also provided them with a sense of perspective and vocabulary to express their feelings. The course encouraged some to explore feminist theories on their own, which further guided their decisions about what they wanted out of their lives, marriage and children. They challenged their parents and very often negotiated to work out a balance within their families.

One of our respondents, RA, mentioned that she had strict curfew to return home while her brothers were not given any. Her family had legitimised a certain kind of "acceptable" social behaviour from her. Rules of "appropriate" and "acceptable" behaviour had been clearly laid out for her to follow. She was constantly told not to socialise with friends in the evening or drink in public places. Her resistance to unequal norms was in the form of questioning and reasoning with her parents. She also learnt to value her own work and her position at work, and could negotiate on these matters with her husband. As Manjrekar (2020) says, "Gender is a fundamental element of the everyday representation of self; it is also a lens through which others view us" (p. 12). RA ensured that her family respected her identity and role as a working woman professional.

> *The course made me a more aware of the things that were happening around me, questioning and nudging me to not just accept things that I would accept earlier. It made me realise how patriarchal our own homes were, how my own rights were different from those of my two brothers. It took several months to make myself be heard and be understood by my own family. When it was time for me to get married, I decided to talk to my prospective husband. I had a demanding job by this time and I wanted to ensure that the domestic responsibilities were equally divided between the two of us. Fortunately, he was on the same page. Now that we have children, we take turns to cook and to look after them.*

On the other hand, PK was tired of following rituals but never had the courage to voice her opinion. Before her marriage, she decided to have a talk with her family for she looked at these rituals as oppressive and demeaning to women.

> *During my marriage, I questioned the ritualised customs and negotiated for not putting sindoor [2] or mangal sutra, which for me are symbols of patronising women. I even questioned the ritual of kanyadaan from one man [father] to another [husband] as I am not an object to be transferred.*

[2] sindoor: vermilion; mangal sutra: holy thread, a symbol of marriage; kanyadaan: giving away of the bride

Another respondent, JD, reflected on her journey as a young student and argued that parents in middle-class families in India tend to take practical decisions on behalf of their daughters that would make them financially independent in the future. Children growing up in such families neither have a say, nor question but become party to such decisions. The following vignette shows how deeply obedience is seen as a virtue in a patriarchal society such as ours.

> *My dad decided that I should join B.El.Ed. A clear choice was made for me. Here was a course with a guarantee of getting a job and finding a marriage proposal for me in the future. It was a very practical and instrumental decision. It was not coming from any love for me or being cognizant of my interests. I did not oppose or question his decision either. Accepting it came naturally. I became part of a process where my voice didn't matter. He gave a lot of importance to education but it was always about 'extraction'. What is it that my daughter would get if she did this course? It is important to say that it takes a lot of insight and courage to unfold and understand these inherent processes that exist in families. Interestingly, what I wanted to do in life came as a question to me very late in my life. Similarly, when my brother had to prepare for his IIT entrance exam, my mom quit her school job. There was a subtle pressure on her to do so and she willingly sacrificed her job to take care of my brother's needs while he was at home. Till date, she doesn't find anything wrong with the decision. She is in fact proud of having done so. Even though it sounds harsh, I would say that there is 'exploitation' in homes. Discourses in BElEd classrooms make you realise, reflect and question how most of us grow up without resisting such practices. As a teacher-educator, I am trying to merge the gap between theory and practice through discussions in my classroom.*

*Cultivating teacher agency*

Narratives revealed that the alumni felt that many courses in the BElEd programme gave them the voice and agency to deal with personal situations at home. Buzzing with theoretical knowledge and internship experience, they graduated with confidence, aspirations and changed identities, looking forward to bringing about change in future classrooms. This excitement was short lived, as they discovered that their knowledge, opinions and ideas did not quite matter; they were expected to fall in line and obey the orders that came from the top.

These effects of managerialism have been quite damaging to alumni-teachers' emotions as they feel disempowered and despondent. Several education researchers have used concepts like deskilling (Apple, 1986), proletarianization (Densmore, 1987), and deprofessionalization (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996) to describe how managerialism cognitively disempowers teachers and becomes a concern of their agency and mental well-being. Our BElEd alumni working as teachers are no exception. The dialogical spaces within their classrooms are shrinking. As elementary schoolteachers in private and government-run schools, they feel that they are under constant surveillance to follow standardised teaching and testing, with pre-set templates of lesson plans, activity sheets and assessment tasks. There is also constant pressure on them to report "deliverables" and "outcomes". Government-run schools have an additional set of challenges. With a shortage of teachers in schools, their classes are often combined with another. This puts extra burden on them to make teaching plans for multiple grades. In addition, they are entrusted with all types of administrative work that eats into their teaching time. Given these systemic pressures that enforce compliance on teachers and the larger global discourse on "the world facing a learning crisis

in education - in essence a teaching crisis" (World Bank Report, 2020) to which India is no exception, teachers are indeed in a very vulnerable spot both globally and in India.

Interviews with the BElEd alumni brought all such issues to the forefront. These concerns highlight the challenges and struggles that they face daily and offer insights on what it is like to work within such systems. When regulations and controls are imposed in uniform formats in the name of standardisation, teaching and learning both suffer. Teachers are pushed to "teach to a test" and are held accountable for test preparation and test results. The conflict between what the "system" demands of them and what it does to their "agency" is a constant struggle they face.

Priestly, Biesta and Robinson (2015) use "teacher agency" to refer to situations where teachers have the capacity to exercise their discretion and judgement in adapting their instruction and curriculum to meet the diverse and changing needs of their students. Agency is also defined as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their own professional growth and that of their colleagues (Calvert, 2016). Atkin (1994) believes that if teachers have agency, they also find a voice that can shape educational policy. The implicit assumption here is that teacher agency, if supported by various other stakeholders such as the administrators, governments and policy makers, can genuinely lead to quality equitable education. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that agency involves three kinds of capital: first, human capital, which refers to the knowledge and skills that teachers acquire from teacher education programmes and their teaching experience; second, social capital, which involves collaboration with other teachers; and third, decisional capital, which enables teachers to exercise their learnings so that they can feed into policies.

Since "teacher agency" as a phrase came up several times while interviewing alumni, it becomes pertinent to understand what their own notion of it was, whether they felt agentic in some ways, and factors that constrained or facilitated their agency. While a few appear to have given into the system of following regressive teaching-learning practices and administrative work, some chose to negotiate with school managements, administrators and principals. The responses reveal how the BElEd alumni are able to problematise the concept and practice of teacher agency in the larger social-historical-educational context they work in, while continuing to negotiate and exercise their agency. Their responses reflect that they look at teacher agency in terms of freedom to define their own curriculum goals and design their own teaching plans, assessment and pedagogic practices.

J articulated her idea of agency, saying that

> *Agency is about taking ownership about how I want to teach. As a freelance theatre resource person, I had a lot more agency. I could plan my sessions the way I liked, with no one 'watching'. But ever since I have become a regular teacher in a municipal corporation school, I find that there is always some pressure of inspections, writing reports and filling in our journal diaries. All of a sudden, 'theatre' is not seen to add any value in the scheme of school education. We have to focus on preparing children to pass tests and exams. But I have not given up on what I want to do. I have convinced my principal that I will do what is expected of me but I will also do what I want to do. I find time to do theatre and my class children just love it.*

Another respondent, DC, said,

> *I understand teacher agency as having the freedom to make instructional decisions based on my learners' needs and context. This means understanding that no textbook is going to address the needs of all learners and is going to be relevant for decades to come. Having agency means that I would have the freedom to refine my instructional goals, modify course material, and (re)design learning materials and assessment given to the learners being taught in that particular moment of time. This requires administrative and institutional support. It requires pre-planning and once I put it down on paper, it helps me to demand support from the school authorities.*

Similarly, SM traced their conception of agency to a particular reading.

> *My understanding of teacher agency started taking shape from the time when we read 'The Meek Dictator' by Krishna Kumar. During the time I was teaching in a government school, I had experiences of helplessness on the one hand, and freedom and agency on the other. The former arose at times when there were inspections, lack of any decision-making in the promotion/intake of students, and basic infrastructure for teaching and learning. The latter was at the level of pedagogy and classroom interaction. Today, even the latter has disappeared. Teachers are given ready-made syllabus, question papers and worksheets and are expected to 'achieve' very specific goals which are often covering a certain amount of syllabus and concepts in a specific and specified order. This is along with the increasing burden of clerical and mechanical non-teaching tasks all through the day. So, I don't see much agency in the present times.*

SM and JD raised important issues of responsibility, power and trust that are deeply related to the idea and practice of teacher agency. SM said,

> *Teachers have agency when they are able to make well-informed decisions regarding their pedagogy and classroom interaction in the best interest of their students. They should also have a say in other domains as well: not just students' needs, but also their own in terms of the basic infrastructure, ambience, rules and regulations and non-teaching domains which impact teaching-learning processes. Agency also comes with a lot of responsibility and taking it away also takes away that responsibility. Hence, lack of agency results in irresponsible and detached professionals who develop distrust in themselves as well as their students. This goes a long way in creating pedagogical frames where no stakeholder trusts the other. If the system gives agency to teachers in a real sense (not to make dictators and instructors out of them), the same percolates to the students.*

JD echoes this sentiment:

> *Factors affecting teacher agency seem to be complex and interwoven. I think a general mistrust in our culture leads to taking away the agency of professionals, particularly teachers and adopting a dictatorial stance. But another important factor which cannot be ignored is that as India is a big country with a large population, managing systems have to resort to the most economical processes. That probably entails an in-built hierarchy, which implies lack of agency at micro levels.*

> *Our classrooms become a reflection of what is happening outside, in the larger world. If you push teacher bashing a little bit, you realise that you are living in such a bureaucratic atmosphere that you know only two things; you know how to take orders and you know how to give orders. You don't know anything else and that's all we can do. I take orders without even seeing who is giving, what is the person saying, without even asking, 'What are you saying?' Somebody tells us to do something, we just start doing it. Thinking is also an action, but at some point we all seem to have forgotten about it.*

PK talks about challenges of a different nature and magnitude in government schools, where more than teacher agency, it is the day-to-day challenges that she has to constantly deal with.

> *...but then when I went to the field, specifically into a government school system, jahan par aapke paas na class hoti hai, na board hota hai, na chairs hote hain, koi facilities nahi hoti hain and the students are coming and crying and there is so much of mess. Aap parents se ek taraf deal kar rahe ho, bachhe ko chot lag gayi hai, doctor is saying ki teacher ke upar medical case banaenge hum, teacher ne mara hoga. You know when you're dealing with these kinds of things, to aapka ek theory or practice ke beech me kitna connection reh jata hai and how do you work it out in the real field?*
>
> *(...but then when I went to the field, specifically into a government school system, where there is no classroom, no blackboard, no chairs and no facilities, and the students are coming and crying and there is so much of mess. Parents are then complaining that their child is injured, the doctor is advocating a medical case against the teacher. You know when you're dealing with these kinds of things, the connection between theory and practice plays no role and how do you work it out in the real field?)*

SM exhibits feelings of anger, betrayal and frustration when the system appears to leave her powerless.

> *I am kind of getting burnt out. The political scenario, and the scenario in what you can do in education is so terrible that I seem to be losing all hope and I want to dissociate myself from schools, from education, everything. I just want to get into research. But I do feel that I am being very self-centred, selfish. I feel that to maintain my sanity, I need to get away from this mess because while we go on talking about bringing changes into the field of education, we have no control, we have no power to bring any kind of change right now.*

BK, meanwhile, carves out her own path amid the tasks expected of them.

> *Whoever comes to school for inspection says a few things to us and leaves; the parents say things and leave; the principal comes into the class, says things and leaves. Are teachers not supposed to have any dignity as a professional? I hear things from one ear and take it out from the other. I do what I want to do, do the way I want to do. While assessment worksheets come from above, I administer them but then I design my own assessments and evaluate my children on them. I make sure that I complete my paperwork so that no one questions me.*

While their own preparation during BElEd has taught them to value theory–pedagogy connections, reflection, co-construction of knowledge and enabling dialogical processes in their classroom, they themselves are in structures and systems where there are impediments. The attitudes they have towards students and teaching are dismissed. They have to find ways to work around systemic constraints of all kinds: infrastructure, lack of resources, inspections, pre-designed curriculum and assessment. To find their own voice and build agency under such circumstances is not easy.

So, what does this mean for quality education and the survival of BElEd alumni in such prescriptive and oppressive environments? The study reveals that BElEd alumni do not comply thoughtlessly. Instead, they find gaps in the system in which they create possibilities to engage with children in meaningful ways. Whether they use these gaps for addressing curiosities of children through circle time, or incorporate theatre and children's literature as pedagogical practices, the possibilities are endless. These represent forms of resistance against the diktats of establishments, whether schools, the state or its policies. While these efforts take a toll on their time and energy, they continue to keep hope alive by nurturing self-reflexivity and kindling imaginations with the power of "talk". This hopefulness continues to empower them to think in new ways, experiment with ideas and continue to work for social justice. By doing so, they are not only attempting to transform the lives of children, but also create sustainable futures for those children and for themselves.

Stromquist (2018) talks about how uncommon it is for teachers to be given opportunities to help shape education policies and their implementation. However, there are a few experiments in developed nations that have engaged teachers in the conceptualisation and implementation of education policies (Zeichner, 2019). These have required teachers coming together to exercise "collective agency" rather than individual agency. Hee-Ryong Kang, in her article (2009) "Teachers, Praxis, and Minjung: Korean Teachers' Struggle for Recognition", documents a collective journey of 90,000 teachers for 12 years to fight for legalisation and recognition, a struggle for identity and political power. While KS talked about the "caged agency" of teachers, she found that when teachers collaborate to do action research and disseminate their findings, it helps them to feel agentic and confident. She felt that if teachers can form communities of practice, their collective agency can have large-scale impact on quality and equitable education.

> *In my current working context, teachers are not aware of the agency they have. They often come across as confused between what the government is asking them to do, and what they think is more appropriate for the students. This confusion is a result of the clear exclusion of teachers in the process of curriculum development. Teachers are demeaned at every step. Even when they are being trained, their experiences, their knowledge, their work ethic and even their identity as a teacher is challenged all the time. They don't visualise themselves as having any worthy knowledge. Because of the continuous rejection of their opinion, teachers often simply give up. They declare that there is no point in dialogue, or to share their experiences. They themselves start questioning their reflections. This feeling is infectious, and often most teachers start thinking like this.*
>
> *I am not sure what the solutions are, but a way to address it is to help teachers realise the difference they are making. Since their classes are still the site of their open thoughts, we need to start from there. Firstly, teachers need to feel confident in exercising agency in their classes. Providing them support*

> *in taking the right (read, informed) curricular decisions for their learners. Showing a faith in their reflections and facilitating them if needed will help them plan as per the requirement of their students.*
>
> *The next step would be to support teachers in disseminating their experiences to a wider audience. More teachers, functionaries and policymakers need to 'listen' to the teacher. They need to hold dialogue (in Freirean terms) with teachers, and inform their own roles based on it. I encourage my teachers to hold sessions where they talk about their little success stories, an experiment that worked for them, or a new pedagogical approach. This gives them confidence and the agency to solve problems that they face from time to time. This way, teachers learn from each other.*

Another area of agency is that of using learnings from the BElEd colloquia. Many alumni say that the colloquium on "Storytelling and Children's Literature" has had a deep impact on them. Most of the BElEd alumni reveal that they had no access to storybooks while growing up. It was not always because of lack of money that parents did not invest in buying storybooks, but because they considered reading for pleasure as a waste of time. One respondent, SS, said that as a schoolteacher, using storybooks in her class was one of the most fulfilling and enjoyable experiences.

When I was browsing through the BElEd prospectus, I saw that it had Storytelling and Children's Literature and Theatre as part of the curriculum. I felt an instant sense of liberation even though I had not experienced either. I decided I would apply for the programme. The storytelling colloquium developed a life-long interest in reading. When I became a teacher in SP school, I used stories extensively. Being a member of Jan Natya Manch at that time, I would often combine my learnings from Theatre in the BElED and Jan Natya Manch to inculcate love for books in my class children. Together, we converted some stories into performative plays in school with elements of voice modulation, expression and dialogue delivery.

JD talked about the positive impact of the colloquium on her becoming a reader. Books have given her the agency to heal herself in times of a personal crisis.

> *Literature came to my life very late. It opened up a different world. At times, to survive through this world, you need the other world also, and that became an anchoring point for me. I think only recently, when I'm going through some personal crisis, it has helped me. My pace in life has really slowed down. And I'm not like, you know, running behind publications and this promotion and that. It's also nice when you have a pace like that and then you realise the value of literature and today it heals me. But I do miss the fact that I never read as a teenager. I think my life trajectory would have been a little softer and maybe more holistic if that portion had been there. I was reading Walter Benjamin and he was talking about the importance of this book, storytellers at work and oh God, how beautiful it is. So, I am a learner today, reading fiction.*

Thus, an exploration of the concept of teacher agency is complex. Individualised notions of agency ignore questions of structure, context and resources. Biesta and Tedder (2006) view agency as the capacity of actors to "critically shape their responses to problematic situations" (p. 11). Agency, in other words, is not something that people can have; it is something that people do. Rather than viewing agency as residing in individuals as a property or capacity, the ecological view of agency sees agency as an emergent phenomenon of the ecological

conditions through which it is enacted. Viewing agency in such terms, according to Biesta and Tedder (2007), helps us to understand how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints, but also how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments.

## ALUMNI CAREER TRAJECTORIES

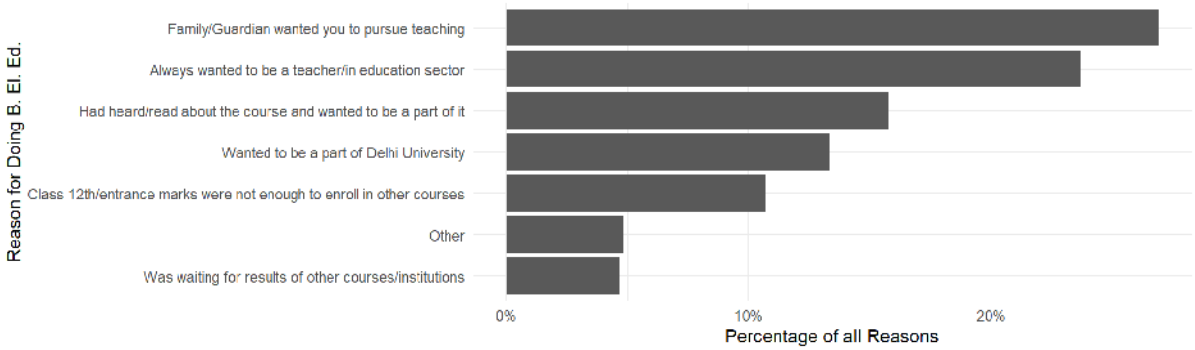
### The Compulsion of Preparing to be Teachers

The most important reason cited by alumni for joining the BElEd programme, among others, was the push from their families (see Figure 1). This was corroborated through personal narratives where it was found that 16 out of the 28 alumni said that their parents saw merit in them joining a teacher preparation programme as they felt that it offered security of a stable job, which other programmes do not offer directly after graduation. Some fathers also looked at the teacher education programme as a "good" or "ideal" programme for their daughters. Such statements typically reflect the domination of patriarchal values in homes where girls are expected to carry out household work and look after children after marriage as their primary future roles. A teaching job, it is believed, can enable women to fulfil their domestic roles alongside. The alumni shared that they did not resist the decision of their parents as was always the case. Questioning elders was not acceptable in most families.

Narrative analysis reveals that many of the alumni came from backgrounds where family members have been teachers. This influenced their decision-making. They were themselves quite neutral and had not spent time exploring other options. While they had options to study other courses on journalism, English literature, history and other undergraduate courses, the comfort of a secure job after graduation lured them into taking admission in the BElEd programme.

Some of the alumni had also heard good things about the BElEd programme through friends and family. Since it was also a Delhi University programme, they went ahead with it. One of the alumni said that when her friend told her that the programme offered unique colloquia, she immediately decided to go ahead with her application process.

Figure 1: Reasons for joining the BElEd programme



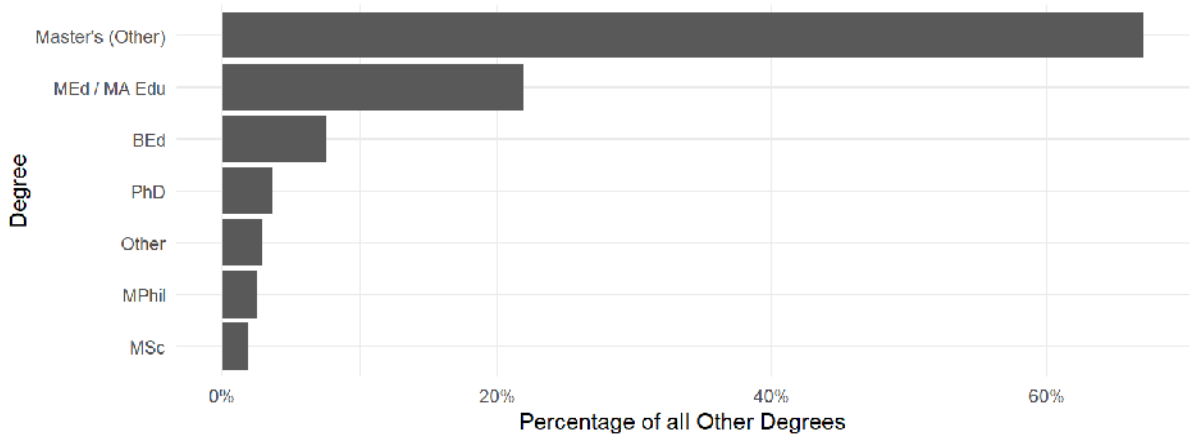

Source: R Analysis

For many who did not want to be teachers or work in the education sector, this was a forced choice as they did not get admission into the courses they wished to pursue. A closer look at the academic subjects they pursued in school reveals that more than 53 per cent of the alumni studied science in school. Of the 28 alumni interviewed, 18 had studied science in school. Their dream, and that of their parents, was to be in the medical or engineering fields, but since they did not get sufficient marks in Class 12 or even clear the entrance examinations, they opted for the BElEd programme, though they were not initially inclined towards it.

## Sought-after Higher Education Degrees

Figure 2 shows that the most sought-after degree after BElEd is a master's degree in the disciplines of English literature, philosophy, linguistics, sociology or psychology. Narratives reveal that there is a clear link between the choice of liberal option (specialisation in a discipline subject) in second and third year of BElEd and the master's degree that BElEd graduates pursue. However, it becomes important to note that students who take up liberal options such as mathematics and science do not find avenues to pursue master's degrees in those subjects, especially in Delhi University. Narrative analysis reveals that BElEd students feel frustrated as their liberal options are not considered at par with bachelor's degrees in those disciplines. Therefore, they are compelled to choose another discipline for further studies.

Figure 2: Higher education degrees




Source: R Analysis

The second most popular choice after BElEd is a Master of Education (M.Ed) or Master of Arts (MA) (Education) (22 per cent). This is a natural path for many BElEd graduates, especially if they aspire to become elementary schoolteacher educators or join research programmes in education.

The third most popular degree, B.Ed, appears to be a forced choice. A few alumni offer insights into why BElEd graduates were pushed into pursuing a B.Ed despite having a teacher education degree. Many alumni, after years of teaching, struggled to get promoted to teach upper primary classes and reach the pay scale of a trained graduate teacher. Most schools in Delhi demand a B.Ed degree for promotion as they do not consider the BElEd degree as sufficient for the trained graduate teacher scale. Three BElEd alumni decided to appeal in the high courts to get justice. After years of struggle and moving from one court to the other, these alumni won their case against their school managements, when the Delhi

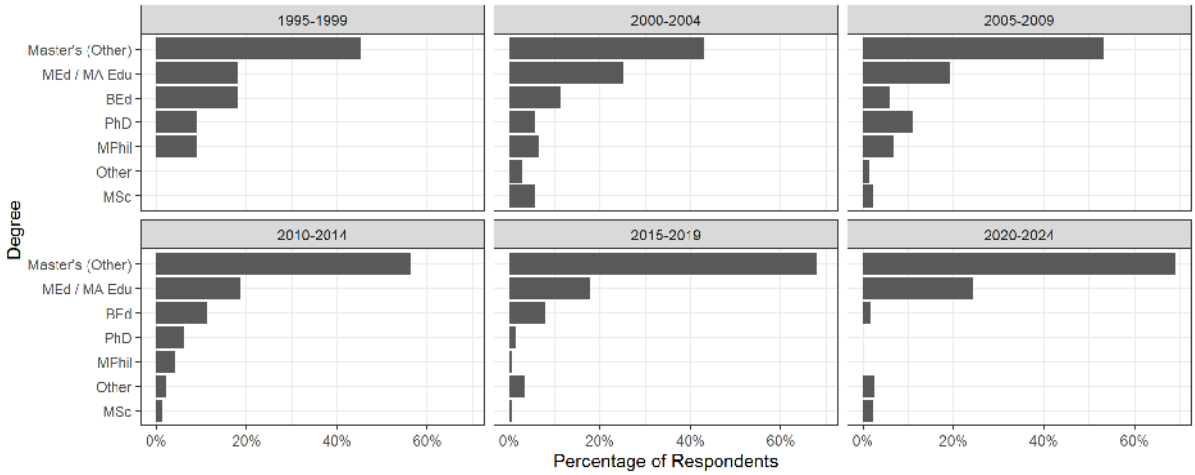
High Court passed a landmark verdict declaring the BElEd degree as eligible for promotion to the trained graduate teacher scale as well as eligible for direct recruitment to the trained graduate teacher scale.

Meanwhile, degrees such as Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D), Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Master of Science (M.Sc) have few takers, with less than 5 per cent of BElEd alumni choosing to pursue them. Those who wish to stay in academia, teaching in higher education institutes and conduct research opt for these degrees.

## Percentage of Students Enrolling for Higher Education

If we examine the recent patterns of enrolment in higher education across five-year periods of graduation (see Figure 3), it shows that a larger number of BElEd graduates enrol for a master's degree in disciplines other than those seen in the earlier years of the programme. This is followed by enrolment in M.Ed or MA (Education) programmes. There has been a steady decline in opting for a B.Ed degree in recent years. This indicates greater acceptability of the BElEd degree in the employment and higher education market.

Figure 3: Percentage of enrolment in higher education programmes



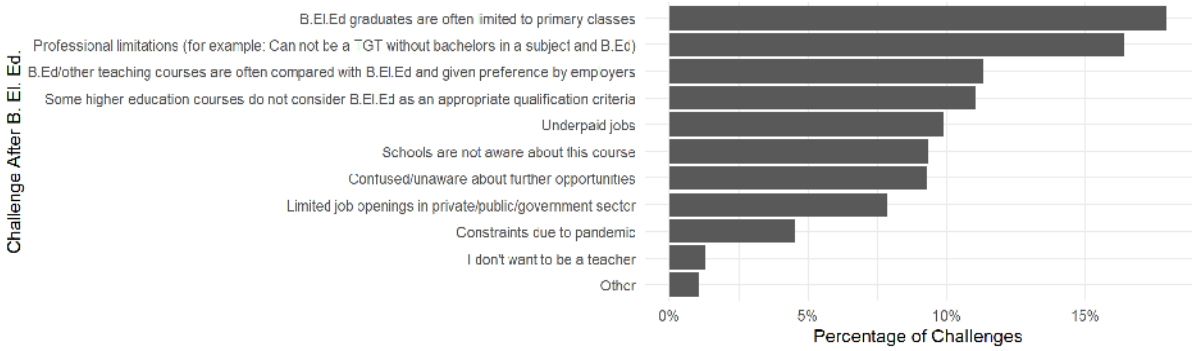

Source: R Analysis

Data reveals that many BElEd alumni are opting to work as curriculum designers, content writers, research associates, academic programme managers and teacher educators. These are typically career shifts that they have made after having been a teacher for several years. Many BElEd alumni are discovering new opportunities in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and edtech companies as well.

It became evident in a recent online networking event of BElEd alumni that many of them are still not aware of the Delhi High Court judgement that gives legitimacy to their degree for direct recruitment and promotion to the trained graduate teacher scale. Many who wanted to stay in the teaching profession commented that they were struggling with the same issue. This indicates the need for wider dissemination of court verdicts to enable the BElEd community to join the larger battle with collective agency.

## Challenges Post B.El.Ed

Figure 4: Challenges faced by alumni post B.El.Ed




Source: R Analysis

Figure 4 reveals that alumni consider lack of mobility to upper primary school or to a higher grade in the primary school as their biggest challenge as elementary schoolteachers. This leads to stagnation in a particular class for several years. Also, as mentioned earlier, the lower the class, the lower is the salary and social status in a hierarchical system of education. Narratives reveal that schoolteachers find this struggle for occupational mobility frustrating.

Many schools are not aware that a BElEd degree is, in fact, a specialised degree for elementary school teaching. Historically, since B.Ed degree holders taught all levels in school, many schools continue to demand the degree for promotion to the next grade of a trained graduate teacher. Given the long (colonial) history of B.Ed as the only degree qualification to become a teacher, schools continue to employ teachers with a B.Ed degree.

Another daunting challenge after BElEd is to pursue a master's degree in the disciplines of mathematics and sciences within Delhi University. Two years of specialisation in these subjects as liberal options are not seen at par with a bachelor's degree in these disciplines. Many alumni have had to switch their disciplines after the BElEd because of this reason.

Salaries of schoolteachers are low in comparison to other professions. This turned out to be one of the major reasons for trajectory shifts. As there are more employment opportunities within the private education sector in recent years, many BElEd alumni are opting to work with them for higher salaries, even if it means less job satisfaction.

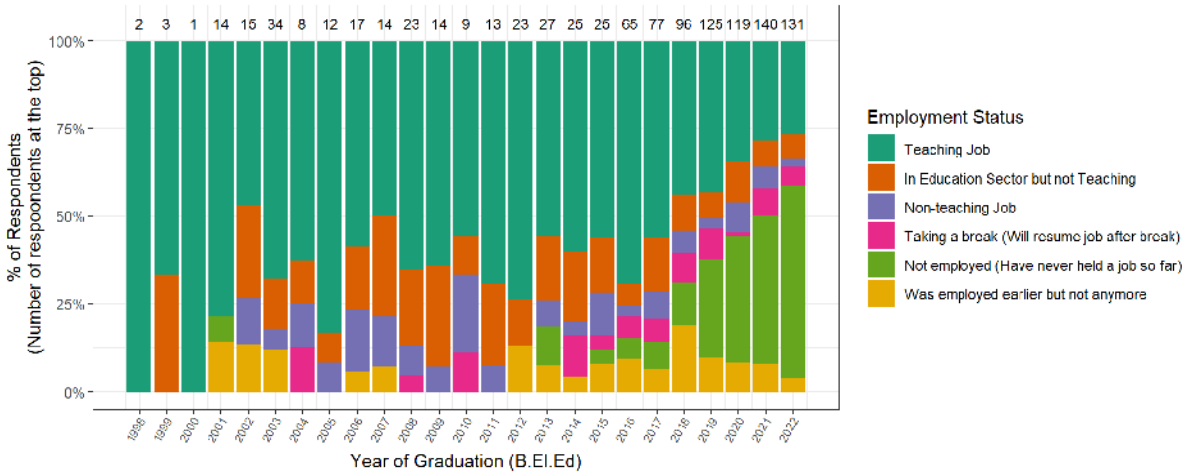
*Employment status of alumni*

Figure 5 reveals that the majority of BElEd alumni are employed in the education sector. While most of the alumni are teaching as primary schoolteachers, trained graduate teachers and post-graduate teachers in schools, some teach at the university level in teacher preparation BElEd and B.Ed programmes.

Non-teaching jobs in the education sector involve working as curriculum developers, content writers, research associates and academic coordinators or academic programme managers. These jobs are largely in the private sector, run by NGOs, corporations and edtech companies. In Figure 5, the orange

bars in the chart show that BElEd graduates, other than teaching have had non-teaching opportunities as well in the education sector within the years 2012 to 2017.

Figure 5: Work profiles

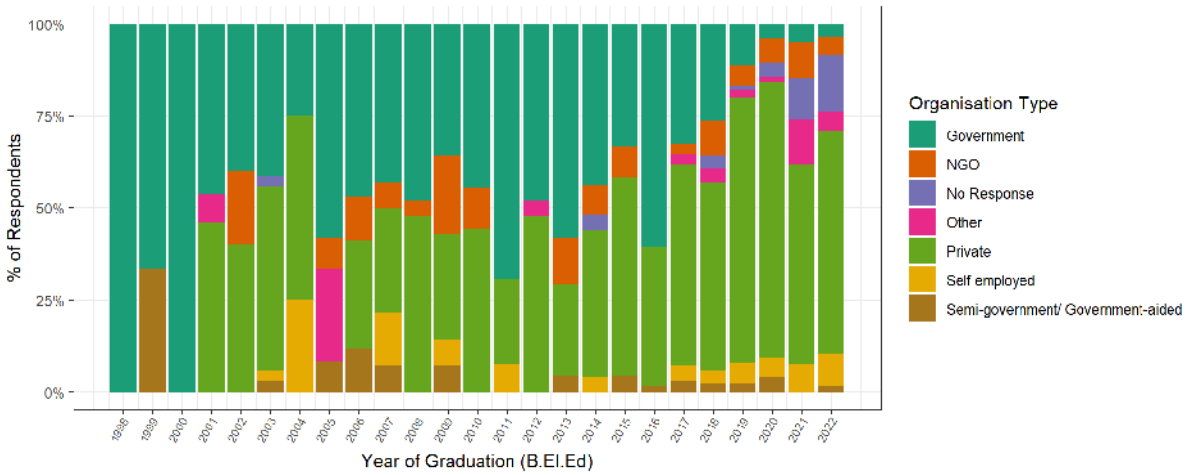



Source: R Analysis

*Organisation type*

Figure 6 indicates that teaching jobs in the government sector have gradually been shrinking over the last two decades. Meanwhile, there has been a drastic rise in employment opportunities in the private sector for both teaching and non-teaching jobs. Narratives reveal that the private sector—largely comprising schools, NGOs and edtech companies—create opportunities to work as schoolteachers, teacher trainers, curriculum designers or content writers. They are undertaken as public–private partnership models or corporate social responsibility initiatives. The chart shows a clear pattern of private sector employment over the last two decades.

Figure 6: Type of organisation




Source: R Analysis

Table 3 shows that most BElEd alumni (89.5 per cent in government schools and 93.1 per cent in private schools) work as primary schoolteachers. A very low percentage (8.2 per cent in government schools and 6.2 per cent in private schools) get opportunities to work in the capacity of trained graduate teachers and a further lower percentage (2.3 per cent in government schools and 0.7 per cent in private schools) in the capacity of post-graduate teachers.

Table 3: PRT, TGT and PGT Distribution of schoolteachers

| Government-run Schools (39.6%) | Private Schools (60.4%) |
|---|---|
| Primary schoolteachers: 89.5% | Primary schoolteachers: 93.1% |
| Trained graduate teachers: 8.2% | Trained graduate teachers: 6.2% |
| Post-graduate teachers: 2.3% | Post-graduate teachers: 0.7% |

Source: Compiled by author

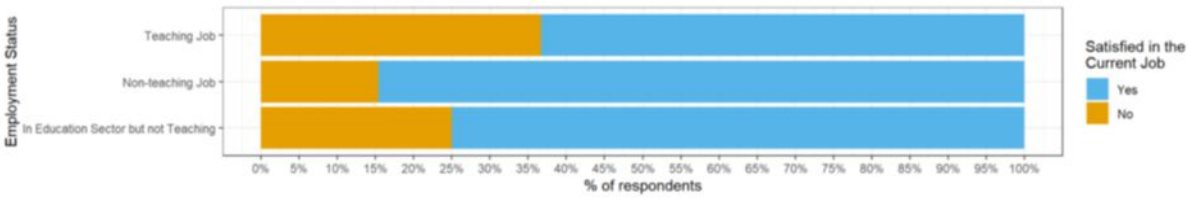
One can see that BElEd alumni are opting for jobs in the private sector. Narratives bring out the attraction of higher salaries in the private sector. Many NGOs and private universities have adopted state schools, and they function at three levels. Their interventions are at the level of curriculum designing, at the level of teaching children from underprivileged backgrounds and at the level of teacher training.

*Job satisfaction*

Figure 7 indicates the level of satisfaction that alumni have with their current jobs. While most BElEd alumni are satisfied with their work, about 38 per cent working as elementary schoolteachers and 25 per cent of those working as curriculum designers, content writers and teacher trainers within the education sector express dissatisfaction with their jobs. In comparison, least dissatisfaction was seen among those with jobs in the non-education sector, where BElEd alumni are working as bankers, lawyers and human resource (HR) professionals.

Narratives indicate primarily two reasons for dissatisfaction in teaching jobs. First, schools do not allow occupational mobility, either within the primary grades or to upper primary grades (see Figure 4). Second, compared to other professions, salaries of schoolteachers are much lower. Some private schools are exploitative. Few alumni reported that they are actually paid less than the full salary they should get. Low social status of schoolteachers, excessive administrative work, lack of autonomy due to prescribed curriculum and plans, pressure of uniformity, undue focus on testing and lack of agency are the reasons mentioned by teachers that create dissatisfaction for them.

Figure 7: Satisfaction levels | Source: R Analysis



Edtech companies, on the other hand, are largely focused on objective testing and quizzing. Most of their services are again utilised by children from marginalised backgrounds. While working as curriculum designers or content writers can be intellectually challenging and satisfying, they have no direct access to the children whom they design the material for. They receive feedback on the material from their superior once it has been tried out on children. Lack of interaction with the children whom they prepare the material for leads to dissatisfaction. These also tend to be online jobs, adding to their dissatisfaction. Alumni reported that teams in edtech companies do not usually have a background in education and therefore, they do not understand what knowledge is required to build a curriculum. Lack of engaging discussions and excessive focus on objectivity, gaming and animation leads to substandard "products" where the focus is on piecemeal transmission of knowledge.

Those working with in-service teachers as teacher educators work in remote areas. The cascade model of training "master trainers" who in turn train local teachers is also deeply dissatisfying for many. Very often, these trainings are conducted without understanding the requirements, concerns and challenges that local teachers face. Working in these remote areas is sometimes a lonely journey for many, especially without their families. This too adds to their dissatisfaction.

Interviews with four BElEd alumni who are working as an HR professional in a bank, a lawyer in Delhi High Court, a social worker in the development sector and an LGBT resource person respectively suggest that each one of them took a conscious decision to not enter the teaching profession. Interestingly, while they have opted out of school teaching as a career, they teach underprivileged children voluntarily. Each one of them talked about a heightened sense of agency in their non-teaching profession, which gives them immense satisfaction. For example, the LGBT resource person takes workshops to spread awareness and sensitivity towards the queer community. He also writes his own script for producing podcasts that are based on research. He uses these as well during workshop sessions. He feels agentic doing this work.

## Career Trajectories

Table 4 gives a summary of the career directions that BElEd alumni opt for within the education sector.

Table 4: Career trajectories in the education sector

| Schoolteachers | Higher education: Post-graduate studies including MA (Education), B.Ed, M.Phil and PhD | University faculty in BElEd, B.Ed and other programmes | Curriculum designers and content writers | Teacher educators for in-service teacher support | Administrators, academic managers and researchers | Home tutors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **49%** | **28%** | **2%** | **2.6%** | **2.3%** | **2.8%** | **1%** |

Source: Compiled by author

Our analysis reveals seven categories of work profiles within the education sector. Forty-nine per cent of BElEd alumni have been absorbed as elementary schoolteachers and an additional 10 per cent have taken up other assignments within the education sector. Data also reflects that most employment opportunities are in private schools rather than government schools. This is also because a large number of teacher vacancies in government schools are left vacant. Apart from this, many alumni make a conscious decision to work at the university level, planning towards fulfilling all the requisite eligibility criteria. Further investigation sheds light on the fact that more than 80 per cent of schoolteachers work as primary schoolteachers, while a few manage to get promoted as trained graduate teachers or post-graduate teachers.

While most alumni begin their careers as schoolteachers, they shift to other work profiles after a few years. This trend has been quite recent though. Better pay, diverse work experience and flexible working hours have been cited as reasons for these shifts.

## Patterns in Trajectory Shifts within the Education Sector

Over the past 25 years, a clear pattern has emerged from our analysis of the career shifts that BElEd alumni have made.

- Shifts within schools: Many alumni, after teaching as primary schoolteachers for several years are now working as trained graduate teachers or postgraduate teachers. For this promotion, they had to complete a master's degree in a discipline of their specialisation. This promotion brought them higher social status as well as personal and professional growth. Many also confided that working at one level became monotonous and they wanted to challenge themselves to teach higher classes.

- Private schools to government schools: Those BElEd alumni who only want to work as schoolteachers, prefer government-run schools over private schools, even if the employment is on contract basis. Many have made this shift, but the reverse shift from government to private schools was not observed. Those who have been teaching in government-run schools either as permanent teachers or recently as contract teachers prefer to stay on because of the "stability" or in anticipation of that stability in the future. According to them, working in government-run schools is a better bet compared to private schools, which are only contractual in today's times.

- Also, private schools sometimes cheat on the salaries that they pay to schoolteachers. Schoolteachers to university teachers: A few alumni have been able to make this shift after clearing the University Grants Commission's National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET). Most of these alumni have also completed their Ph.D after becoming university faculty or are pursuing it currently.

*Schoolteachers to other roles in the private education sector*

**Curriculum designers/content writers:** BElEd alumni find that their creative potential, practical experience and theoretical content knowledge helps them become curriculum developers and content writers. What attracts them to such roles is the pay package, which is almost three times that of a schoolteacher. Some of them have the option of working from home with flexible hours. While they commented that they miss an active teaching role, the freedom to express themselves is far greater in

these roles than in schools. It is important to note that only those BElEd alumni who taught in private schools made this shift, not those who taught in government schools.

Another reason for such a shift was because of their desire to be part of decision-making in matters of school curriculum and selection of content. While working as schoolteachers, the BElEd alumni felt that their role as elementary schoolteachers was merely to implement a curriculum that was handed over to them top-down. Since most private schools have uniform templates for even their lesson plans, they did not have the freedom to include newer activities and subject content on their own. Even if there was little freedom, it required a long process of approval from senior teacher coordinators. By the time the approval came through, it was time to move on to another topic according to the schedule that was handed down to teachers. Some alumni also claimed that there was major interference from parents. Since private schools have to keep the parents happy, teachers were instructed to not put forward their point of view with the parents. Private schoolteachers were also expected to stay back after school hours to work on planning, writing reports or doing documentation work. These factors led them to explore options that would make them participate at the back end, where they felt that their theoretical knowledge and practical experience of having taught in schools could help them contribute in designing the curriculum and selection of subject content. They also expressed that since the management of corporate organisations where they work is not from an education background, they were more open to listening to and valuing the opinions of BElEd alumni as curriculum developers. The alumni generally have greater freedom to try out their ideas in such organisations. This role gives them a greater sense of self-worth. However, some of them also lamented not being able to engage with children in classrooms anymore.

**Teacher educators**: Most of these organisations are either corporate-funded foundations or NGOs that partner with state governments and adopt schools. BElEd alumni working in these organisations prepare training modules and then train master teachers, primarily in English and mathematics who in turn conduct bulk trainings for regular schoolteachers. This works as a cascade model, where trained master teachers train the regular schoolteachers working within the same district. Master teachers also give feedback after training modules are tried out. Regular schoolteachers provide feedback to master teachers in terms of what works or does not work in classrooms. The BElEd alumni who have shifted to the role of teacher trainers/educators perceive themselves as working in leadership roles that are likely to have greater impact. This is because these foundations and NGOs work with several state governments to train in-service teachers. Their titles also suggest leadership positions such as “academic lead manager”, “senior academic excellence director”, “project in-charge” or “senior content and mentoring lead”. Their roles require them to have a say in module preparation and train master teacher trainers, who in turn train schoolteachers working in several state government schools. These BElEd alumni are the mediators between their organisations and master teacher trainers. They also give feedback received from schoolteachers through the master teacher trainer to strengthen the content of the modules that are regularly upgraded. The pay packages received for these roles are better than those of schoolteachers. However, the drawback as most of them reported is extensive travel to several districts to assess the impact of their training. Another interesting observation that some of them made is the current focus on foundational literacy and numeracy that is in line with NEP 2020 to push the idea of developing skills. They felt that a lot is being tested out to push for this and quality education without any visible impact because very often the training is around random activities that don’t individually add up to a “whole”.

*Other careers*

About 3.8 per cent of BElEd alumni work in non-education sectors as lawyers, bankers, human resources officers and resource persons in various social organisations working in the spheres of public health and LGBT rights. Homemakers constitute 8.5 per cent of the alumni sample of this study. We could not explore details of this category because of time constraints.

There are three major findings of this research project that have a bearing on policy framing. First, the alumni narratives from our study reveal the powerful nature of the BElEd curriculum. If quality education must become a reality, we need to have more such programmes in our country. The fact that 87.7 per cent of alumni have chosen to stay in the education sector serving in various capacities speaks volumes about BElEd as an elementary education programme. We cannot ignore teachers or their preparation for transforming education for sustainable futures. Second, the professional identities of teachers are under threat. BElEd alumni try to resist the mechanical nature of their role by finding gaps within institutional structures to exercise their agency. Since resistance is also a reflection of agency, collective agency in decision-making against certain practices can enable the powerful authorities to listen to their voices. Third, political leaders and policymakers must recognise the challenges of mobility within the current education system and work to improve pay scales. These concerns must be addressed in order to reinstate the status and role of teachers in society. Collective voice and agency will give them an edge to confront school managements, state governments and policymakers. They also need to document their stories for better outreach and collective action.

## CONCLUSION

The insights from the project underscore the importance of teacher education programmes such as the BElEd in developing teachers as critical and transformative intellectuals. Despite institutional and policy constraints, BElEd alumni have succeeded in creating a culture of possibilities within their classrooms. Their narratives revealed that while many experience feelings of frustration, anguish and betrayal, they continue to exercise their agency through storytelling, theatre and self-development activities. Instead of marginalising their role, voice and agency, teachers need to be supported as individuals with ideas, capable of making knowledge generation as emancipatory. A key finding from this study points to the fact that while teachers will have to continue to fight for their agency, mobility and better pay scale, collective agency can empower them better to confront powerful and hierarchical institutional and political structures. Creation of a network of communities of practice would enable them to share experiences, resources and fight for their collective agency. BElEd alumni suggested that continued dialogue could be one of the means at their disposal to be heard and to strengthen teacher agency. This study has attempted to document their stories through narratives to make their voices heard. It has also underlined the need for policy recommendations so that issues of mobility, voice, agency and identity come to forefront. For quality education, policymakers and political leaders will have to repose and reiterate their faith in teachers, who are the critical pillars in education in addition to focusing on infrastructure, curriculum and teaching-learning environments.

## A short film on 'Teachers Negotiating Agency'

The author scripted and produced a short 5-minute mobile film on BElEd alumni who are working as school teachers. It showcases their successes and struggles as they negotiate their teacher agency in highly structured hierarchal school structures and within the policy framework that's increasingly marganalising their identity, status and role.

Link to the short film: https://drive.google.com/file/d/19J3Tf-54K-ayLBwxbsDQnJHFj8E1ugPg/view?usp=drivesdk

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