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COUNTER IMAGINARIES

Toward a new cartography of agency

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Prologue: About The Premise of the Story	4
The What	4
And The Why	5
Act 1: About Methods, Methodology and Participants	7
The How	7
The Who	8
Act 2: About the Difficulties and Challenges	9
Act 3: Learnings	11
Capacity Development	12
Findings & Insights	13
Epilogue ☒ But not the End	15
A Note on Influences	18
References	19

ABSTRACT

Performance can foster social imagination, help us understand the connection between historical processes and personal experiences, and to see how social structures and forces shape our lives and identities. The use of performance can help both educators and learners to expose the pedagogies of oppression—how education can reproduce or reinforce the existing power relations and ideologies in society. Performance when deployed as a critical pedagogy can enhance the agency of both educators and learners, encouraging them to question and challenge the status quo, and provoke individual and social transformation. Performance as pedagogy can contribute to an awareness of one's own values, beliefs, and actions, and how they affect oneself and others, as well as promote a culture of dialogue, respect and inclusion in the classroom or school.

PROLOGUE: ABOUT THE PREMISE OF THE STORY

The what

Counter imaginaries set out to map the idea of agency and its relationship to transformation. Using the lens of theatre and the performing arts, this project explored the diverse perspectives and challenges that shape the experiences of those who are excluded or marginalised in the educational system. By examining these perspectives and challenges, the project aimed to better understand the idea and praxis of *agency*. Data for this mapping was gathered through long-form conversations with four different groups of participants—in-service teachers who had graduated from a specific teacher education programme at Delhi University, young people belonging to the De-notified Tribes, teacher-educators engaged in teacher education and training, and performing artists influenced by the Phule- Ambedkarite traditions of thought (Patil, P.G., 1991).

The project aimed at capturing and communicating the complex, and often hidden realities that affect the teaching-learning process for marginalised and excluded groups. The definition of *excluded* and *marginalised* was broader than what the terms usually imply, and included not only individuals from socially marginalised groups but also those whose voices are marginalised within the teaching-learning architecture of education, specifically, teachers/educators who find themselves increasingly sidelined in the larger discourses around education.

Education systems often mirror and reinforce dominant ideologies and power structures of society that favour certain groups over others. This can result in the exclusion and marginalisation of individuals who belong to different groups based on their identity or circumstances. These individuals are often denied the opportunity to participate in or influence the educational processes that affect them, such as curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, and assessment methods. This leads to a lack of recognition and respect for their rights, needs, aspirations, cultures, languages, histories, and identities as human beings

and as learners. It also results in a failure to acknowledge their valuable knowledge and experiences, which can enrich the understanding and practice of education for themselves and others.

Arts-based research practices have demonstrated immense value in devising a creative space for embodied dialogue. Therefore, employing this method can foster social reflexivity, public deliberation, and understanding (Greene, M., 1995). The decision to examine the educational experiences of individuals belonging to marginalised groups in this manner was driven by the aim to adopt a diverging perspective to help identify and understand the causes and consequences of educational inequality and exclusion, and how that affects the lives, well-being, educational trajectories and outcomes of individuals (Nambissan, Geetha B., & Rao, Srinivasa S., 2013).

The research conducted as part of this project aims to pose questions to the situation by creating a platform for participants to express their views and concerns, share their stories and achievements, and co-create possibilities that are relevant and responsive to their contexts. By using the theatre-lens, the project engaged participants in reflection and dialogue, as well as, we hope, empowering and amplifying the voices and perspectives that are often silenced or ignored in educational decision-making and research.

Through this project and its methodology, we also hope to challenge, critique, and transform dominant narratives and norms. By highlighting the diversity and complexity of experiences and examining appropriate theoretical frameworks, we seek to generate evidence-based insights and identify gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. This, we hope, can help inform and evaluate policies and practices aimed at promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in the teaching-learning architecture of education.

And the why

It is not an exaggeration to state that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing crisis in the Indian education system. Empirical data and analyses have consistently revealed the manifold factors that impede the educational process—enrolment, retention, attainment, budgetary allocations, curriculum design, teacher competency, and systemic inequality. A crucial aspect of this crisis concerns the nature and function of teacher education.

It has been pointed out that the neglect of the potential role of teacher education in fostering equitable and quality education was a conscious policy choice. Consequently, teacher education capacity in some of the most educationally deprived states in India remains woefully inadequate (Batra, P., 2021). With the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, the crisis has seemingly worsened. Schools in India were shut down for more than 17 months. While a small fraction of children with means and access to technology were able to continue their studies, others were effectively excluded. This situation is further compounded by the growing distress caused by a slowing economy and the ravaging effects of climate change. There is a likelihood that the longstanding inequalities between students in rural and urban areas will increase further, aggravating the crisis in public education. The situation calls for a radical reimagination of the education system, and performative practices can contribute significantly to this re-imagination of the educational system.

The concept of *agency* is understood in various ways. Some see it as some type of thing that people have inside of them, such as a trait or a skill or a capacity. This conception of *agency* implies that some people

are more agentic than others, and that agency remains relatively stable and consistent across situations. Others perceive it as something that people do or achieve, depending on the conditions that enable or disable their actions. This suggests that agency is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic and relational phenomenon that emerges from the interaction between people and contexts.

This latter conception of *agency* as an emergent phenomenon helps us see how people can be creative and critical, acting against different types of constraints, while also being influenced by their surroundings and capacities (Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S., 2015). For example, a teacher may have more agency in designing their own curriculum than in adhering to a prescribed one. Similarly, they may have less agency in a school that does not support their professional development compared to one that does. Agency is a process that happens in the present but is shaped by the past and the future, thus becoming an ongoing agentic practice. This means that agency is not a one-time event but a continuous and reflective practice that involves learning from past experiences, responding to the present and anticipating future possibilities.

A teacher may develop their agency by reflecting on their teaching beliefs and practices and exploring new ways of teaching that align with their goals and values. This perspective on *agency* and the ongoing practice of *agency* shifts the responsibility of transforming education from the individual to the contexts and environments in which they are situated. This means that *agency* and the practice of *agency*, becomes not only a personal or individual matter but also a collective and social one that requires collaboration and dialogue among different stakeholders. A teacher may enhance their agency by working with other teachers, students, parents, and administrators to create more conducive and supportive learning environments for themselves and others.

This also leads us to the concept of co-creation, which means that agency is not only about acting on the self or the world, but also creating it together with others. Co-creation involves sharing ideas, resources, and responsibilities, as well as negotiating meanings and values in the process of transforming education. We think that this shift from individual capacity to contexts, and the interplay between individuals and context is an important consideration in helping us understand how teachers might embody practice, engage with policy, and ultimately bring about transformations in the teaching-learning architecture of education. It is within this space between individuals and contexts that we believe, theatre and the performing arts can reveal reflexive possibilities for examining the process of teaching and learning.

ACT 1: ABOUT METHODS, METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT

The how

We started out with a set of questions. Looking back now, we realise that our questions were really trying to unravel the larger, broader question of how theatre and the performing arts impact the development and operation of *agency*. We looked at them as pathways inside a forest with the possibility of leading us deeper in, or more to the edges. Here's how we defined these pathways:

- ❑ How is inequality defined? How does inequality play out in the classroom?
- ❑ What are teachers' perceptions of equality and social justice in the classroom? What are learners' perceptions of equality and social justice in the classroom?
- ❑ How does the experience of theatre shape the development of Self and Identity in student-teachers?
- ❑ How does the evolving Self and Identity of student-teachers relate to transformation and change?
- ❑ How can theatre be used in a classroom setting to create more equitable and socially just spaces?
- ❑ What forms of theatre could be conducive to this? Do existing forms of theatre need to be re-imagined for the present time?
- ❑ How can teacher education be reframed through the lens of theatre and performance pedagogies?
- ❑ In what forms can this knowledge be transmitted? What are the possibilities for equitable and low-barrier modes of transmission? What role can public digital platforms play in the transmission of knowledge?

Given our background as practicing artists, we were, from the outset, interested in people's subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. We aimed to generate understandings from qualitative data, looking at phenomenon from the ground up rather than testing pre-existing theories. The principles of grounded theory proved invaluable in this regard. We also drew upon the tenets of the creative arts in favouring aesthetic understanding, meaning-making, metaphor, evocation, and provocation. Since language forms the basis of much of our lives, understandings, thoughts, and values, we settled on dialogic conversation form for our research. This form was also selected keeping in mind our eventual narrative outputs, which we felt would benefit from the narrative and oral form. Prior to this project, as researchers, we had engaged with some of the participants through theatre workshops, gaining some understanding of their contexts.

In the beginning, the conversations resembled passive interviews, with both the participants and us, the researchers, settling easily into our roles as interviewer and interviewee. But as we began to engage in more conversations, the process became more active and iterative. Moving back and forth within and between different conversations we began to see emerging ideas, themes, concepts, and categories related to our research questions. This also involved making constant comparisons, where we as researchers were comparing different interviews, cases and situations to identify similarities and differences, and to define and refine the emerging concepts and categories and see what connections they evoked with our research questions. During the conversations, we also began to question and challenge what the participants

said, to generate an exchange of ideas rather than passively accepting one viewpoint. In some cases, we followed up the first conversation with a second conversation, either to explore what had been said previously, or what we thought as inconsistencies, or to further extend the conversation into other thematic areas. Whenever possible, these conversations were conducted in person; if not, they were conducted at mutually convenient times over the phone or Zoom. All conversations were recorded in audio format.

To analyse the conversations, we transcribed them and listened to them to gain a comprehensive understanding. Then we made a second pass and listened to each conversation a second time, but this time taking notes to record initial impressions, thoughts, and questions about the themes and ideas. In some cases, where we found the conversations were densely layered and offered more insights, we made a third or very occasionally a fourth listening pass.

Using our notes and memos, we began coding the data using an open form of coding, assigning labels or names to portions of the conversation that seemed to capture their meaning or essence. We used descriptive codes which reflected the words or phrases used by the participants, as well as words that were used by the participants themselves. We also used codes to capture some of the actions or processes described in these conversations. Although we aim to achieve even greater granularity by coding incident by incident, we have not yet reached this level of detail due to time constraints.

Next, we grouped or clustered the codes into broader categories or themes that represented more abstract concepts or phenomena. We also began to identify the properties or characteristics, and variations within each category or theme, and how they relate to each other, which required the use of subcategories or subthemes to capture subtypes or aspects.

Finally, we integrated and refined the categories or themes into a set of core categories or themes that represented the central concept or phenomenon of our research: how theatre and the performing arts impact the development and operation of *agency*.

The who

We leveraged our existing networks to engage with the teachers and students. Our connections with teachers came out of our engagement as teaching artists in the Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) programme at Delhi University. As for the students, we have a prior relationship through a two-year theatre project run by Sukhesh Arora in collaboration with the NGO Muskaan, based in Bhopal, India. Muskaan facilitated access to students from communities classified as Denotified Tribes. At a later stage, Muskaan expressed concerns about our transparency in our collaboration and requested to dissociate with the project. In deference to their wish, we have not included data gathered from conversations with participants introduced through Muskaan.

Connections with teacher educators and teaching artists were also established during our engagement with the B.El.Ed. programme. Connections with artists who identify as Dalit or engage with Dalit theatre and performance traditions were made through artist networks or social media where the work of these artists was visible. Each individual involved in this project is considered a participant, and they can be broadly divided into four different groups. The table below provides an overview of these groups, including the number of participants and the nature of their relationship.

	Group	Criteria	No. of Participants	Relationship
1.	Teachers	Graduates of the B.El.Ed. programme; should have graduated from the programme no later than 2018; should have had some teaching experience preferably also during the COVID-19 pandemic	18	Participants
2.	Students	Coming from a socially marginalised group; should have had some experience of formal schooling; can presently be in school or out of school	18	Participants
3.	Teacher educators or teaching artists	Should be engaged in training teachers at the school or university level, or in education and training, with a practice grounded in a theatrical form	7	Participants
4.	Artists	Artists who identify as Dalit or engage in specific Dalit theatre and performance traditions	6	Participants

ACT 2: ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

We encountered four significant challenges during this project:

1. Representation and Awareness of Privilege

This has by far been the biggest challenge we faced. While we were constantly trying to stay aware of our own *location* as individuals with a certain amount of privilege who are not marginalised, we realised that it is not so easy when one tries to represent issues of oppression and injustice. This also raised questions of power and decision-making, and who was doing what. This became very relevant in our relationship with Muskaan. As an organisation, they felt that transparency about the project and its workings was lacking, leading them to disassociate themselves from the work. These questions require very careful consideration, and while we strive to be open and reflexive, intentions alone are not enough. Intentions must be backed up by actions, and actions require collaboration, and must be based in context. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that there is no one correct approach. Solutions, or the attempt to find solutions, is relative to what one is trying to do. The work in this sort of approach is often messy, and the best way forward is not to deny or control the messiness of the work but to embrace it.

2. Geography and Time

The teachers we engaged with were scattered across a wide geographical area. Additionally, their various life and work commitments added to time constraints, making it challenging to coordinate conversations. Although all our participants were very willing to speak, finding mutually convenient times was difficult. Gathering a large group of teachers together could have provided a different perspective, as the exchange of ideas and thoughts in a group setting allows for diverse interpretations. However, this task was complex, and we ultimately gave up the idea after careful consideration.

3. The Quantum of Qualitative Data

The sheer amount of “data” that emerged from these conversations was overwhelming. We were not quite prepared for it, and by that we mean, in terms of processing and analysing the data. The conversations were rich in experiences, anecdotes, reflections, and theories, making it challenging to parse through this data, and to make sense of it.

4. Language

Participants of the project came from diverse backgrounds and spoke different languages, including Pardhi, Gondhi, Kanjari, Marathi. They also spoke Hindi and English, with varying levels of fluency. As the principal investigator and co-investigator were fluent in Hindi and English, these two languages became the primary means of communication, and served as bridging languages when expressing concepts or ideas from the other languages.

Conversations with participants took place in either of the two languages, as they preferred. However, there were no restrictions on the use of different languages. We attempted to capture, whenever possible, the linguistic diversity through a song or poem in the original languages during our conversations. These moments allowed us, as researchers/listeners/individuals, to access a different world of ideas and expression. Our sense is that our participants were doing the same when communicating with us in the two languages we understood, both consciously and subconsciously.

Sometimes, within a single conversation, the language switched between Hindi and English. We are aware that this privileges Hindi and English in certain ways. However, we felt that our participants supported us by using Hindi and English to compensate for our lack of fluency in their native language(s). The combination of the two languages allowed for flexibility in expression, and we did not observe any particular difficulty on the part of our participants in expressing concepts or ideas using a combination of Hindi and English.

Given the massive linguistic diversity in India, it is always a gigantic task to be able to fully acknowledge the different forms of expression. For us too, this was a tricky question, and there has been somewhat of a give and take during this process, which we see as being a factor in the co-creation of knowledge generated from within this project. Our participants granted us a certain privilege—stemming from our place of “not knowing”—and to reciprocate for that privilege, we created a space within our outputs, as best we could, to acknowledge the linguistic diversity and expressions of our participants. Notably, the graphic book is an act of co-creation, with illustrations and editorial content being moderated by some of the participants from the Gond,

Pardhi and Kanjar communities. We aspire to translate the graphic book into the participants' native languages, and we feel that this process will allow for a more relevant, and perhaps authentic translation in the future.

The challenges themselves have led us to the solutions. Since physical gatherings were not feasible, we used technology platforms like Zoom to bring them together virtually, albeit in smaller constellations. We found Zoom indispensable and fairly responsive to the needs of the project. Technology also allowed us to have some of these conversations over the phone while maintaining a high level of audio fidelity, which was important for the podcast. With respect to the parsing of data, we have benefited greatly from the already existing literature on the subject, although no easily adaptable models were available for us to use readily. This prompted us to delve into other domains and discover alternative models of analysis, which have helped us in developing our own framework for data analysis.

ACT 3: THE LEARNINGS

Capacity development

The most crucial aspect of our capacity development (and challenge) has been the evolution of our theoretical perspectives on education, performance, research, and marginalisation. This has meant a lot of reading, exposure to new thoughts and perspectives we were not aware of before, and conversations with people well-versed in these important discourses. Our participants themselves have at times provided valuable perspectives. One such perspective that emerged from conversations with teacher-educators and storytellers led us to Sharmila Rege's work about Dalit testimonies and Dalit cultural forms of performance and presentation (1998). Her work on Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice (2000) has laid a solid foundation for reframing performance pedagogies that constitute teachers and students as truth-seekers and agents of transformation, ideas which this project also attempts to investigate.

It was through the testimonies of our participants that we were able to actually see that performance can be a powerful tool for learning and teaching, fostering agency, creativity, criticality and empathy. However, it also became clear that education is a very complex and dynamic process that involves multiple actors, factors, and contexts. Likewise, research is a systematic and iterative process that can generate theory from data, rather than testing existing theories. What also became apparent is that while we understand the concept of society as a diverse and changing entity that can be influenced and transformed by education, the transformation is not easily perceptible and often manifests itself in both extraordinary and small ways.

The other major area of capacity development has been developing skills for data collection, analysis, and presentation. We have had to develop our own methods of 'data collection' such as conversation and interviewing techniques, as well as our own methods of analysis. This has been a steep learning curve, but also an exciting one. It has shifted our perspective on what evidence means, to what it *can* mean. We feel that evidence generated in this form cannot be dissociated from its context, and it also points at something specific from that context. Much of this has required us to delve into emotions and feelings, traditionally seen as being outside the framework of 'rigorous research.'

As we sought to make available our research to a broader audience through narrative forms, particularly in the form of the podcast, we had to learn and develop the skills for podcasting. This involved learning how to use microphones and recorders to capture high-quality audio from interviews, set up suitable recording environments, utilise audio editing software to edit raw audio files, use digital audio workstations to mix edited audio with music and sound effects, and create transitions and segments. Additionally, we familiarised ourselves with podcast hosting services to upload and publish podcast episodes, and learned how to submit the podcast to various directories and platforms. Through this process, we have also come to believe that podcasting offers immense potential not just as a tool or methodological approach to research, but as pedagogy by itself. This is something we intend to explore further since it also relates to one of our research questions.

Findings and insights

Some of the key findings related to our research questions at this stage are listed below. We are still in the process of further refining these findings, and correlate them with what has been described in the same conversation, as well as with inputs from other participants addressing the same questions. In attempting the process of refinement, our emphasis is on clarifying meaning rather than drilling down to achieve universal or absolute truth.

1. The way inequality is defined and what its perceptions are among students and teachers, and how it plays out in the classroom are linked questions. What emerged is that inequality and its perceptions are not so easy to describe. Inequality can also be related to differences, the perception of differences, and various forms of social status.

One of our teacher participants, Bhawna, told us:

I think maybe in the bigger classes, but in the smaller classes there is not so much of a perception of difference. (with regard to whether a child belongs to the RTE category i.e., requiring financial support)

But when asked about whether there is an awareness of caste in the classroom, she replied:

Of course, different caste, because when you talk about SC, they have a particular surname, you get to know caste usually from your surname, so if it's Shukla, Sharma, Pandey, you know that they are Pandits, these (others) are from a lower caste, these (others) are Kshatriyas. They know (in general) but in the lower grades I don't find that children pay much attention to this probably because I don't pay attention to it either. I don't know. Not so evident in the primary grades.

A little later in the conversation, she said:

“Oh, ya, I have heard, I don’t know whether this is true or not, that some teachers give more marks to their caste children in the practicals in the board classes (classes 10- 12). I don’t know if it is true or not.”

2. One element that emerged, both amongst teachers and teaching-artists that we spoke to, was the inadequacy of schools as the sole sites for learning, and the questions it raises about what is education itself. Radha, a teaching-artist, practitioner of the theatre form known as Theatre of the Oppressed had this to say about her own journey from being a teacher to teaching-artist:

“(there was) an increasing discomfort with the awareness that the classroom can only go so far...so here was a kind of learning (referring to her work with an NGO outside of her real teaching environment which was a university level English literature program) that was so real because it connected to our lives outside the classroom. Here was a kind of learning that was joyous but at the same time, you know, it made us angry when we saw the kind of iniquities, the kind of inequalities that all of us seem to take for granted.”

Nikita, one of our teacher participants, echoed this in a different way:

“I am a firm believer of the fact that schools are not the necessary places to receive education. If a boy or a girl living on the streets is selling vegetables or doing any kind of work, is able to do some kind of addition or subtraction, would we say that that boy is educated?... Education is a never-ending process of learning, and unlearning.”

3. Participants’ journeys reflected a dissatisfaction with the status quo, a search for something else, in order to transform their environments, which can range from turning the lens inward, another recurring theme, to a search for practical tools. Radha had this to say:

“So two things happened. One is wanting to look at just teaching differently, wanting to look at issues, somehow just connect that to what one was doing in the classroom. Theatre of course had always been an abiding interest. Here was something that made you sharply aware of your location, made you look at that, connect it to everything you were doing, so what you were doing in the classroom is not unconnected to who you are in society, and you have a responsibility. Here was a tool that told me I could do something with it which I could never do inside the classroom... Freire¹ says, a teacher is not neutral. You might be teaching mathematics but that does not mean you don’t have a stand on issues or that what you’re doing in the classroom is apolitical... but here was a tool that made me feel I could do something with it, change things.”

¹ A possible reference to Paulo Freire’s argument in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that no educational system or educator is neutral, and can either domesticate or liberate people. This implies an intimate relation between power and social relations, suggesting that one can challenge power structures by trying to change the social relations that give rise to them.

Nikita's search turned inwards instead:

When I was teaching, that was my first experience in a co-educational set up, and I came to know that there is 25 percent EWS² reservation, and one of my fellow teachers said you should know who those students are from that 25 percent students so that you can take extra care of them but later I observed that the fellow teachers were asking me to do so because they just wanted to know who all could afford to pay for the school trip and who can't so as a teacher, in order to step up for them (the EWS category students) the first and foremost and most difficult part for me to do was to analyse my own lens. How do I see those students in my head? What is the perception of them I have in my head? And that was reflecting my own lens, the way and how I can support them, and how can I make the classroom a better and safe space for them came much after that. I had a big dilemma. I had to unlearn I would say a lot of biases and stereotypes I had on my own.

4. This urge to transform the situation in one's environment is the starting point of agency and leads to a method or methodologies or tools which can be deployed. But often there is a confusion between agency and exercising autonomy, which is something that requires more investigation and further corroboration. Radha had this to say:

It (theatre practice) sneaked in also... Anu calls it sneaky pedagogy... I know this to be true because I do the same so when I go to schools and I offer Theatre of the Oppressed workshops, I never tell them the whole story, I never say what is possible in this workshop. Can you imagine telling a headmaster that your teachers will start to think for themselves. Not what they want to hear, right? So kind of say something like, you know, teachers are performers and this will give them greater confidence, and it's not a lie, right?

which really complicates the issue of agency and transformation, and almost pits Agency and Transformation against each other, because Transformation, while desirable, requires Agency, which requires independent thinking, which seems to be an undesirable trait.

While teachers are aware of the power of theatre, most of them expressed a hesitance in deploying performance based pedagogies, stemming from what they perceived to be their own lack of familiarity with its processes, and a perception that it required some form of special training.

5. Clues to the process of transformation do not come directly but are expressed either in the form of values. Radha says:

Diversity and inclusion are hard to practice, right, when you have this kind of a structure, a socially structured kind of exclusion Education should also be a model for our communities... what can communities be like, how can we be self-supporting, how can we help people grow and reach wherever they wish to reach you know.

² Economically Weaker Section (EWS) is a subcategory of people in India having an annual family income of less than ₹8 lakh, and who do not belong to any category such as SC/ST/OBC across India, nor to MBC in Tamil Nadu. On 7 January 2019, the Union Council of Ministers approved a 10% reservation in government jobs and educational institutions for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) in the unreserved category which is over and above the existing 50% reservation for SC/ST/OBC categories.

Or a set of analogies. Shalu, one of the teachers said:

“I actually feel that society is constructed of people. We are the building blocks, us, children and individuals. There are other structures, but humans are a bigger structure which can develop or transform much more quickly. Like culture doesn’t change so fast but generation after generation, the way of thinking, the education level of people, standard of living, these things probably change 2 or 3 times in the course of a lifetime. So when I saw we need to work on the individual, I mean that this will be the source to change things quicker. Meaning, that if there is a religious practice or a cultural practice which has been happening for many years, so even if 1 child or 2 children in a family begin to question it, that practice cannot be carried on peacefully after that day, and when peace is disturbed, people begin to think, is there a need for change here?”

EPILOGUE – BUT NOT THE END

Outputs, sharing and future discussions

One of the refrains we heard during this journey was that learning is a never-ending process and continues so long as the individual is alive. It is similar in theatre – a story and its characters do not reach the end and disappear; they take a pause – and the story continues, perhaps in another place, another dimension, or only in the imagination. There are separate strands of engagement in this journey that extend beyond the life of the project with different groups. Some of these include:

1. Journal article: Counter Imaginaries – Toward a new cartography of agency (working title)
In response to a call for submissions for the special issue of the Global Social Challenges Journal, we proposed an intervention related to policy and practice, which – could be a shorter summary of key findings from a project with a focus on recommendations for change/reform in policy and practice. The proposal has been accepted by editors Lizzi Milligan and Maria Balarin. This article will be approximately 3,500 words in English and co-written with Isha Verma, a graduate of the B.El.Ed programme from Jesus & Mary College, New Delhi, who is currently pursuing her Ph.D at the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong.

Abstract - The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption in the prevalent teaching-learning architecture of education, widening longstanding gaps, increasing inequalities, and exacerbating the crisis of public education all over the world. Countries like India, where schools remained shut for more than 17 months, were specially impacted. How can educators, learners and policy makers respond to this situation? Through this year long project funded by TESF Project Plus as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund, we investigated the idea of agency in an educational setting - both teacher agency and learner agency - as a means of transforming pedagogic practices. Navigated by two teaching-artists, both of whom are grounded in performance and performance making, the project focused on gathering qualitative data in the form of narratives - loosely based on the idea of the testimonio - from teachers, learners from marginalized communities, and Shalirs, or storytellers, who practice a

specific form of storytelling. The purpose was to uncover how performative practices and pedagogy can interact to create more equitable and diverse learning environments. This intervention will share some of the emergent findings from this project and their implications for policy.

The work is in progress and is expected to be completed by September 30, 2023.

2. Conference presentation: Counter Imaginaries – Toward a new cartography of agency (working title)

DiE Days is an annual, bilingual conference (English and German), which focuses on best practices and research in Drama and Theatre in Education in second and foreign language teaching. This year, conference organisers sought contributions from teachers, scholars, and performers working with drama and theatre in language education at all levels, from primary to tertiary, including teacher training, that reflect the best practices or disseminate research findings. We proposed a presentation and discussion based on our research which has been accepted. The conference will be held online from September 15-16, 2023, with an in-person edition taking place from October 29-30, 2023, at Teater Aros, Uppsala, Sweden. The online presentation is scheduled for 30 minutes, including a discussion.

Abstract: Recent discourses in education have focused on the role of teacher agency in driving educational transformation. But what do we mean when we talk about agency? The concept of agency is formulated in several different ways. One view of agency looks at it as a skill or capacity that people carry inside them. Another view conceives agency as something that people do or achieve, a practice or a process which depends on the conditions that make it possible or impossible for people to act. In this sense, agency is characterized as an emergent phenomenon and thus, a continuing practice towards achieving agency becomes agentive practice. Thinking of agency and agentive practice in this way shifts the burden of transforming education away from the individual and individual capacity, to the contexts and environments within which the individuals are located.

The presentation will share emerging insights from a year-long research project funded by TESF Project Plus as part of the Global Challenges Research Fund. The project used the lens of theater to understand the experiences of those who are excluded/marginalized in the educational system as a step towards reconsidering the role of performative pedagogies after the Covid-19 pandemic. The definition of 'excluded' and 'marginalized' applied here was somewhat broader than what the terms usually imply, and included not just those from socially marginalized groups but also those whose voices are marginalized within the teaching-learning architecture of education, specifically, teachers/educators who find themselves increasingly sidelined in the larger discourses around education. The core of the research is based on extensive conversations and long-form interviews with in-service teachers, teacher educators and performing artists.

This presentation is a work-in-progress, and its completion is expected by October 30, 2023.

3. Storytelling module

A short audio story based on the graphic book will be made available as a storytelling module through the podcast and the main project website. This module will be a downloadable resource that we encourage our participants, teachers and other invited teachers to use. We will collect feedback from them, which will be shared on the website. The intention is to test and refine the module, so that it can then be made available as a public resource. We continue to work with a small group of teachers to develop the storytelling module. When the module is ready, we intend to reach out to our teacher-participants to try out the module in their respective teaching-learning spaces.

The work is in progress and is expected to be completed by August 30, 2023.

4. Podcast: In Search of Agency

The podcast was initially planned as a series comprising 12 episodes, each approximately 25-30 minutes long, with a release schedule of one episode every four weeks. We are currently editing the first set of episodes. Initially, we had planned to release the episodes alongside the ongoing conversations, but the dense layers of meanings that emerged from the conversations require a more careful sifting of the material, along with the participants featured on the podcast. We continue to engage with our participants to follow up on certain conversations that required additional exploration or clarification. The podcast may extend beyond the initial planned 12 episodes. The podcast takes the form of a search or investigation for an elusive thing called agency, where the researchers act as sleuths, and the participants are witnesses who provide clues to its existence and whereabouts.

5. Graphic book

The graphic book is episodic in nature, and part documentary, part fiction. The episodes are inspired from the conversations with some of the participants. The book takes the form of micro-stories which connect to each other in subtle ways. The text was developed together with the participants who inspired the episodes.

The work is in progress and is expected to be completed by July 31, 2023.

6. Performance

In our initial proposal, we suggested collecting interviews as narratives and weave them together to tell a story in the form of a lecture performance. When artistic research is framed and presented within academic contexts, the lecture performance provides possibilities to creatively blur the boundaries between artistic work and theory or reflection. Our aim as artist-researchers in this project was to use variations and combinations of performance, lecture, slide presentations and audio-visual material to disseminate the narratives and findings. However, as we spoke with artists and teachers, other possibilities began to emerge. Conversations have begun with one of the artist participants on a collaborative performance as part of this research project. We are currently exploring possibilities and structures for collaboration. We intend to create a full-fledged theatrical piece which involves at least some of our participants, professional writers and theatremakers to develop a multimedia performance which could be presented online as well as live, in theatres,

schools, community settings as well as academic settings like universities and colleges.

We have set up a blog-style website (<https://co-im.weebly.com/>)

7. to share the findings from our project and engage with our audience.

There are many reasons why we chose to do this. We intend this to be a platform that is accessible, interactive and dynamic. We want to communicate our research findings and insights in a more informal, personal and engaging manner, using various formats and media. This website will help us convey the complexity and uniqueness of our participants' experiences and capture the richness and depth of their stories. This will also allow us to reach a wider and more diverse audience who may not have access to or interest in academic publications or conferences, but who may be interested in performance, pedagogy, education and society. We will share regular updates to our audience on the progress and outcomes of the project and share new developments that arise during the process.

Announcements about the podcast, the graphic book, and the planned performance will appear here first, and then shared across other social media channels. We will invite feedback and comments from our audience, and create a dialogue and a community around the core concerns of our research project. This should also help us reflect on our own learning journey as artist-researchers, and to document the research process and its outcomes. Additionally, the podcast will be available through all podcast apps such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts. The podcast will have its dedicated website which will also link to the main project blog.

A note about influences

We lay no claim to originality in this project for we stand on the shoulders of giants. We are not silos, and our voices are not only ours; we are part of a dense semiosphere. Our voice is just one among many, and words are used here in the sense of having a conversation. However, we do lay claim to a small portion of uniqueness, to that, which our participants have shared and hence revealed, something that is deeply personal and yet symbolizes something greater than the personal. This work has grown through reading, conversations and critique. The list of those to be thanked is long. Some, whose names can be mentioned are listed in the appendix; and to the ones who cannot be named, we send gratitude through the ether.

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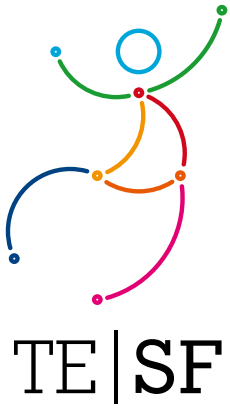
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