

# Impact of Self Development on Developing Teachers

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This report is in draft version.

## Abstract

This report shares findings of a project seeking to document the diversity of formats, locales and processes engaged for the transaction of Self-Development curriculum across the eight colleges of Delhi University offering the BEIEd programme. It also critically examines the influence of engaging with the 'Self Development Workshops' (SDW) and the course on 'Human Relations and Communication' (HRC) on the 'agency' in personal, professional and social lives of BEIEd alumni and pre-service students from across eight colleges offering the BEIEd programme. It further seeks to explore if reflective thinking and conscious development of students in SDW and HRC enables students in resisting regressive practices and in initiating democratic, equitable, collaborative practices in schools and personal life spaces.

## Introduction

In this report I share the narratives of a specific cohort of students and facilitators that have engaged in the self-development process as a part of the Bachelors of Elementary Education programme of University of Delhi. I story the nature of 'remembrance' of having engaged with self, identity and human relations and if that made them into agentic beings with voice of their own articulated in their personal, social and professional lives. I also examine the sense of the world they 'hold', the multiple life spaces, concerns and challenges they negotiate, and the nature of their resistance and self-creation that marks their location and politics.

Let me begin with the location of this study. The Bachelors of Elementary Education (BEIEd) programme that began in University of Delhi in 1994 aimed at making teachers into socially sensitive reflective practitioners. While it sought to weave critical reflection in all courses, it created a dedicated space for Self-Development Workshops (SDW) as well. It also comprises a course on Human Relations and Communication (HRC) that looks at education as a relational, reflective and dialogical process. The BEIEd Review report (2013) states that a majority BEIEd alumni find SDW and HRC to be central to their preparation as teachers. This I feel warrants further exploration, of the potential complexity of nested fields that pattern the self-developmental experiences of the students, the nature of their relational explorations and emancipatory experiences. Let me first take a look at the way in which the two courses are articulated in the BEIEd Handbook (MACESE, 2001).

## **The Self Development Practicum**

The course on Self Development is conceptualised as a practicum to be held in a workshop mode centred on themes such as: understanding the self, understanding our own childhood, understanding gaps in perception between the child and an adult, creativity, fear and trust, competition and cooperation and communication. The stated aim is to engage in reflection, listen deeply, be open to growth, become empathetic, and relate to one's own childhood experiences –their hurt, longings, fantasies and joys. It aims to develop the ability to gain personal agency through questioning of the self, challenging fixed attitudes and conditioning, prejudices and stereotypes and take responsibility for one's growth and progress. It seeks to develop social sensitivity and empathy in learners and the capacity to take initiative to change realities in multiple contexts. The workshops are conducted by trained professionals conducting personal growth/counselling workshops. The faculty teaching the course 'Human Relations and Communications' compliments this practicum and participates in the workshops.

## **The Human Relations and Communication Course**

HRC was designed to be a 'discussion paper' grounded in the lives and experiences of student-teachers, seeking to create an informed perspective on critical issues of personal and social identity of the learner, understanding the nature of adult-child gap, understanding and challenging the hidden curriculum and exploring alternatives to regressive educational practices in form of strict disciplinarian, competitive, hierarchical and fear-based school cultures.

## **Brief Historical Context**

In India, I find that a process-oriented dedicated space for self-development in educational contexts is a more recent phenomenon. BEEd course pioneered this idea in the Indian context. That self-development is critical to the process of teacher preparation has slowly gained recognition in the last 15 years. In 2009, Self Development was included as a critical component for teacher preparation under the heading 'Developing the Self and Aspirations as a Teacher' in the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) (NCTE, 2009). NCFTE draws upon the BEEd programme in outlining the scope of several courses including the component on Development of the Self and Aspirations as a Teacher. Through this it aims to create

A greater insight into one's aims of life, one's strengths and weaknesses and the dynamics of identity formation provides the base for developing a professionally competent teacher who is sensitive to issues of equity, democracy and social justice. (NCFTE, 2009, p. 33)

Several DEEd and B.Ed. curricula across Indian states (Haryana, Meghalaya, Chhattisgarh are some examples) included this component while renewing their curricula thereafter. Several members of the BEEd faculty were included in renewal of curricula across states. In 2015, with a shift to a two-year B.Ed., self-development became a core component of teacher preparation at the national level.

If I turn to the more recent National Education Policy (2020), I see it foregrounding the importance of experiential learning, holistic learning, and developing life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience. However, a significant gap is the lack of mention of a dedicated space for self-development or personal development in the process of teacher preparation. Moreover, the life skills approach as projected in policy appears to have a focus on developing discrete 'skills' and not locating the entire process in critical personal-political and socio-political-educational realities. In this context, I find it meaningful to look at the BEEd experience and the socio-political narratives that it yields in exploring the criticality of self-development and human relational processes; and their transformative potential of sustaining inner change and outer action as critical praxis.

My study is poised at a specific socio-political historical moment in India. This moment is a time span of over 25 years (since the inception of the BEEd programme) in which there has been a general shrinking of public commitment to higher education and a significant policy push towards further marketization of education. Education is viewed more and more as a commodity that is positioned to create an individual as a glitzy product that will be delivered as speedily as possible to its destined place in the market. This education system is impatient with the humanising dialoguing and wants to clinch the 'technical' that can deliver to it the promised fulfilment of necessities.

The preference of mainstream schools during placements for teachers who dress 'well', are 'smart' and in possession of English of a certain tonality is distressing as they have often required little else in terms of pedagogic knowledge or critical social knowledge. It is these

well-packaged teachers along with ‘smart boards’ that sells these schools to the parents. In a sense this market logic “subordinates human being to things splitting human beings off from themselves” (McLaren, 2016, p.19). The objects and things (clothes, boards) are no longer personal or relational –they spell a privileged veneer that seeks to impress and in reality, alienates.

School teachers are often expected to ‘fit into’ organisational cultures that expect very little from them than to transact the customary curriculum. According to Kumar (2016), “if education is something that should encourage dissension, alternative imagination, ability to transcend the given, then it is no longer the agenda of education today. Teachers become workers.

The technological-managerial approaches to structuring educational spaces compact learning into ‘deliverables’, ‘skills’ and ‘outcomes’ that can be easily feed into ranking systems. I am witness to the ranking madness that has been imposed/bought into by existing institutions, sucking in time and creating exhaustion – of creating endless lists and other trivia. The centralised assessment systems have created learning spaces that are cognitively splintered and relationally debilitated by structural competition. Our educational structures are meritocratic, creating a class of students that are unable to stay afloat in a system that scarcely prizes their effort (even maximum), if it does not lead to success. The criteria of success are extrinsically determined having little relevance to internal imperatives of growth and selfhood.

Gender, class and caste are other lenses through which the nexus of capitalism, patriarchy and polity can be laid bare to sight. Capitalist focus on maximised productivity in nexus with patriarchy relegates the labour of women to lower paid professions like teaching and nursing. Caste oppressions are invisibilised by sweeping the entire discourse under the carpet as though by its denial the pernicious tentacles of caste-stigma can be wished away. The dynamics of social class oppression in education too are invisibilised. The more recent integration of ‘children from economically weaker section’ into often classist elite schools has created suffering –creating a depressed ‘moral aesthetic’ that knows that it cannot easily create justice where exclusion is hidden, nonverbal and insidious. In addition, according to Gramsci (In Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 2021) child from the a more privileged class “before he ever enters the classroom he has numerous advantages over his comrades, and is already in possession of

attitudes learnt from his family environment, he concentrates more easily as he is used to ‘sitting still’ ” (p. 42). The parents of children from working class according to Gramsci (in Hoare & Nowell- Smith, 2021) can see it as a ‘trick’ of the privileged class that costs their children ‘tears and blood’ to succeed in this world. (McLaren, 2016) observes in this context that “capital has strapped us to the slaughter-bench of history from which we must try and continue our effort of intellectual and cultural struggle creating working class solidarity...” (p.20)

In this historical moment, I create a snapshot-in-time of how do the teacher preparation efforts of BEEd fare in the perception of students and teachers who have lived its processes and challenges. Do they see the programme to be capable of educational processes that are dialogical, critical and socially sensitive? What happens to the students as they move into other educational and workspaces? What are the challenges to their agency posed by the educational structures of the neo-liberal times? What happens to the personal-familial lives? Specifically, what do they remember of their critical self-developmental processes while in the programme and how it has influenced their later journeys –creativity, resistance, voice.

### **The Nature of the Self and Pedagogy**

The need for pedagogic spaces that enable turning the lens from the study of the ‘other’ to the study of the ‘self’ can help enhance processes of self-reflection and cultivate personal and social agency. It can rescue one from the emotionally truncated flatlands of information overload to relational warmth that seeks to express compassion towards others and the self. The freedom of alternate dialogical spaces is not only disruptive of mechanical inertia that creeps into formalised encounters in a classroom, but also creates space for multiple authentic relations. It prepares the person for praxis through its emphasis on emancipatory knowledge that helps understand how social relations are manipulated by power and privilege (McLaren, 2009).

The approaches to understanding ‘self’ or ‘selves’ that we inhabit and those that express themselves through us in action, I find, are many and varied. At this point, I wish to name some thinkers whose ideas I feel can give exciting directions to the analysis of the self-developmental discourse in this project in terms of both concerns and processes.

I first turn to the critical thought of Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) that emphasises self as the process of becoming. According to Gramsci ((in Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 2021 p.351), “man is a process, and more exactly, the process of his actions”. Further “each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but history of these relations” (in Hoare & Nowell- Smith, 2021 p. 353). The nature of becoming of man takes place through “concordia, discors” (discordant concord) which does not start with unity but contains within it, the reasons for a possible unity (p. 356). For Gramsci the nature of man is inherently political as through it an individual defines action in the world. It is in this political sphere that the public and private selves find expression. His pedagogy emphasises the process where a learner is history-in-action and needs sufficient autonomy, originality of thought and freedom from external examinations to think without censure. The task of the teacher is to be a friendly guide but not to impose. Politically, he was committed to creating ‘organic intellectuals from the working class - organic intellectuals being those who “arise from the masses and remain in touch with them” (p. 340). It is the active participation of organic intellectuals in practical life of the masses that creates critical social change.

Another perspective on ‘self’ I see in Michel Foucault’s (1926-1984) take on Greek philosophers’ view on nature of self -knowledge and the Greek concept of *epimeleia heautou* or ‘care of self’. For Foucault (1998) knowing oneself for Christian ascetics took the form of ‘renunciation of self’. In the Greek view, it is important to not renounce the self but to be concerned with it in its everydayness. To be concerned with one’s own self – body, health, emotions, spirituality was not immoral but humanising. The care of self is not just an attitude but involves actual activities of care in the world and is therefore, a political act. The domain of the eros too needs self-care. The act of self-disclosure as confession or penance is a renunciation of self for as it expects a person to “to prove suffering, to show shame, to make visible humility and exhibit modesty” as self-punishment (Foucault, 1998, p.42)

Introspection, self-analysis and reflection through writing are humane methods that have their roots in the Greek classical age. According to Foucault, we in contemporary times can find ways to express inner conflict through verbalisation and dialogue “without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self” (Foucault, 1998., p.49). In terms of pedagogy, I find in Foucault’s work a concern to free the individual from the regimes of hierarchy, surveillance and control contained in institutionalised disciplinary structures.

I turn next to Paulo Friere (1922-1997), the Brazilian critical thinker who offers another



critical perspective on self and what it means to be “fully human” (Friere 1993, p.26). Towards this end, the dehumanisation and oppression of labour must end as that is the source of alienation – the “rejects of life” as Friere puts it (1993, p.37). In education students become dehumanised when they are treated as passive beings who are to be filled with deposits of information which he calls the banking model. In such a system of education – ‘a person is merely in the world, not with the world or with others, the individual is spectator, not a recreator’ (p.56). These passive beings are not conscious as the world passes them by as they are not located within it. Liberation and authentic thinking emerges from original thinking and cognition rather than accretion and regurgitation of facts. The aim of education is problem posing through embodied communication. Like Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Friere also looks at problem posing education as a process of becoming as human beings are unfinished and inhabit a world which too is unfinished. “To be, it must become” says, Friere (p. 64). The educational pedagogy of Friere is that it must be a practice of freedom rather than an impulse to dominate or the antialogical consciousness. A person can be fully human only in authentic dialogue and solidarity of others i.e., one cannot be fully human while not allowing others also the same privilege. (Friere, 1993).

A more inward route to understanding the nature of the human being is given by the Indian thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). He spoke of the possibility of radical transformation of the self through awareness. According to him, it is the silencing of the outer self-identifications (I am not my house, my possessions, my book) that gives a person the capacity to live life with awareness. Awareness is a form of critical thinking (also called choiceless awareness) in which one does not build oneself negatively or positively. One simply observes the process of one’s unfoldment through awareness. The critical understanding so gained through this reveals the problem more fully as one neither denies nor accepts it. For instance, if a person is observing her anger, there may be a movement to rationalise, to deny or to condemn her anger. This prevents understanding what anger is and its process. To be aware is to be –and this moment-to-moment awareness without noise is transformative and dissolves the anger from its root through understanding. Thus the noise and disorders of multiple becomings can be balanced and harmonised into order through awareness. Krishnamurti’s pedagogy is based on creating individual freedom that is capable of questioning externally imposed authority, to understand the nature of fear and dissolve it through awareness, to break education out of routine and mechanicalness and imbue it with deeper meaning and significance.

In Sri Aurobindo, the Indian thinker (1872-1950), I find a thinker whose notion of self synthesizes individual and collective change. According to Sri Aurobindo (in CWSA Vol. 21-22, 2005) self is the sense of the Being and its continued becoming in life. He believed that both ascetic denial of life and materialistic denial of inner life as problematic. He believed *all life* to be an occasion of transformation –from the smallest of inner actions to greatest of social change. An interesting aspect of his work is that he proposed how through aspiration and conscious action human nature can be changed. Change is born in the inner stillness of the being when outer noise is quietened. He believed that humanity in its present moment must be able to manifest the values of equality, liberty and fraternity and find a way of deepening these values through inner subjective knowledge and spiritual connect –to create a society that is collaborative and harmonious. Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo proposes a concept of dynamic meditation that can be used to solve the problems of life. She proposes that we can use meditation “to discover the points to be transformed ... you may also meditate for very practical reasons: when you have a difficulty to clear up, a solution to find, when you want help in some action or other.” (in Dalal, 1987, p. 123). According to Sri Aurobindo, education is an act of freedom and a practice of spiritual anarchy. His pedagogy is based on free progress which is an assertion that nothing can be taught –the learners must be allowed to take initiative of charting their own growth, their minds must be consulted and the learning must begin with context and environment that is most near to a learner.

From more recent times, I explore the conception of self or rather ‘non-self’ that comes to us from Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese monk who gave the concept of engaged Buddhism. According to him, Buddha’s concept of non-self was a reaction to the absolutist notion of self as expressed in unjust Hindu society in Vedic times. Non-self or emptiness is a way of creating space for the human being to be. Further *to be* is to be *the inter-being* –we are relational. If I exist, others exist. If I am not, others cease to be. We must strive together in our interconnectedness. Engaged Buddhism proposes both simultaneity of action and mindfulness. Injustice can be resisted through communities of resistance. Resistance means “opposition to be invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system” (Hahn and Berrigan, 2009, p.129). The purpose of resistance is positive - to seek healing of the community. The pedagogy of engaged Buddhism is to practice mindfulness - to learn to live in the here and now – to not hurry but be seated within one’s body – as home.

Many of the views and concerns about the self-mentioned above, I find, woven into the engaged pedagogy of the black feminist thinker bell hooks (1952-2021). She combines critical pedagogy with concern for the self, wholeness and healing. Her work shows pathways to transgress the boundaries of the conventional classroom through disruptions from “ruptured, broken, unruly speech of the vernacular” of the black persons to create intimacy where there was none; to speak of feelings of oppression from everyday life and eros/desires and inner sacredness which find little space in a conventional classroom. Eros for bell hooks is not just sexuality but a connection with the mystery of life – the dandelion and the stars. She talks about how “loudness, anger, emotional outbursts and even something as innocent as unrestrained laughter” (1994, p.178) are seen as vulgar and associated with the lower class in schools. To fit in, students attempt to change their vernacular speech and erase all material signs of difference of class. Through engaged pedagogy she talks about excitement of real change that liberates both of the inner self and outer action. (hooks, 1998)

In the Indian context, Phule-Ambedkarite Pedagogies (PAF) proposed by Sharmila Rege (1964-2013) (2010) gives articulation to Dalit Studies as pedagogic practice. Rege (2010) invokes the writing of Jyotiba Phule who saw education as a Trutiya Ratna or the third eye that is capable of transforming knowledge-power hierarchies that oppress. She talks about dissent against the academic spaces and cultural practices that are insensitive to societal suffering. According to her,

The ‘difference’ of Phule-Ambedkarite pedagogical perspectives lies in a double articulation that conceives education then not only in terms of cultures of learning and teaching but also dissenting against that which is learnt and taught by dominant cultural practices. This entails constituting teachers and students as modern truth seekers and agents of social transformation who seek to become ‘a light unto themselves’. (p. 93)

Pedagogic methods need to integrate Buddhist concepts of “Prajya (critical understanding), karuna (empathetic love) and samata (equality)” (Rege, 2010 p.93) and move beyond binaries objective/subjective, reason/emotion and brahmin/shudra. She is concerned about the erasing of the oral language of the Dalit Community from standard languages of the academics and urges us to listen to the voices of the invisibilised and the un-named within classrooms. Like bell hooks (1998), she proposes a passionate engagement in teaching that includes space for the body and the eros.

The perspectives on self and non-self explicated above are powerful critical voices on inner psychological transformation and outer social change. Gramsci, Paulo Friere, Foucault, bell hooks, Sharmila Rege, Thich Nhat Hahn articulate the need for creating cultures of resistance of oppression to usher in social change. Sri Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, Thich Nhat Hahn distinguish between quiescence and quietude or active silence that leads to deeper understanding and social action. These perspectives look at education as a reflective *process* that must be rooted in cultures of freedom, original thinking and engagement with life. These then become potentially important self-developmental pedagogies that seek to disrupt traditional classroom rituals by creating intimacy that breaks the ‘culture of silence’ and creates space for personalised voices of resistance, passion, emotion, excitement, engagement with the body, eros, inner quietness, stillness and interbeing.

In this project, I initiate an exploration of the nature of self-developmental spaces and pedagogies as they are practiced in the BEIEd programme, the lived self-developmental experience of students, and the entwining of these themes in their later lives.

## Objectives

The specific objectives that I have formulated for this project are:

1. To document the diversity and richness of formats, locales and processes engaged for the transaction of Self-Development curricula and experiences across the eight colleges of the University of Delhi that offer the BEIEd programme.
2. To critically examine the influence of engaging with the Self Development practicum and the course on Human Relations and Communication on the personal, professional and social lives of pre-service students from across the eight colleges and the BEIEd Alumni.
3. To explore how habits of reflective thinking and conscious development enable resisting regressive practices and initiate democratic, equitable, collaborative practices in schools and other workspaces.
4. To explore student perceptions about potential inter-linkages between self-development practicum and other courses in the BEIEd programme.
5. To document suggestions from BEIEd Alumni regarding self-development that can help further strengthen the BEIEd Programme.

## Method

### Sample

The BEIEd alumni for this research were drawn from eight constituent colleges of the University of Delhi that offer the BEIEd programme and one another that offered the programme between 1998 and 2001. I interviewed 24 BEIEd alumni spread over a period of 25 years to get a time-space spread of experiences. The sample purposively constituted of a significant number of government and private school teachers in addition to other profiles. These other profiles included counsellors, college faculty, homemakers, researchers or those working with Ed tech companies, NGOs, corporates, and international funding agencies. Focused group discussions were held with 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students of three BEIEd colleges. Eight faculty members teaching Human Relations and Communication (HRC) were interviewed from across colleges –three of these faculty members were BEIEd Alumni and shared their experience of studying in the programme and their later stories as well. Seven self-development workshop (SDW) facilitators were interviewed who have over the years facilitated workshops in various colleges.

Table 1: Distribution of participants in the study

S.No.	Nature of Participation	Number
1	Interviews with Alumni from 9 Colleges offering BEIEd programme	24
2	Interviews with Faculty Teaching 'Human Relations and Communication Course in 8 colleges offering BEIEd programme	8
3	Interviews with Self Development Facilitators from across 8 colleges offering BEIEd programme	7
4	Focussed Group Discussions with 3 <sup>rd</sup> and/or 4 <sup>th</sup> year current BEIEd Students from across three colleges offering the BEIEd programme.	100

Source: The author

### Research Design

A powerful way to understand a community is the stories that they live and tell about themselves. (Lapan and Quatroli, 2012) The collation of narratives enabled this. Narrative

analysis is a form of qualitative research in which the researcher collects individual stories and attempts to understand their epistemic nature. I was aware of my positionality which as a teacher could potentially queer the power balance with students. I tried to create sufficient rapport and space for freedom of expression. The interviews were set up by a research associate who also became part of the interview process and at times asked a few questions. The interview process was intimate and flexible allowing for an inter-subjective flow of ideas. I had created a set of questions but it was the participant's sense of life and self that created emergent questions and drove the interview process. I found most participants to be communicative, reflective, and enthusiastically engaged with the interview process. I did not stand back from the emotions shared by the participants and shared my experience where natural. Many ideas, emotions, insights were born within the shared communicative fields— I often experienced a form of inter-being holding and supporting us together. I looked for 'critical events during the interview (unplanned, emergent emotional experiences or creative expressions) that can yield understanding of the current psychological space of the participants.

### **Process of Data Collection**

The process of data collection began with the framing of semi-structured interview schedules for the BEIEd Alumni, current BEIEd students, HRC faculty and SDW facilitators. The BEIEd alumni were taken from the data base prepared a part of the broader project. Some I traced through their colleges and these were added to the data base. Interviews were conducted in online and offline modes and were spread over the period of April 2022 to January 2023. Most interviews were audio and video recorded. I found that most of the participants (except one) seemed comfortable with recording of the interview and their non-verbal communication did not seem to communicate resistance. A majority of the interviews were transcribed.

### **Analysis**

I coded the data according to emergent themes, subthemes and relevant vignettes. The process of analysis helped in identifying broader patterns, making connections and variety and richness of narratives and themes.

### **Discussion**

I weave my discussions of the multiple strands and the complex, rich mess of data along two themes –the self-developmental experiences of students and facilitators while participating in the BEIEd programme and the self-developmental stories of the BEIEd alumni as told within multiple life contexts.

### **Self- Development in the BEIEd Programme**

In this section, I look at the locale, formats, theoretical leanings, processes and themes used during the self-development workshops. I include here narratives from the current students, alumni and the HRC and SDW facilitators.

#### *Faculty, locale and formats*

The Self-development Workshops I find were conducted by external faculty specialised in personal growth, counselling etc. in most of the colleges. In some cases, students travelled to a site outside of college, in other cases the specialised faculty travelled to the college site. The locale of these workshops was varied and flexible. These were conducted indoors, in lawns, rooftops, in gardens, schools, streets, farmers' markets, museums, boxing events, retreats in mountains where they did mountaintop meditations; forest walks and visit to village communities etc. The seating of the workshops was sought to be circular with open space for group work, role plays, body work and meditation. This allowed for a break in the hierarchy of facilitator-learner relationship and allowed students to make direct eye contact as they shared their experiences. Space was creatively viewed –for instance a student remembers that in one of the workshops they spent considerable time lying in the corridors of the college and observed the world from that vantage point –as the facilitator tried to deconstruct the concept 'normalcy' for them. The theoretical perspectives from which the SDW faculty drew inspiration were often eclectic or synthetic even though at times they were embedded in a particular philosophy. The perspectives from which facilitators drew inspiration included Paulo Friere, Augusto Boal and other critical theorists; existential thinkers like Victor Frankl; transactional analysis thinkers like Eric Berne and Thomas Harris; spiritual thinkers like Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, Khalil Gibran, Dalai Lama and other Buddhist thinkers; Dalit thinkers; feminist thinkers; and myriad stories, plays and poems. The SDW facilitator who created this course shared: "*While academics is a part of self-development, true learning is a much more direct and a larger process of life itself*". Her

narrative was interesting as she gave me insight into working with a small group of Tibetan children who had walked into India with all possible creative angles –this for her became the seed thought for the conceptualisation of the self-developmental space, a decade later.

I found discussions during the Human Relations and Communication course to be facilitated largely by faculty trained in psychology or child development. The discussions happened indoors and there was visit to the slums, markets, schools practising alternate relational pedagogies, protest sites and other critical communities. The HRC faculty was associated with the SDW practicum. She attended the workshops if the students and SDW facilitators were comfortable with her presence – for instance, an HRC faculty member shared that she encouraged the students to claim this freedom for themselves if they felt that her presence would obstruct the flow of their self-expression. To her students seemed surprised that they could actually ask a teacher to step out but when made comfortable, they used this freedom. This perhaps allowed them to step out of the deeply ingrained habit of looking at teachers not as teacher-masks or ‘possessors of authority’ but as ‘persons’ with struggles and failings. Many HRC faculty members reported participating in these workshops, sharing their experience and growing along with students as a self-developmental community. This deepened their personal relations with students, allowed them to know the students’ individual stories, past ghosts and present challenges which created a more intimate, dialogical space in the HRC learning space. The themes taken up during self-development workshops often spilled into the HRC classes for further discussion. The practicum on observing children which was conducted in multiple everyday contexts also gave teachers the space to make connections across courses.

### *The processes of developing the self*

**The criticality of the being of the facilitator:** For facilitators, developing their own being seemed important to the process of facilitation. According to them, only if they could be conscious and manifest compassion, mindfulness and deep listening through their being, could the process be truly initiated. Authenticity was another condition for facilitation as the facilitator too needs to recover her humanness with shades of grey and ambiguity. Self-development was often experienced by the students as a *critical event* while interacting with the authentic being of the facilitator or experiences shared by



peers.

D shares that when she joined the BEIEd she thought of herself as a loud and rebellious person with a lot of inner anger. The anger was rooted in resistance against censure faced from female members of her family. The anger took hold and she started viewing herself negatively. Once while attending a self-development workshop she was called out by a teacher to discuss the return of a book to the library. She became angry as she did not agree with the stance of the teacher. As she entered the SDW space, the facilitator gently asked her what was the matter. She expected a rejection of her anger. However, the facilitator fully accepted her being with her anger –she experienced an emotional release in that moment –she could be accepted as she was.

The emotional release for D did not seem to happen through the number of workshops she attended or number of activities she engaged in. It perhaps took place according to her through a creative moment of compassion experienced through the being of the facilitator.

**Engaging with the personal curriculum of students:** The SDW facilitators shared that they were often flexible during sessions while engaging with the emergent needs of students. Individual concerns were given space and voices heard. Each facilitator had their own method of deciding the flow of the workshops.

B, a facilitator, shares that she first talks to each individual in the group, finding out their personal stories and concerns. Then the individual and group themes are decided. Individual concerns are addressed through individual projects and group themes are based on the most urgently articulated needs of the group. Themes of the workshops and their practical articulation are different from year to year.

The facilitator here foregrounded the importance of curriculum that flows from the being of the learner. Freedom to choose and autonomy has been accorded much importance by thinkers like Sri Aurobindo. When Sri Aurobindo says ‘Nothing can be taught’ he is invoking a space in the curriculum for imperatives that emanate from within a student’s being. Gramsci (in Hoare & Nowell- Smith, 2021) too is in favour of giving sufficient freedom and autonomy to students so that they can understand their histories and their

own political relationship with the world.

**Answering the question “Who am I?”:** The facilitators shared engaging with both the outside and inside stories of students. Students attempt to answer the question ‘who am I?’ and engage with creating a vision for life through mind maps, storyboards and other creative visualisations. The students often carried the memory of these exercises and retained their vision statements pasting it on their desks or boards sometimes even after passing out of the BEEd.

*W: No journey of self can be without the society. I attempt to see the society around me. I seek answers from life itself.*

*S: Jo ek sui har sakti hai woh talvaar nahin kar sakti [What a needle can do, a sword cannot]. She says she learnt in gentleness the purpose of her life through the self-development workshops.*

*K: I did not just get seeds of my development, I actually saw shoots and buds of my personality ...I grew confident of my sense of life every day.*

These sharings and imageries communicated by students often contain a burgeoning sense of self. They also felt that the project of self-authorship and self-naming is an on-going one. There are parts of self that remain in conflict as a person negotiates their political and social positions in the world much like the ‘Concordia Dicors (discordant concord) articulated by Gramsci (in Hoare & Nowell- Smith, 2021).

**Engaging with childhood:** The discussions on hurts, longings, dissonances as well as joys of childhood were taken up by facilitators to connect past, present and future selves. This seemed to help the students to release a lot of emotional baggage that they carried from the past. Many broke their silence for the first time to those issues that festered inside –forlorn and unaddressed. Child sexual abuse was one such issue that was often expressed in these workshops which students experienced to be a safe space.

*A: I could recall in one of the workshops I shared the time I was sexually abused and I was not even a teenager at that time, vo meine apne parents se bhi share nahi kiya tha. [That which I had not shared with my parents, I shared in that space]*

*V: Sometimes after good sessions in the classroom, I spent time in solitude, in either lawn or in the canteen reflecting, sometimes crying ...okay this is what happened, this is what led to this. I was able to receive what the facilitators had*

*to offer and it was dealt by them very carefully and maturely.*

To grow up in world where one must affirm identity-in-effort is a difficult process. The SDW sharing reveals that if we look behind outward normalcy of everyday life, we find that the physical and familial spaces that we grow up in are often unsafe and predatory. Our emotional being is at times enmeshed, entangled, and engulfed by difficult patterns of relationships. Children as they grow up are not able to express these emotions easily – they stay knotted within, festering in guilt, violence and self-violence. These emotions knot themselves into our bodies—neck, shoulders, the pit of the stomach—we embody our difficult emotions and our sadness of thoughts. The self-developmental workshops during the BEIEd attempted to create psychologically safe spaces where students could potentially articulate their fears, find courage to name past ghosts and experiment with self-healing – and sometimes the first unsteady efforts of trusting themselves and those around them.

**Engaging with the body:** Our bodies define our location in this world. According to Thich Nhat Hahn (2009), bodies are our homes. When the self is seated within the body and not externalised, we are at peace. Bodies also are culturally constructed and controlled. The patriarchal structures attempt to constrict and confine women’s bodies into habits of restricted eye contact, body movement, spaces and emotions. In theatre and self-development workshops, the BEIEd students find an occasion to understand their cultural conditioning and challenge it.

H shares a theatre experience:

*We were letting lose our bodies, sitting on the floor, lying on the floor. Our bodies became open. It broke the construct that girls have to walk in a certain way and take a less space as possible. I was told by my family that I walk like a boy - shoulders stiff, arms swinging wide. I tried to hunch my shoulders. In the workshops, I was told to take as much space that I need in the classroom – my facilitator said, you are entitled to it... your body is worth the space that you claim. Now when I am in my own classroom teaching...I ensure my students also have this experience of this space.*

*J: Once I walked such that my legs were not quite close together in a march past...a senior teacher came to me and said that please walk with your legs close*

*together. It was later in college that I realised that you can carry your body as you want.*

*N: Maine dekha workshop mein ki hum neck niche karke chalte hai na. Hum apne aas pass hi cheeze ko observe karte hue thodi na chalte hai ... Aur space bhi hum kitni use karte hai? Aaj bhi dekhti hu jaha pe main rehti hu ki same hi building mein ladke rehte hai aur main bhi rehti hu. Toh hamara jo daayara hai space ko use karne ka wo bhut kam hai, ladke ka daayara -wo to upar niche saari jagah ghumte hai. Main un dinno apne parents se in baton pe bahut jhadap karti thi ... Wo bole, 'Jab se tum college jane lagi ho bahut bolne lagi ho' .... Mera bhai bahut gora tha aur mein bahut savli. Sab is baat ko point out karte the...ladki thodi gori hoti aur ladka savla to accha hota. Mein unse door rahti thi. Bahut samay laga iss baat se nikalne mein...ho sakta hai mera shuru ka motive padai ka tha apne ko bahatareen banana ... par ab mein janti hoon ki rang ka koi farak nahin padta, Ab padti hoon ki panda chahti hoon.*

*[In the workshops I realised that I walk with my eyes cast down, I do not observe the world as I walk and how much space do I claim? Even now where I stay the space that boys claim is much more than girls...they wander all over. I started having argument with my parents on issues like this during the BEIEd. They said- 'Since you have started going to college, you have started speaking a lot'. My brother was very fair and I was dark complexioned. Whoever came to my house said that it would have been good if the girl had been fair and the boy darker. I used to stay away from these people...It took me a long time to get out of this... It is possible that my motivation to study was to prove my ability...but now I know skin colour does not matter, I study because I want to]*

W, a kathak dancer and an educator shared that the self-development workshops and theatre experience gave her a sense of a deepening self and body awareness.

*I start with walking; in walking the human being negotiating the spaces takes on layers of meaning. We go to gardens; we go into all kinds of spaces, art spaces, sports spaces; we observe the shifting of the spaces and what happens to an individual as it shifts...I also experiment with creative linkage between dance and communication using mudras (stylised Indian classical hand movements). Learners create body awareness by making 'a butterfly, a flower or rain'*

*through graceful mudras –it is a dance of communication, in a sense between one who sees and the one who dances.*

J's intuitive resistance seems to be that of 'man as machine'—a body that "is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys..." (Foucault, 1975, p. 136) imposed here on the female body. J's experience was of being humiliated – of being reduced. She experienced resistance to this but was able to understand and articulate her resistance much later. N's resistance was a reaction to the cultural constraint on spaces that girls have access to. According a study by Siwach (2020), the mobility of girls between age of 15- middle adulthood is restricted in traditional families. The division of spaces also is also reflection of the patriarchal society that legitimises them. There is restricted access to girls to public spaces. The presence of girls in streets is seen as 'loitering'. It is interesting that when women's assistance is needed, they are given access to male spaces. N was able to resist this cultural conditioning through her learning during the workshops –her silent and unarticulated resistance found a voice and she was able to re-negotiate parts of her identity.

H's narrative points towards the covert or overt pressures on the female body to fit into the cultural notions of femininity. The cultural notions of beauty in India are used to create an exchangeable cultural capital (skin tone, body weight) in the marriage market out of the oppressed natural bodies of women. "Women are independent agents...but the direct linkage of being the 'group/population' for the men to exert their bio-power is profoundly disturbing" (Pandian, 2020, p.122). The workshops create a space not just to resist the overt stated stances of society but also the covert pressure that the student may have internalised from society. W's experience with her body is that of an intimate bodily aesthesis which she uses in her own self-developmental work to walk multiple outer spaces and the human communicative terrain. She reported experiencing a flow during the workshops and a sense of a sculpting of her being. She shed a lot of her culturally conditioned inhibitions during the workshops. She became fascinated with spaces and the way they can be experienced socio-politically and in human development. She conducts self-development workshops for her students currently and the concept of space is at the centre. Her work reminds me of a thought from Sri Aurobindo (in CWSA, Vol. 27, 2003) "Beauty is a divine language in forms" (p. 900). It also has the potential to bring out the aesthetic eros in the form of interconnection of all

beings into the learning spaces (hooks, 1998).

**Breaking out of emotional prisons:** The emotional self of students –an inner dis-ease needs, space to be expressed. “At its deepest level, emotion can be seen as the longing to experience and express the nature of being, the life force, in its many aspects” (Johnson, 2011. p.6). Emotionality is also the way to spirituality – of reclaiming wholeness and the relational (Johnson, 2011). Students in the workshops learnt to express warmth, compassion and self-compassion. Many of the students remembered the emotional release they had experienced during the workshops. They also shared narratives of emotionally supporting their parents.

*R: I learnt to hug myself during the workshops...It was a wonderful emotional release and experience of wholeness. I then learnt to give an open expression of my emotions to my parents too. My mother was a single parent and she brought three kids up. I know that she was lonely and would cry at times. After the workshops, I hugged my mother when I felt that there was an emotional fall for her. I had forgotten how to do this and a distance had crept in between the both of us. Then onwards I hugged her again and again. I have also learnt to do this in my classroom. Recently a girl started crying as she felt her mother will scold her for not trying enough. I held her in my arms for 5 minutes and she was then fine.*

*D: I had a deeper relationship with my grandmother as compared to my mother. After one workshop on emotional development, I went home and helped my mother in small tasks. She gave me such a wonderful smile that I could never forget it. My relationship with her changed somewhat... these small memories of happiness makes my life good –without this life is boring and tasteless.*

*N: In these workshops, we often held hands and touched each other – something we otherwise may not have done. Touch created warm emotions and a bond that was deeper. I now also do this for children in my school classroom.*

Thich Nhat Hahn says that “caring for yourself and establishing peace in yourself is the basic condition for helping someone else” (in Caldwell, 2011, p. 101). Foucault (1988)

too could be invoked here with his focus on self-care. Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the human mind is valued above all else (hooks, 2003). Self-developmental spaces in the BEEd seemed rich in a flow of emotionality – something that is missing in regular classrooms. Touch, tears, loud laughter and warmth had a natural place here which is sanitised out of regular academic spaces. The students in these workshops seemed to experience nurturance not only from the facilitators but also from their peers. Many came closer and supported each other in times of crisis –bonds that in many cases last throughout their adult lives.

*K: We came very close together as entire class during self-development workshops. We knew each other's stories and struggles. We started supporting each other. Once when there was a tragedy in one family, we all went home and supported our classmate out of the crisis. Many of these relationships continued long after we graduated.*

**Engaging with authority relations:** A strand of self-development that seemed to create a lot of inner tension in students was the relationships with authority figures in their lives – parents, relatives, and teachers. The students learnt to find their legitimate voice, a constructive capacity to say a positive ‘no’ and take a stand where and when needed.

*A: I live in a joint family, I have two older sisters...after this course I became vocal.... My family did not allow me to wear sleeveless clothes. I questioned this ... I dialogued and reflected back their position to them. They understood ... now everyone, taiji (aunt) is wearing sleeveless because of me. Some are now actually wearing shorts and it is actually because of my stand ... and my parents also grow with me ... they have understood.*

It is interesting that identity negotiations also need a nuanced understanding of the need to dominate. According to Krishnamurti (1997), to be free of the pressure of authority, we must be able to understand the need to dominate and be dominated. In COVID times, a critical challenge for students was to find a safe space at home during self-development; to articulate concerns with enmeshed and difficult authority relations that experienced every day at home. In other cases, students also reported that some of their parents attended sessions and said that they gained in perspective.

**Learning to communicate:** Facilitators work with students through a number of workshops to help them examine their communication verbal patterns for openness, labels, presuppositions, sharing power and control. Non-verbal communication was examined for eye contact, body language, paralanguage and gestures. Students in their narratives explored where and when their communication tends to close, fragment, and breaks; and create new ways of relating and communicating.

*S: I used to be a person who is very aggressive. I would not shed a tear if I had a heated argument with someone; I wanted to have an upper hand when I believed myself to be correct. We during self- development workshops experienced moments of change and cried. The students were discussing all sorts of naked truths and communicating openly. They peeled off the truth layer by layer –however bad it made them look –it was their truth. I too started reflecting on what was holding me back from people around me.*

*S: We learnt to communicate and empathize with the other person, even if our perspectives were not similar. We do not have to put ourselves and others on the cross. If your view opposes mine –you are not my enemy, I can listen to you.*

**Playfulness and spontaneity:** The self-developmental spaces across different courses including HRC was seen by students as informal, playful, and spontaneous. The students said that they learnt to be playful because their facilitators were full of playfulness.

*D: Hamre ek sir bhi thee jo khud hamare saath khelte the, wo khud bachche ho jaate the. Is course ki wajah se teacher wali hierarchy chain break ho jati hai. [We had a teacher, who would play with us; he used to become a child. In this course a hierarchy between a teacher and student breaks down.]*

*J: Once our teacher asked us to go and play what we liked in the lawn. We played games from our past memory- kho-kho, kikli, marrum pittu etc. We kept waiting for him...he intentionally did not come. We played the entire duration of the class. Next day –he asked us –what did you play? We told him the names of the games. He asked –why did you not play organised games like volleyball or football...the sports room was right next to you, we said that we played the games we were used to in childhood. Thus, started our discussion on play and*



*gender and how play and gender are culturally constructed.*

Playfulness I feel creates an open time-space, structuring our relational beings. Our playful selves, hide, reveal, surprise and hold us as the play of the sunlight, wind and clouds and colour in the skies. We are fully human as we play (Schiller in Dörnberg, 2006). As we leave nothing out –bodies breathing in space, emotions become joyous and tumultuous, mind –a flow of movement in the present time mooring. I wonder if one of the malaises of education is that our seriousness is not playful. There is much I feel, by recovering the inner-person-at-play that can affirm our humanness in an academic world that has forgotten to play.

**Challenging normalcy, understanding privilege/social class:** The expressed aim of her workshops according an SDW facilitator was to help students break through the ‘normalcy’ of the way in which they exist in the world. It entailed pushing them out of their comfort zones which seem to them normal, so that they become more sensitive to the truths that are organised and mechanised, to power hierarchies that constrain some people to oppressed conditions and legitimised certain exploitative ways of being. It also helps to see spaces, objects, and people from multiple angles with their own histories, present meanings and creative futures.

*S: One activity, I clearly remember the days we were that we haven't done in our lives. So, we chose a construction site nearby where they were putting bricks into a trolley and then taking it up through the pulley. So, the four of us asked the workers if we can carry the bricks because it not something the girls do... not something well-dressed girls from good families do! Next thing we did is actually run in front of - like a red light. We lay down on the road and it was not something which is expected from girls. We did the activities but there were walls inside us –this is weird, why is she making us do these things. In the next class she used the floor to chalk everything out –something that again was out of the normal. She asked us what is normal –we could not define normal. We could only say practically what is normal is not normal for us. We then discussed that what may be normal for you might not normal for someone else. So that was my first eye opening moment and till date when somebody uses the word normal in my house, I say –can you define normal, please.*

*N: After the BEEd I think I realized my privilege as a person - a 'normal' Hindu person from a certain caste.*

In the first narrative, “well dressed girls from good families” were the labels that students had owned at the time of the activity without realising the cultural, economic and social class-based privilege that they legitimately claimed to be their due. Challenging the normalcy of this privilege potentially helped them see the hegemonies that are manifested and legitimised by society in the form of assumed status, polished language, institutional affiliation, and prevailing culture.

**Engaging with caste issues:** Caste issues are often invisibilised in educational spaces. Here is a facilitator narrative of an instance of emergent caste issue in self-development workshops.

*Y: I could see polarising dynamics of class and caste in a particular group that I was working with. A group of students were excluded by another group of peers at one time openly said, 'Hum Gujjar<sup>1</sup> ke saath nahin baithte hain' [We don't sit with the Gujjars]. It took a long process of dialoguing, challenging of this narrative of exclusion and exploration of an alternative narrative with them. Caste-based exclusion exists but its denial mostly continues. This is a little strange as there is so much conversation in the curriculum about caste. It has not penetrated deep enough in terms real change. Sexuality too was a taboo subject some time back but now there is a lot of openness with which students discuss sexuality and the LGBTQIA+ discourse. This is supported by many narratives on this topic in mass media and popular culture. Caste still needs much more work.*

To be able to confront caste can be “demanding, painful, frightening and never makes the teacher ‘instantly popular’ or the classes ‘fun’ to be” (Rege, 2010, p. 96). Caste, I feel remains unfronted as the privileged class denies its oppressive presence and explains it away by claiming that society has become ‘progressive’ and ‘egalitarian’ and they do not notice it anywhere. Caste keeps hiding in the kitchens of the privileged class

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<sup>1</sup> Gujjars or Gurjars are classified as Other Backward Class (OBC) in some states in India. However, Gurjars in Jammu and Kashmir and parts of Himachal Pradesh are categorised as a Scheduled Tribe (ST).

where there segregation of utensils based on caste and class or in spaces (sofas, dining table, bed) invisibly cordoned off through ritualised exclusion in the house where a person from a certain caste and class cannot hope sit. Yet this exclusion is not quite noticed by those who normalise these privileges –unless overtly pointed out. When these are pointed out, there is surprise of being surrounded by the ‘unprogressive practices’ in their own homes, followed often by some self-questioning. The second reason that caste remains hidden is because to avoid societal stigma, the Dalit students are forced to keep silent on the caste issue. Safe spaces of confrontation and reconciliation are needed where the Dalit students can recover the ‘power of identities’ that have been snatched away from them and as Rege (2010) points out to tell their stories in their own words and language.

**Learning empathy/compassion:** The self-development facilitators shared that they attempted to create a psychological space that was dialogical and reflexive. Dialogue was not possible without the capacity to empathise listen deeply. It meant listening to the self and to others. I share here three narratives of students who learnt to gain confidence in them and empathise with the other.

*A: Now I can empathize with the other person, even if our perspectives are not similar. We do not have to put ourselves and others on cross. If you have a point of view different from mine -you are not my enemy...I can listen to you. So that was the thing that opened up for me. To be able to be myself and let others be.*

*C: I learnt how to listen during SDW workshops. Once I faced a very difficult problem at workplace. I kept trying to listen and calm myself. After some time, I felt that the situation became better because I was listening and not adding to the noise.*

*V: I started to listen to myself. Once I did not receive any feedback in a task which I felt I had done well. I felt very let down. My facilitator said very playfully, ‘Arre vo aloo hai jo samane bthe hue hai, tum aloo se kaise apne aap ko judge kar sakti ho, Jo khud nahi feedback de sakta, use tum kaise judge karogi apne apko. [These are potatoes, how can you expect them to judge you. Those who are not able to give feedback, how can you judge yourself because of them.]*

*That also makes you feel that you don't have to rely on external judgement all the time because you don't know in what space the other is.*

**Stress, slowing down and stillness:** The facilitators took up themes related with stress and engaged these issues through dialogue or practice of stillness and meditation.

*P: Once our entire group was very stressed because of a submission that we were required to make. The SDW facilitator came and saw our long faces. We talked about stress that day – what it does to us, our bodies and mind. How fear cripples our mind? How we drag the stress into the present moment? One point that is very important was that that you are a person and being able to make to deadline is not your only goal. Your first goal is and always will be yourself.*

*R: One of our classmates got into accident in an outdoor self-development camp. We learnt how to handle our fear and stress from the way the facilitator managed the situation. She was very calm and still. There was no fear or panic in her and our fears quietened down. At that time, I think that was remarkable. That taught me a lot in life. I will not say that every fear just goes away...some deep-rooted fears still remain and you struggle with them all your life.... But in this kind of learning you can see beyond your fear or the other side of the fear.”*

Stillness and slowing down help an evolving person to both *step up* in life's situations as it is exactly required and *step back* (The Mother, in Dalal, 1984) to give room for self-expression to others and to reduce the noise in interactions.

*Z: I was quite stressed in COVID period with family and friends. The guided meditations in SDW and HRC sessions helped me to quieten and look at myself and my problems calmly.*

The facilitators of self-development workshops shared how they sometimes attempted attempt to imbue their interaction moments of stillness, and a perspective of sacredness of life. One facilitator reflects how a person learns re-cognise themselves during these workshops.

*T: In learning there is cognition and there is re-cognition. Most of the academic learning is re-cognition as it is what happened in the past. True learning or cognition (in stillness) happens when we can receive the moment exactly as the other meant it to be.*

**Journaling and other forms of self-expression:** The self-development sessions often included different forms of journaling. They reflected on sessions or a particular aspect of their personal or social lives. Journaling included specifics like ‘light and shadow’ journals where students learnt to see for themselves the aspects of their life which were in light for them and those which were experienced as darkness. They also did gratitude journaling at times.

*I: I did gratitude journaling during COVID. I would write my gratitude every morning and learnings in the evening. This helped me and gave meaning to my days.*

To sum up, students, facilitators and HRC faculty associated with this practicum seemed to break into fresh new ground in their being. Self-developmental processes as seen from the eyes of the students and facilitators remind me of an image from the Greek Philosopher Heraclitus where he says that you cannot step into the same river twice. The river is different every time you step into it. The stream of consciousness shared by the participants in the interviews was one moment in that river; the same story could be retold differently in another stream of consciousness with a different interviewer at a different time in their lives.

### **Human and Relational Identities and Education**

In this section, I turn my gaze towards the processes of learning in the HRC course as seen and experienced by students and the Faculty. According to Krishnamurti, (1997)– the mind is a process of relationship with nature, with people around us, with our own projection, with everything. Our entire life is nothing but a relationship. This discussion course seeks to build individual perspective on relating and communicating in education through discussion of readings, films, games, activities, art, poetry, music etc. The course structure was perceived as flexible by most the HRC faculty. The HRC faculty

shared that in addition to a set of classical readings, they experimented with new readings and resources every year in tandem with changing socio-political realities. One faculty member, D, remarked:

*HRC is much more of a process of unlearning –to challenge the way we look at ourselves, society, discipline, competition in schools etc...We as students have studied issues of humanistic psychology, social, identities, hidden curriculum and educational imaginations separately but HRC bring them together in an organic whole.*

The course begins with contemplation on the nature of self. Self is sought to be understood in terms of openness to experience and creating trust in one's own being so that a learner feels confident to finding their own answers in life's emergent situations (Rogers, 1983). Self is also discussed terms of self-in-education with discussion around themes like how to become a reflective practitioner, (Pollard, 2014) and be one's authentic self in learning situations, as one attempts to prize the learner's being with an inner unconditionality or bargaining (Rogers. 1983). The discussions included a psychological understanding of identity (with a special focus on feminist critical scholarship) and sociological identities including the gender spectrum, class, caste, tribal identities, religion, disability, mental health body and identity, social media identities etc. HRC facilitators shared that the gender spectrum (male, female, LGBTQIA+ identities) generated a lot of spontaneous discussion and issues like, patriarchy, menstruation, child sexual abuse, teasing, marital rape, consent, prejudices towards males/females and persons of mutiple sexual orientations.

*S: Before our discussions LGBTQIA+ identities, I used to think that being gay or lesbian is a psychological disease...I used to laugh at them and also at boys who wore pink, or liked wearing makeup, or girls who were tomboys. I truly respect who they are now. Classes in HRC and gender and schooling made a difference.”*

In HRC discussions, students find courage to break silences and express suppressed emotions.

*V: One student broke her silence and made a presentation on the topic of mental illness and identity and shared her struggles with anxiety and depression with her class. She says her interaction with her class improved after she found*

*acceptance of issues that she was facing from her classmates. Before this, every time she had an episode, she stayed away from college, for she felt she could not face her friends and they would stigmatise her.*

One student reported finding courage to express her sexual orientation, and made a presentation on the LGBTQIA+ identities in the class.

B shares,

*I found that there was a lot of openness in the faculty in HRC regarding acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities. I relaxed and let them know about my sexual orientation. I feel students need still deeper awareness of this issue.*

Sometimes, the signs of this suppressed need to speak must be read by the faculty.

*N: Once in a self-development workshop that I attended with them, I sensed that student narratives seemed full of underlying shame and guilt. I gave them an assignment where I gave them a number of emotional terms –with a range of empowered, happy and difficult emotions. I asked them to write about their emotional stories in depth and they could keep their assignment anonymous if they so wished. I was shocked to read their narratives. In a class of 50 nearly 38 to 40 girls reported some sort of sexual assault, abuse, molestation in their growing up years, some by very close relatives. I could see their deep suffering and trauma and also their resilience. Some were coming out of their homes, attending classes, going back to the same horror site, and still hoping to live to improve their lives. We opened out to each other and got strength from each other to share our stories. I shared my world too. I decided to keep the assignment non-evaluative as these sharings needed full affirmation.*

The HRC facilitators shared that discussions on caste, class, tribal identities, religious and disability identities needed negotiation of many presuppositions, prejudices, received and unexamined views. The privilege and other games and activities were woven in and sometimes played to make students aware of the socially iniquitous world that they inhabit. Here is a narrative of a faculty member, N, engaging with caste issues:

*I gave an assignment in which I asked the students- “what is the story of your surname? Did you ever feel like changing your name? Did you ever feel discriminated or privileged by the name that you carry? If you get an opportunity now to change your name, would you like to change it? If you would like to*

*change it then what name would you give yourself? Some shared stories of discrimination; some also shared privileges that their name bestows... Discrimination bahut logo nein share kiya is assignment mein par kissi ne bhi is group mein naam badalne ki iccha nahin dikhaiyi (a number of students shared a feeling of discrimination but none wanted to change their names in this group}. I feel when girls share these stories in the class, they kind of develop a sense of empowerment, voice and a sense that there are people who are ready to actively listen to them. There is also a kind of a ripple effect that happens in the class and more people want to share their stories too.”*

Some faculty members also use adaptations of the theatre of the oppressed in classrooms. This helped the students to identify the patterns of their oppression, and explore specific ways of resisting oppression in daily life with the help of their peers.

From one batch to another, the time spent on discussions is variable, depending on issues imperative to the groups. Many of these issues are often discussed in group and individual presentations. One of the facilitators asks students to create videos, or collect movie clips or documentaries around which they can have discussions in the classroom. For instance, entering a toy store and making a movie about which toys, toy store owners recommend for children of different ages? Which toys are sold the most? What toys do children demand? What do their parents buy? These discussions may potentially be used to understand the relationship between the world of children, adults, market and gender stereotypes. Another facilitator has taken students to look at children at protest sites and slums to understand multiple childhoods. There are assignments to help students move out of their comfort zone by interviewing individuals whom they in normal course of life would not have interacted with much because of invisible social boundaries – these included persons from a different class e.g., sanitation workers, household workers, persons on construction sites; different castes; sexual orientations; body image orientations; religions; disabilities; mental illness; and serving a jail term. The aim of such assignments is to examine the nature of inner resistance, received views and prejudices and create an insider-view to the stories of persons interviewed. The social realities were also sought to deepen by looking at art, protest art, revolutionary songs, poetry etc. Here is a self-narrative from M:

*During COVID, I wondered how to make students’ social perspectives deeper as they could no longer go out of their homes. I turned to art and poetry. We looked*



*together at significant art works and saw the way in which men, women, LGBTQIA+ identities, bodies of persons with disabilities and mental illness were depicted in art and protest art. For instance, we undertook an analysis of the works of Frida Kahlo. For class, caste and issues of religious identities –we turned to revolutionary songs and poetry. We also examined the self through surreal art expressions.*

*N: For the theme of gender, we did analysis of folk songs, which are sung at the time of weddings or childbirth or at the time of harvest. Girls brought songs from Rajasthan, from Uttarakhand and other places where they belonged.*

The fluidity in academic engagement in HRC was sometimes experienced during the COVID times where the difference between academic and personal spaces of students and faculty collapsed.

*M: “We were discussing gender issues that day. The discussions became emotional with students sharing their pain and anguish –which had become even more pronounced because of isolation and loneliness during COVID lockdown. I posted a poem on the WhatsApp group. I asked them to write poetry. Many students responded. We wrote poetry late into the night...I was surprised at how many people wrote. Many poured out appreciation for the poetry they liked. Not all poetry was sad –there was fun, laughter and wisecracks too...we all grew closer. Our poetry continued over days...I felt we were connected and broke space barriers. I am sharing two couplets of students:*

*‘Ajeeb saal tha yeh,  
Kisi ke sapne le gaya,  
Kisi ke apne le gaya.’  
‘Kalam Kagaz par rakh,  
Teri Sayaahi mein kya nahin behta.’*

The students also examined notions of hidden curriculum and alternate imaginations of education. Books like Totochan, Danger School and Divaswapan stayed in their ‘remembrance’, even the older alumni and they remember growing through these.

K, an old alumni and person with disability remembers,

*I remember an incident in Totochan where all children are asked to swim naked and become comfortable with each other's bodies including the body of a disabled child. I found that very interesting. Another image that has stayed with me is that from the book- 'Danger school'- which shows how all children go into a school-machine and come out not equal but unequal.*

Some students and HRC facilitators felt students found it difficult to engage with the theoretical lens that was adopted in this course. HRC facilitators shared that the capacity of students to read and engage theoretically has decreased over the years. They attempted to encourage them to read books and articles to increase theoretical engagement.

To sum, the open discussion pattern of this course was largely popular both with students and faculty members. Many personal transformative moments were experienced by them in contested-negotiated spaces of social identities. They critiqued the current education system and discussed alternatives to cultures of fear, strict discipline and competition.

### **Onwards Relational Journeys: Work and Life of BEIEd Alumni**

In this section, I try to see the onward journeys of the alumni in terms of their perceived capacity to be reflexive and agentic in multiple life contexts –personal, work and family lives. According to Batra (2023),

for teachers to feel empowered requires not only individual agency to take professional decisions inside the classroom, but also political agency that comes from an understanding of the many facets that impact education, and a vision for a transformed society. (p. 723–724)

It also involves a capacity to take collective political action. In the 24 stories the BEIEd alumni narrated, their sense of life – hopes, fears, strivings, satisfaction of having found their voice and the frustration of having it thwarted. They shared of their negotiations, synergies and at times 'broken interstices of the being' –of hope in a society that refuses to change. During interviews, almost all the participants shared that the four-year period was a period of burgeoning self-confidence and transformation. This experience of the "Self-in-BEIEd" appears to remain with them as an empowered self-referential which

they invoked with a sense of ownership and nostalgia, even as they grew and moved through, personal, academic and work spaces. Many seemed to have the need to learn and experience more. For instance, some remained in touch with their self-development facilitators even after they graduated, and requested them to conduct workshops for their peer group; some went to trips to places like Dharamshala with their facilitators after the BEIEd. Others expressed the need to go back to self-developmental spaces and learn more “*Itna kaafi nahi hai*” (This much is not enough).

### *Self-developmental narratives around work lives*

In their work lives, I sensed some restlessness. Many students seemed to experience a long period of exploration of work-identities after the BEIEd. Those who joined mainstream schools in this group, often had a sharp critique for these settings and moved on to either higher education, government jobs or more progressive schools or research assignments.

The work lives of the BEIEd alumni are seen from three frames –expression of resistance and agency in work life including structural challenges to the expression of agency and agency of taking collective political action. Each one of these is presented below.

**Agency and resistance in work lives:** Many of the participants had a sense of doing meaningful work and being agentic in creating and imagining alternative practices in their workplaces. Others struggled within systemic inertia and constraints of power-relations within hierarchical institutions. Their narratives tell stories of schooling experiences and other work spaces in their lives and times. I focus here on the school narratives.

**The enabled selves:** There were many narratives that spoke of their attempts at professional self-expression and self-growth. One participant who was working with a field-based organisation in Haridwar reflects:

*A: I learnt to dialogue in the BEIEd. I used this in work. We work with Muslim communities in Haridwar. I noticed that the interaction of teachers with the community was often prejudiced. I started dialoguing with them on this topic. During the BEIEd I had learnt that to dialogue you must first learn to listen. I would try not*

*to get disturbed by their statements and first listen to them completely. Then I would share my position. I think I was able make a change. Another area where I initiated change was when I asked male members of the staff to procure sanitary napkins for school as there seemed to be a cultural discomfort with procuring women's articles. I was able to initiate a change in these attitudes over time.*

Others learnt to use their developed capacity of self- reflexivity to grow and change as they moved through multiple contexts of life.

*V: I used to be very concerned about issues of caste/class divide and prejudices. I would take up these issues in my family and neighbourhood which often ended up in heated discussions. I noticed that I was functioning at the argumentation level. When I joined my workplace, I decided to move from argumentation to a much more dialogical style of engagement.*

*A: Earlier, while talking to parents in school, I used to talk a lot. But now I first try to listen to them. I try to understand what their thinking process is, and then I take my action.*

In addition to narratives of agency, students at times articulated a sense of resistance to many of the regressive practices in their work spaces. They expressed their resistance when they found that their work environments are highly controlled spaces in terms of imposed regimes of truth and discipline, loss of voice, hierarchy, surveillance, control of bodies, scripted pedagogies, silenced-disciplined minds, meritocracy, structural competition, issues of techno-determinism, invisibilisation of labour, exploitation of care, systemic coldness, mechanised form of assessment and especially an invasion of the market into the epistemic body of schools.

**Regimes of truth and discipline:** Highly controlled environment was often experienced by the participants both in the public education and private schools. What is the “infinitesimal distribution of the power relations” (Foucault, 1975, p.216) that teachers experience in schools? The participant narratives reveal how pedagogies in both public and private schools are embedded in structural competitiveness, meritocracy, and control of body, emotions and morality to distribute individuals in the competitive markets. Further, private schools seek to maximise profits by controlling the physical and mental

labour of the teacher. This is the variformed ground of power relations, systemic inertia, and vested interests within which the struggle to articulate new pedagogies is attempted by the participants.

**Hierarchy:** In institutions like schools, control is often exercised through *concerted hierarchical action* (Foucault, 1975) that can in this case function to ‘constrain’ freedom and the agency of students and teachers in service of the current regime of truth. Hierarchical discipline in institutions according to Foucault (1975) often operates as an infra-law (an underside of law that overpasses boundaries of the lawful) achieved through an asymmetrical assertion of power that subordinates one group of people under another. It functions by “excluding reciprocities” (Foucault, 1975, p. 222) and confirming power only on the higher scale of hierarchy. The convergence between asymmetrical nature of power relations and break down of reciprocity can be seen in the following narrative:

*S: There is a senior teacher in my school who keeps asking me to do many tasks for her- e.g., wiping the black board, decorating the boards etc. She takes credit for the work that I do for her. I find that I am not in position to say no –even though I know it is exploitative. I attempted to confront her once but she shouted at me...I almost want to leave the school but said to myself, ‘Koi baat nahin’ [It is okay]. She is senior. I am here to learn. Let me learn.*

S here experienced a form of hierarchical domination that was demeaning and unjust. The infra-lawful disciplining of her being by the senior teacher is done in the guise of cultural expectation of ‘respect for the seniors. With the senior teacher, there is also a breakdown of reciprocity, she cannot expect with surety that the teacher may respond to her with ‘care’. In an asymmetrical relationship, she can be seen here ‘holding’ in simultaneity many complex emotions – humiliation, the invisibilisation of her labour, her resistance, her anger, her helplessness, her attempts to regain sanity and agency and an understanding of the cultural inter-generational matrix that mediates her situation.

**Surveillance:** The disciplining of the teacher is effected by the surveillance mechanisms used in the school. Biometric attendance, CCTV cameras within the classroom, inspection rounds by the Principal and in the case of government schools, rounds by schools’ inspectors. The teacher narratives tell of the invasive presence of cameras in the classroom and other methods of surveillance.

*S: There is a CCTV camera in my classroom. It makes me very conscious of what I am doing and wearing.*

*A: The principal when she comes on rounds scolds me in front of the students for small issues.*

*C: When the school inspectors are coming to school, the principal wants to make a good impression. She wants all children to be studying quietly within the classroom and does not want us to take children to the school grounds for doing activities. We have not been able to go to school grounds for 15 days now.*

Foucault (1975) writes about how in a period of 100 years (17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century) the French penitentiary system moved from confining the prisoners in underground dungeons where the swarming, howling masses were kept away from inconveniencing the public with their uncomfortable presence to prisons above the ground in form of a panopticon. In the panopticon, the crowd or the melted-together individualities were divided into separate prison cells where each individual could be surveilled through an invisible presence in a central tower. The person in the central tower could see the inmates but could not himself be observed. After 150 years of its creation, the panopticon still lives on in a mutated form of the insidious presence of the CCTV cameras that seek to control emotions and behaviour. The howling of the masses kept out of sight in dungeons in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is replaced by the relegation of emotions to inner dungeons through a strict control of behaviour through cameras. Neither teachers nor students in controlled environments are to cry out loud, even to an outward insult –the emotional suppression is evidently written on their faces.

**Pre-scripted pedagogies:** Many of the participants identified the lack of freedom to create their own pedagogical flow and rhythm in schools as a dissonant cord in their work lives. There was in several instances in the narratives of the control the time-space structuring of what is taught, by whom, for how much time and when.

*C: There is very little freedom to be innovative. The lessons are pre-planned and we are given prepared worksheets. There is pressure to remain confined to the pre-given syllabus and time frame.*

*N: The students and teachers need to be given space to decide the curriculum. There needs to be a bottom-up approach to curriculum planning.*

The pre-scripting of pedagogies is seen to take place in both private and public schools. This potentially takes away from teachers the freedom to co-create knowledge with students,

dialogue on issues of social and personal relevance and break into new surprised grounds of creativity. The pre-scripted curriculum becomes the centre of pedagogical transaction not the emergent differential needs of students. Many of the participants shared that they tried to move away from the script wherever they could find institutional space to engage with students. In other contexts, control was so tight, that to not follow the script, made them directly answerable to both school authorities and parents. A study done in academic institutions in three cities by Batra et al (2021) corroborates the findings of the present study. The study found that teachers took the role of techno-managers while teaching online classes. Their interactions were very closely monitored leaving them with little control for self-expression.

**Broken curricular rhythms:** In addition to scripted pedagogies, the participants also spoke about tight timetabling as potentially deleterious to learning. The short periods did not allow possibilities of immersive experiences nor sufficient time to see how all children are engaging with learning.

*S: You have to follow fifty-minute period and you know, if we are continuing beyond fifty minutes, the other class loses time. And I have to ask someone else to please go and look after that class. Apparently, children cannot look after themselves.*

Short periods have a specific dynamic –they keep the teacher syllabus-focussed. A concept is introduced, a few applications discussed, a few responses of enthusiastic students are taken ...there is no time to check with all students. For many the circularity of learning is not complete –the concept remains half understood. The accretion of many such experiences can feel like half-digested food in the stomach for learners –a source of continued inward discomfort. According to Sri Aurobindo (1956), successive and immersive curriculum can lead to a deeper, more inwardly processed learning than simultaneous learning where many subjects are introduced at the same time. Participants felt that school rhythms especially in tightly controlled private schools did not give them the agency to structure time flexibly. Another concern raised by the participants working in government schools was that of interventions in the school by too many external agencies. The intervention done through government programmes or NGOs was seen to be done in an unplanned, ad hoc and arbitrary manner. In addition to this, the teachers were burdened with a lot of mechanical work of record keeping, significantly reducing the teaching time in the classroom. A participant, N, working in a government school share:

*Abhi NCPCR se information aa rahi hai, ek information abhi SCERT de raha hai, ek information abhi hame DIET se aa rahi hai, ek information hamen NEP de raha hai, ek information hame kisi NGO se aa rahi hai....Sab humko bolkar jaate hain...Unhe lagta hai ki woh hamesha hamse jyada jaante hain. Kuchch actual kaam hone ke bajaye, aise record ke mechanical kaamon mein effort jaata hai.... Krishna Kumar Sir kahte the ki teacher ek meek dictator ban jaata hai. Yahaan to who meek dictator bhi nahin hai. Woh class pahunch hi kahan raha hai.Mujhe man karta hai ki mujhe samay mile to main khub taiyari ke saath class mein jaaun par mechanical kamon mein planning ka samay nahin milta. [One information is given to us by NCPCR, another by SCERT, another by DIET, still another by NEP or an NGO. Everyone talks down to us. They feel we know nothing much. Instead of actual work, we are busy with mechanical work of record keeping. Krishna Kumar Sir used to say that a teacher often becomes a meek dictator in class. Here a teacher is not even a meek dictator -- for he is not even reaching the classroom. I wish I could get time and go into my classroom with a lot of planning but there is no time for that because of burden of mechanical work.]*

N seemed quite disturbed by the fact that she was getting very little time in the classroom. She also felt that as a teacher she was not seen as an agentic person who could be dialogued with by the different agencies seeking to intervene in the school. The COVID -19 Study by Batra et al (2021) also corroborates how teachers were sucked into mechanical online work getting little time to interact with their families. I would like to invoke here observations made by Michael Apple (2013) on controlling the work of teachers in American schools. He writes about how the teacher's work is seen as 'labour' and proletarianised. Further, the teacher's work can be subjected to legitimising interventions from the state which seeks to divorce "conception from execution". The teachers are seen as mere executors who need to be deskilled of their own knowledge and reskilled by a set of 'experts'. He writes, "The process of control, increasing technicisation and intensification of the teaching act, the proletarianisation of their work –all this was an absent presence. It was misrecognised as symbols of their increased *professionalism*" (Apple, 2013, p.174). The supposed "professionalisation" of the Indian teachers seems to be treading the same ground –with little voice deciding the fate of an externally pulverised curriculum that they must teach in increasing mechanical-technicised school spaces.



**Discipline and silence:** The conversations during interviews touch the micropolitics of planned discipline and imposed silence and what it potentially does to the human mind. The pervasive disciplining and scripted pedagogies create a strong tendency in students to tread ‘safe’ grounds –grounds that are shorn of any unexpected flights of imagination and intuition. The expectation that they will remain within disciplined silence and listen to the teacher –also has potential of silencing in passive quiescence, the fertile-bubbling chaos of questions and spontaneous observations. One of the participants, S, notes:

*When they [students] have to choose for themselves, they are blank. They are like, ‘Ab kaun batayega [who will tell us now what to do] ... blank canvas. They are incapable of choosing what colour I should paint this. They remain within given boundaries. If there is a sun, it has to be yellow.*

**Meritocracy:** One strand in the dialogues within the interviews focussed upon the meritocratic structures that celebrate ability over the effort that students put into learning. The meritocratic system defines the nature of ‘merit’ and proceeds to “hierchicize in terms of value the ability, the value and the ‘nature’ of individuals. It introduces through this value giving measure, the constraint of conformity that must be achieved” (Foucault, 1975, p. 183). It divides the students into ‘the shameful class’, the ‘average’ student and those who ‘excel’. The ‘average’ is a swarm that is perpetually ‘not quite there’ for there is room at the top for very few. The ‘average’ has some semblance of respect but the ‘shameful class’ is sans any form of dignity. This class comprises those who do not match up to the standard of merit or the valued principle. These are students on the margins, those who are seen not to possess ability, who are depressed, abnormal, deviant and ‘lazy’. In the modern classroom, the ‘shameful’ class is sometimes a manifested form of subtle or overt exclusions, for instance, the ‘black stars’ on the achievement charts displayed on the classroom walls. The participants questioned the meritocratic practices and pushed for addressing diversity in the unique learning needs of all children.

*M: I do not understand why only a few students are chosen for competitive events. The same set of students is chosen again and again giving little opportunity to others. Learning opportunities need to be there for all the students and not just for a few.*

*N: If someone comes ‘first’, then someone also is “last”. We need to break this system of being judgmental about the effort of students.*

**Structural competition:** The regime of truth in mainstream schools sees individuals as independent competitive units who must be trained and examined in separateness so as to find a way to distribute them in the market in accordance with their ‘abilities.’ Let us look at the following narrative from a teacher:

*S: I had divided the students in groups of five for project work. The principal was on the rounds. There was some noise generated as students discussed aspects of the project. The Principal came and said- “Koi group work nahin hoga, sab individual kaam karenge [There is be no group work, everyone will work individually].*

The hidden premium in schools is often on individual work. If the aim of the school is to prepare individual students for the competitive market, then power is used to control student interactions, collaborations and reciprocities as they distract from the important task of preparing for the exam. To adapt an image from Foucault (1975), the school authorities are effecting a ‘tightly controlled’ collective ‘manoeuvre’ that requires docility of student bodies and minds for collective passing of the ‘exam’. The narratives reveal that most teachers skip the interactive activities that are given at the end of the chapter in the NCERT textbooks. Their own efforts to extend the activities beyond the text require much negotiation.

**Understanding the remedial:** A form of meritocracy-in-operation is the remedial. For doing remediation, a child must be pulled out the regular class and often made a part of an ‘ability’ grouping. The government schools in Delhi use this form of ability grouping. On probing I found that the alumni were uncomfortable with such groupings and found them to be a source of labelling, attribution of failure to ability leading to low self-esteem amongst students. The concept of remediation takes the normative standard of the curriculum and seeks to ‘repair’ the students as compared to looking at the differential pace of students as their own natural standard. There is also a probable intersectionality of social class and meritocracy in government schools. For instance, the regional backgrounds of students from Bihar, Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand in government schools is not seen to be a source of pedagogic richness but is sought to be invisibilised. “Because the non-middle-class identity is supposed to be invisible; it is viewed not as a diverse cultural asset but as a condition to be repaired (Lawrence and Mackenzie in Van Galen, 2007, p. 11).

**Imposed moralisms:** Some teachers often treat children as guilty unless proven innocent. For instance, if something is lost in a classroom, the bags of all children are checked which is a violation of their dignity and privacy. Truth-telling is also potentially shamed. For instance, if a teacher asks a student why he was late and the student says that he did not get up in time, his honesty is seen as an admission of guilt which deserves sharp moralistic reprimands. One of the participants shared her experience of controlling the moral voice of the teacher and instead extending respect to the needs articulated by children:

*M: There was a child in my online class who was not able to do much. Rather than accusing him, I asked- 'What happened?' He told me with hesitation that he was not often able to sleep at night. I took care that I did not grade him negatively on his worksheets when he was not able to do something. I supported him emotionally and soon he started responding in class.*

Often, legitimate reasons given by students are explained away as 'excuses'. In the above narrative, the participant made a conscious effort to control the judgemental inner voice that can mar the fragile bond of trust. The moralistic tenor seemed to permeate the display boards in the school corridors, the pictures of great persons on the walls and sayings like 'Honesty is the best policy'. Here is a narrative from a current student doing internship the fourth year.

*D: We had with great excitement put together a storyboard in our classroom –based on a story of a bhoot (ghost). The storyboard was interactive and we felt it will appeal to children. However, we were asked to remove it and create a display of moral stories, stories of great people or slogans.*

The moral sanitisation throws out all that is 'alive' in children's imagined worlds –fears, excitement, desires, longings. It also throws out the richness of cultural symbolisms that myths, folktales and *daastaans* (oral stories) hold within themselves, weaving together the past, present and imagined futures. Another participant was disturbed by the wastage of food materials in frequent *hawans* (ritual worship) done in schools.

*S: Why do we have to waste food materials while doing hawans. I feel the money can be spent in feeding those who are poor. I shared my views in school and got sarcastic comments.*

One may or may not agree with S, but I feel that an openness of mind is needed for progressive thought that can create new forms of relating and experiencing the world and

its problems. S.'s comment is located in a wider socio-historical moment where there is a shrinking of such dialogic spaces in the public sphere. The rise of narrowness is especially dangerous for schools –for to be ‘schooled’ does not mean to be herded into a received order but truer to its Greek meaning ‘schloē’ which is ‘leisure’ –leisure of untrammelled explorations.

**Control of bodies:** The control often extends beyond the moralistic control of the mind to strict control of the bodies of teacher and students. Docile bodies are used to create surplus labour of teachers which is then consumed by the school management. Here are some narratives:

*S: I am expected to stand in my class from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. with only short breaks in between. When I come back home, I am utterly exhausted and I sleep for some time. In the evening, I touch the leaves, flowers, bark of tress, something that I learnt in self-development workshops. This refreshes me.*

*N: There are no chairs in the classroom, we are just not expected to sit down.*

*A: What we wear is strictly monitored. We cannot wear sleeveless clothes or jeans to school.*

*M: There is a lot of unnecessary body shaming of children in schools. If a girl is not in two ponytails or a child in hurry wears two different coloured socks, it is pointed out rudely. I am deeply disturbed by this.*

*S: When I enter the classroom, it is very much important for me to make sure that my students know that their private space is not the half of the desk. Their private space is as much as they want, without constricting the others.*

The narratives of body pain and exploitation were shared by some participants with considerable amount of distress. The ‘missing chair’ is indicative of how bodies are structurally constrained. Much of the pain of the bodies of teachers is invisibilised –for instance, the pain of the female body of standing the full school day on the first day of menstruation. Michael Apple (2013) writes about how the labour of teachers is intensified. Intensification is a process through which “work privileges of educational workers is eroded” (p.172). This took form here of not being allowed to sit down or relax, in other contexts it

may be little time to go to the bathroom or eat. It is the self-directedness of teacher and sociability that is compromised here the most (Apple, 2013).

Another form of control comes from the rude interruptions of announcements from a public address system. “*Class 5C ki teacher fatafat principal ke office mein report karen* [Class 5C teacher is to report to the principal’s office immediately]”. This form of summoning of the teacher’s body results in an undignified exit of the teacher from the classroom in haste. The teacher has no choice but to leave the class after such a public announcement –she cannot choose to finish what she was doing and then later attend to the query of the principal. There is also some speculation likely among students as to why the teacher has been summoned. The students learn to see the teacher as someone who is as controlled as they themselves are. The ‘packaging’ of teachers in formal clothing is a form of creation of ‘smartness’ that can sell the school in the market. An alternate reason for control seems to be a form of moral policing based on conditioned cultural reactions that considers ‘jeans’ and ‘sleeveless’ clothes to be inappropriate. Body shaming of students and younger teachers seems to be common experience in many schools. For instance, checking of nails, dress, body odour, and hair lead to humiliation and body shaming of children from lower income groups.

**The missing mess:** Some participants talked about the discomfort of fellow teachers and administrators about displaying work of all children in class. The focus especially in primary grades is on decorating the classroom with eye-catching displays and only ‘good’ work of students is displayed on the walls. Ghertner (2015) shares an interesting Foucauldian analysis of how urban spaces through aesthetic governmentality want to become ‘world class’ by removal of messy areas like slums that do not look good. Extending this analysis to the classroom space, the ‘look good’ aesthetics can at times be used to create ‘world-class’ smart schools; the perfect mess of the work of children finds no space in such a setting.

**Systemic coldness:** The relationships of students and teachers are often mediated by a systemic coldness that makes invisible the ‘emotional selves’ of students. Here is a narrative from a government school teacher:

*M: One girl from class 3 had recently lost her mother. I wanted her to cheer up. Some of the children in the class were chosen to go for a trip to a local monument. I wanted her to go along. However, the order said that children must have ‘proper dress’ to be able to go. This girl did not have the ‘proper school uniform’ and so was not allowed to go.*

*M: Hamari ek sabse hard working teacher...itna mehnat karti hai wo ladki bacho ke sath, group banake kam karti hai. Uski class mein ek bache ko jo ussi din aaya tha, uss bache se pucha swaal school inspector ne aur bacha nahin jawaab de paya...unke liye itni lambi written instructions deke gaye hai ki class mein inko ye karwana chaheyhe, yeh karwana chaheyhe. [We have a very hard-working teacher who puts in a lot of effort with students, does a lot of group work. A school inspector asked a question from a child who had joined school on that day, and he could not answer. The inspector wrote a long series of written instructions for the teacher as to how she should teach.]*

*S: School is like a machine ... they do not expect us to be friendly with students, they want us to maintain a distance.*

*S: I have decided to let my class know that on some day I am having a bad day. You know it's very normal to have bad day. Students need to know – we can also have bad days...teacher is also someone like us.*

The 'orders from above' and 'written instructions' seem too official and 'distant' for teachers to experience agency or the space to dialogue. The emotionality of students or teachers can neither be 'seen' nor 'acknowledged' by cold systemic ritual. According to Foucault (1975) emotional coldness is a form of control in institutions. It keeps the emotional mess and reciprocity out of sight and helps focus on the 'truth' that a regime is perpetuating –here it is the all-important exam. Erich Fromm (1985) writes that 'respect' derives from the word 'respicere' which means to 'look at' – to see the person just as is. "Respect thus implies an absence of exploitation" (Fromm, 1985, p. 22). To respect, one must know a person.

The above narratives show how the school systems can systemically fail to know and extend warmth, care and respect to teachers and students. The emotional need of the child who lost her mother in the above narrative could not be 'seen' because of systemic coldness. The personhood of the teacher was mangled by a systemic coldness which must have the last word. School spaces are also potentially off-limits for Parents from lower socio-economic groups are often treated with lack of respect as they do not possess sufficient economic, social and educational privilege to be 'seen' and 'heard'. A number of narratives talk about how in the self-development sessions, they learnt to 'look at' people around them with much more respect and appreciation of difference. Some spoke of learning to extend personal emotional boundaries and express warmth and care which they also try and bring into their interactions with children and parents in schools. Teacher in schools are not unloving

persons. The actual act of love in school settings is often complex. It is mediated by the extent to which the teacher internalizes the ‘truth’ of a regime. Much of the violence and coldness that is systemically expressed in a regime is done for the ‘greater good’ of students. For this to change, the means and end of education perhaps needs to be the same –deep relations of individual uniqueness expressed in inner freedom -a ‘spiritual anarchy’ as seen by Sri Aurobindo (1997).

**Cultural capital and privilege:** The reproduction of social, cultural and economic capital has attracted a lot of attention and analysis. Schools are seen as sources of institutionalised social capital that distribute privilege and status. (Bourdieu, 1986). What were the encounters with institutionalised social capital and privilege in this participant group? Did they attempt to question the entrenched dispositional in the hope of creating just and socially grounded pedagogic practices? The alumni did report instances wherein lack of privilege was created by language, caste, class and religion. They also reported instances of initiating socially just pedagogic practices.

*N: Teachers are biased and they discriminate based on caste. The older teachers who have been staying in this area for a long time are more biased...There is politics among students from different class backgrounds. The children who stay in quarters do not like interacting with children from jhuggis (slums) or from villages. The parents too ask the children to stay away.*

*N: Jab teacher ye keh raha hai ki ‘ye is caste ka hai’ ...aur “Is wajah se ye yahan rahete hai aur ye isi tarah ka behave karte hai toh inse aap kya hi expect kar sakte ho.” To ise pata chalta hai ki apki expectation, apki aspiration bachon ke sath nahi hai uss tarah ki. [When a teacher says that ‘this child belongs to this caste’ ...and “this is why they stay here and behave like this and you can hardly expect anything from them’. From this we know what kind of aspirations teachers have from students.*

*M: Schools celebrate Holi, Diwali and Christmas but not Eid or Gurupurab.*

*B: There was a terrorist attack when one student said that the reason behind these attacks is the Muslim community...at that moment I left what I was doing and we started discussing this.*

*M: Mein toh khud saath lagti thi bacho ke cleaning krte time. Agar teacher hee saath nahin dega toh bacha hee ye soche ga ki hum chote hai isliye safai kr rhe hai. Safai ke lia toh koi chota bada nahi hota. [I used to participate in cleaning the classroom; if a*

*teacher does not participate, the students can think that we are younger, therefore the teacher does not help. Nobody is young or old for cleaning].*

Some alumni also shared that their use of Hindi during interviews was perceived as a distinct lack of cultural privilege. Even while interviewing for the post of the Hindi teacher, their requirement was to speak in English. A participant reported developing strong emotional resistance to this and gaining satisfaction when she chanced upon a school that prized her self-expression in Hindi.

### **Bare Life in Schools**

The social class dynamics in schools can be seen from the lens also of creating bare life for students in multiple settings. Bare life is life marginalised and divested of any real value according to Agamben (1998). The person living the bare life is the *homo sacer* (a person whose life cannot be sacrifice but there is no impunity in killing such a person) (Agamben, 1998). The children belonging to the economically weaker sections<sup>2</sup> in school seemed to live a marginalised life according to some of the participants.

*A: I have EWS students in my class and you can see the difference. For example, small examples that we have a fruit break in the school so. And they were asked to bring sanitizers as well. So most of the EWS do not bring fruit and do not bring sanitizers because they do not have that much money. And that is very much visible. Sports teacher came to me and he said in your class there are so many EWS children. I said 'Sir, I don't know, I am new'... so he said 'Dekh kar hi pata chal jata hai'. [You can tell that they are EWS just by looking at them.]*

The school routines and rituals coldly exclude children from economically weaker sections. An incident that I myself remember is that of a teacher who was amused that a child was so poor that he kept collecting toffees from all the birthdays that came up in schools so that he could distribute these toffees to his classmates on his birthday. The attitude of the teachers sometimes towards this child is that of '*bechara*' – someone who could be potentially pitied, invisibilised, relegated to bare margins. However, the EWS child is not bonafide part of the competitive race – which is the lot of the privileged class

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<sup>2</sup> Under the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, at least 22 per cent of seats to entry-level classes—nursery, kindergarten, and Class 1—have to be reserved for children from economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups (DG), with a further 3 per cent reserved for children with disabilities.



–to be pressed, pressured and be sacrificed to the severe competition. He is neglected because, he is expected to hang in within the bare margins classroom where he is not seen to belong or expected to succeed making him the ‘barely living’ – homo sacer.

### **Education Markets**

Many alumni in recent times have found jobs in the newly emerging Ed-Tech companies. Those whom I interviewed were deeply disenchanted with this sector. They found these companies propagating mechanical straightjacketed pedagogies that leave little room for students’ creative expression. The education market they argue is pushing children’s anxiety over the edge as they relentlessly sell the ways of becoming competitive.

*V: There is whole market jo tumhe marks provide karne ke liye baithi hai...parents ki anxiety ke sath...bachchon ki anxiety ke sath vo khel rahe hai. [There is an entire market which is there to get you marks, they are playing with anxieties of parents and children.]*

*V: While recommending education programmes to the consumer, the edtech companies do not cater to the best interests of students but sell them what fetches them most money.*

Some felt that these issues could be dealt with decisively only through the formulation of coherent policy measures that can protect the best interests of developing students.

*A: NEP is not talking about private tuition or shadow education. That is also one of my major critiques...chahe voh higher education mein ho ya school education mein ho. It stays silent. [Whether it is higher education or school education, the policy is silent.]*

It is of concern if our current academic culture is creating a form of hypohumanities which “erase the class and labour relations that shape education by foregrounding digital skills in teaching and obscuring the place of human labour in education” (Ebert & Zavarzadeb, 2010, p. 39). Such an education can lose its foothold in life and perpetuate endless engagement with the indeterminate play of signs (a thoughtful thoughtlessness) creating a cybertariat (Ebert & Zavarzadeb, 2010). The new frenzy of teaching coding in Indian schools for instance, divests learning spaces of any grounded discourse on social issues and concerns.

## **Forming Critical Communities**

I had shared some narratives of ‘enabled selves’ of select alumni at the beginning of this section. However, as the later narratives show, the possibility of transformative change can in many cases be held hostage to systemic inertia and entrenched cultural habits of thinking. Some narratives of the BEIEd alumni foreground the possibility of breaking through this inertia through forming small critical communities inside school settings. These are groups of like-minded individuals who want to try out new pedagogies, alternative relational cultures and real-life problem solving.

*M: We always try to think, as a group that what can we do to improve the morale in students, to improve behaviour in students, instead of resorting to physical punishment or verbal punishment? What can we do? So, this is where something we all agree upon, there is no one in our group who will say that, let's leave it, you should just scold that kid, no we are all here together, and we all understand each other that corporal punishment is something which we will never go resort to, this is not an option, what we can do, how can we make this better? And how can we as a group, come together and develop ourselves.*

*V: I learnt so much from a small group of BEIEd students who I met while working in a school. We came very close together, shared our family issues, gender related concerns and worked closely together to develop new pedagogies. We are close friends even now though we have moved into different professional areas and support each other.*

*K: I started facing issues related to disability in my workplace. I started a WhatsApp group of persons with disabilities in different schools. We share our issues through this group and try and find solutions.*

The formation of such collectives presents opportunities for emergent communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). These then can be used to support, question, and refine one’s own ideas. It is interesting that such communities also tend to develop a non-verbal communicative space which is emotionally supportive.

*A: Sometimes when I am fed up with administration and emotionally upset, I don’t need to explain to my close colleagues that I need space to be with myself.*

*They know the issues I am going through without my having to say them out aloud.*

As Batra (2023) points out, formation of such small communities could be critical for collective political action in schools. Book clubs, discussion groups, visit to critical sites, retreats, informal parent-teacher groups, non-hierarchical groups of teaching, administrative and ground staff in school and collective engagement with creative curriculum formation or events could potentially deepen the impact of such critical communities.

To summarise, it could be said that schools need a new form of learning and emotional aesthetics that allow them to 'see' how constrained and distorted learning patterns can cause emotional suffering. Bare life in schools, lives languishing in the margins, the sore dynamic of class, caste and religion-based politics needs to be brought to view. The alumni in schools consciously or subconsciously resist these practices as is evident in their narratives. Their angst of not being heard and being treated with systemic arbitrariness or subjected to anti-dialogics (Friere, 1993) is evident in their stories. Some tried to raise their voice even in the face of stiff resistance. Others looked for negotiating spaces to express themselves. Their voices gained in strength when there was a critical community of like-minded teachers in school e.g., other BEIEd alumni. In such situations they were sometimes able to sustain transformative change in their school environments. The BEIEd alumni often exercise choice in altering educational practices of private schools that they found regressive and authoritarian. In government schools they had no such choice and therefore try to bring about change in their own classrooms and other spheres of operation they have control over; and resist being sucked into systemic inertia and stagnation.

### **Family Lives**

Professional journeys are embedded in the evolving personal life-imperatives and choices of many BEIEd alumni. I tried to explore how their potentially deepening engagement with the self, expressed itself in their personal and familial journeys. The narratives could not be fit into neat categories as each life trajectory had its own prelude, rhythm, discord and concord. While some lives seemed outwardly smooth, others struggled with patriarchy, entrenched role divisions and lack of empathy for their professional selves. Researchers have

investigated how personal life themes influence knowledge construction and teacher knowledge (Olson, 2008). This makes sense as life is the real field setting where many theoretical ideas related to gender, human relations and justice are tested for their own capacity to effectuate change and ‘hold on’ to people and ideas that to them are critical to their personal-social vision. The life-sense so gained then enters the classroom along with the underlying optimism or pessimism about life. I am discussing here three life narratives of BEIEd alumni which foreground the texture of their stories.

### *Narrative 1*

N stepped into an early batch of the BEIEd programme with a lot of aspiration but struggled due to the lack of curriculum material in Hindi. Her family belongs to Najafgarh and she is from the *Jat*<sup>3</sup> community. There was a lot of pressure to get married early and gender discrimination was widely prevalent in her family and the larger community. She reports getting confident in finding her voice and honing her perspective on her ‘self’ and ‘gender’ through engagement with BEIEd. She shares that her father would sometimes jokingly tell her that till such time that she is studying, he will not marry her off but the day she stops, she will be married off. She pursued higher studies also as a means to ward off marriage during the four-year BEIEd programme and then further negotiated her freedom by doing Masters in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics and MEd from the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi. She decided to marry a partner of her own choice which created a mini-storm in her family. Her partner was a Brahmin and there was resistance by both sets of parents to her marriage. She tried negotiating that she will prefer to remain unmarried till both achieve financial independence, but to no avail. Her decision to make choices by herself did not go down well with her family. Her father refused to speak with her and has not done so for the last 15 years. She feels that as a consequence of her decision, the first reaction of her community was to restrict the educational freedom of other girls in the community with the view that too much education ‘spoils’ the girls. However, the next generation i.e., the children of her uncles are in touch with her and often seek her advice and ask her to share her life experiences. There is much more freedom now available to the younger generation within her community.

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<sup>3</sup> The Jats represent one of the largest ethnic groups that has evolved in the northwest region of the Indian subcontinent—India and Pakistan—over several thousand years. They are included in Central OBC List (Other Backward Classes) for reservation in nine states of India.

She shared:

*Kehte hai ki hum free hai, hum koi bhi decision le sakte hai, hum apni life se sambandhit bahut saari cheeze kar sakte hai lekin uss freedom ki hamesha cost bhi hoti hai... Aur mujhe lagta hai ki ye ek balance personality ki characteristic hai ki wo kitna apni freedom chahata hai aur kitna wo uske liye responsibility le sakta hai. Ye nahi ho sakta ki aap freedom bhi chahe aur ye bhi kahe ki responsibility koi aur le. Agar apki achievements apki hai toh struggle toh apko hi karna padega. Aur kayi bar ye hai ki apka struggle apko koi kisi tarah ka koi positive benefit de, ye bhi zaruri nahi hota kuch cheeze aisi bhi karte hai hum jo hamare baad ane wale logo ke liye kam ayengi.*

*[We say that we are free and we can take any action related with our lives with that freedom, but there is also a cost of that freedom. I feel a balanced person has a characteristic that he knows how much freedom he wants and takes responsibility for it. It cannot happen that you claim your freedom and make someone else responsible for your decisions. If your achievements are your own then you need to struggle for them. Sometimes your struggle has no real benefit for you, but is useful for others of the coming generation.]*

## Narrative 2

For V. the BEIEd experience was a life changing one. She comes from an educated family and things were easy for her in her parents' home. After graduating she took up a job in a well-known school in Delhi and met a group of BEIEd students who became her friends for life and shared her trials and tribulations. She took a decision to choose her own marriage partner. She was idealistic and wanted to spend her own money on her wedding and reduce expenses as much as possible. She shares:

*I tried to reduce expenses as much as possible, contributing my bit into my own wedding. I questioned all the rituals also. I did not change my surname. It was an inter-caste marriage. My ideas were not very well accepted by my in-laws. Although my mother-in-law is educated. She has also taught for some years. So somewhere she valued studies. But because she had been a housewife throughout her life, she valued housework more than anything else. So even if nobody really stopped me from working but the expectation to comply with rituals, to comply with how the patriarchal structure is and taking part in household chores remained. The fact that I did not change my surname, remains even to this day a contested issue for my in-laws*

*that comes in the way of accepting me. I also over the time learned that you have to negotiate spaces but you also have to do it within certain realms. If boundaries are too tight, then things start breaking up. So yeah you have to keep negotiating, keep trying and it's a constant struggle.*

V lives in Faridabad and was very disappointed with mainstream schools in that area. She shifted her older child to a progressive school in Noida. She would leave her daughter every day in her parents' home in Patparganj from where the school bus picked her up. In the evening she would travel a long distance to pick up her daughter. When I asked her as to why she did not consider moving closer to the school, she said that such a shift as yet would be difficult to accept for her in-laws.

### *Narrative 3*

D comes from a family with financial constraints. Her father was not working and her mother was a health care worker with a very meagre salary. Her grandmother supported their family in difficult times. D has been teaching tuitions since grade 9. She shared that the BEIEd experiences deepened her sense of self and life and made her gender sensitive. She held a job after the BEIEd where she could implement pedagogic innovations. However, there was pressure to get married and according to her after marriage her life took a downward turn. She was forced to give up her job and started a tuition centre at home to support her family economically. She felt that her family does not quite understand her need to have a professional identity. She shares:

*Now I am like a typical bahu. Itne padhne ke baad life journey krne ki baad bhi kuch change nahi . Change laney ke liye aapke pas support hona important hai. If I bring the change no one would support me -sasural waley bhi nahi ghar wale bhi nahi. Bahut achchi family mein shaadi hui hai (bitterness). Bahut socha tha ki ek kafi achi upbringing krni hai apni daughter ki (6 months old) but shaadi ke bad now I feel ki pata nahin mere haath mai hoga ya nahi hoga. Mein haar gayi. [breaks down and cries]*

*[Now I am like a typical daughter in law. After studying so much, my life still has not changed. For bringing change, there has to be support – I feel neither my in-laws nor my parents understand me. It is a very nice family. I had thought that I will bring up my daughter very well but now I feel I don't know whether I will be able to do anything for her. I feel defeated.]*

I called D after a few days to check if she was well. She told me in a very resolute voice that she was determined to find a way out of the depression that her situation had brought on and prove her professional self to her family.

All the three persons mentioned above came across as gender sensitive and self-reflective during the interview process. N.'s voice was powerful as she narrated her journey through her life choices. She seemed to take up the role of an 'organic intellectual' (Gramsci, in Hoare, Q., & Nowell- Smith, G., 2021)) in her family and community; taking decisions that challenged social inertia, taking responsibility and looking towards nurturing the future generations. V had an idealistic orientation to bringing change in society and her younger self battled regressive social attitudes with a lot of vigour. She holds on both to her ideals and her family, hoping to find a balance in daily life –resisting and expressing compassion in a single stance. Her decision to educate her daughter in a progressive school despite several odds shows her commitment to her educational ideals. D's journey was severely constrained by financial constraint and the patriarchal family set up that she is married into. She finds herself alone with no one to speak with about her professional self and personal sensibilities. In a moment of deep suffering and agonising over her failure towards her idealised self, one could hear the shatter and pain of not finding the social space that could nurture her higher possibilities. She nevertheless remains resolute and decides to not give up. She seems to resonate with the voice Gramsci (in Hoare, Q., & Nowell- Smith, G., 2021) expresses, "Fatalism is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active when in a weak position" (p. 337). Her moment of fatalism is momentous and her recovered resoluteness even more moving. All three voices brought in the possibility of political action in the personal-social sphere. According to Gramsci (in Hoare, Q., & Nowell- Smith, G., 2021) "critical understanding of self takes place...through a struggle of political hegemonies and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper, in order to arrive at the working out at the higher level of one's own conception of reality (p. 333). Political change requires a coming together of the realm of the theory and the realm of the practical. It is the development of such politico-practical sphere that gives rise to critical self-consciousness that holds the promise of change within itself (Gramsci, in Hoare, Q., & Nowell- Smith, G., 2021).

## Conclusion

The explorations in this project point to the need to foreground the personal curriculum of students and through its testing in the field of life, politics and ethics arrive at a deeper understanding of one's location in the world. The narratives of the participants point out that self-reflexivity makes for a keener understanding of the possibilities of one's life, the capacity to make a choice and also take responsibility for it. The lives of the participants were often touched by critical transformative change through deep engagement with lived realities through self-development workshops and the course on human relations and communication. This appears to have helped them to reclaim a sense of personhood in very difficult and humiliating contexts and the agency to negotiate for the freedom for self-expression and self-determination. Where outer change seemed difficult, they sometimes initiated dialogue with the self and tried to sustain a positive view of the world. By their own account, the development of critical self-consciousness sometimes made their lives difficult but worth living.



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