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# **BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF USING DIALOGUE-BASED PEDAGOGY**

For The Gender Education Of Pre-Service Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

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### The Problem

Gender-just classrooms are imperative to realising a gender-just society. Patriarchal gender norms are often reproduced and perpetuated in schools through biased curriculum, gendered textbooks, hidden curriculum and even gendered views of those who educate. The key to a gender equitable classroom is a gender conscious teacher. To begin our engagement on the subject, we analysed the gender component in the curriculum of the elementary teacher education programme offered at District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) under the Kerala State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT). The curriculum was found to offer very limited engagement with just one chapter on gender under the topic of inclusive education in the third semester of the programme. This was in contrast to the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 guidelines which requires at least one full paper on gender in a teacher education programme.

The analysis also revealed that the existing chapter on gender with highly didactic and contextually alien content was not sufficient to help pre-service teachers to reflect on and understand the gender norms that they experience and even perform or perpetuate in their day-to-day lives. The chapter also did not offer any description of various theoretical perspectives on gender. To address these limitations, we developed a dialogue-based pedagogy that could critically engage pre-service teachers with issues and concerns of gender to cultivate gender consciousness among them. This was then used to work with students of Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed) at a DIET in Kerala. The approach was to use dialogic teaching methods to develop a safe space in the classroom for collectively negotiating gender. The learning outcomes included development of critical understanding on the topic of gender and the development of dialogic dispositions such as perspective-taking skills, collective reflection skills, neutral talking, articulation skills and so on. The engagement took place over two semesters. We collected data to understand the benefits and challenges of using dialogic pedagogy as an intervention to engage student-teachers critically with issues of gender and facilitate the development of a gender consciousness.

The sample of the study was the entire class strength of 38 students in the age group of 19–35. Baseline, midline, and endline data were collected to assess the impact of the intervention. For the baseline and midline, the sample size remained the same. For the endline, a stratified sampling technique was used to probe deeper into the perspectives of students to understand the depth of impact. The nature of the data collected is mainly qualitative.

### Findings

- Analysis of the initial beliefs of students showed the existence of benevolent sexism.
- Almost all participants reported a change in the way they perceived gender and related issues. However, the nature of change in gender perception varied according to the participants' gender, age and earlier exposure to the subject.
- Men in the group reported a change in the way they perceive their women peers and the relationship they share with them.
- Women in the group who had had earlier exposure to the subject were seen to be developing a critical lens to see gender bias within and around them.

- Women, both young and old, who had a somewhat late exposure to the topic of gender, started identifying gender discrimination around them but did not seem to have developed enough insight to perceive and conceptualise larger patterns of how patriarchy operates in everyday life.
- Students reported development of listening and perspective-taking skills. The study saw a significant change in the classroom environment. Students, both men and women, started talking openly and more confidently about matters like menstruation that were earlier either not spoken of or spoken about in a hushed manner.
- Many men who had been averse to the idea of engaging with women started to open up and develop friendships with them.
- A culture of dialogue evolved in the classroom, and students talked about shared problems and engaged collectively to seek solutions or reach a consensus on several conflicting issues. Students reported the development of a virtual peer support system where they share each other's experiences and support each other in addressing them.
- The study uncovered evidence that dialogue can be a very efficient and beneficial approach to gender consciousness and mindfulness as it prompts students to negotiate gender from the locations they are in instead of forcing counter viewpoints on them. With this approach, students felt ownership of new understandings that were developed through the engagement. Being a collective process, dialogue helped create a supportive environment for participants to challenge gender bias that exists within and outside them.

## Challenges

- It was not easy to develop space for dialogue in a social context that is highly conservative and hierarchical. Students feared the repercussions of opening up about the gender discrimination they face within the institution. This was also a frustrating experience as they began to see gender discrimination but were unable to do anything about it.
- As students were not used to and open to dialogic teaching approaches, it made it difficult to ensure their mindful engagement with processes.
- Strict age-based hierarchy in the class was another hurdle in developing a safe space for dialogue on gender.
- One important limitation of the current framework was a lack of deep engagement with critical theories on gender. Even though attempts were made to engage students with theories, they did not respond well. This can be because students do not have any prior experience of critically engaging with academic theories since the general education culture at DIET is to memorise textbook content and reproduce it for examinations. This aspect will be given additional attention in the next iteration.

## Recommendations

Recommendations cover two broad areas: programme logistics and programme curriculum and pedagogy.

### *Programme logistics*

- Rather than approaching DIET directly, it would be better to approach the institute through an authority it is accountable to such as the SCERT.
- A more involved participation of the DIET faculty must be ensured in any such intervention.
- Approximate hours of engagement during the intervention must be planned and fixed with the consent of the institute authorities.

*Programme curriculum and pedagogy*

- School classroom perspectives need to be included in the content of the planned intervention.
- Dialogue sessions would be better planned and executed with guided rather than unguided enquiry.
- The content of the intervention should be appropriate for different groups of participants according to gender, age and social background.
- Activities that can empower students from reserved categories should be included in the content.
- A better engagement with theoretical perspectives could be ensured through simplified learning materials for the students and improving the general education culture in the DIET.



## INTRODUCTION

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Our mainstream education system has the reputation of being monotonous with its textbook-centric, exam-driven, skill development centred model of learning. A legacy of the colonial era, our education system is more responsive towards the needs of the labour market than towards equipping students to address personal and societal challenges of the time. This concern arose again when the Kerala government proposed the use of schools as a space to transform gender perceptions and cultivate gender equality in society. This call was made by the state's chief minister shortly after witnessing a shocking surge in the incidence of violence committed against women following the COVID-19 lockdown. According to the statistics provided by the Kerala State Police, crimes against women stood at 16,199 in 2021, the highest compared to previous years (Crime Statistics - Crime Against Women, n.d.). Violence against transgender individuals was also high even though it was barely reported by mainstream media. These events prompted a review of the state's performance in terms of gender equality. It is interesting to note that even with a 95.2 per cent literacy rate for women against men at 97.4 per cent, the labour force participation of women in Kerala is just 28.3 per cent compared to 69.8 per cent for men (NSO, 2019). The representation of women in positions of power also remains low. The state has never seen the percentage of women members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) in the state assembly crossing over 10 per cent of the total (Surya, 2021). These facts bring forth contradictory experiences in Kerala with gender parity in human development indexes such as literacy rate, life expectancy, sex ratio and so on not translating into a real state of equality.

To address these issues through education, we need to look carefully at the multiple factors that come into play, one of which is teachers who are equipped to carry out this mission. To bring gender consciousness into the classroom, we need to ensure that teachers themselves do not carry gender prejudice. Teachers also need to be equipped with gender conscious education materials and teaching-learning practices. To understand how the current approach in teacher professional development caters to these requirements, we analysed the curriculum of D.El.Ed offered by the DIETs under the state SCERT. The analysis followed guidelines on gender education for teachers provided by the NCFTE. According to NCFTE guidelines, a pre-service teacher education course is required to have a minimum of "a single course on gender" that discusses various theories on gender and uses the gender lens to critically look at self and society, analyse school curriculum and textbooks, and examine school cultures (NCFTE, 2009). The analysis found that the existing approach in the D.El.Ed programme falls short on these requirements. The chapter on gender is developed in a didactic manner without providing any space to critically engage with the concept and theories of gender. Examples used to discuss gender inequality and violence are drawn from states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, (mis)leading students to believe that such things do not happen in Kerala. The content of the chapter was also found to imply that the purpose of gender equality is to emancipate women who suffer character distortion from staying at home with no opportunity to go out and develop themselves.

One key requirement here is to understand what kind of pedagogy works to address deep-rooted gender prejudices in an individual. Development of gender consciousness cannot be achieved by simply giving students information about problems of gender. We need a more holistic approach informed by the nature of gender prejudice, its mechanisms of reproduction and sustenance in people's consciousness.

According to Paulo Freire, transformation of oppression happens when individuals conscientise the oppression and take actions to transform it. By conscientisation Freire means critically reflecting on reality and simultaneously objectifying it to act upon it. Freire says that a banking model of education where students are treated as passive receptors of knowledge will end up recreating oppression in the classroom. He says that for education to be truly transformative it needs to take place through a dialogue between teachers and students, where students become co-investigators of the problem posed. Even though this revolutionary idea has been in existence for a long time, empirical evidence on the practicality of using it in the classroom is still very limited. This study aims at using a dialogue-based pedagogy for the gender education of pre-service teachers while understanding the benefits, challenges and possibilities of incorporating this in a conventional educational set-up like DIET.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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To address gender prejudice in an individual, we need to understand the historical context from which these prejudices emerge, socio-cultural mechanisms of its reproduction and the psychological mechanisms of its sustenance in an individual's consciousness. The adaptation of dialogue as a mechanism to facilitate the development of gender consciousness in pre-service teachers considers the historical, sociological and psychological aspects of gender.

### Understanding the Psychology of Gender Prejudice

Gender being one of the earliest learnt identities for an individual (Halim & Ruble, 2010 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019), it becomes a crucial aspect with which individuals look at and experience the world. Studies have found that in heteronormative patriarchal societies, children acquire "gender related knowledge" even before they enter pre-school (Martinez et al., 2019). By ninth months old, children become capable of identifying men and women (from photos) based on their hair and dressing (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993; Martin & Ruble, 2004 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019). By the age of two, they easily classify men and women seen in their everyday lives (Powlishta et al., 1994; Zosuls et al., 2009 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019). Around 28–30 months of age, children start labelling themselves and others based on gender (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019). At 18–24 months, children start to identify objects in relation to gender such as certain accessories for girls and others for boys (Eichstedt et al., 2002 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019). By the time of pre-school, children start to actively engage in gender conforming behaviours. They also display "negative evaluation" towards violation of gender norms such as cross dressing (Ruble et al., 2007 as cited in Martinez et al., 2019).

As the contexts for these studies are mostly developed countries and are done in a binary framework, there are limitations adapting it into the Indian context and understanding aspects of intersectionality of identities and experiences of gender non-confirming individuals. However, these studies show how early children begin to internalise a gendered worldview. Martinez et al (2019) also points out that this gender conditioning happens not through explicit teaching of gender values to children, but through observing day-to-day interactions around them. These gender beliefs are so deep rooted that the holders of these beliefs perceive it as a part of the natural order of the world, making them difficult to challenge.



Studies from social psychology have shown that addressing gender stereotypes would require a more systematic approach than simply providing counter evidence to gendered beliefs. This is because when the holder of stereotypical gender beliefs sees a person who does not fit into this perception, they compartmentalise the counter evidence from their gender belief by seeing the person either as deviant from the “typical man woman” image or as an exceptional case which can be given the benefit of rarity (Rudman & Laurie, 2005).

Engaging learners with various theoretical perspectives on gender is one commonly-used approach in gender education programmes. While this is important to help students understand the larger social structure that informs their lived experiences, that alone is not sufficient to address their gender biases. The explanation for this lies in the nature of bias and how it manifests in the actions of an individual. Biases and prejudices can be explicit and implicit in nature (Brownstein, 2019). Explicit biases are “outright prejudices” that individuals uphold consciously, and which studies have identified as a major reason for the gender and race-based discrimination in many places (Singal, 2017 as cited in Brownstein, 2019). Implicit bias, according to the original definition provided by Greenwald and Banaji is “introspectively unidentified (or inaccurately identified) traces of past experience that mediate favourable or unfavourable feeling, thought, or action toward social objects” (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995 as cited in Brownstein, 2019).

This means gender bias does not always happen out of the conscious choice of people. This can happen even to a person who is well aware of the problems of gender stereotypes and consciously rejects it. But without being able to identify this pattern in their habits, behaviours and actions, they end up perpetuating it (Madsen et al., 2018). That is why it becomes crucial for gender education programmes to choose a pedagogical approach that can facilitate the identification and reflection on implicit biases that manifest subtly through an individual’s thoughts and actions.

Another key nuance to understand is the ambivalent nature of sexism. According to the ambivalent sexism theory developed by Glick and Fiske (1996), hostile sexism is understood as antipathy towards women, where they are viewed as inferior, incompetent or unreliable. On the other hand, benevolent sexism views women stereotypically but with a flattering undertone. Women are looked at as loving, kind, nurturing, and as the ones to be protected, thus justifying the restriction of their social roles and oppressive gender relations (Glick & Fiske, 1996 as cited in Chen et al., 2009). Holders of these contradicting views do so by categorising women into good and bad. Women who challenge traditional gender norms are considered to be deserving hostile treatment while the ones who abide by it are treated with benevolence (Chen et al., 2009 as cited in Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Ambivalent sexism is a key concept in the understanding of gender prejudice seen among Malayalis. It can help to put in perspective the extreme sympathy Malayalis hold for helpless women who are subjected to domestic or sexual violence and mockery towards women who try to be assertive of their rights and protest against their oppression. This ambivalence is not a coincidence. Its occurrence in modern Malayali consciousness has a historical root.

## Understanding Gender Perceptions of Kerala

The historical root of ambivalent sexism in Kerala is explored in depth by the feminist historian J Devika (2010) in her book *Kulasthreeyum Chanda Pennum Undayathengane*. She explains that the 'man-woman' imagination as we see of today amongst Malayalis emerged during the late 19th and 20th century. During this period, Kerala was undergoing a massive transformation with reformations in all walks of society to fight the evil of the caste system. The activities of missionaries who rejected the caste system as going against their religious belief that everyone is equal before the eyes of their god, the interventions made by the English and educated Malayali men, the new middle class that emerged from various communities, including 'lower caste communities' such as Ezhava and Pulaya, and the seizing of job opportunities offered by the emergence of capitalism all became contributing factors. This educated population was also greatly influenced by the values of equality and social justice that were emerging from the Western world (Devika, 2010).

Gender norms for women in those times were more about what is attributed to them based on their caste status. Women from the upper castes were allowed to cover their upper body while women from lower castes were required to keep their torso uncovered (Raj, 2016). Women from the Brahmin community were required to stay 'pure' by observing chastity and stay within the *Illam* (a Namboothiri Brahmin household). They were never allowed to leave the home unaccompanied. Among Nairs, a dominant caste amongst Shudras who followed matriliney, the women were allowed to have multiple partners from castes similar to or above theirs. For women from lower castes, who were slaves to the upper caste, the concept of chastity did not exist. They were required to go out and work in the field alongside men (Devika, 2010). Dalit scholar Rekha Raj cautions us to not mistake this for freedom but rather to see it as part of the norms of the hegemonic caste system which dehumanised the bodies of lower-caste people. For upper caste women, their mobility and sexuality were controlled to preserve caste purity whereas, the norms for women from lower caste were such that their sexuality and labour could be exploited by upper-caste men (Raj, 2016).

Because of this, the body of women, their sexuality, mobility and their role in society became the major site for reformation (Devika, 2010). Various caste communities which were oppressed in the caste hierarchy started seeing the virtue of their women as the determining factor in the status of their community (Devika, 2010). This emancipation through the reimagining of womanhood materialised by adopting values of women's morality from the Victorian system and Brahmanical patriarchy. This reimagining gave birth to the idea of "*kulasthree*"<sup>1</sup>—the virtuous woman, who is chaste and uses her "natural capacity" to love, nurture and endure suffering to manage her husband's home and direct the family to the right path. The image of *kulasthree* stood in opposition to the image of *chanthapenne*<sup>2</sup> —the non-virtuous woman who goes against the system (Devika, 2010).

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note the casteist implications of the terms *kulasthree* and *chanthapenne*. *Kulasthree* indicates a woman who upholds the values for her community. A synonym to this term is *tharavaadu sthree* implying a woman from an upper-caste household. *Tharavaadu*, the household of upper caste people for a long time stood as a space which preserved notions of caste purity. This notion of purity was adapted to define a chaste woman who belongs to a "respectable (upper-caste) family" (Devika, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> In the term *chanthapenne*, *chantha* means market, *penne* means women. The market was a place where people from lower castes used to work and mingle without gender boundaries. The construction of the respectable *kulasthree* ideal happened in opposition to the unrespectable *chanthapenne* who doesn't maintain purity. Caste prejudice is evident from these notions as the one who stays within the *tharavaadu* is seen as the respectable one and the one who goes to market is seen as undeserving of respect (Devika, 2010).

J Devika explains that the implantation of these ideas into modern Malayali consciousness took place through an elaborate cultural project that used novels, dramas, movies and women's magazines. For a long time, the major theme of Malayalam movies was the efforts husbands make to discipline their prideful wives who are not willing to fulfil wifely duties. Movies even showed women being slapped by their husbands as a last resort to showing them the "right path", justifying the violence women face at the hands of their husbands. One example of this is a movie named *Amma- Ammayamma*.<sup>3</sup> In it, there is a scene where a supporting character slaps his wife who is portrayed as one of the villains. The reason she is portrayed as an antagonist is that she refuses to stay at her in-laws', do household chores, and desires a luxurious life. When the mother-in-law character asks, "With what right did you dare to slap her"<sup>4</sup> he replies, "With the right of being her husband". These nuances in Kerala's history call for a contextualised content while developing a gender education programme as otherwise learners will not be able to completely understand the oppressive social norms that they experience on a day-to-day basis.

The moral policing menace in modern day Kerala is a notable consequence of the culture's adoption of Brahmanical patriarchy. There have been numerous reports of men and women being attacked by vigilantes for sitting together on a bench or going together to a beach. They are asked to prove that they are relatives (Mohan, 2022). The larger culture now believes in the strict segregation between men and women in all places unless they are legally married.<sup>5</sup>

Such segregation can be seen in public places in Kerala like schools and religious institutions. By merely sitting together, these individuals are perceived as straying away from the virtuous path that a man and woman must follow. Segregation practices also have other severe consequences. Since men and women do not have a space to openly interact with each other, they grow up with a sense of mystery about each other. The lack of understanding often leads to using stereotypical perceptions to make sense of the other gender (Kumar, 1992). Men also tend to develop a deep fear of interacting with women. They mask this fear by trying to appear aggressive and tough in front of women (Kumar, 1992).

### Choosing the Appropriate Pedagogy

Any intervention in teacher professional development cannot be made without understanding the politico-cultural nature of educational institutions and the role of teachers in those institutions. Educational theorist Michel Apple (1971) through his work *Ideology and Curriculum* has tried to do this in depth. He cautions against looking at education as a neutral enterprise and urges that we look at schools as a political space caught in the nexus of various social institutions that sustains structural inequalities. He says that as schools and curricula are found within the dominant culture that governs the social order, schools become places of reproduction of social norms. This happens through the day-to-day activities in the school, "the formal corpus of knowledge" that is chosen to teach, the process of teaching, and the mechanism of evaluation (Apple, 1971). He says it is not simple to work out of this situation as it cannot be done simply by improving the curricula or bettering teacher education. This is because the existence of this dominant culture is not in the form of an ideology that can be easily questioned but rather in the form of a complex hegemonic social structure that individuals live as meanings, values, practices, expectations and priorities. It lies in the very way individuals comprehend themselves and the world around them (Apple, 1971). To challenge this dominant culture it would need a significant amount of intellectual work on the part of a

<sup>3</sup> Mother-Mother-in-law

<sup>4</sup> Film dialogues are translated from Malayalam.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Mohan, 2022.

committed teacher to analyse where they stand and actively work towards conceptualising and developing a socially, politically and economically equal society.

This perspective holds immense significance in gender education for teachers as the development of a gender conscious space in the classroom is nothing less than a political activity. For this, teachers will be required to be vigilant of the patriarchal social norms that creep into the everyday interactions of the classroom, the institution, as well as those that inform the lives of their students. This will require both capacity and motivation in teachers to reflect on these aspects, objectively understand it in the larger context of patriarchy and take actions to transform the situation. This is what, according to Freire (1968), a dialogic pedagogy can facilitate. Here learners are not just developing the capacity to cognise the reality that surrounds them. As this process happens as a collective inquiry of teacher and students in a space guided by the values of humility, trust in humanity and hope for transformation, Freire envisions that the result of this process will be the emergence of love and empathy for each other which comes from the liberation of the mind from oppressive social values and prejudices. This empathy can be the source of motivation for teachers to continuously work on prejudices that they see within and without them.

### Significance of the Study

The Khadar Committee report (2019) for school education repeatedly emphasises the need for process-oriented teaching (dialogue is known to go deeper than process-oriented learning as it seeks to incorporate awareness of the hegemonic social structure within which our social institutions stands (Apple, 1971)) where learning happens in a democratic manner which can provide students tools to cultivate values of equality and justice. However, empirical evidence is very scarce on the practicality of using this kind of a pedagogic approach in the classroom. There are studies published by organisations like Jan Sanskriti (2015) who found success in using dialogic teaching tools like Theatre of the Oppressed to empower villagers in West Bengal build awareness about and take collective action against the oppression they were facing. There is also some evidence coming in from a few educational institutions on using dialogic pedagogy to teach B.Ed. students, doctors and nurses.<sup>6</sup>

So far, no such evidence has been found coming from Kerala especially from DIETs. It is very important to introduce innovative interventions and studies in DIETs as governments rarely pay attention to reforming these institutions. These institutions stand as an unfortunate legacy of the colonial era with teachers being seen as mere deliverers of prescribed education models (Batra, 2005). Poonam Batra, a prominent elementary education and teacher education academic, in her article "Voice and Agency of Teachers: Missing Link in National Curriculum Framework 2005" explains the process of teacher training as follows.

*Conventional teacher education programmes train teachers to adjust to the needs of the existing system through the mechanical planning of lessons in standardised formats (reminiscent of the early Taylorist period of the industrial revolution), rituals of fulfilling the required number of lessons delivered and supervised, organising school assemblies and other routine activities.*

She says that even when subjects of inclusion, marginalisation and gender parity are taught in these institutions, it is done so as not to disturb the status quo of the system (Batra, 2005). This furthers the need for systematic development of teacher education programmes with evidence informed interventions.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to these articles- '<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/225448>' & '<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/384719>'

## AIMS OF THE PROJECT

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The aims of the study include the following:

- Working with future teachers to create gender conscious classrooms guided by a culture of collaboration and dialogue.
- Contributing to the efforts that aim at templatising a model of dialogic pedagogy to cultivate gender consciousness among pre-service teachers which can be recommended for inclusion in the teacher education curriculum across the state of Kerala.
- Helping teachers to become co-creators of new knowledge and practices.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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- **RQ1:** What are the benefits and limitations of using a dialogic pedagogy in facilitating gender consciousness among pre-service teachers?
- **RQ2:** What are the possibilities and challenges in introducing and developing a dialogic pedagogy with pre-service students of a DIET in Kerala?

## METHODOLOGY

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The study is an action research project where an intervention on gender education of pre-service teachers through a dialogue-based pedagogy was designed and implemented. Its benefits have been studied mainly through a qualitative approach where the primary focus has been on capturing individual stories of transformation.

The study was conducted at DIET, Kottayam. The participants were 38 students—29 women and 9 men. Baseline data, midline data and endline data were collected during the intervention to record the changes and transformations that the participants went through during the intervention. For baseline data, all 38 participants were included. The data was collected primarily through focus group discussions. The observations from the initial classroom engagement were also included in the baseline data. Midway through the intervention, midline data was collected. All participants were included. The data was collected through focus group discussions and classroom observations on how the students responded to the dialogue-based approach on gender education. They were also asked for feedback on the transformations they underwent and any changes that they would require in the approach. When the intervention was done, endline data was collected from the participants.

For the endline data, the primary focus was to go deeper and capture individual stories of transformation. There was not enough time to record each participant's stories due to certain institutional difficulties

in DIET that required us to wind up the intervention. Therefore, it was decided to not include the whole population in the data. The participant sample was selected by coupling random sampling and stratified sampling techniques. This is because during the intervention we identified three groups (strata) with similar characteristics in the population—15 women who were already exposed to the subject, 13 women who had no prior exposure to the subject, and 9 men. To get an accurate representation, samples were collected from these groups (Cohen et al., 2005, p. 101). There were a total of 18 participants – seven women with earlier exposure, six women with no prior exposure, and five men. The data was collected through focus group discussions, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews. Collected data was analysed using the technique of content and discourse analysis.

### Details of the Intervention

The focus of the intervention was the use of dialogic teaching tools to develop a safe space in the classroom to facilitate the development of dialogic and critical thinking capacities along with understanding on gender. The expectation was that students would use these capacities to create a safe space among themselves for an ongoing collective negotiation of various social problems including gender. One key aspect of developing dialogic capacity in students was to also develop the capacity to regulate their emotions so that they can engage constructively on conflicting matters. A lot of time during the intervention was devoted to letting students mingle with each other, perceive each other's experiences, and collectively reflect on the various perspectives of students by posing questions which can help students to think on the matter from different viewpoints. The expected learning outcomes of the intervention are the following.

Towards the end of the engagement participants are expected to have developed the following.

- **Dispositions for dialogue**
  - **Emotion regulation:** The capacity to identify and regulate emotions.
  - **Neutral talking:** Sharing one's perspective as an opinion rather than as a fact or a statement. This can help the other party feel more open to the idea and not like someone else's opinion is being imposed on them.



Figure 1: A moment from the dialogue forum conducted to talk about the problem of moral policing students face at the DIET. Source: The author



- **Active listening:** This is to ensure that learners listen until the speaker has finished and understand them instead of trying to respond instantly or making interjections. This can help make the speaker feel that they are being heard.
- **Paraphrasing:** Seeking clarity by having listeners paraphrase what they understood of the speaker's articulation to avoid miscommunication.
- **Constructive criticism and respectful disagreement:** These ensure that when there is a criticism or disagreement, it is communicated constructively so that the other party feels safe accommodating that perspective.
- **Perspective taking:** Respecting and valuing different viewpoints, actively seeking out others' point of view, suspending judgement, cognitively engaging with arguments conflicting with one's own point of view, readiness to accept it if it is found to be true.
- **Commitment to use dialogue**  
Along with capacity for dialogue it is important for students to understand the importance of it and be committed to using it whenever they feel it is possible
  - in negotiating social problems and resolving conflicts.
  - in day-to-day classroom practices.
- **Critical thinking capacity**  
To create critical thinking capacity in organising a dialogic space, participants should first be able to think critically through their beliefs so that they start to see more possibilities without remaining stuck in them. Second, they should also be able to identify what is valid and what is invalid while building their perspectives. Third and most important, students should be able to have the critical lens to see the unequal power structure within the dialogic space so that those at a disadvantage have more support to feel safe to share their experiences.
  - Discerning fact from falseness
  - Forming judgements based on valid evidence
  - Systems thinking capacity to discern the relationship between structures and individuals
  - Finding the root cause of problems
- **Capacity for self-enquiry**
  - Capacity to observe and locate one's own values, beliefs, attitudes and habits to identify gender biases within—without developing the capacity for self-enquiry, students will only end up problematising the world outside them and not the one within.
- **Capacity to facilitate gender conscious dialogue based pedagogy**
  - Understanding the need for gender conscious dialogue-based pedagogy.
  - Ability to identify, develop, and use gender conscious dialogic teaching methods and classroom practices.

When participants start teaching, they should be able to develop a gender conscious space in the classroom for their students. They should be able to look critically at institutional practices and the content taught so that they can identify and actively work towards eliminating gender biases. This requirement leads to the next learning outcome.

- **Critical gender lens to identify gender biases in everyday practices**
  - Understand various concepts around gender (sex, gender identity, gender expression, equity, equality, gender as a spectrum, intersectionality etc.)
  - Understand various theoretical perspectives on gender
  - Locate gender biases within and around the participants.

### Topics Covered during the Intervention

- Understanding social identities, intersectionality of identities and their impact on our lives.
- What is biological sex? How many biological sexes are there? Are male/female bodies the same?
- Understanding gender as a social construct.
- Deconstructing man-woman imaginations of our society. Where is it coming from?
- Understanding dynamicity of gender roles in different social contexts at different points in time. For example, How do gender roles vary for different social classes or castes? How different were gender roles in the past for Kerala compared to gender roles as we see them now?
- Understanding gender prejudice—catching it in action.
- Understanding how gender prejudice is perpetuated, critically analysing media.
- Understanding the role of teachers in perpetuating gender prejudice.
- Looking at gender as a spectrum.
- More conversations on intersectionality.
- Moral policing in educational institutions.
- Who decides appropriate clothing for female teachers?
- Shifting the focus to I. How can we ensure that we are not perpetuating gender prejudices?

The engagement happened over two semesters taking up to 55 hours of formal engagement. The first semester was dedicated to developing critical understanding of gender and dialoguing abilities in students using dialogic learning methods. The second was used for conducting dialogue forums and developing learning materials. The lesson plan for each engagement was designed in a way that was responsive to the emerging learning needs of the students. These needs were identified through feedback from students and reflections made by the facilitators on what they observed in the class. Following are a few major teaching tools that were used:

### Theatre of the Oppressed

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is an interactive form of theatre developed by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. Drawing inspiration from the concept of critical pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire, he created Theatre of the Oppressed as a means to facilitate critical observation and reflection of reality and to encourage to “act” on situations than to just “think about it” (The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2019). One important concept in TO is spect-actor where audiences are not mere spectators. They are invited to explore innovative ideas to transform the oppressive situation and try it out in the safe space offered by TO (Theatre of the Oppressed n.d.).

TO was one major component of the intervention. During the initial phase, since the D.El.Ed course had just begun, it was necessary to find activities that would break the ice, encourage participants to get to know each other, and develop a sense of community among participants. Games and activities from TO were helpful here.

- **Musical chairs:** Participants have to run around chairs while music is being played and sit in a chair when it goes off.
- **Sword game:** Participants face each other with one hand out in front with a pointed forefinger (the sword), and one open hand behind their back, palm outwards (the target). Each tries to score points by touching their sword onto the other’s target. The first to touch the target wins.



Figure 2: Students during columbian hypnosis game from Theatre of the Oppressed. Source: The author

- **Bird, nest, storm:** This is a formation game. Students are divided into groups of four. They then need to get into the formation of two birds sitting inside a bird nest. Two people form themselves into a nest and two people will sit inside the nest like birds. One person will be left without joining any groups. Then the mediator will give commands of "bird, nest and storm". For the command "bird", all the people who are playing a bird will need to leave a nest and find a new home while the person who was left behind earlier will try to replace a bird. After all nests get filled, the one who is left behind then will then wait for their chance to replace someone once the mediator gives the next command. For the command "nest" all the people playing nest will have to move from their position and find out some other two birds to make a nest around while the person left behind is trying to take their position. For the command "storm" all formations will dissolve and they have to find a new group to make the formation.

TO games were also used to facilitate mindfulness among participants and inviting their attention to the classroom space, their body and emotions. This is important because dialogue happens in the space co-created by the teacher and students. Once students lose the attention, the dialogic space ceases to exist. Listed below are a few of the games that were used.

- **Colombian hypnosis:** At least two and at most three people are needed for this activity. One player is the leader and the other the follower. The leader has to place the palm of their hand/hands in front of the face of the follower/followers without touching the face. The leader can then move their hands in whatever direction they want, and the followers must follow it. The followers must ensure that the distance between the leader's hands and the follower's face remains constant. Each person gets a chance to be the leader and each round goes on for 5 minutes.  
Apart from helping develop focus and attention of the participants, this activity is also useful for the participants to reflect on and understand their relationship to power; whether they are more submissive to authority or whether they are more resistant to it.
- **Walk, stop, share:** All the participants walk slowly around the room. When the facilitator says "stop",

they have to stop where they are and share what they are feeling. This activity is 20 minutes long.

This activity is aimed at developing the participant's awareness of surroundings and emotional awareness. Slow moving helps the participants to pay attention to the things around them and their body. This, along with reflection on their feelings when they stop walking, helps them become more emotionally aware.

- **Muscle memory exercise:** This exercise requires the participants to imagine an object in front of them or anywhere in the room. They have to pick up this object with the same effort it would take them to pick it up if it were real. For example, if a participant imagines a chair in front of him, he has to pick up that imaginary chair but with the same effort as if it were real.

This body awareness activity is aimed at helping participants remember and sense their muscle movements.

- **Sculpting:** In this activity, participants are divided into groups of two. All groups are given a word which has a larger cultural context. They have to make use of their bodies to make an image representing that word. For instance, during the course, the words "thief", "farmer" and "labourer" were given to the groups and they had to represent these as images.

This activity is useful to show the different ways people think about these cultural concepts.

The most important use of TO was for the development of a space to showcase varied perspectives and collectively reflect on them seeking mechanisms to transform the oppressions we face.

- **Image theatre:** Participants are divided into groups. Each group chooses a social issue. They have to create an image representing that social situation. All of them pool in their ideas, discuss them with each other, and come to a consensus on a common idea regarding the subject. Then they have to use their bodies to represent it as an image. They have to stay frozen in this image. When the facilitator claps, each of them has to say what their thoughts are as the character that they play in that image. Apart from the benefit of representing a social situation with an image, this activity also helps participants become aware of their character and their relationship to that character.

- **Forum theatre:** Participants are divided into groups. Each group chooses a social issue and enacts a play they create about it. The play must describe social injustice or conflict in the situation but must not provide solutions. When they enact the play before an audience, the facilitator gives anyone in the audience freedom to come forward and take the role of a character in the play and find a way to solve that issue. To come forward at any point in the play, the person just needs to say "stop" and tap on the character he wants to play.

This activity can be very powerful in helping the participants understand the lived reality of individuals suffering social oppression. It can also be empowering for people in that situation to come forward and provide a solution.

### Mindfulness Exercises

- **Journaling:** Participants were asked to journal their feedback on the sessions. They were asked to journal their reflections on how they felt, their new learnings and insights, and any perspective shifts. The activity was aimed at helping the participants solidify their learnings through reflection and writing.
- **Memory emotion exercise:** Participants were asked to think of something in their past that made them happy or sad. Then they were asked to note how that memory made them feel to help them become more aware of their feelings and the sensations it caused in the body.

- **Bringing attention to the body:** The participants were prescribed different exercises to bring attention to their body. The body scan is an exercise where they try to become aware of each part of their body and see if they carry any tension. Breathwork is another that brings attention to the relation between the breath and the body. Slow walking helps bring attention to the surroundings along with the body.

### **Setting Principles for Dialogue**

This activity was used to come to a common understanding about the need for a safe space for dialogue and collectively decide on the principles that can be used to organise the dialogic space.

### **Identity Mapping**

This helps students understand the concept of social identity. A technique from psychology of identity formation was used to map the social identities that we live with, which was then used to understand the implications of social identity in our lives.

### **Privilege Walk**

This is also a TO activity. Participants were asked to stand in a line. The facilitator then would call out privileges such as “I have my own vehicle” or “I can travel outside at night”. This is to bring into consciousness how much privilege or discrimination participants themselves and people around them might experience.

### **Catching Prejudice in Action**

This activity was used to help students to observe their own prejudices and biases while in action. Students were asked to look at a list of professions put up on the board and say what gender came to mind when they thought of a person engaged in it.

### **Lecture Discussions**

Lecture discussions brought new concepts such as understanding biological sex or understanding LGBTQIA+ identities and looking at gender as a spectrum into the picture.

### **Learning through Stories**

Different stories of gender roles as seen across the world and across time are brought to the classroom for discussion. This helps students understand that gender roles are relative to culture, are not fixed, and change over time.

### **Deconstructing Man Woman Images**

To help realise performativity of gender, we asked men in the class to perform as women and vice versa. After the performance, students of each gender were asked what they thought about how their gender was portrayed and if they felt that this gender image adequately represented who they were.

### **Structured Academic Controversy**

This helped students look at a problem with multiple perspectives. Two groups of students are given a topic. One group has to make points to argue for, and the other, against. Once the group has prepared the points, instead of getting into debate, they are asked to switch roles. This gives students a chance to approach the subject from both sides.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

This tool helps deconstruct messages in popular media to understand how they perpetuate prejudice. Movies, news reports, and advertisements were subjected to critical discourse analysis. In one such activity, students were made to do a comparative analysis of a feminist movie called *The Great Indian Kitchen* and a sexist movie named *Bro Daddy*, both of which are recent Malayalam movies. Students were asked to identify the message communicated by each movie, whose story or perspective the movie was sharing, the importance, screen space and scope for character building given to men and women characters, social values communicated by the movie, emotions it invokes in the viewers, and so on to identify the overt and covert messages the movies send to viewers.

### **Understanding Gender as a Spectrum**

Queer activist Niharika conducted a session on understanding gender as a spectrum. In the session she discussed LGBTQIA+ identities and how teachers can support students who experience gender confusion.

### **Board Game**

We used board games to explain the concept of intersectionality in detail. The board game used was developed for the intervention using real life stories of people from four different social contexts. The people interviewed for this were a woman from an upper-class Christian family, a man from an Other Backward Class Christian family, a Muslim trans man, and a Scheduled Caste (SC) woman from an upper-middle-class family. The purpose was for students to see how intersectionality works and how actions of others affect their lives. This was then used to start an "I" conversation about how participants in their individual agency can be conscious not to propagate caste or gender-based violence or discriminations through their action.

### **Deconstructing Abusive Words**

This activity is a continuation of the attempt to bring the conversation back to 'I'. We listed common abusive words that students use on the board and tried to understand their evolution. Most words were found to be either casteist or misogynist. This helped students see how they unconsciously perpetuated discrimination.

### **Awareness Class on Menstruation**

Based on the suggestion of some women participants, an awareness session on menstruation was conducted for the whole class. Women participants felt the need to develop awareness on menstruation among men. Two women participants volunteered to facilitate the session.

### **Sticky Noting Thoughts and Feelings**

This technique was used to address the conflict between students. All students were asked to write down what they felt on sticky notes without their names. These were displayed on the board for everyone to read. This activity helped in many misunderstandings that were sustaining the conflict. This was followed up with a dialogue forum.

### **Focus Group for Gender Handbook**

As requested by students, a small focus group discussion (FGD) was organised with transgender activist Sheethal Shyam. The FGD was attended by eight selected students who represented the class. They used



the opportunity to ask questions about gender as a spectrum. The students curated these questions from written suggestions their classmates provided.

### **Dialogue Forum**

The students picked the topic of the dialogue based on what they experienced in the institution—moral policing in the institution, understanding morality, and who decides appropriate dressing for teachers.

## KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

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### Observations on the Institutional Culture

As existing literature and secondary data suggested, DIET was found to be a traditional set up following the conventional idea of teacher training which treats teachers as an agency-less channel to deliver content to their students. The capacity for teaching was being treated as a collection of skills that included preparing lesson plans, taking class by summarising content to students, doing maximum work (assignments, seminars, record writing) in the least amount of time, conducting assemblies, and so on. This summarises the majority of ritualised activities students perform at the DIET over the two-year period. Students reported that for exams and assignments, they were not expected to write the answers as they understood them or produce original ideas, but to reproduce either what they were taught or the contents of the source book.<sup>7</sup>

*"It is not that we don't think and create ideas. We do. But teachers here rarely appreciate it. They simply tell us to do as they say. How can we think on our own in such a situation?"*

*"We are given marks only if we reproduce content exactly as given in the sourcebook".*

Students were found to be overburdened with a large number of assignments to complete in a short span of time. One student said, *"I am scared when a new programme is announced here. Even your workshop. We are asked to write a report of everything we do here. We have to maintain a record of everything. We don't get enough time to do all of this"*. The preparation of teachers at the DIET seems to need to fulfil two requirements. First, to prepare them to endure the difficulties of excess workload at schools. Second, to discipline and mould the teachers into the normative idea. About this, one student said, *"This place is like a mini convent. It is neither a college nor a school. When we ask teachers to teach us topics, they say, "You are teacher students. You should be able to learn on your own. But when it comes to other matters, we have no freedom"*.

Another student said, *"We cannot even ask them questions. Students who ask questions are targeted, and their internal marks reduced"*.

The preparation of students, especially of women, also included how they would present and conduct themselves in schools. A faculty member of DIET was asked why female students are required to wear sarees even though there is a government ordinance which says they can wear the uniform of their choice. The faculty replied *"We have no problem if they don't wear sarees, but schools have issues. They complain that our students don't even know how to wear sarees and ask if we did not teach them? That is why we ask them to wear a saree—so that they can get used to it"*.

A year-long observation of experiences of students at the DIET showed that the teacher training process there was killing the enthusiasm and capacity of students to produce ideas of their own. Students join

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<sup>7</sup> Sourcebook is what D.El.Ed students use as their textbook.

the programme with passion and end up exhausted by the end of the first semester. Many students were found to be thinking of dropping out as they felt no value addition from the programme. One student said, *"I joined this course because I really liked teaching children. It was not an accident or anything. Now, I have lost all interest. I just want to finish all of this and go home"*. These observations were cause for concern and had great influence on the intervention. Using a dialogic pedagogy in a context where the institution tries to control the thought process of students was like going against the flow. These observations also indicated that systemic change will be required in DIETs before adapting dialogic pedagogy into the teacher education programme.

### Initial Gender Beliefs Among the Participants

We collected baseline data to understand the initial gender perceptions among participants. However, an in-depth peek into these perceptions only happened during the course of engagement when students opened up. What was evident from the analysis of these initial beliefs was the presence of ambivalent sexism in their belief system. Both men and women held hostile sexism against women who were very active and open about their thoughts in class. At least five of nine men in the class clearly showed hostile sexism for women who were vocal about their opinions. When asked about this they said, *"Girls like Suma [name changed] are of a special [indifferent] character. We don't want to interact with them"*. Women participants who experienced this hostility said, *"We are easily tagged as ahankari [prideful], even when they know nothing about us"*.

*"I don't know why they hold so much anger towards me. I am an active student in the class. I talk a lot. Boys don't like this. There are many other girls like me who are opinionated, and boys call us jada [a person with an attitude]. I don't talk much in class now"*. Another instance of hostile sexism that was observed was when women participants started talking about the mandate that female students wear shawls over informal clothing on campus. They found this difficult, not being used to it. To this, a man of age 26 responded *"First we protested for the right to cover breasts. Now we are protesting to take it off"*. He was referring to the Channar<sup>8</sup> revolt in the 19th century which demanded the right to wear an upper body cloth. During that period, it was a caste privilege to cover the upper body. Women from lower castes were not allowed to cover their torso.

While talking about a young woman vocal about her viewpoints, another woman of age 35 said *"She is of a peculiar character, isn't she? There is some problem with her. The way she talks in the class is not normal"*. This comment was passed in response to the other woman participant talking openly about her body and bodily processes such as menstruation, and criticising gender discriminations that she faces from the institution.

There was also evidence of benevolent sexism in participants' imaginations of men and women. One man in his early twenties put forward very romantically his perception that women are generally better than men in terms of cooking and taking care of others because *"Women have two brains because of which they can multitask. I am not sure where I learnt this, but I think that is true. At home my mother cooks at least three or four curries in a single go. On the other hand, if my father is cooking, the maximum he can*

<sup>8</sup> A sub caste within Ezhava community (Rao, 1987)

*manage is one curry at a time*". Women were also found to hold benevolent sexist perceptions in the way they understood themselves. One woman said that she thinks women are generally better at subjects like language and social science and weak at science and maths. Another woman said, "It is after this session I understood that so much can happen on a bus." This is about a forum theatre that was conducted to discuss the sexual abuse that men and women face on bus. She said "I don't have to worry about any of it because my parents never let me travel alone. I only travel alone to the DIET. They go everywhere else with me". She perceived the control that her parents exert on her mobility as an act of care and protection.

What made it even more complex was the compartmentalisation in their belief system. A 20-year-old man in the group imagined women as emotional, weak, naturally inclined towards care jobs, lacking leadership skills, and so on. He saw women who did not abide these notions as odd deviations from what women "naturally" should be. He tried to justify this by saying "Every bunch of bananas has some rotten ones in it". The woman who believed that women are generally better at subjects like language than maths also admitted that she has many women friends who are good at maths but attributed this inconsistency in her beliefs to the possibility of exceptional cases.

### **Change in Gender Perceptions and Beliefs**

Analysis of the impact of the study found that offering a safe space for men and women to engage with each other meaningfully resulted in a significant shift in the way they imagined gender and gender relations. However, learnings and perception changes varied according to gender, age, and earlier exposure to the subject of the participants. The FGDs showed that students were able to relate discussions on matters like gender roles to experiences in their personal lives. Both men and women reported changes in the way they perceived each other and the development of quality friendships between them. Women were mainly the ones to report changes in self-perception. Participants across all groups reported a positive shift in the way they perceive people of LGBTQIA+ identities.

#### *Shifts in Thinking about Gender as Experienced by Men*

All men (9 out of total 38 participants) reported some sort of attitude shift towards women, including their peers. Two of them, higher secondary graduates aged 18–19, reported that they started perceiving the possibilities of men-women relationships going beyond romance. They said, "Earlier when a boy and girl would sit together in a class, everybody would think that they were a couple. Now such talk has reduced".<sup>9</sup> One participant reported that he witnessed a significant shift in the way two of his male classmates viewed women in the class. "There has been a lot of change. After the session Ramya [name changed] and Divya [Name changed] conducted on menstruation, I heard Rohit [name changed] and Mahesh [name changed] talking about how surprised they were to see women talk confidently about periods. They even congratulated Ramya and Divya for being so brave. They are here straight out of school and have only seen women who are very shy. This experience changed this view". Mahesh "used to think that as a man, anything was possible. But now I understand that women can also do anything that they want". This was a significant change for these participants who were initially averse to having women friends and even hesitated to engage with women during group activities. In the beginning, all of the men in the group except three refused to engage with women in the class and stuck together even while participating in classroom activities.

<sup>9</sup> All the responses from the participants of the study given in this report are translated from Malayalam to English.

Another participant, a higher secondary graduate aged 18, said he was rethinking gender roles in the family. *"I started thinking about my mom's experience...I have started to wash plates unlike before"*. He also reports how he has started to notice gender stereotypes in movies as well. Prior to our engagement he used to believe that men and women are naturally designed for the gender roles they are given by society. He also said that now he is able to see women's perspectives.

This shift was a result of dialogic pedagogy offering a constructive space for participants to interact with each other and perceive each other's experiences. This might have helped them see their peers in a new light challenging earlier beliefs. There were also sessions where collective reflections were held on various individuals. As an example, let us examine the case of the man who experienced a shift in the way he understood gender roles. We conducted a class activity to look into Kerala's history to see if gender roles were always the same in small groups. There was a reflection session at the end of this activity to understand how students felt. One student shared the belief that women are better at house chores. An excerpt of the session can be helpful to understand how a collective reflection helped to work through this prejudice.

Participant 1(P1): *Don't you think that whatever we say there are things at which men are better and those that women are?*

Facilitator(F): *Why do you think so?*

P1: *"I have heard that women have two brains because of which they can multitask. I am not sure where I learnt this, but I think that is true. My mother cooks at least three to four curries in a single go. On the other hand, if my father is cooking, the most he can manage is one curry at a time"*.

Participant 2: *"But what about men who cook? There are fathers who take care of their children by themselves"*.

P1: *"That is true. But they cannot be as good as women"*.

Participant 3(P3): *"I don't agree with that. Women become good at it only because they do it more. When a man starts doing it every day, he will get faster"*.

F: *"Have you tried to verify what you have heard about the brain? Can you try to find out where you heard this from?"*

A discussion on the concept of brain plasticity followed, and later, another session to review the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* to understand the problems with gender roles. We also held a session to discuss different social roles seen in various communities, especially non-patriarchal, around the world.

A key observation from the data collected which needs special attention is something which, on initial analysis, appeared to be a relapse to previous beliefs. During the baseline study we found that, except for one, all the men in the group believed that gender equality meant trying to make men and women alike and hence actively rejected the concept.

By the time of midline data collection, all students agreed that gender equality was necessary for every human being to have a fulfilling life irrespective of their gender. Participants said *"Everyone needs gender equality. People should be able to do whatever they want without society's impositions. Feminism needs to be renamed humanism"*. Another participant said *"We need to teach everyone this, including our teachers [DIET faculty]. They create unnecessary problems when they see men and women interact freely"*. However, towards the endline, at least four men reiterated the earlier belief that gender equality could only be limited as men and women cannot be the same. The reason for this could have been confusion caused by the lack of clarity about the term. These men were using the terms gender equality and gender neutrality interchangeably. While they accepted the need for equity and also saw the problem with gender norms, their concern was *"How can men and women be the same? That is impossible"*. One reason for this could be confusion caused by the state government's push to make educational spaces gender neutral. Many people mistook this for an attempt to invisibilise or nullify gender inviting outrage from conservative groups (Singh, 2022). Even during conversations in class, students were found to be using the terms gender equality and gender neutrality interchangeably. Although steps were taken to clarify the meaning of both these terms, some students found it difficult to understand them. Another plausible reason was that, even though the intervention led them to challenge many conventional gender norms, they still held on to certain heteronormative gender norms. Even when they claimed to be accepting of people from LGBTQIA+ communities, they could still have been seeing men and women as normative genders. This can be linked to one observation made by the feminist historian J Devika (2010) in her book *"Kula Sthreeyum Chandapennum Undayadengane"*<sup>10</sup>. She says that Kerala's society, even while claiming to be pro gender equality, refuse to touch the concept of gender and still see man and woman as a natural category. Even as the idea of what women can be and what men can be is refashioned with time based on incoming socio-cultural shifts, the normative category of man and woman stays (Devika, 2010). Something similar could have been happening within the study as well.

#### *Changes experienced by women*

With dialogic pedagogy providing the opportunity to look at their lived reality critically, it was found that women participants were beginning to look at their everyday lives through a gender lens. However, the women's (29) response to the class varied based on their age and early exposure to the subject of gender.

#### *Women with earlier exposure to the topic of gender*

In the case of women who had earlier exposure to the topic (around 13 of the 29 women), both younger and older, they were found to be developing a critical gender lens during the engagement. They also expressed strong opinions and were assertive about their rights as women. These participants reported a shift in the way they perceived and conducted themselves. Here are a few things they said.

*"Earlier while doing some things, I used to think I am a woman. Whenever I ran late, I would think, I am a woman, I have to go back early. Now this is changing. My thinking has become more independent"*. Another participant responded to this saying *"Isn't that exactly the point? We should be able to do things without having to think I am a woman, I cannot do this, or I am not allowed to do this"*. Participants also reported feeling more confident sitting with their legs up in public or sitting alongside men on the bus. They said that they would never have done so earlier worrying about what people would think about it.

<sup>10</sup> "How virtuous and non-virtuous women originated (in Kerala Society)"



Participants were also found to have developed a critical gender lens. Participants said that they are able to see patriarchy around them.

*"Patriarchy is everywhere".*

*"I can now see how women are becoming small. How we are not given space".*

One participant said that she was now able to observe gender bias in classroom interactions and conversations. She spoke of an incident where one of her classmates was complaining about his sister not wearing a shawl to college. He said that college authorities had complained to their parents about this. When she heard this, the participant told her classmate that it was up to his sister to decide if she wanted to wear a shawl and not for anyone else to decide.

Another participant problematised the term "women empowerment" saying that the term implies women need to be empowered signifying that they are some sort of lesser beings. Participants also said that they had a better understanding of different concepts within the subject of gender. One participant made a critical observation about the need for gender equality during her internship. In the school that she went to she saw two male teacher interns being given additional marks for staying late and working in the school. But the woman intern who was unable to stay late was given a lower mark even though she did all other work very well. The participant observed that this was an instance of "patriarchal privilege". She said that a case like this needed equity. Authorities must understand that the woman intern is doing the best she can despite the limitations faced as a woman, and she should be appreciated for this. In the matter of attitude towards LGBTQIA+ people, two women participants said that they themselves corrected the way they use pronouns while writing or talking. Instead of using he/she, they used 'they' to talk about people in general. Also, instead of saying "boys" or "girls", they use the gender-neutral term "children".

#### *Older women participants who did not have earlier exposure to the topic*

Older women participants without an earlier engagement with issues of gender (4 out of 15 participants) reported being able to connect the discussions to their lived experiences. Participants said that they were able to connect it to the experiences of married friends: *"Men don't have to do housework, only women do it"*, and to the experiences of their mothers: *"Even when my mother is sick, she never gets to rest"*. One participant said that she thought that that was how things would always be for women, but was now able to see the possibility for change. It is possible that since these students were engaging with the subject of gender for the first time, the discussion helped them question many things that were earlier normalised. As these norms get deconstructed, participants can see the possibility of changing them. These students expressed happiness for the way men in the class and their attitude towards women had changed. *"Lot of things have changed. Boys now openly talk to girls and share their lives with us. The other day Ahmed [name changed] told me about the difficulties he was facing at home since his parents expected him to be the provider. He already does part time jobs. This is also gender, right? He is unable to study because of this"*. This, they said, never used to happen earlier. Seeing this shift in their peers might also be one reason for the emergence of the hope for change among participants.

*Younger women participants who didn't have earlier exposure to the topic*

Younger participants (higher secondary graduates) who didn't have earlier exposure to the topic of gender (around 11 in total) said that they had started observing gender based differential treatments around them. Participants talked about discrimination they face at home such as not being allowed to travel alone, continuously being called to be checked up on while travelling alone, their brothers not being made to do household chores, them not being allowed to stay out late while their brothers had no such limitations and so on.

On gender equality, three participants in the group said that men needed to start valuing and respecting the opinions of women. They said, *"Men have always assumed that they have been given authority over women. That has to change"*.

*"If women have to go somewhere now, the husband has to give permission 'you can go here', 'you can't go here'. That has to change"*.

*"Men have to understand that women also have their own opinions. When children grow up, we should tell the boys that girls also have opinions. We should make them aware of women's freedom and rights"*.

One interesting thing we noticed was that, while both younger and older women participants who had late exposure to the subject showed that they had developed the capacity to identify to see gender-based discrimination, it was mostly explicit discriminations that they could identify. Some students were also found to perceive the restrictions imposed by family as a protection mechanism. One student stated, *"At home only I do house chores and not my brother, but I have not seen any patriarchy at home"*. It seems that she sees patriarchy as just violent oppressions. During the midline data collection, the same participant said that *"After the theatre activity that you did to understand sexual abuse women face while travelling, I was really scared. I never thought that all these things could happen. But I don't have to worry because my parents don't let me travel alone. They go everywhere with me. I travel only short distances alone"*. This attitude seems to be in line with what studies have found about women unconsciously complying to benevolent sexism as they find it supportive rather than restrictive (Radke et al., 2018). Benevolent sexism, as defined by ambivalent sexism theory, is a form of sexist apathy towards women but with a positive overtone (Glick & Fiske, 1996). It views women as stereotypically weak and needing protection. With its romantic outlook, women perceive this protection as a form of care and thereby accept the restriction imposed (Glick & Fiske, 1996 as cited in Yi, 2015). Psychological studies have found that benevolent sexism affects the way women perceive themselves, causing self-doubt and making them feel weak and dependent on men (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Rudman & Laurie, 2005).

The participants in this group are mostly from rural backgrounds. But that alone cannot be the reason for this attitude as there were other women students in the class who actively spoke against patriarchal control. Participants who saw patriarchal control in a positive light also reported being from protective families where they were monitored while going out and travelling alone. Even though they could see the discrimination at home, they weren't ready to demand equality or fight for it. Compared to the group who had had earlier exposure to the topic of gender, this group was not vocal about their needs and opinions. They also complied with many patriarchal gender norms as seen in the case of the student who believed

travel restrictions imposed by her parents were for her own good. It also seems that even when these participants identify gender discrimination, they use mechanisms like jokes to lighten the confrontation instead of actively confronting it. This could be from an unconscious or conscious fear of going against social norms or disturbing the social order. One participant said that she does talk about gender equality at home but as a joke. She said *"when my brother leaves the table without clearing and washing his plate, I would tell my mom that people like her were the reason there is gender inequality in society. Why can't you make him wash his plates? But not seriously, only as a joke"*. This casual joke could also be seen as a subtle mechanism of resistance. Their unwillingness to actively demand equal treatment could arise from the difficulty of seeing family as a political space where power is in operation, especially if it is a protective and caring one as happens in the case of benevolent sexism.

Another important observation made by participants in the late exposure category was that while talking about gender equality, they kept shifting the focus of the conversation on gender equality from themselves to men. One point that many participants in this group reiterated often was that *"gender equality is not only for women, but also for men"*.

*"It is not about more opportunities for women than men, it is about equal opportunity for everyone"*.

During baseline data collection, these participants had reported that they believed feminism and arguments for gender equality were anti-men and hence don't support it. Looking at this again with the lens of benevolent sexism shows that women who are conditioned by this system might reasonably feel more sympathy towards protector men rather than towards feminist women who call out paternalistic dominance. These observations bring forth the need for interventions to develop gender consciousness and delve more into mechanisms that facilitate the identification and exploration of benevolent sexism. It might be useful to incorporate activities that can help participants reflect on their self-image and push them out of their comfort zones. Activities that can enable them to move around freely, talk loudly, use their strengths, voice their opinions, and explore new possibilities could help students challenge their own self-image.

### **Development of Dispositions for Dialogue**

The major focus of the intervention was facilitating the development of dispositions for dialogue in participants and using dialogue as a mechanism to negotiate gender in classrooms. Participants responded well to the concept of dialogue and reported that through the engagement they developed better listening, perspective taking, and articulation capacities. They reported that they had started valuing the experiences and perspectives of others more, and that they saw value in listening to others.

### *Improvement in listening and perspective taking skills*

Participants across gender said that they had started to listen to others better after the engagement. The intervention also witnessed the emergence of empathy in students, seeing value in diverse perspectives and understanding the importance of giving other's voices space. Younger students were mainly found to have made really good progress through the sessions. Below are a few testimonies from students.

*"I used to love talking. Once I start talking, I don't stop. I was not very keen to listen to others. Now I have started listening more to understand the other side (their point of view in a discussion)".* This was reported by one of the 18-year-old men. A woman participant of the same age group made a similar point. She said that even her friends had started to notice that she was listening more than talking.

*"When you folks first came in, you told us to give everyone the opportunity to talk, that we have to be aware of certain things when we talk, not take away another's chance to speak, or listen to what one has to say, take a break for some time and.... similar points like that were there (made). So, sometimes before I say something, I think about those points"* said another participant.

Another woman participant who is a graduate said that an activity during the sessions where each group was given certain topics and was challenged to think of points both in support of and in opposition to the matter made her understand that there may be no single right view. There could be valid points in the opposing view that another person is sharing.

One of the men who used to have serious conflicts with women peers said that *"Now I tend to listen fully before responding. Even if I don't like the person, I listen to them before pushing away (rejecting) what they are saying"*.

However, there were few students who said that they didn't enjoy the concept of dialogue much. A few participants (two men and one woman) said that dialogue sessions felt like an imposition where they had to suppress their emotions and pretend to be patient. There are two key observations here. First, these students were older ones who had joined the D.El.Ed programme after graduation. It was observed during the engagement that compared to younger students who were enthusiastic and open towards dialogic activities such as Theatre of the Oppressed, older students were either apprehensive or hostile to it. They also kept saying *"We are older now. Our perspectives cannot be changed"*. Second, these students were quite irregular to class. This was a problem since the initiation of the class into dialogue took place through a series of activities developed to facilitate team building, perceiving, and sharing experiences, collectively understanding the need for dialogue, and co-creating principles to organise dialogic space in the class. Missing some of these stages might make it very difficult for students to become part of the dialogic space that has emerged in the class over time.

### *Shift towards more mindful self-expression*

Some participants—both men and women—mostly higher secondary graduates and undergraduates (around 7 of them) reported that they were able to reflect on what they were saying and communicate better. Below are some statements from students.

*"I now try to speak slower. Generally, we try to think about how a sentence should be said, right? I have started to reflect about how that should come out. Before, there used to be no such reflection".*

Another participant said, *"Before, if I talked for 10 minutes, there would be content only for 2 or 3 minutes. For the rest of the time, conversation would be about things surrounding the content. Now when I talk, there is an attempt to bring in more content".*

Participants said that they saw an improvement in the way they formulated answers. One man reported that he has started to reflect on what he speaks—how he could have done it better or differently. He also said that he had also begun to wait and try to understand the situation better before jumping to conclusions. A woman participant said she had *"started to watch how I say things. If someone has wronged me, even if I know they are wrong, I try to communicate without hurting them. Now when I go to school, I do it with the children there as well. When I talk to them, I check how I am talking to them, if I am being kind".*

These testimonies show that students started understanding the need for articulation in a way that listeners understand what they are trying to say. They also started to be mindful of what the listener might feel when they heard them and not to impose their perspectives on them.

#### *Some observations from the dialogue forums conducted*

From the observations made during the engagement, it was clear that students respond well to the concept of dialogue. They started seeing dialogue as a useful tool to have conversations on sensitive matters. Towards the end, we conducted a dialogue form to discuss an ongoing conflict around gender in the class. Even though it was something many students had a personal stake in, they did their best to follow the principles of dialogue. Even when they became angry and aggressive, they stopped themselves without the intervention of the mediator, took time to calm themselves, and continue with their point. They were also seen giving other parties enough time to finish what they were saying and respond only after asking if they had anything more to say. This willingness to give each other the space to express themselves was a result of the empathy they developed towards each other during dialogic sessions. It seemed to have developed a sense of fraternity between students.

### **Noticeable Shifts in the Classroom Environment and Discourse**

Students reported a significant change in the classroom environment after the engagement. The group of men mentioned earlier in the report who were averse to engaging with women and showed hostility towards women who were vocal in the class reported that they had started to interact freely and more openly with girls. They said that engaging in group activities and various games (of Theatre of the Oppressed) with women participants helped them get to know their woman peers better. One participant said *"I can see the value of group activities. When you made us go into groups with people we didn't know, I didn't want to. But then, when we did, I got to know a lot of people I would otherwise not talk to".*

*"In that session where we were asked to talk about the problems of gender we face at home, when I heard the problems Rohita chechi [name changed] faces with her husband's family I realised she goes through so much to come to class. It felt nice to know her personal experiences".* They also said that seeing women

talk openly and confidently about menstruation helped change their perception of women. After two of our participants conducted a class on menstruation, the men congratulated them for talking about it confidently. Women participants said that they saw the boys begin to talk about menstruation freely in class. They also said that the men had started to open up to their women peers, relating personal and vulnerable experiences.

One significant observation to be made here is that young men just out of school were more intent on staying away from women than those who went to college which is a freer space allowing for open interactions. This could be an indication of the abyss that schools create by not letting students interact meaningfully without gender boundaries. It is worth recalling what Krishnakumar (1992) said about the damage he experienced as a young boy due to gender segregation in school. He saw himself trying to appear aggressive and tough in front of women, a behaviour he traced back to the deep-seated fear of interacting with them. With dialogic pedagogy offering a space for students to constructively engage with each other and collectively question their prejudices, they started to transgress gender boundaries and establish meaningful relationships.

Other important shifts in classroom culture that participants noticed were better unity, better communication between peers, and the development of a peer support system. Students reported that the class had adopted the technique of dialogue to develop a system to talk about and find solutions to common problems faced by students. When they had a common concern or wanted to collectively demand something from a teacher, they would get together and discuss it first. Here they said that they would try to follow the principles of dialogue by giving everyone a chance to talk, listening to each other carefully, and then come to a common consensus on the matter. Students said that they even put in additional effort to push those who rarely speak in class to state their opinions. *"The other day when we had to talk to Subi teacher [name changed] about organising an event, everyone first sat down to talk about it with each other. Sujith Chettan [name changed] also reminded everybody to think about the dialogue principles that Krupa and Yasir used in class. Everybody was given space to talk. Even those who barely talk in class were pushed to share what they thought. After that we came to a common agreement and talked to the teacher. Because everybody stood together, the teacher couldn't say much. She agreed with us".*

With the development of the peer support system in the class, students said that they could now share their problems with each other and try to support each other in difficulty. They also try to motivate each other to do things. The emergence of this support system needs to be seen as an important outcome of the dialogue framework as it has the potential to aid the development of empathy and sense of community amongst the participants. Following are two major instances the students recalled:

*"After the discussion [dialogue forum on the topic of imposition of the saree as a uniform on women] boys started to encourage us to wear the uniform that we are comfortable in. We had a rally and teachers asked us to wear sarees. Some boys came to us and asked us why we were doing something we were not comfortable with. So, we decided that we would not wear sarees. Because everybody did that together, the teacher said nothing. We have also stopped wearing shawls to the DIET".*



*"Some of the women in the class were having issues with getting student concessions on the bus. The bus conductors wouldn't give them the concession even when the students had concession cards. These women were too scared to protest this and went on paying for the full ticket. When they told some of our male friends about it, they encouraged and supported them to question the bus conductor. Eventually these women students started speaking up. What I heard is that they have now started getting concessions on buses".* This shift was observed after the dialogue forum to discuss some active conflicts that were going on in the class. Going through the process helped them understand the misconceptions that were causing the conflicts, need for proper communication and seeking clarification, and the benefit of unity amongst students to negotiate their needs with the institution.

## **Benefits of the Framework Identified by Students**

### *Benefit of dialogue*

Students identified dialogue as an effective method to conduct classes. One participant said that with activities, games, and question-answer sessions, there was a better possibility of educating students about gender. Participants said that the classroom became democratic with dialogue, an idea they said they only knew from textbooks. Students said that since they had a chance to share their points of view and experiences, they felt like they had ownership of the conclusion of the discussion. They did not feel like they were being forced to study since instead of being taught things students were themselves allowed to arrive at the points that the facilitator wanted to communicate to them. One participant said, *"Teachers usually talk about critical pedagogy, dialogue, Paulo Freire, and all that, but in class they don't even let us speak. But your approach was different. We were able to share our viewpoints openly"*. In the words of another participant *"Instead of simply teaching us, you engaged us in a lot of activities to get us to understand the concept. We felt like we came to form our own opinions on this and not like you were telling us how things are"*.

### *Benefit of group activities*

Participants said that group activities helped them open up better, confidently sharing their perspectives and being able to talk to classmates they had never interacted with before, listen to other people's perspectives, and improve closeness with classmates. Younger students, particularly, showed more interest in group activities. This could be because older students were mostly already vocal in class and given the age hierarchy, younger students felt more comfortable in a smaller group. One participant said that being a student who had just finished his plus two, he felt intimidated when asked questions in front of the whole class, but felt more comfortable in group discussions.

### *Benefit of student centric approach*

As the approach of the intervention was student centric, it was the practice to collect feedback from students after every class. This feedback would then go into informing the planning of the next session. Initially students would just write general comments. As students started seeing changes in the engagement based on their feedback, they started taking it more seriously. They said, *"Initially we thought that it would just go in the dustbin as it always does. But when I saw that you take what we say seriously, I felt happy. I felt our opinions were important"*. Participants used to give feedback on what topic they wanted to talk more about. It was the students who proposed taking up moral policing as the topic

for a dialogue forum. Another suggestion from students was the incorporation of more sessions on understanding LGBTQIA+ identities because of which transgender activist Sheethal Shyam was invited to conduct class on understanding gender as a spectrum. They would also say what teaching approach was working for them and what was not. Participants reported that their opinions and concerns were being heard. They stated that the facilitators focused more on students in this pedagogical approach when compared to traditional methods. They also found it helpful that the changes they suggested were incorporated in the curriculum and pedagogy.

## CHALLENGES

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### **Absence of Faculty in the Institution and Lack of Support**

The DIET we worked on was severely understaffed with just 8 faculty members when there is a need for 21. As a result, existing faculty were always occupied. Since DIETs oversee other schools and teacher training centres in the district, faculty are often out on meetings or inspections. There were times when there were no faculty available at all. Since staff there were on deputation, which means a temporary posting, many were not very keen on making additional effort to become part of an engagement like ours. It was very difficult to get any sort of support from them or to get them to participate in the sessions. Their absence also caused frustration among students as they were at DIET without learning anything new, simply completing assignments that faculty had given them to keep them occupied.

### **Lack of Coordination among Faculty Members**

Lack of coordination among faculty was a serious problem as they would overburden students with work. Multiple faculty would assign work to students at the same time. This would affect our class as well. Even if one faculty member gave us permission to take their slot, others, unaware of this, would assign the students work at the same time. This would cause a lot of uncertainty about the schedule. For the intervention, we were not given a separate time and had to find slots within the working hours of the DIET. This meant we had to wait the whole day at the institution for any free periods. This didn't work for the facilitators or the participants. Participants began to demand fixed hours for the engagement where they would not be given any other work. Towards the middle of the project, we took this demand to the faculty after which we were given fixed hours.

### **Lack of Engagement from Faculty**

How DIET faculty perceived the project had a serious impact on how students saw its purpose. When we were given permission to do our work at the DIET, the purpose seemed more for the study itself than for the benefit of students. Because of this, students also didn't give the class enough attention for some time.

### **Difficulty in Developing a Safe Space for Students**

Dialogue requires a safe space for students to open up about their experiences. Students found discussing gender discrimination—especially about how it was prevalent in the institution—both frightening and frustrating. They feared that criticising teachers could result in their internal marks being reduced as retribution. Even when they were discussing it with us, they would check to see if anyone was listening.

One student said *"I am scared to open up in discussion. I don't want to say anything. There are spies in the class who report everything to the teachers."* Another student said *"If you question teachers, they target you. That is what happened with Sarath and Robin (name changed). They assign them unnecessary loads of work. That is how they show their anger. They might even reduce CE marks. So, most students will just comply with everything"*.

The culture that DIETs follow is of discipline and control. The classroom culture that our intervention was trying to promote was of democracy and individual agency. Conflicting cultural currents in the classroom and the institution were a source of frustration for students as students felt that they couldn't do anything about problems that they saw. It made them feel hopeless. Our project navigated this problem by using the strength of classroom unity. Students started using the power of the collective to demand their needs.

### **Lack of capacity and motivation towards theoretical engagement**

The students were not used to theoretical engagement. They had only ever been taught to memorise information. As a result, when they were introduced to theory, they were very disinterested. They were bored and did not want to read it at all. Theoretical engagement is necessary to connect all the seemingly disconnected insights that the students gain through various activities, and perceive the bigger picture of patriarchy. Without theory, there could be a lack of coherence in understanding. The seeming relapse in the understanding of gender equality for some students that was discussed in the findings could be a result of this. They were able to see the problem in isolated instances of gender discrimination, but were unable to connect it to the larger gender binary framework.

## **OTHER CHALLENGES**

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### **Resistance to Dialogue-based Approaches**

Since concepts like dialogue, games, and theatre were not conventionally seen as mechanisms for learning, students, especially older ones, perceived it as a waste of time. As they had been traditionally taught through a lecturing model with cognitive engagement alone, they were not used to such experiential learning processes. Older students felt that they were being infantilised by being made to participate in games. This could be linked to the age-based hierarchy in the classroom. More than an aversion towards the games, they might have wanted to be perceived as more serious and mature in relation to the younger students. The fact that the facilitators were younger than these students would have also contributed to their condescension. Explaining the rationale of these activities improved cooperation from these students to an extent. It was also difficult to get students to engage in critical thinking. Students would get frustrated with activities used to get students to reflect on various matters. One student openly said *"Why are you making us do unnecessary activities? Just tell us the concept directly. We will learn that. We don't want to go through all these discussions"*. Eventually, however, students started adapting to it, especially when discussions revolved around subjects relating to their personal lives.

### **Absence of Students**

There was no mechanism to ensure the presence of the students in class. The intervention was designed in such a way that each session flowed from the previous one. Because of this, irregular attendance became a major challenge in achieving course outcomes. As students themselves would take attendance, it was not mandatory to attend all classes. At times even other teachers would come to call out students and assign them with other work, requiring them to leave the class.

### **Diversity in Age Group**

Since the age group of participants ranged between 18 to 35, there was a strong age-based hierarchy in the class. This made it challenging to develop a safe space for dialogue as younger students would not open up in front of older ones. During discussions, it would be older students who would share their opinions the most, and younger students were getting space to voice their opinions. Younger students also felt that during group activities older students imposed their opinions on them. The vast difference in age also made it difficult to select age-appropriate content for the class. When the basics were being explained, older students felt that they weren't learning anything new. When older students picked topics which they wanted to discuss, younger students found them difficult to understand. Younger students wanted more game components in the session, but older students were against it.

## **DISCUSSION**

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From the findings of the study, it is clear that dialogue is a useful tool to build bridges of empathy between individuals and tackle deep rooted prejudices. In the case of the participants of this intervention, even though they still held many binary thoughts and prejudices, they became more open to perceiving other voices and even became ready to challenge their prejudices in the light of new perspectives. This attitude is required to keep this breaking out of social conditioning going. This is important as tackling prejudice is not a one-time thing. It requires constant attention and inquiry into our own behaviours, thoughts, and actions. The motivation for this must come from the respect and empathy that individuals have for their fellow human beings. This is the very capacity that would enable teachers to become gender conscious so that they can critically think through day-to-day interactions in their classrooms and identify biases and prejudices that are perpetuated through their classroom. Teachers can also use their critical understanding of gender and their dialogic abilities to help students reflect on their inner prejudices.

However, introducing a gender education course using a teacher education curriculum is not easy and would require changes at different levels. If such a course is incorporated into the curriculum of the D.El. Ed programme at the DIETs (other TTCs as well), it is important to understand if the DIETs have the kind of educational space and culture that is conducive to dialogic pedagogy. DIETs are currently places of hierarchy and control. They function more as a site for overseeing schools in the district than as a site for education. As DIETs lack sufficient faculty, teacher education suffers further. At the Kottayam DIET for example, there are only eight staff instead of the required 21 and they are out most of the time on school visits, leaving D.El.Ed students to learn subjects on their own. Along with ensuring adequate staffing, it is important to work with developing the institution into a more liberal and open space. DIET faculty should

be adequately trained to ensure that they have the capacity and motivation to handle dialogic pedagogy. One major question here is how gender can be conducted as a stand-alone course using dialogue while other subjects continue to be taught through lecturing. Even evaluation has become just another ritual where students submit a number of assignments and reproduce what they have memorised in exam papers. As discussed in the challenges, students at DIET do not get a chance to develop their capacity to engage with theories and develop critical thinking capacity. To incorporate dialogic pedagogy, we need to either work on a micro and macro level systemic change, or rethink DIETs as appropriate sites for conducting teacher education.

## DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

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### **Lack of Physical Activities to Overcome Gender Boundaries**

To completely let go of their prejudices, individuals must transcend them both intellectually and somatically. Often transformations stagnate at the intellectual level and do not progress to a somatic transformation. They may be aware of their prejudices but still bound to the feelings and sensations behind it. This often leads them to the conclusion that complete transformation is not possible. For example, many girls grow up believing that they don't have enough physical strength to do things like lifting heavy objects. Even when they become aware of their conditioning, they do not believe transformation is possible.

Theatre of the Oppressed and other dialoguing tools in the current framework only work at the level of awareness where students may start to talk about these difficulties. But without tools that focus on somatic transformation, such dialogue would seem purposeless to students due to a perceived lack of hope. This is why it is necessary to incorporate activities aimed at both intellectual and somatic transgression of gender boundaries.

### **Need for Perspectives from Elementary Classrooms**

An intervention designed to develop gender consciousness in pre-service teachers needs to be informed by what will happen in the classroom that they will teach in—in our case elementary classrooms. Since facilitators didn't have experience working with elementary students, this component was missing from the engagement. We will try to mitigate this in the next iteration of the project by collaborating with people who have experience teaching in elementary schools.

### **Lack of Cooperation from DIET Faculty**

There was constant difficulty getting the DIET faculty to cooperate to effectively implement the intervention. This lack of cooperation and their constant absence from the institution made it impossible to get data from them and verify student data through data triangulation.

## PROJECT OUTCOMES

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- A board game was designed with the experiences of four individuals from different social discrimination contexts incorporated into it. The game was designed with the intention of helping students understand the concept of intersectionality.
- A handbook on gender was co-created with the help of the transgender activist Sheethal Shyam and the students. We conducted a session where students interacted with Sheethal to address their questions on gender. The answers that emerged from this session have been codified into this gender handbook.
- The paper "Benefits of Using Dialogic Pedagogy for Developing Gender Consciousness in Pre-service Teachers", which is based on the findings of this study, was named the best paper in the Kerala School Education Congress 2023. The paper is in the process of being published by the SCERT, Kerala.
- We did an analysis of the topic of gender in the D.El.Ed textbook to prepare this intervention for DIET, Kottayam. This analysis was later provided to SCERT, Kerala to assist in its process of conducting a gender audit of the Kerala public education system.
- Many dialoguing teaching tools were developed during the intervention. A repository of dialoguing teaching tools is in the process of being published on the website of the organisation 'Sahapaadi: Centre for Dialogic Learning' - [www.sahapaadi.org](http://www.sahapaadi.org).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The course could have been improved with the following changes to the logistics of the programme and the course curriculum and pedagogy.

### Programme Logistics

- It would be helpful if participation of faculty was ensured so that they also understand the problems students face and how their perspectives are changing.
- Fixed hours of engagement must be ensured so that class flow is not interrupted.
- It would be better to work with the DIETs through a higher authority such as the SCERT. This could ensure that the DIET officials approach the course with the required seriousness.



### **Course Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The gender sensitisation course for pre-service teachers could be more effective if school classroom perspectives are included in the curriculum.

- During dialogue, a guided enquiry works better than undirected enquiry as it leads to misconceptions. It is important for the facilitator to sum up the concepts in the end.
- The course content should be appropriate for students of different gender, age, and other social backgrounds.
- The course content should include empowering activities to help more reserved students open up.
- It is important that theoretical engagement with gender perspectives is ensured. To cultivate it in a space where the culture of critically engaging with theories doesn't exist, we could try to create learning materials or simplified readings coupled with discussions to introduce students to it. The lack of engagement with theories in the D.El.Ed also proves the need for rethinking teacher education. Currently we have a skill development model. This is not sufficient. What we need is a critical teacher education programme that can prepare future teachers to be at the forefront of leadership for social transformation.

### **WAY FORWARD**

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The authors have formed a not-for-profit organisation, Sahapaadi: Centre for Dialogic Learning, with the vision of developing a dialogic learning ecosystem for a just, sustainable, and multicultural world. Through Sahapaadi, the present intervention would be modified and continued after incorporating the learnings and insights from the previous year. The context of the intervention has been shifted to DIET, Kozhikode, considering the institutional challenges of conducting such an intervention effectively in DIET, Kottayam. The collaboration with DIET, Kozhikode is in its final stage and will be completed by the end of April 2023. The study will be conducted for two more years with the aim of developing an evidence-based, dialogue-based pedagogy model of gender education.

## CONCLUSION

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Conversations on the necessity of developing gender consciousness amongst teachers has been happening in all walks of the society but attention is rarely paid to understanding what teaching approach can best facilitate this. This is important because even when individuals engage with various theoretical perspectives on gender, it might not entirely help to identify and tackle their gender prejudices. This is because tackling one's own prejudices needs motivation to do so and second, since gender prejudice can also manifest unconsciously, deep reflection into one's own actions and behaviours are required to identify it and work on it. The present intervention was developed keeping in mind the potential of dialogue as a pedagogic tool to address these challenges. The findings of the intervention show that the dialogic approach helped students to build empathy and a sense of community with their peers which helped them question many of their previous assumptions. Dialogic approach also helped develop a peer support system in the class which students used to address gender and other similar issues together. It was interesting to see that the learnings participants had was not uniform and changed based on factors like age, gender, and early or late exposure to the topic. From the testimonies of the students, it is clear that with dialogic pedagogy and its situated content, students were able to relate the conversations to what is happening in their surroundings and even modify how they conducted themselves in their personal lives. In order to formally adapt dialogic pedagogy for the gender education of pre-service teachers into the D.El.Ed curriculum, it would definitely need more studies and structural changes to be made. However, it can be said that conducting dialogic pedagogy in a context like DIET is possible as long as the faculty has the capacity and motivation for it.

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# APPENDIX

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION

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### Ambitions Statements and Status of the Project

#### *Knowledge*

- To understand the usefulness of dialogue-based pedagogy in facilitating gender sensitisation of pre-service teachers;
- To understand the usefulness of Theatre of the Oppressed in developing an emotionally safe space for dialoguing;
- To explore various educational tools and classroom practices which can help participants transgress gender boundaries.

#### Status

We were able to complete the project successfully and collect relevant data to answer the above-mentioned questions. We have now developed it into a research report. A dialogue handbook was also developed out of this. Right now, we are working on developing a research paper.

#### *Capacity*

- To develop our capacity as dialogue facilitators;
- To develop our capacity for learning material development;
- To develop the capacity of our participant pre-service teachers for learning material development.

#### Status

We were able to develop our capacity for facilitating dialogue by engaging with people and organisations who are experts in the field such as Pravah, India and Gnostic Centre. We also were able to develop capacity in producing learning materials with online researching and taking small online courses. We produced a board game and a gender handbook after this. However, we couldn't engage with participants to develop learning materials as the engagement was cut short along with their semester due to the pandemic.

### *People and relationships*

- Teacher Collective: The purpose of this relationship is to set the stage for the workshop participants to form a collective of their own as they enter their professional fields so that they can further the work of pedagogic research and learning material development in collaboration with SCERT, but with autonomy.
- Civil Society Organisations (CSO) like Pravah: The purpose of this relationship is to seek guidance in resource and capacity development in the light of their expertise.
- Relationships between team members: The project understands communication within the team as a component to be reviewed for better efficiency in work execution.

### Status

We were able to form the teacher collective with 9 interested participants. We also conducted a session with the teacher collective where they interacted with transgender rights activist Sheethal Shyam. We were able to produce a handbook on gender out of the questions students asked Sheethal Shyam and the responses they received.

We were able to build our relationship with organisations like Disha, Pravah, Zero to One, and Sex Ed Kerala. We are currently working on a few other short-term projects on gender and experiential learning with some of these organisations. We have also developed better communication mechanisms within the team to ensure better coordination.

### *Output and Sharing*

- To co-create learning materials and teaching aids on the topic of gender with D.El.Ed students;
- To develop a research paper on the usefulness of situated dialogic pedagogy to facilitate the gender sensitisation of pre-service teachers;
- To develop a blog page/website for sharing articles generated from the new learnings from the engagement.

### Status

We developed an experience-based dialogue handbook and gender handbook. Gender handbooks can be used as a learning material in future engagements with pre-service teachers. The findings from the study were presented at the Comparative Education Society of India (CESI) conference 2022 and the Kerala School Education Conference (KSEC) 2023 conducted by SCERT, Kerala. The research article written based on the findings from the project study was awarded as the best paper



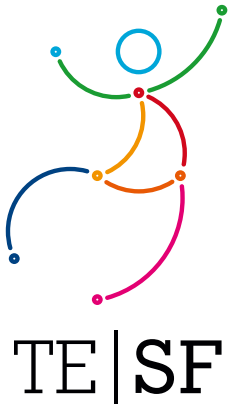
presented under perspectives in teacher education at KSEC-2023. We now also have a website to talk about our work and share our findings.

### *Legacies*

- SCERT has incorporated situated dialogic pedagogy for gender sensitisation in teacher education curriculum.
- Elementary teachers to use gender conscious dialogic pedagogy for teaching in elementary classrooms.

### Status

To develop a model of dialogic pedagogy for the gender sensitisation of pre-service teachers which we can recommend the government incorporates into the teacher education curriculum will take three or four more iterations. But what we were able to do this time was provide our findings about the existing course on gender and the textbook content to the committee that SCERT created for the gender auditing of the education system.



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