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IMPACT OF STORYTELLING AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ON DEVELOPING TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This report is based on a year-long project that studied the impact of the Storytelling and Children's Literature (STCL) course, offered as part of the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) programme, on the personal and professional trajectories of BEEd alumni and teacher educators. The study examines the ways in which BEEd alumni negotiate their agency as teachers and professionals in other educational contexts while working in conservative spaces that are dominated by a skill-based approach to teaching language and literacy. Using narrative interviews, the project intends to capture the lived experiences of teacher educators in eight colleges offering the BEEd programme. The aim is to capture the big and small ways in which STCL as an open-format course has impacted the discourse around the pedagogy of language and literacy. The study reveals that alumni working in different sectors of education have employed storytelling skills and knowledge about children's literature to nurture the socio-emotional growth and literacy skills of their students.

LITERATURE-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

The Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) programme is unique in offering a compulsory course on children's literature to second-year student teachers. This structure enables teacher educators to make connections between children's literature and the theory-based course on literacy pedagogy titled Language across the Curriculum (LAC), which is also taught in the second year. The course is conducted as a colloquium, titled Storytelling and Children's Literature (STCL), through workshops and projects that enable students to "examine and develop a criteria of evaluating children's literature, develop skills of building resources for children and hone their skills of storytelling" (Maulana Azad Centre for Elementary and Social Education, 2001). Over the course of an academic year, students participate in workshops to read, analyse and discuss various aspects and genres of children's literature, ranging from picture books to poetry to informative books. Storytelling workshops introduce them to the possibilities of meaning making across curricular areas through stories.

As a colloquium, STCL is taught in workshop mode over an entire academic year. Each workshop is a two-hour session held once a week. The workshops focus on various aspects of children's literature, such as selection and evaluation, various genres, and pedagogical practices. With oral storytelling, the focus of the workshops is on techniques of narration and selection and choice of stories (see MACESE, 2001 for more details on the structure of STCL).

This study aims to examine BEEd student teachers' participation in STCL and the ways in which they have taken their learnings forward in their professional journeys as education practitioners. The objective is to trace the journey of select alumni's endeavours to create dialogic spaces around literature during their journey as beginning teachers. Given the pressures of fixed curricula and rigid structures of testing, the findings from this study help identify the specific challenges faced by BEEd teachers in implementing reader response¹ classrooms for teaching reading and literature. It was also interesting to track graduates who work with government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in starting a conversation on the importance of children's literature in teaching literacy, a relatively new area of study in India.

The teaching of children's literature in teacher preparation programmes focuses on the challenge of using children's literature to develop sound elementary school curriculum and pedagogy. Literature-based language teaching emphasises meaningful engagement with literacy rather than the mechanical drill of acquiring skills. The aim is to go beyond literary studies of children's literature to sharing children's literature "in a socially conscious manner so as to prepare a critically literate citizenry for the 21st century" (Leland et al., 2018, p. xi). The challenge is that this needs to happen in an educational context that supports the mechanistic processes of teaching literacy as a neutral, decontextualised set of skills. An important objective of the colloquium is to enable BEEd students to experience and critically engage with a vast range of children's literature and storytelling to be prepared to enable their own students to become

¹ Reader response theory is a literary theory which places the reader at the centre of the reading process. Reading literature is primarily about the response it evokes in the reader during the process of reading. Thus, experiencing a story/poem is all about what we bring to the text, and not merely about some inherent meaning in the text.

enthusiastic and engaged readers. To this end, Leland et al. (2018) suggest that the “new educational mantra” for saving our democracies is to “raise readers” who know how to “Enjoy! Dig deeply! Take action!” (p. 1). Hence, this study is an important step in articulating how a course in children’s literature in a teacher education programme has impacted alumni working in different yet conservative contexts in education. The study also aims to examine whether and how engagement with the STCL impacted teacher educators.

CONTEXT: POLICY FRAMEWORKS AROUND LITERACY IN INDIA

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005 was developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the apex educational organisation in India, amidst an atmosphere of demands for increased “standardisation”, testing to measure learning outcomes, calls for teacher surveillance and accountability, and neoliberal policy shifts towards privatising education. The NCF, on the contrary, views education as culturally rooted, from a social constructivist prism, and presents a vision to enable children to make sense of their lives in a diverse and plural country. The NCF stresses the need for an education system that would challenge the inequalities of gender, caste, language and culture through curriculum content, pedagogic practices and teaching-learning processes. With this view, the NCF recommends that “the concept of critical pedagogy has to be practised in all dimensions of school education, including teacher education” (NCERT, 2005, p. 6).

Having established the need for a critical pedagogy for equity and justice, the NCF points out that the voice heard in the classroom is that of the teacher, while children speak only to answer the teacher’s questions. For learners to actively construct knowledge, classrooms need to value opportunities to interact in mixed groups. The NCF recommends that a pedagogy that is “sensitive to gender, class, caste and global inequalities” needs to be based on “participatory learning and teaching, emotion and experience”. Connecting orality to the lives and cultures of people, the NCF states that “school privileges the literate, but cannot afford to continue to ignore the oral. Sustaining oral skills of all kinds is important” (NCERT, 2005, p. 27).

Ruing the teaching of discrete language skills in a linear and additive manner in school, the NCF lays emphasis on listening and speaking as complex abilities that can bring respect for multiple perspectives and the ability to articulate one’s point of view. From the perspective of active listening and the need for “imaginative input”, the NCF recommends storytelling because “fantasy and mystery play an important role in child development” (NCERT, 2005, p. 41). In fact, the NCF strongly recommends the use of traditional folk art—including locally performed storytelling traditions—to connect formal education with children’s cultures outside the classroom.

However, the reality of language and literacy education in the Indian classroom is very different. In 1999, after an extensive study of schooling in India, the Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE) highlighted the “burden of non-comprehension” in classrooms, where a lot of abstract terms from the textbook are merely rote memorised by students. The report also pointed out that the kinds of stories and

poems included in textbooks hardly have any connection to the reality of the lives of children in rural areas. PROBE questioned the widely-held notion that children drop out of school due to parental indifference. Some years later, Kumar (2004) pointed out that India's high drop-out rate has a clear connection with its faulty pedagogy of reading. He challenges the theory that children drop out in Class 1 for economic reasons. The process of learning to read and write through the mechanical and arduous task of decoding and encoding is extremely frustrating for a young child who comes to school to make sense of the world. The only materials available for literacy instruction in early childhood are primers and language textbooks in the later grades. The need for a print-rich environment which would "immerse" children in print and give them opportunities to engage meaningfully with it is extremely vital (Sinha, 2019). Sinha (2019) also emphasised the need for quality children's literature, especially for children who come from literacy-poor backgrounds. Most Indian classrooms continue to remain resource poor, where the textbook is the only reading material available. We need more extended definitions of literacy that go beyond mechanical drills in decoding and classrooms that incorporate children's literature and print materials from their own backgrounds.

Contrary to research studies in the West, which emphasise the importance of a rich literacy environment, especially in the early grades, the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 advocates for early literacy pedagogy to be based on achieving "universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025" (p. 8). It cites a "learning crisis" in children's inability to read "basic" texts as the reason for advocating for "all viable methods" to be used to urgently achieve foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) if the rest of the NEP is to succeed. These methods include preparing digital material and using peer tutoring and trained volunteers to achieve this "highest priority". Each "literate member of the community" is encouraged to be a literacy training volunteer in schools, thus precluding the need for highly trained teachers who understand the complex processes involved in reading and writing. FLN is premised on a very reductive approach to reading, which sees early literacy as a process of drilling the "basic" skills of decoding and encoding. Trained teachers, especially of an intensive elementary programme such as the BEIEd, understand that early literacy pedagogy must take into account the theoretical perspective of emergent literacy, which posits that children's encounters with print include approximations and making meaning from functional aspects of print. Already, FLN has had a tremendous impact on literacy instruction in primary school with students being segregated on the basis of their reading ability and early grade pedagogy being reduced to running "literacy labs".

It is also pertinent to examine some of the recent pedagogical and curricular policies of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Delhi, with regard to increasing children's engagement with school and developing literacy. The Delhi government's policies in the Directorate of Education (DoE) schools have ranged from Mission Buniyaad (now in its second phase) to introducing the Happiness and Deshbhakti curricula. With regard to FLN, Mission Buniyaad was the precursor to NEP 2020. It was first launched in 2018 with the claim that it would ensure "basic" literacy and numeracy for all children from Classes 3 to 8. However, as its title indicates, the policy is based on a very mechanical notion of foundational literacy. It sees literacy as a hierarchically ordered set of technical skills and subskills, which begins with mastering the alphabet-sound system. Comprehension or meaning construction is regarded as an additive result of having mastered these "foundational" or basic skills. In other words, literacy is seen as a neutral, cognitive skill involving largely decoding and encoding symbols. The accompanying collection of 26 stories claims that "No child left behind" ("*Koi bhi bachcha peechhe na chhoote*") is the aim of Mission Buniyaad (State

Council of Educational Research and Training [SCERT], 2022b). The 26 stories included in Kahaniyan (SCERT, 2022a) are one-page, bite-sized stories with a minimalistic storyline created for the didactic purpose of teaching reading fluency as a skill. Hardly any story is engaging or inviting enough to create independent readers or lead to deep conversations. Each story is followed by exercises that focus on phonics or vocabulary development. Moreover, the teacher is instructed to get students to follow the text with their fingers to sound out each word.

One of the most important components of the Happiness and Deshbhakti curricula are stories. However, the stories are used merely as instruments to drive home a moral lesson, either of conservative “goodness” or nationalism. The document on the Deshbhakti curriculum uses words such as “instil”, “inculcate”, “equip” and “learn” quite frequently to talk about the need for “patriotic values among students” and “to prepare them for nation-building” (SCERT, 2021a). The aim, as stated by the Deshbhakti Curriculum Framework (SCERT, 2021a), is to make students *kattar deshbhakt* (hardcore or staunch nationalist). A supporting document titled Hamare Deshbhakt Krantikari contains 100 short stories and biographies on freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh and Sarojini Naidu. The introduction to the collection clearly states that each one-page biography will be used to instil a feeling of nationalism. Children will be taught to read each story from the perspective of appreciating the sacrifices made by freedom fighters. The stories have been created for a clear didactic purpose. Children who encounter such pseudo-stories² find it difficult to develop the ability to connect them with their experiences, understand story structures and develop the realisation that real stories offer several interpretations, all of which are “correct”. This undermines the transformative potential of literature. As Short (2014) points out, descriptions of even stories and authentic children’s literature in education also often “typically focus on how to use children’s books to teach something else” (p. 118). It undermines the power of stories to create pedagogies of imagination and reflection.

This skill-based approach to literacy is also what underlies NEP 2020 and its advocacy of foundational literacy. This approach to literacy is based on a “banking model” (Freire, 1970) of education, which ignores the social, functional and ideological context of literacy. According to Freire (1985), teachers work “bureaucratically” when they transform literacy into a “technical event, into something without emotions, without invention, without creativity – but with repetition” (p. 19). Student teachers who have rich experiences around children’s literature themselves will organise their own classrooms around meaningful and holistic language activities, which invite children to use written and oral language in various functional ways.

² ‘Pseudo-story’ as a term was first used by American educator Bertram Bruce in the 1970s to describe stories for young children where the narrative or storyline is sacrificed to teach component skills, such as decoding or vocabulary. The assumption that there is no need for high quality and thoughtful stories in the early grades makes reading a boring chore for many children. Bruce emphasised that children need frequent exposure to good and challenging stories to become successful readers.

AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE

This project investigated the impact of STCL, a practicum course, on developing teachers. The course is taught in the second year of the BEIEd programme. STCL is taught as a colloquium, in workshop mode, over an entire academic year. In the same year, students also do a theoretical course on language and literacy pedagogy (called Language Across the Curriculum) for the primary classes. Most teacher educators attempt to bring together LAC and STCL so that student teachers can learn the value of a print-rich classroom for teaching reading as a transaction between the text and the reader. This is particularly important in the context of a policy shift towards FLN and to challenge classroom contexts where the teaching of phonics has traditionally dominated the pedagogy of early grades.

This project seeks to examine the impact of the STCL course on the pedagogy of developing teachers who have graduated from the BEIEd programme. It aims to understand whether BEIEd alumni incorporate children's literature in their classrooms as elementary school teachers. The project also intends to understand the ways in which alumni have taken forward their learnings from STCL into various other educational contexts beyond classroom teaching. Narratives from teacher educators involved in teaching STCL were also analysed to understand how university teachers looked at their own professional growth and agency with this colloquium.

This project is particularly relevant because teacher education is under attack in India for several reasons. Especially in the context of literacy education, the perception is that there is a crisis in education and that teachers are inadequately prepared to teach students to read at grade level. According to a World Bank report, for instance, "the learning crisis is, at its core, a teaching crisis" (World Bank, 2019). A pan-India survey of literacy and numeracy in rural schools by an NGO has consistently been used to highlight the abysmal levels of learning in government-run schools. This has led to a clamour for privatisation in school education and a systematic attack on teachers in government-run schools. What has been bypassed is the complexity of issues responsible for poor levels of literacy not just in government but also in private schools. This has resulted in several private players intervening in schools through partnership models, which sideline the experience and learning of the teacher to hand her pre-prepared modules which merely need to be "delivered" in the classroom.

The project underlines the importance of narrative research, which captures the lived experiences of teachers. As a teacher educator and researcher, I felt that listening to teachers and their construction of reality would be another way of inquiring into the field of education. The subjective realities of individual teachers and teacher educators could help build a community through shared understandings of identity, experiences, attitudes and hopes. In educational research then, where the subjects of research are students and teachers, their voices must be brought to the centre of the research.

As described earlier, this project is particularly relevant in current times, when one of the provisions of the NEP (2020), is to invite volunteers from civil society and private organisations to volunteer in government schools. This move, described as the Vidyanjali scheme by the Ministry of Education, de-professionalises

teaching and tries to convey, in the name of community involvement, that anyone can enter a school and teach. The neoliberal impact on higher education has also led to increasing privatisation and withdrawal of the state from public-funded education. With an increasing emphasis on competition and ratings, university spaces have become more about monitoring and outcomes rather than collaboration and research. The atmosphere is one of mistrust of teachers and students, and social values such as diversity, equity and community participation are thrust aside. In this context, it is heartening to see how almost all teacher educators spoke about developing professionally in a social context and the value of participating in a community of teacher educators. Thus, the discourse on the importance of children's literature in education has developed in the BEIED programme a collective hope of wanting to resist the dominant perspective on literacy as a set of neutral skills that can be learnt through repeated practice. There are more details on this later in the report.

With the turn towards direct phonics instruction in early literacy classrooms in several Western countries since the 2000s, there has been renewed focus on it in India as well, where early literacy pedagogy has traditionally focused on exclusively teaching grapho-phonics, with comprehension being seen as an automatic consequence. Most Indian classrooms are resource poor, where the textbook is the only material available for reading. Reading for various purposes, of which reading literature for pleasure is an important one, is often sidelined to take a very narrow view of reading as largely a process of sounding out words. Thus, preparing teachers who learn to take pleasure in reading would be an important step towards creating more interested and engaged readers in school, especially in the Indian context where the school is the only space where such opportunities are available for a majority of children who come from resource-poor backgrounds.

The project brought together several of these strands to underscore the relevance of an intensive teacher education programme, which regards reading as an exercise in meaning making rather than a set of skills to be mastered. To create an equitable society where all citizens have the chance to participate to the best of their ability, we must aspire towards literacy education that leads to engaged and thoughtful readers, who read voluntarily and with pleasure, for various purposes. Teachers who bring to schools and other educational contexts a rich understanding of the centrality of children's literature in creating readers might help mitigate the consequences of a narrow view of literacy pedagogy. Paulo Freire (1985) emphasised that "teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event", full of creativity and emotions, rather than a "technical event" based on a bureaucratic programme (p. 19).

The main objectives of the project are

- To trace the professional journeys of teacher educators involved in teaching STCL over the years.
- To capture the success and challenges of BEIED alumni working with children's literature in school and non-school contexts.
- To ascertain the feedback of current BEIED students and the impact of the STCL colloquium on their own learning and growth with respect to building an understanding about children's literature and storytelling.
- To study the impact of online teaching on STCL as a relational activity, heavily dependent on collaborative and dialogic learning.

NARRATIVE RESEARCH

This project was planned as a qualitative study within the interpretivist paradigm of research to examine the objective, journey and impact of the STCL colloquium on alumni working in different contexts in education and on teacher educators teaching STCL. A mixed methods research methodology was employed to collect data from alumni of the eight colleges of Delhi University that offer the BEIEd programme. Open-ended questions on a Google form and collation of narratives formed the core of the data collection process. I interviewed teacher educators currently teaching the STCL course as well as those who have taught it in the past to capture their stories about how they conducted workshops, organised the colloquium and engaged with students over the years through specific tasks, assignments and projects.

My interest in the project stemmed from a desire to collect multiple stories from the journeys of alumni after they graduated from the BEIEd programme. I hoped to be able to reflect on what these multiple narratives revealed about teachers' self-perceptions, their dilemmas and their challenges, and how beginning teachers grapple with their professional agency as they shape and are shaped by the dominant discourse around teachers in neoliberal times. The multiplicity of narratives from teacher educators, particularly those teaching STCL, reveal individual and collective stories of hope as they speak about their deeply personal connections with work.

The 1980s saw what has often been described as a "narrative turn" in research, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Particularly, the writing of Jerome Bruner has had an impact on valuing narratives and individual stories as modes of thought and expression.

One aspect of narrative analysis that was highlighted in this research was participants' construction of their work identity as agents of resistance. Even as developing teachers articulated their struggles with an education system that has been deeply corporatised, they also saw their own classrooms as sacrosanct, where they could shape a pedagogy that was more humane and creative. Several teachers spoke about the value that stories and children's literature brought to their pedagogy and even brought them closer to their students. Narrative research methods, such as interpreting the telling and re-telling of stories, were regarded as offering insights into pedagogy, teacher agency and identity, and the larger challenges of working within institutional and policy constraints.

Narrative interviews were the most important data collection tool and were conducted with alumni and teacher educators. The analysis of narratives was done using deductive coding. Besides this, a short, open-ended survey questionnaire was shared with nearly 1,000 alumni to gather information on their learnings from the STCL colloquium.

SAMPLE

My primary sample consisted of BEIED alumni working in various educational contexts as teachers, writers, counsellors and programme developers with NGOs and corporate houses. I also worked with teacher educators who have been teaching the STCL course for several years. Both alumni and teacher educators have been participants in the research as they shared with me autobiographical narratives of their professional life. These narrative accounts are 20 in all. Besides this, more than 1,000 alumni responded to a brief open-ended questionnaire.

Additionally, research and analysis included contributions from my research assistant, Swati Sharma, who is a BEIED alumna of the 2018 batch. As a graduate of the programme and as someone who has taken the STCL course, her own journey and insights offered an interesting participant frame to the research.

ALUMNI NARRATIVES

Becoming Storytellers

The project revealed that a large number of alumni mentioned STCL as one of their favourite courses in the BEIED programme. Several alumni mentioned this along with the practicum of theatre, which student teachers attend in the first and third year of the programme. This indicates the ways in which student teachers combined their learning from both courses to build their capacities as teachers who welcome stories and children's literature in their classrooms.

One of the most cited reasons for loving this colloquium was that it gave student teachers the chance to acquire the skills of storytelling. Alumni have mentioned that STCL put them in touch with a new side of their personality: to be a performer. Schools rarely give students the chance to explore different sides of their personalities. Classroom teaching is textbook-focused and a good student is one who gets good marks in tests. Activities such as drama are still seen as extra-curricular and only some students, who are carefully selected by teachers on the basis of their "talent", get the opportunity to represent the school in year-end productions. Apart from performing stories, alumni also mentioned learning how to explore narratives in the teaching of other content areas and to engage the attention of reluctant readers. Below are some responses.³

J: "The various aspects of STCL are many a times remembered by me as during taking tuitions I always get help to teach the students through storytelling, which is of course due to the STCL programme. Moreover, it enhanced my verbal communication and also I was able to overcome my hesitation."

³ All respondents' names have been anonymised.

AK: *"Loved the way we were taught, demonstrated and modelled the techniques of storytelling Always enjoyed the classes."*

MS: *"STCL made me confident, a better communicator, it brought me closer to my students."*

RM: *"The way a story is told, voice modulation, selection of stories, animations by teacher in absence of a story book has helped me a lot as a teacher to make class more interesting... Not just theoretical information was imparted, but many opportunities were provided so that we could understand how to conduct storytelling sessions."*

AN: *"Toh actually ek memory hai... hume pair mai ek story perform karni thi toh performance ke bahut se tareeke ho sakte hain... aap puppets ke through karo, pictures ke through karo, flashcards ke through karo, vocals ke through karo... your wish... toh maine aur meri friend ne puppets ke through kiya tha. Mujhe yaad hai hum do din pehle ek dusre ke ghar gaye the, humne set banaya tha. Toh mujhe lagta hai in cheezon ke through bahut kuch seekhne ko mil gaya"*

"I have one memory... we were asked to perform a story which could have taken many forms... through puppets, through pictures, through flash cards or through oral narration. My friend and I decided to use puppets. We went to each other's home and prepared a set. Through this process we acquired many skills."

For several alumni, STCL gave them the opportunity to experience storytelling and children's literature for the first time. As an exploratory space, the fluid curriculum enabled student teachers to both experience and try out, in a safe space, the various demands of oral storytelling: selecting a story and learning how to narrate it well.

Joining Communities of Storytellers

Several alumni mentioned how they sought out communities of storytellers working with children. Once their own imagination was fired through STCL, theatre and self-development, many alumni looked for communities in order to learn more and take their interests forward.

For AK and AN, joining Kathamanch offered that possibility. Kathamanch is a registered trust that works with government school libraries to advocate oral storytelling for everyone. Particularly for AN, the association with Kathamanch began during the COVID-19 lockdown, when she turned to her college teachers to help her find ways to manage her anxiety. But for both AK and AN, it was their interest in STCL which has kept the involvement going.

AN: *"Pehle toh lockdown tha, kuch bhi nahin ho raha tha, par hamara main kaam yahi tha ki hamein content prepare karna tha. Uske liye humne kuch kuch stories, poems, kuch iss tarah ki cheezein prepare kee. Aur uske baad jab bilkul initial lockdown wala phase khatam hua, tab Kathamanch started some workshops... par vo bhi online hee chal rahi thee. Toh un workshops par report banana, unhe manage karna, yeh hamara kaam tha. Now, Vijay sir is trying to develop a magazine for Kathamanch, so we're helping him in that."*

"We joined [Kathamanch] during the lockdown. We began by preparing content around stories and poems. Once the lock down became less severe, we also helped Kathamanch in organising online workshops. We are now engaged in the process of helping Kathamanch develop a magazine."

SB: "I've done a paid internship with a storytelling company called Kabuliwala to become a better storyteller."

However, several alumni have also mentioned that they would have wanted to join storytelling networks after graduation to continue to build expertise in this area. Such networks and platforms are still quite rare in India, particularly outside large metro cities like Delhi and Bengaluru. In the West, such opportunities exist in public libraries and schools also welcome writers and storytellers to interact with students. In India, public libraries hardly exist and schools still see storytelling as mere entertainment with little value in the serious business of transacting the formal curriculum. The teaching of literacy in schools is still seen as a factor of transacting the language textbook; in early literacy classrooms, this is the primer. The association of effective literacy instruction with a print-rich environment, especially for children who come from low-literacy homes, is still not recognised (Sinha, 2019).

Becoming Readers

For many alumni, the STCL course was their first chance to become readers. Several alumni looked back at their BEIEd journeys and said candidly that the STCL course was their first opportunity to become readers.

VA: "Ever since I was introduced to this colloquium, I have been building my own library of children's literature, first and foremost being a self-audience of it. I love it!"

The colonial legacy in the Indian education system has led to an extremely textbook-focused pedagogy. Textbooks are conflated with the curriculum and form the basis of the examination system. There is almost a complete absence of any other kind of reading material in schools or in homes. Acknowledging this, the narratives of teacher educators also reveal an emphasis on exploring children's literature in a dialogic context as the most important aspect of STCL. Visiting book fairs, becoming members of the few public libraries that exist in Delhi and creating their own personal libraries are some valuable experiences of the STCL colloquium cited by most alumni. It is important to note that alumni have valued these experiences and competencies, even though the larger education system views the teacher as merely a deliverer of subject content in the classroom.

One of the most important pedagogical practices in STCL is to enable student teachers to explore children's literature. Teacher educators across colleges have built small libraries where student teachers are encouraged to read children's literature from India and other countries. The classes are conducted in workshop mode, where student teachers engage in "grand conversations" around shared literature experiences (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Different interpretations are encouraged and participants learn to listen and respond to each other while respecting differences in interpretation. Unlike school, where teachers "explain" the author's intention behind a literary text, "grand conversations" lead to shared interpretive authority. Hence, student teachers learn to develop a "voice" as they become confident about their contributions and interpretations during discussions. In fact, this is how S, an alumna and now a programme developer in children's literature, put it:

"I think this programme gave that opportunity, you know, where I could talk about my ideas. And when I finally recognised that I mattered as a reader, I think that was a big thing for me. Otherwise, it always felt that, you know, when I'm reading something between the book and me, it's the book that is so important that is, you know, so significant. So, I wasn't able to kind of acknowledge this for myself, that what I'm thinking is equally important. So, it just gave me that space, you know, it gave those ears to me, you know, where people were listening, and we could talk about books."

Another alumnus, AR, said, *"It was one of the best parts of the BEIEd curriculum; it gave me an insight into children's world and analysing children's literature from various perspectives."*

SUBTLE REBELLION: FIGHTING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE ON LITERACY

Alumni narratives also reveal individual stories of impacting the dominant discourse in education in various contexts. For instance, alumni working as teachers in both public and private schools mention creating spaces for storytelling and children's literature in their classrooms, in spite of most school cultures being highly textbook-oriented.

IK: *"Storytelling is my personal favourite method to introduce any new concept to students. So, I use storytelling to make my class more engaging. Mainly I use it in language classes."*

NA: *"I am currently working as a teacher for primary kids and stories is something that is the soul of teaching and learning for this age group. I try to look at various reading strategies and thinking routines that can be associated with reading and I work with children on a regular basis."*

RM: *"The transaction of STCL was very effective. I try to implement all the learnings from STCL colloquium in my classes. As a primary teacher I think it's a positive point for me."*

MS: *"The dynamic nature of the subject is something that really kept me engaged. Storytelling has become my favourite technique since then to use in teaching of any subjects, I can say so especially after working with preschool kids."*

NC: *"In my school, I am in charge of the morning assembly for primary kids where I develop and help in developing three stories per week and students use those stories and enact them in the assembly."*

MS2: *"As a language teacher, I try to provide exposure to books and stories to students. We are also given the opportunity to revise textbooks since the school has its own set of books, so I review their books and try to enrich it with better stories and literature. I recently suggested the story 'Vah Ladka Jisne Poochha Kyon' [Bhimrao Ambedkar: The Boy Who Asked Why] by Tulika to be kept in our school library because it has similar theme to one of the chapters in our textbook."*

SB: *"Being an English facilitator, I have to factor in that we aren't just treating books as the main tool and reading stories, rather we bring in videos, we enact the stories, we read them aloud together and sometimes we play the parts. It's important for me that students not only like the story but connect with the literature."*

Some alumni have also spoken about a few progressive schools welcoming these pedagogical practices and even inviting beginning teachers to create communities of storytellers in the school.

OY, a teacher in the school mentioned here: *So earlier, they [the school] used to call experts from*

outside... for a workshop [on] storytelling, but now they're asking me... and they give me that kind of, you know, environment where I'm being showcased, like, I'm a researcher, I'm not a regular teacher, or something like that. And, you know, as a resource person, you know, everything is set up.

TR: After BEIEd, I got the opportunity to be a reading teacher at Happy English School. As a reading teacher, I got wide exposure to the storytelling field. My main job was to make children interested in reading by using storytelling as a major tool. And this job profile also helped me explore children's literature.

MM: In my school, we take weekly storytelling sessions with all the primary classes during class hours.

Alumni also mentioned how the STCL practicum gave them the chance to challenge the commonly held view that the most important "use" of stories is to instil moral values.

AA: "There are numerous memories of STCL, but the most refreshing was that stories are not only for the purpose of inculcating morality in children but are also an immensely effective teaching aid and has profound impact as pedagogy."

CS: "Due to the STCL colloquium, I became aware of children's literature and storytelling. My only experience of listening to stories was from my grandparents. But after BEIEd, I got to know that stories can be a part of the curriculum instead of just focusing on forced moral values. Stories also help in rapport formation with children."

Alumni narratives also throw light on personal identities shaped by STCL. Alumni who are mothers and not currently working, spoke about ensuring that their children grow up with books. Visiting book fairs with their children, reading aloud to them from a young age and looking for schools that value reading are some ways in which alumni spoke about challenging the lack of a reading culture in the country.

It is heartening, for me as a teacher educator, to hear these stories of alumni working as school teachers and in other capacities, creating space for a more relational pedagogy that values the teacher–student bond. The authoritative role of the teacher who merely passes on accepted notions of morality sugar-coated as stories is transformed to a role where pedagogy is re-interpreted as an "engagement", an exchange, a co-created space.

Transforming Educational Spaces

BEIEd alumni working in educational spaces outside schools also spoke about the impact of children's literature on how they viewed education, especially literacy acquisition. One participant, MT, who works in the corporate social responsibility (CSR)⁴ arm of a corporate firm, spoke about the challenges of working in this sector. MT spoke with a lot of passion about how her interest in children's literature allowed her to ensure its inclusion in a project receiving funds to improve *balwadis*.⁵ She said,

⁴ Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives from corporates in India help fund private–public partnerships (PPP) in sectors such as education.

⁵ *Balwadis* are preschools set up by governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to provide early childhood care and education. *Balwadis* provide day care, nutrition and preschool education to children aged between 3 and 5 years. Most *balwadis* remain under-resourced and the teachers are often underpaid. Following the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the re-structuring of educational stages, *balwadis* have been included in the foundational stage for children from 3 to 8 years of age.

"A project that I'm very passionate about, as a CSR person, is working with an organisation working with community-based balwadis. One element that was missing in their work was children's literature, which is so crucial at that stage too. Although there isn't much literature for very young children, what I did was make sure that there were funds for classroom libraries. I discussed this with the NGO person, and because I have access to children's literature and people who work in this area, and other NGOs who would support this... I got this organisation called Bookworm, which works with librarians, to come on board. They worked with the balwadis and now we have 50 to 100 books in each balwadi... we're now training the teachers to use the books with children. I'm hoping for some magic to happen there. I would like that age group to get accustomed to books and stories. Most of the kids come from urban slums where that deprivation exists... where probably books don't exist. So I'm excited that I could initiate this even from a position where I'm held back with a lot of compliance and regulation. So, literature continues to be a big part of me and I try to plug it in where I can... because it's so valuable in creating a welcoming environment."

Often, CSR initiatives are extremely manager-driven, with an emphasis on programme delivery, assessment and scalability. As a result, these initiatives are managed by people holding a master's in business administration (MBA) and the focus is on delivering business results. Although MT mentioned doing an MBA to be able to work in the corporate world, she was especially proud of this initiative which enabled her academic side to shape the project.

Alumni working in various capacities in a range of professions in education spoke about how their learnings from STCL—about the value of stories and children's literature—have enabled them to create an impact. They have exercised their agency as reflective practitioners to carve out a space for themselves in their respective professions. Although many participants suggested the need to extend STCL into more courses in BEIEd, they have also looked for workspaces that support the professional expertise they bring in.

SM: "I was the founding member of Kathamanch, a group working to advocate storytelling as a pedagogical tool. I planned many events and activities in which BEIEd students and faculty as well as DIET [District Institute of Education and Training] students and faculty participated in large numbers. I have written a paper on how linguistic gender manifests in children's literature and can impact readers' cognition."

SS: "I have been involved with Eklavya with its Reading Programme for a year and have worked with individuals and children around storytelling and developing a reading culture."

SN: "I am working with the language team at CETE [Centre for Excellence in Teacher Education] at TISS [Tata Institute of Social Sciences], which focuses on different aspects of language teaching. Storytelling and literature are definitely a part of it. In fact, a lot of discussions and activities are designed around teaching English through literature in the language courses that are offered at the centre for teachers."

Z: "Recently, I got a fellowship under which I am planning to make storybooks for children on queer and trans lives."

KB: "I am associated with a social work organisation where I often narrate stories to orphaned children."

M: "I make online content, so I do record storytelling sessions."

Box 1: Doctoral research studies on elementary education and children's literature

Doctoral research studies in literacy and response to children's literature have certainly contributed to theory-building in this area in the Indian context. Below are some theses submitted recently.

- Pooja Bahuguna (BEIEd alumna): *Exploring Second Grade Children's Reading and Meaning Making Processes* [PhD]
- Swarnlata Sah (BEIEd alumna and teacher educator): *Literacy in Classroom Context with Specific Emphasis on Critical Literacy* [PhD, ongoing]; *Reading Hindi Literature in Elementary School Context* [MPhil]
- Sonika Kaushik (BEIEd alumna and has been a teacher educator): *Children's Engagement with Literacy in the Pre-primary Years* [PhD]
- Shikha Tripathi (has been a BEIEd teacher educator): *A Study of Sixth Grade Children's Response to Literature* [PhD]; *A Study of Sixth Grade Children's Response to Literature* [MPhil]
- Nidhi Kunwar (BEIEd alumna and teacher educator): *Exploring First Grade Children's Writing in Writing Workshops* [PhD]
- Najia Zeb (BEIEd graduate and teacher educator): *Exploring Gender in Children's Literature* [tentative title, PhD, ongoing]

These titles are only a few that I came across. The important idea here is that over the last few years, BEIEd alumni who have gone into research in education and teacher educators teaching in the BEIEd programme have attempted to create more space for research into literacy learning in the early classes. It is also interesting to note that these research studies examine concepts of literacy, such as comprehension, meaning making, writing and response to literature at a micro level in classrooms and schools and not at the macro level of big data.

Building a discourse around children's literature in education has benefitted other organisations, such as NCERT, Room to Read and Parag, in researching and writing for children.

Generating Knowledge through Research

In this section I will briefly describe how research by BEIED alumni has been transforming dominant research trends in education in India, especially in the context of literacy instruction and children's literature. I have also included research studies conducted in area of language and literacy by teacher educators who teach in the BEIED programme. The narratives of alumni doing doctoral research and teacher educators who are working in the BEIED programme and doing PhDs reveal the ways in which topics for research have contributed to knowledge building in the area of children's literature and elementary education (see Box 1). In fact, classroom-based research in elementary education, especially literacy pedagogy, is hugely lacking in India.

Teacher Author: Pride and Vulnerability

Teachers as authors is another narrative strand that emerged during the project. I interviewed alumni who transformed their passion for children's literature into becoming published writers for children. Several of them have written thoughtful stories and poems for children with some of the best publishers of children's literature, such as Room to Read, Eklavya and Pratham.⁶ Interestingly, these teacher authors have written in Indian languages such as Hindi and Malayalam and shared their writing with their own students, creating informal reader–writer networks which have helped them improve and take pride in their work. A 2003 alumna, Sheetal Paul, has set up a community of teacher authors with whom she shares children's literature and conducts writing workshops to encourage them to write for children.

As student teachers read and respond to children's literature, they also become interested in writing for children. The STCL practicum becomes the context in which they explore their own creativity. Several alumni have mentioned that during the classes they were encouraged to write poetry and read it out to each other.

A: "Toh STCL classes mein hamein bola apne naam se poem banao aur phir jab likhne lage toh interesting lagne laga."

"We were asked to write a poem on our own and when we started writing, we felt it was interesting."

As student teachers explore children's literature and the various dimensions of stories, many develop the desire to write. Several alumni have suggested the possibility of STCL offering a platform for publishing student teachers' writing. In fact, the BEIED programme would benefit from encouraging students to get used to sustained writing, which includes not only research reports and academic essays, but also a variety of reflective writing. However, the STCL practicum focuses more on an exploratory study of storytelling and children's literature through dialogical workshops. Perhaps spaces could be created within the practicum where student teachers can experiment with writing stories and poems and share them with each other.

In the second year of the BEIED programme, students also participate in a theoretical course where they learn about the pedagogy of reading and writing. Theories of literacy emphasise the connection between

⁶ Room to Read, Eklavya and Pratham publish children's literature, apart from working in various capacities in the area of education and literacy in India. Room to Read is an international NGO that works in literacy under the PPP model and also sets up libraries. Eklavya is an NGO working in Madhya Pradesh for several decades in the area of science education and creating resources for learning. Pratham is another large NGO working with literacy under the PPP model, besides conducting the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) survey on rural education.

reading and writing to underline that reading facilitates writing because it draws attention to the writer's craft. Experts on the pedagogy of writing also recommend that teachers who write with their students model the processes of writing and help in creating a community of writers in their classrooms. In the West, teachers are also encouraged to write academic and reflective papers on their own pedagogy in professional journals. However, there are very few initiatives that encourage teachers who are passionate about children's literature to grow themselves as authors. Teachers writing stories or poems as an exploration of their own creativity or as an exploration of the teacher–student bond is not a very common practice in Indian classrooms.

A subtle rebellion against policies and practices that dehumanise the teacher is the Teacher Author programme run by Sheetal Paul,⁷ a BEEd alumna of Jesus and Mary College. On her website,⁸ Sheetal writes that the programme emerged from an “organic journey of moving from being a primary school teacher to a published children's literature author”. She goes on to write that learning about language education and the centrality of children's literature in literacy pedagogy, besides her experience at Digantar, an NGO working in rural Rajasthan, motivated her to create “contextual and comprehensive children's literature in the language of her learners”.

Her passion for writing and her interest in children's literature led Sheetal to launch an online community during the COVID-19 pandemic for teachers and educators who would like to write for children. In April 2023, she conducted the eighteenth programme in the series. She inspires teachers to join with these words: “If there is a book, story or a poem that your learners want to read, but if it is not written yet, then YOU teachers, must write it!”. Her website gives us a few samples of the poems and stories written by teachers who joined the Teacher Author programme and have become published writers by engaging with a community of writers.

In her narrative interview, Sheetal shared how the Teacher Author programme began very organically with a batch of 18 teachers:

“And within like 10 days, 18 people had already confirmed their participation and I thought, okay, this is something that people want to explore... the skill of writing and understanding what language is. So, 18 logon ne jab ekdum se haan kaha [when 18 people said yes] and I told them there will be no certificates at the end of it... no, we don't sell drugs, we don't sell certificates. If you want to come, please come. It's a writer's programme and that's it.”

With a lot of pride, Sheetal goes on to say that from a cohort of more than 104 participants, more than 80 per cent have been teachers. She feels that teachers have years of experience in terms of knowing their students and their interests. Moreover, as they write, teachers have been sharing their writing with their students. In Sheetal's words, *“Whatever they've written, they are already taking it to students. So already that presentation, it was happening.”*

⁷ Sheetal has written several titles in Hindi, English and Malayalam for Room to Read which can be accessed at <https://literacycloud.org/users/5800-sheetal-paul>.

⁸ See <https://teacherauthor.in/>

Teacher_Author #16

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Sheetal Paul
Founder@ Teacher_Author

Teacher_Author program is primarily Sheetal's organic journey of moving from being a primary school teacher to a published children's literature author!

Her journey started as a student of Elementary Education@ DU_JMC, wherein the aspect of nature of language and its pedagogy in the primary grades pushed her to explore the whole gamut of Language Education and specifically around the role of literature for her learners! The first work space at an alternative education pr Digantar Jaipur just added to her mo and experience.

Elavak and Eevak are the names of the
a teacherauthor.in

My TAXI

Don't be loud
Dare you shout.
MY TAXI does not
like that pout!
No picking nose.
No combing hair
MY TAXI just act a repair!

OPPOSITE DAY

It's an opposite day
It's an opposite day!
To do my things
in all opposite ways!

I'll walk on my hands,
And cry when I dance
I'll eat from my cup,
And drink while I prance!

I'll laugh when I'm quiet,
And run in my sleep
I'll read in the kitchen,
And drool in my dream!

I'll jump when I'm crawling,
And stand when I fall!
Hey YOU reading my poem,

Figure 1: Sheetal Paul's Teacher Author programme

Source: Paul, 2023

The online platform that Sheetal created has reached student teachers of other universities as well, such as Azim Premji University. Her initiative challenges the dominant discourse in education in India which sees teachers as mere deliverers of pre-prepared lesson plans teaching in highly surveilled classroom spaces.

Bindu Gupta and Ranjeet Kaur are two other teacher authors who have written and published books with Room to Read. In their narrative, both talk about the exciting journey of participating in a residential writers' workshop: ideating, writing, sharing and then having their stories published as picture books.

Figure 2: Bindu Gupta's picture books published by Room to Read



Source: The author

Figure 3: Ranjeet Kaur's picture books published by Room to Read



Source: The author

Figure 4: Meenu Thomas's picture books published by Pratham



Source: The author

Becoming a teacher author has brought both a sense of pride and vulnerability to alumni working as teachers. Bindu, for instance, said that sharing her published books with her students made her feel satisfied because her students felt a lot of pride in their teacher's achievement:

"Aur jab unhein lagta hai unki ma'am ne likha hai toh unki excitement alag level par hoti hai. Vo bolte hain, 'Ma'am, yeh sach mein aapne likha hai?' Vo chahte hain ki vo ghar jayen aur sabko batayen ki unki ma'am ne likha hai. Bachon mein alag level ki khushi dekhne ko mili jab maine unse [books] share kari. Mere liye bahut pride ka moment hota hai aur bachon ke liye bhi jab vo dekhte hain ki unki ma'am ka naam likha hua hai."

"When students realise that the author is their teacher, they feel very excited. They want to take the books home to tell everyone that their teacher is a writer. I feel very proud and so do my students when they see my name on the books."

Sheetal also spoke about the teacher making herself vulnerable as she writes during the Teacher Author workshops and when she shares her writing with her students. The Teacher Author programme incorporates, within the process of writing, the sharing of drafts by teachers with their students. Getting feedback from children is an emotional process as it involves making the self vulnerable. It was fascinating to hear Sheetal talk about vulnerability, because traditionally, in the Indian classroom, the teacher is an authoritarian figure—what Krishna Kumar (2005) describes as the "meek dictator". In Sheetal's words:

"I think an empowered writer would be very vulnerable. And I'm not saying ki koi ise judge kaise karega? Vo [bachche] usme nahi jana chahenge because I haven't seen my learners 'judge' judge [And I'm not saying that students will judge it. My learners did not 'judge' judge]. Definitely critique the protagonists, which I want because [unintelligible] it's so open... and that's so good. But I think we set it out together, some norms, some rules. This is going to be a critical space. Constructive yes but critical and because they were doing something as learners and not anything can be published. So vo ek space rahega but feel free, right? Not apologetically. Don't be shy, besharmo ki tarah likho. Toh vo pehle din se ek bond sa ban jata hai [We create a critical but constructive space. I tell them: Don't be shy, write without shame. This creates a bond from day one]. I remember teachers who work with children with special needs have written for their students. And I really want to get that out as a book. 2-3 teachers have actually written. We've read stories, we've cried around them together, laughed around them. So, I think ek mahaul sa ban jata hai mujhe lag rha hai. Mujhe zyada kuch karna nahi padta. Mujhe lagta hai ki vo kahaniyaan hi fir kar leti hai apne aap [This creates an atmosphere. I don't have to do much. Stories do the rest]. But we write, we critique, we give feedback; and we give respect to others' ideas."

For Sheetal, therefore, vulnerability is a part of the process of writing, as teachers share their writing with each other and with their students. Constructive criticism from each other and from their students helps them become better writers because quality is important while publishing for children. Teachers who have experienced the vulnerability of conferencing around their writing, sharing and editing, would also appreciate the nervousness that their students might face while sharing their writing. In other words, teachers got to experience the discomfort of being learners.

Every Child is a Story

R is a counsellor in a government school. She has also worked as a teacher and a researcher on a project. She mentioned that STCL was one of her favourite courses because it gave her the chance to explore the genre children's literature and discover her potential as a storyteller. As someone who struggled with English, coming from a Hindi-medium educational background, STCL gave her the opportunity to value her first language, Punjabi. Her most memorable moments from STCL were of narrating stories in Punjabi and realising that storytelling, with its emphasis on oral narration using gestures, voice modulation, emphasis and pauses allowed listeners who did not know Punjabi to respond to the story.

R mentioned that while she does not use specific stories to frame her counselling work, she uses the power of narrative to connect with her students:

"Storytelling hee ek element hai jo mujhe help kar raha hai as a counsellor. Jaise ek character se jud pana, uske mind mein kya chal raha hai, uski inner voice kya hai. In counselling also, jab tak hum bachhe ke saath connect nahin kar paate hain, woh kya soch raha hai, uski situation kya hai, uski jagah apne aap ko rakh ke nahin dekh paate, tab tak hum effective nahin ho sakte. Yeh most important element maine storytelling se seekha. This has helped me evolve as a counsellor. Ki aap connect kar paa rahe hain context se, character se, aap soch paa rahe hain ki uski situation kya hai... Maine koi particular story ka sahaara nahin liya hai... woh skills hain jo aapko counsellor ki tarah help karte hain... Mujhe yahi feel hota hai ki every child is a story... I just listen to them as a life story... ki unki journey kya hai... Mere friends bhi mujhe kehte hain ki tum sunti zyada ho bolti kam ho... Mujhe lagta hai every person is a story, every child is a story... If I just listen to them toh who apne aap mein ek story hain."

"Storytelling is the element which helps me as a counsellor. To connect with a character, to enter their mind and connect to their inner voice. In counselling too, till you connect with the child, connect to their situation and place yourself in their situation, you will not be an effective counsellor. I learnt these skills in storytelling. I feel that every child is a story. I just listen to them as a life story, as their journey. My friends tell me that I talk less and listen more. I feel that every person is a story. If you just listen to the child, they are a story."

SN, a BEIEd alumna and a teacher, said,

"I think the most important thing that I learnt in the STCL colloquium was to open up to my students and tell them my own life stories and experiences in order for them to open up to me. The only way to expect honesty from your students is to stay honest with them."

The recognition that we all live storied lives brings in a sense of empathy. It enables teachers to see teaching as a very human enterprise which "means taking seriously both the quest for life's meaning and the call to care for persons" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 2). In fact, Witherell and Noddings (1991) point out that the notion of "caring" is especially important in education as it "emphasises the relational nature of human interaction and of all moral life" (p. 4). Both in counselling and teaching, trust and caring are based on dialogue, which allows for a negotiation of meaning and does not occur in a vacuum.

These meaning systems are contextual and shaped by personal and cultural histories. Thus, narrative and dialogue “can lead to new insights, compassionate judgement, and the creation of shared knowledge and meanings that can inform professional practice” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 8). With its emphasis on stories and storying, STCL enabled student teachers to see narrative as an epistemological tool; as a way of knowing themselves and their students.

Narrative as a cognitive process

BEEd alumni spoke about the value of narratives and stories while teaching other subjects, especially in the primary classes.

HV: “I regularly tell stories about various problems in our society and relate the concept to stories and make my own stories to make the concept interesting... For example, word problems in Maths. Stories help me relate mathematical problems to their daily life.”

SB: “I am using storytelling to explain all subjects. Storytelling makes my classroom interesting and energetic.”

HK: “I have developed a hobby of making digital comics and have an Instagram page ‘@KuHiistic’ for the same. I post my daily life situations in the form of comics.”

There were many narratives where teachers spoke about challenging the binary of stories being restricted to language classrooms and other subjects focusing on teaching abstract conceptual ideas.

NARRATIVES FROM TEACHER EDUCATORS

Teaching as a “Cerebral” Activity

Engaging critically with several political, sociological and philosophical issues in education, reading and reflecting on them enabled several alumni as student teachers to develop respect for the profession of teaching. An intense teacher education programme such as the BEEd with courses in literacy and children's literature, goes much beyond teaching “methods” courses to student teachers. It requires student teachers to engage deeply with political and sociological challenges of literacy.

S: “I never wanted to be a teacher and I never thought that they were important enough. But when I came to the course, when I joined the programme, I realised that being a teacher is, I mean, it is an activity which is also very cerebral... otherwise it felt like ki koi bhi teacher ban jata hai [anyone can be a teacher]. You know, there was so much to engage with. You had to constantly think, you had to reflect, you had to form an opinion about things, you had to be critical. So, it changed my worldview about education in a way, the whole programme.”

Linda Christensen (2009) describes her work as a teacher for 24 years in a working-class neighbourhood as “teaching for joy and justice” by locating the curriculum in the students' lives. She used books, stories, poems and essays to help her students critically examine the world. Christensen describes good teaching as demanding and complex:

Teaching is like life, filled with daily routines – laundry, cooking, cleaning the bathtub – and then moments of brilliance. We get up intending to create the classroom of our imagination and ideals. Sometimes we reach that place, but often we're doing the spade work that makes those moments possible: mining student lives for stories, building a community where risk-taking can happen, teaching historical background in preparation for insights and connections, or revising drafts – again and again. Those moments of empowerment and illumination are built on the foundation of hard work that often doesn't look shining or glorious. Teaching, really teaching, in a classroom with too many students – both the engaged and the unengaged – is both difficult and rewarding. Teachers don't make enough money; we're treated as intellectually inferior, in need of external 'accountability' programmes and 'training'. (Christensen, 2009, p. 11)

In fact, even policy documents and curriculum frameworks hardly see teaching as an intellectually demanding activity.

Storytelling and Children's Literature as an Open Pedagogical Space for Teacher Educators

The narratives of teacher educators also give insights into how varied the pedagogical and content space for STCL has been. Practicum/colloquium spaces, which are open spaces, have allowed teacher educators

in various colleges to organise in different ways the learning around children's literature for their students. Thus, the narrative stories of teachers have also been catalogues of curricular interpretations of the STCL colloquium. From challenging the notion of universal childhood, to examining children's literature from the perspective of representation, to spending time listening and responding to interpretations of peers in an interpretive community have been some ways in which teacher educators spoke about creating "reading teachers".

Besides this, workshops with experts, interactive sessions with writers, visiting libraries and book fairs and building small individual libraries have been organised to take student teachers outside the classroom. Performing stories individually or in groups, with or without props, conducting interactive reading aloud sessions and developing visual literacy are some other experiences that both alumni and teacher educators have listed. Each of the eight colleges under study here has focused differently on these, depending on how the teacher educators have interpreted the course. While this might have created a differential learning curve across the BEIEd colleges, it has also allowed teacher educators to exercise their agency.

SM: *"When I teach the STCL now, every year I learn something new. Every year, I have a new insight ki haan ye kar sakte hain, ye kar sakte hain. Bahut exciting practicum hai aur usme thankfully abhi tak space hai [Every year I have new insights into what can be done. It's a very exciting practicum and it still has space]. Every year I try to figure out spaces where we can do something different, like collecting children's rhymes, or getting into the literature of different languages. So, for example, this year, we are trying to figure out ki kis kis marginalised language ka ya dusri languages ka literature we can collect and from where [It's a very exciting practicum and it still has space... this year we're trying to figure out in which marginalised languages we can collect literature and from where.]. I see a lot of hope in that and a lot of space, which really, I mean we can explore, all the faculty who are teaching this."*

S: *"We do not have to make storytelling a very gimmicky kind of an activity, you know, where we're using endless props, and you're using all kinds of voice modulations. It could be a very simple, you know, the rendering of a story, a very quiet thing that you do."*

IM: *"Actually, I have a huge collection of children's books... those which are rare nowadays... like Russian books... so I used to take those books with me... and distribute among the students. They would all read... everybody was given a book... so they would read the book and then we would analyse it... what they thought about the book... For example, books like Kamla Bhasin's Meeto... Mahasweta Devi's Kyun Kyun Chhori... and Safdar Hashmi's books... such wonderful books... most of them have never got to read these books in their childhood."*

SW: *"Literacy ko kaise bal sahitya ke madhyam se connect kiya jaye? Toh uske liye toh ek kitab chahiye, and students need an orientation on how to handle a book, how to show print. Bata dene mein to bada asaan lagta hai... but when you start doing it then you start fumbling also and you begin to mismanage it. So why not practice those things in the STCL classroom? So, let's do it, so everybody will do read alouds. Take a book, preferably a big book with a big font size and just imagine that you are dealing with second or third grade children because these*

are foundational years when you really need to strengthen reading and writing. Toh big book lo aur read aloud karo. Because in LAC, students learn the emergent literacy perspective... print ki directionality kya hoti hai, kitab ka kya hota hai, thik hai, kitaab ki ek bhasha hoti hai. Kahaani humesha tum sunake chor nahi sakte ho. To aapko kuch to usko bandhna padega. So what can be the possible follow up activities which you can conduct after doing a read aloud from a big book? Toh main pichle kuch saalo mein in par kuch zyada emphasis karti hoon kyunki otherwise agar hum dekhe ki jo sarkari schools mai bache aate hai they are not the privileged ones... but these children coming from underprivileged sections. They don't have this privilege of access, of having so many books and other reading material around them. So how are they going to get that exposure to print, which we know is very crucial for developing reading and writing? Why not do read aloud sessions frequently in the classroom and learn to do it well in STCL?"

"My aim is to connect literacy with children's literature. For that, my students need to know how to handle a book, how to read aloud from it. This seems very easy but when students actually try it, there are many challenges. So, we do lots of read alouds. It connects with the emergent literacy perspective which they study in LAC. What do you do with a storybook in class? What follow up activities can you do? I focus a lot on all this in STCL. When my students intern in government-run schools, they teach underprivileged children who do not have the privilege of access to books and reading material. So how are they going to get that exposure to print, which we know is very crucial for developing reading and writing? So why not do read aloud frequently in the classroom and learn to do it well in STCL?"

The teacher educators' narratives give insights into professional journeys made over several years in a social context with the support of a small community of peers. The solidarity of the peer group, in the absence of systemic support or even recognition of the centrality of children's literature in the language classroom, has helped build the knowledge base for this colloquium.

SK: "Hum bahut kuch kar sakte hai storytelling mein. Hume bahut kuch karne ki zarurat bhi hai. Ek toh exchange of ideas iski bahut zarurat hai mujhe lagta hai because there are certain things which I know, I think I know. But jab hum baat cheet karte hai na aap ki bhi or humari bhi understanding bahut clear [hoti hai]... bahut nuances mein nahi ja pate otherwise."

"We can do a lot with STCL. We need to exchange ideas, I think this is very important. When we talk, we deepen our understanding. Otherwise, we are not able to go into nuances. Together we can."

What SK and other teacher educators emphasised is the creation of a small community of teacher educators and alumni which values the centrality of children's literature and storytelling in the pedagogy of language and literacy. Teacher educators shared stories of how they not only built libraries of children's literature in their colleges, but also built discourse in this academic area. This small community has nurtured new entrants—teacher educators and students—by sharing new insights through regular meetings and workshops. Fighting for space for children's literature in traditional synthetic phonics classrooms for their own teacher interns in government schools and hoping that classroom research into this would create support for STCL in elementary classrooms has been the way forward for most teacher educators.

CONCLUSION: ABOUT HOPE

The conclusions from this project will strengthen faith in an intensive teacher education programme such as the BEIEd. The project revealed how BEIEd alumni have taken their learnings from STCL in different directions: valuing children's literature in their classrooms, building personal libraries, becoming children's authors and developing the discourse in this domain through research. Not only did the alumni enjoy STCL as a colloquium, becoming storytellers and readers, but they were also able to make connections with other courses, such as theatre and LAC. The narratives of teacher educators reveal how the open format of the course enabled them to exercise greater agency in interpreting STCL and hence enriching the course itself.

I hope that insights and conclusions from the project will also feed into the programme as a whole, and the STCL course specifically, to strengthen it further. The myriad ways in which teacher educators across the BEIEd colleges have interpreted this open-ended colloquium points to the power of creating more such spaces in higher education, which offer possibilities of learning in more dialogical ways rather than very structured programmes with summative assessments at the end. Besides this, the research might also suggest the way forward for the National Council for Teacher Education–designed Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), which is being developed as the flagship programme for the entire country. In its current form, ITEP follows the path set out by NEP 2020, with an excessive focus on foundational literacy and a continuing skill-based approach even in the later classes. Challenging these policy frameworks, we need to underscore that a teacher of language and literacy will not be a competent reading teacher till they are a reader themselves. Understanding the connection between literacy and literature and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to become readers through access to good literature will require teachers who have had the education to understand the socio-cultural aspects of literacy.

What has changed is the fact that academic writing on teaching and teacher education often regards the profession as a space of siege, constantly under attack from neoliberal policy shifts. The insights from this project reveal the subtle forms of resistance that teachers and teacher educators have repeatedly voiced in their own words to protect their professional spaces, to keep up the integrity of their work and do their best for their students in the face of demands for mechanically teaching to the test.

The project underscores the importance of an intensive and well-planned teacher education programme, such as the BEIEd, in producing teachers who can make theory–practice connections, engage with larger questions of education to understand their own professional identity and continue to fight for the sanctity of their pedagogical space. These situated forms of agentic action and subtle forms of resistance offer hope as BEIEd graduates find ways of working around the dominant neoliberal discourse, which sees teachers as merely implementers of changing national policies in education. Alumni narratives, which delve into past and present stories of teaching, highlight the power of engaging with narratives of alumni involved with education in various contexts, from teaching in different schools, to becoming counsellors, to going for higher education and interpreting policy in the development sector. This research reveals that developing teachers from the BEIEd programme construct their identities in much more agentic ways, as intellectuals who thoughtfully and critically engage with government policies.

In many similar ways, the narratives from teacher educators highlight the work that they put in towards keeping hope alive. All teacher educators speak about their professional development, the intellectually challenging ways they have engaged student teachers and the sense of community which drives their professional identity.

The trend in education towards big data and randomised controlled trials drowns out the everyday classroom narrative voices of teachers and teacher educators. It is in these stories that hope is enacted and intersections of the personal, social and professional are seen to be shaped by institutional, cultural and linguistic narratives. The project reveals teachers and teacher educators welcoming the articulation of their narratives as ways of becoming; as reflecting on their journeys to understand their personal and professional selves better.

The disruption in education caused by the pandemic drove home the importance of the teacher in keeping children engaged in learning in spite of huge inequalities in access. Thus, socially just and equitable education systems will have to place the teacher at the centre. Teacher education programmes such as the BEEd prepare teachers to engage with the Indian context and to examine the challenges around literacy education in India. This project focused on the stories of teachers and teacher educators who do the hard work of creating hope in individual contexts where they attempt to define literacy in socially-constructivist ways which are meaningful for teachers and students rather than narrow concepts of literacy as a set of skills.

It is also important to underline another key finding from this project: that the fight for teacher agency has to be fought continuously. Teachers need to be supported through systemic changes in examinations, teacher recruitment and how in-service teacher education is conducted. Thus, the curricular fight to include a study of children's literature in teacher education programmes, where it is significant in its absence, might be a first step. This study highlights how a course in storytelling and children's literature can prepare teachers committed to making their students successful readers and writers. It also underlines that the job of teaching children to read cannot be left to prescriptive worksheets, simplified texts and standardised tests. The emphasis on FLN in NEP 2020 and the Delhi government's Mission Buniyaad can be countered only by teachers who are educated to understand the value of children's literature and other print materials in a constructivist classroom where reading and writing are meaningful social activities. This also means creating space to recognise teachers as professionals who are self-empowered and allowed to use their body of knowledge.

Several alumni mentioned the constant pressure on their time to write reports, keep records and upload data on government databases, leaving them with little time to teach, leave alone read children's literature. Finding space and legitimacy for building a reading culture in school would also require creating reading communities among teachers and allowing them time to read and talk about books with colleagues. In fact, one teacher in a private school mentioned that post the pandemic, schools have cut down on teacher recruitment, thus adding to their workload. Thus, a statutory requirement for reading and studying children's literature in teacher education programmes and supporting teachers in creating response-based language classrooms would require a concerted effort at many levels.

Pre-service teacher education, which brings together theory and practice, may not be the answer to all the challenges in education, but does have a huge role to play in constructing a positive teacher identity and agency. The project underlines the need for more narrative analysis into how teachers construct stories and narratives of professional sustenance from their own experience. These stories of hope might ensure greater professional and personal agency for teachers and teacher educators in contexts where neoliberal forces undermine the teacher's role in the classroom.

Finally, the self-reflexive stories from alumni and teacher educators offer possibilities of what Giroux (2015) describes as "educated hope", which is not based on an empty sense of optimism, but emerges by developing "the capacities to think, question, doubt, imagine the unimaginable".

As Larsen (2009) points out, the work lives of university teachers are often described in terms of workload calculations, effective pedagogy and managing diversity and student needs, often leaving unspoken "deeply meaningful, more personal stories of teaching" (p. 151). These "personal hope stories of work" are very valuable in countering the dominant and powerful "institutional cover stories" framed around questions of efficiency and outcomes.

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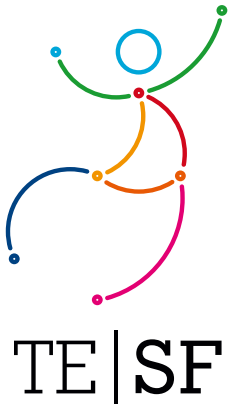
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