

PERSPECTIVES ON THE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPONENT WITHIN THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

SAESHA PILLAI

Abstract

The paper looks at a key issue in teacher education, that of developing teachers who are caring, humane, reflective practitioners with the ability to work with the socio-emotional aspects of children, ensuring that children develop holistically. This, when in the light of a competitive and achievement-oriented society; social and emotional struggles for children are looming constantly. The paper, primarily uses a qualitative and some quantitative aspects to highlight three types (Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3) of perspectives that participants hold, on the socio-emotional learning component in their pre-service teacher education program in a government Teacher Education Institute in Mysuru. The participants are mainly student teachers and model-school alumni teachers as well as teacher educators, whose perspectives are analysed to conclude that they majorly belong to the Type 2 perspective where they have an understanding of socio-emotional aspects of children and its importance, but largely in theory and not as much in implementation and it exists mainly for certain children, who visibly have socio-emotional issues, versus it being an integral part of learning to be considered for 'all' children.

Key Words: Socio-Emotional aspects of children, Teacher as a reflective practitioner, Teacher Education Program.

Perspectives on the Socio-Emotional Learning component within the Pre-service Teacher Education Program

In a society that is tending towards extreme competition and increased stress; where academic and material achievement is becoming the yardstick for success rather than the quality of an individual's life based on their social, emotional, physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing; it depends on education to enable us towards a more humane future through creating caring, well-rounded, reflective individuals. (Hernandez-Amoros, Urrea Solano, June 2016).

Saesha Pillai MA in Education 2018-20, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. A Dance Movement Therapy Practitioner with a Diploma in DMT from Kolkata Sanved and TISS, Mumbai. A Fellow and a Program Manager with Teach For India, from 2012-2017 in Mumbai. Interest areas include: Contemplative Practices 'in' and 'as' Education, the SEE Learning Framework, teacher wellbeing and its impact on student wellbeing and the field of children's literature.

A classroom interaction is then incomplete without a teacher having a holistic understanding of children to be able to develop them holistically. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) too, states the important role of teachers in developing the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral and spiritual aspects of human beings, while also acknowledging the current need for reflective teachers, who with their positive outlooks and beliefs about children, will make up for the neglect of these aspects in the past years. (NCFTE 2010, pg. 15). This gives further reasons to delve into understanding, how the curriculum of a Teacher Education Program (TEP) enables this capacity in aspiring teachers.

Learning is enhanced in a positive classroom environment which thus, becomes the responsibility of the teacher to create. To do so, a teacher needs to understand multiple aspects of children beyond their intellectual (cognitive) ability. The aspects include understanding the context of the child and child's emotional make-up i.e., socio-emotional aspects as well as wellbeing of every child. One of the spaces for a teacher to inculcate these outlooks through formal education would be the teacher education programs that include both pre-service and in-service TEPs. However, this study focused on the pre-service program as it lays the foundational knowledge for a student teacher. With changes having been made to the B.Ed curriculum (from the one year to two year time-frame and inter-disciplinary approach), the research aimed to study the perspectives of different participants on how the current curriculum and its transaction enables an understanding of these socio-emotional aspects of children.

Context of the Site:

The Institute of Teacher Education visited for the study, is among the earliest few institutes established by National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) with an objective of providing qualitative improvement of school education through innovative pre-service and in-service teacher training programs and relevant research.

Located in Mysuru, it was founded in August 1963, and it extends technical and academic support to the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and UTs of Lakshadweep and Puducherry for pre-service education with an affiliation to University of Mysore as well as all India for post graduate programs. It has a large residential campus with hostel, staff quarters, a Demonstration model school (DMS) and other facilities all present within the campus. Given it is a government run institute there are clear strict, procedures and protocols followed by both students and faculties for daily functions.

Under the main research question of ‘What are the perspectives of participants on the socio-emotional learning component within the Pre-service Teacher Education Program?’ the following were the research objectives of the study.

Research Objectives- To understand the participant’s perspective on:

- Their understanding of socio-emotional aspects of children and its importance.
- Their perspective on the socio-emotional component in the B.Ed curriculum and its implementation.
- Their perspective on their handling of socio-emotional aspects of children in the classroom (internship).
- The Challenges faced in all of the above.

The participants chosen for our study were: Student Teachers, Teachers (at the model school) and Teacher Educators at the Institute.

Literature Review:

Changing views on Teacher Education:

NCFTE 2009’s vision for Teacher Education poses an important question-

“What value does teacher education add to the prospective teacher’s ability to face challenges of facilitating the development of critical and creative students and subsequently adults?” (NCFTE, 2009)

Over the years, teacher education has undergone multiple reforms to make it more eclectic, integrated and professional. Hence, reforms in teacher education has been one of the abiding concerns of various education commissions and committees’ reports and has further led to the establishment of statutory and advisory bodies to regulate teacher education as well as comprehensive teacher education institutes country wide. (NCFTE, 2009)

Mapping these changes across philosophical basis of education and learning, the syllabus for the two-year B. Ed program published by NCERT provides a conceptual shift in understanding crucial components of teacher education-

1. *Learner* from passive recipient to an active participant in the process of learning
2. *Teacher* from being a source of knowledge to a facilitator of transforming information into knowledge
3. *Knowledge* as multi-disciplinary in nature within the context of education

Therefore, the teacher-education program was envisioned to provide adequate scope for viewing theoretical understanding and its practical aspects in a more integrated manner rather than separate compartments. (Syllabus for Two-year Bachelor of Education, NCERT first edition, February 2012)

Based on the recommendations of the Justice Verma Commission, the B.Ed program has been enhanced from one year to two years by NCTE from the academic year 2015 to incorporate a deeper and more protracted engagement with school-based experience and reflective and critical engagement with theory. This brought about a change in the concepts of educational psychology being taught as learning theories on to understand children's learning & thinking and development. Themes of growing up, understanding the learner are now meant to enable teachers to look at children as feeling, thinking, developing humans.

Educational Psychology: It's role in a Teacher Education Program:

In the words of E.A. Peel, "Educational psychology helps the teacher to understand the development of his/her pupils, the range and limits of their capacities, the processes by which they learn and their social relationships." (Parankimalil, March 9, 2012)

Educational Psychology as a discipline, thus covers the ambit of human development, teaching and learning, motivation, emotional and moral development and social relationships within the formal school environment.

That, it is necessary and presents itself in teacher preparation programs around the world as standard courses since at least a 100 years cannot be denied. (Nezhad, Vahedi, 2011). Even in India, the curriculum documents ranging from 1967-1988, across the Universities of Udaipur, Gandhi Hindi Vidyapith and University of Delhi all show the presence of 'Educational Psychology' as a course area of study. The module on 'Childhood and Growing up' under the course of 'Perspectives in Education' in the current B.Ed Curriculum, has units on 'Development and Learning' and 'Stages for Child Development: Implications for Teachers' which aim to enable student teachers to work with the socio-emotional aspects of children, creating a positive classroom environment and to enable a holistic wellbeing of children. (Syllabus for Two-year Bachelor of Education, NCERT, 2016). The course outline of the institute we visited also had on the same lines, the module of 'Understanding the learner', 'Teaching and Learning' under the 'Perspective Courses' that were conducted early on in the first year of the two year course as part of foundational courses.

With a clear presence of theories of learning and ways of understanding the socio-emotional make-up of children in the curriculums, what was then seen as a point of contention, was the time and opportunities for student teachers to apply, practice in real time these theories learnt in the classroom rather than view them as theories in isolation to the rest of pedagogical learning. (Nezhad, Vahedi, 2011). We to study the integration of theories that deal with the socio-emotional aspects of children into the curriculum at our institute as well as look for if and how these play out in the practice of the student teachers and practicing teachers.

Socio-emotional aspects of children

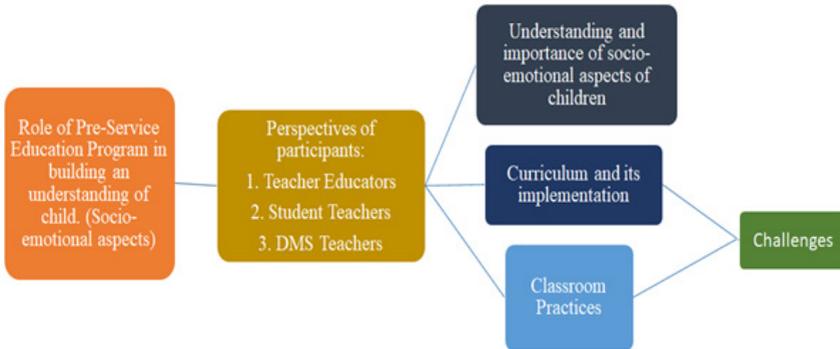
“Social-emotional development includes the child’s experience, expression, and management of emotions and the ability to establish positive and rewarding relationships with others” (April 12, 2018, Socio- emotional development domain, California department of education, retrieved from <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/itf09socemodev.asp>)

The core features of socio- emotional development include the ability to identify and understand one’s own feelings, to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others, to manage strong emotions and their expression in a constructive manner, to regulate one’s own behavior, to develop empathy for others, and to establish and maintain relationships. (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004, 2)

In the context of the intergenerational view of life, the teacher’s own development is as critical as his or her ability to be generative towards the next generation. (Batra S, 2013)

Children seek cognitive stimulation, purposeful social exchange and emotional development. To meet their needs it becomes essential, to focus on what, why and how we develop the needed skills in teachers to provide learning opportunities for children. A teacher’s own reflective practices thus also adds to his/her ability to work with the socio-emotional aspects of children.

Conceptual Framework:



Based on our earlier stated understanding of the pre-service Teacher Education program with its changes over the course of time; our understanding of socio-emotional learning as a concept for teachers within a widely existent discipline of ‘Educational Psychology’; we aimed to study the above depicted concepts in greater detail.

We prioritized:

- a. Understanding what participants mean by ‘socio-emotional aspects’ of children and the importance they associate to it.
- b. Getting perspectives of participants on the scope of the curriculum and its implementation, for building socio-emotional understanding of children and the challenges associated with it.
- c. Understanding the practical challenges involved for participants in imparting (for teacher educators) as well as handling (for student and DMS teachers) the social-emotional aspects of children.

Methodology:

The two week study was primarily qualitative with some aspects being quantitative. Considering the data involved perspectives, rich descriptions of participant views on their current B.Ed curriculum and its implementation as well as their classroom practices were considered.

Methods:

Sample Set: The sampling for the study was done through snow-ball sampling and simple random sampling.

Student teacher participants were from the 2nd year B.Ed class of twenty three students in the age range of 21-37 years, with average age being 24 years.

The teacher educators were senior teachers at the institute, having 32 years and 18 years of experience respectively at the institute; teaching the 'knowledge and curriculum', 'guidance and counselling' and 'understanding the learner', among other courses in the institute.

The school teachers were alumni graduates of the institute teaching at the model school connected to the institute, since seven months and three years respectively.

1. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Four student teacher interviews, two model school teacher interviews and two teacher educator interviews were undertaken apart from other informal conversations with students (including one with a 2nd year M.Ed student)
2. **Classroom Observations:** One teacher educator's class on 'Inclusive education' and one model school teacher's revision class in grade two were observed.
3. **Informal Focus Group Discussion:** One FGD was done with five student teachers.
4. **Survey with one classroom of student teachers:** There were twenty three respondents, i.e. the class of 2nd year B.Ed students who responded to a written survey intended to get a pulse of the class on their perspectives on socio-emotional aspects of children.

Limitations of the scope of the study:

1. The time period of the study being two weeks, it enabled a limited sample set although it did give enough time for strong relationship building with the existing sample set of participants.
2. Also, it being during the last semester of the course, scope for classroom observations for student teachers, as well as observing the initial, 'Perspective Courses' that covered topics of interest for the study were not feasible. Thus the study relies on perspectives shared by the participants about their own experience of their classes and their own practice during the internships.

Observations and Analysis:

For each of the research sub-questions/objectives, observations and their analysis were as follows:

1. Socio-emotional understanding and its importance:

In a survey question that gave choices of,

1. Children expressing and managing their emotions
2. Children comprehending emotional states in others
3. Children self-regulating their emotions and behaviour
4. Children establishing and maintaining positive relationships
5. All of the above

82.6 % (19 of 23) of the respondents chose ‘all of the above’ survey option, indicating the probability of a holistic understanding of socio-emotional aspects of children, however the interviews and group discussions conducted later show that there are leanings towards some aspects more than others as well as a range of different understandings of socio-emotional aspects ranging from ‘catering to children’s individual differences’ to ‘discipline as a means of caring for children’s needs’. A common thread of observation was to see majority of the participants, associating socio-emotional aspects mainly to those children labelled as deviants or those with visible distress, emotional issues. A sample response from a student teacher was, *“Boys and girls, will face many problems stress, background of family, disabilities, psychological problems, adolescence problems, One of my students very poor, mother used to work in a shop, no father, I did personal case study on that and gave guidance to him and for my class he started coming.”* That socio-emotional aspects of ‘all’ children need to be considered irrespective of them having or not having visible issues, wasn’t a popular view.

Also, 22 out of 23 student teachers said on the survey, that as to-be teachers they consider their role to meet the student’s socio-emotional needs as ‘Highly Important’ (1 person said ‘Important’), showing a clear acceptance of the said statement. What is interesting to note is the rationales of the student teachers with regards to understanding children’s needs beyond academics, some of which seemed slightly vague, reasons like “Because they are the future citizens of our country” and “Most time of children is spent with teachers more than with parents”. Few were also clear reasons of “A holistic development will have to include me taking care of the socio-emotional needs” and “It is important for effective learning in the classroom”. In general though, participants did cover areas of ‘emotional regulation during outbursts’

and 'wellbeing' (understanding them outside the classroom), 'inter-personal relationships between children and teacher and between peers', 'adolescent struggles' and others as areas of socio-emotional aspects of children that need attention.

2. Socio-emotional aspects in the Institute's B.Ed curriculum:

Through conversations, most participants identified, that the 'Perspective Courses' in their curriculum included modules of 'Understanding the learner', 'Teaching and learning' which covered aspects of social and emotional needs of children, teachers catering to a child's context, getting to know student's interests and taking into consideration children's individual differences when planning for lessons. The 'Inclusive Education' course, too some perceived as giving them an understanding of children with special needs and building sensitivity towards them. However, it can be noted from the teacher educator's perspective as well as the student teachers' that they did see that these were only 2-3 out of many modules of the B.Ed curriculum.

One of the clear learnings from the curriculum, which most of the student teachers, articulated, was the 'Constructivist approach' that the institute's curriculum seemed to focus on strongly. Its connection to the topic of study could be seen in the way that the student teachers were encouraged to create spaces for enquiry and to spend time understanding children's current experiences to build on their learning as well as to value and cater to children's individual needs as mentioned above. Thus not looking at children as passive receivers of knowledge but as active learners, was a mindset that most participants identified with strongly. A teacher educator's view on it was, "*Earlier the paper was more oriented to the discipline of psychology than from the orientation of education and understanding the learner. More of psychology less of education. Also behaviouristic orientation. Now trying to understand the child and the constructivist philosophy.*" This was clearly done with the aim of moulding, more humane teachers.

A key component of the curriculum which according to the participants, created major learning of the socio-emotional aspects of children were the practical components of the curriculum which include the SAP (4 weeks of the School Attachment Program) and 15 weeks of Internship in the third semester coupled with 1 week of community engagement, that gave a hands-on experience of understanding the various needs of children in reality. A resounding sentiment was that the internship experience really pulled student teachers out of their comfort zones, making them consider a number of new perspectives about working with children and the challenges of their role. A teacher educator when articulating the importance of the internship in

helping students see the value and need of building strong relations, said, *“Any amount of saying in the classroom will not help, it has to be felt during the internship to reach out to children.”*

3. Challenges in transaction of socio-emotional components of the curriculum:

Honest reflections came through, with participants sharing openly about the pedagogical courses in the institute, getting more time and weightage as compared to the perspective courses. The perspective courses, were viewed by both the first year and second year students as basic foundational courses which could be skimmed through leaving attention and time for the more important, rigorous, pedagogy courses that carried more weightage. One of the teacher educator’s shared that, *“They are getting not much exposure to understand the child. It is theoretical but not much experienced understanding despite internships. Requires more planned activities, but constraints as number of student teachers are more; limitations as part of system to provide opportunities in the time table”*

Another challenge seen by some student teachers, was that two years, was not enough for preparing to become a teacher who is skilled to work on the holistic development of children. The sentiment shared was that the curriculum helps in building teaching skills (how to teach) and build perspective on children but does not give in-depth preparation to understand behavioral and emotional aspects of children.

One of the model school teacher’s emphatic statement was, *“University teaching, can help with the teaching skills but on a personal note, I’m implementing methods on my own to understand children. My B.A.B.Ed helped only so much. They have taught methods and techniques on how to take a lesson. I have come up with my own ideas for understanding children”*

A perspective shared and observed by us in practice, was that the relationship between the teacher educator and the student teachers played a role in the student teachers’ willingness to seek support regarding struggles or issues they face when working with children in the classroom. A reflection they shared during the focus group discussion was that, they hadn’t post the field engagements spent quality time reflecting on their work with children back with their teachers educators to look into their own biases and improve themselves. In line with this opinion, was the opinion of the teacher educators who shared that, *“the structure of Reflective journal for writing learnings post field engagements, gets seen as a task. It is a business to complete for some of the students. Only some take it seriously and fill regularly”*.

Honest and open sharing of the teacher educators brought to light the structural challenge in focusing strongly on the socio-emotional component of the curriculum and integrating it across the subjects as is the aim of the institute in line with the recommendations of the NCFTE. They shared that, “There is less teacher interaction possible; 25% time is spent teaching. Rest of the time is spent on administrative work, in-service programs and research projects. Have to sometimes skip classes for other work. Don’t get to brainstorm much with other teacher educators. Socio-emotional aspects hasn’t been a topic much, maybe vaguely.” They also shared that, “There is a lack of collective thinking among a heterogeneous group of TE’s (teacher educators)” Those with ‘discipline knowledge’ and those with ‘learner knowledge’ do not get the time to interact with one another leading to courses in the curriculum being transacted in more or less isolated manner and not in the supposed, inter-disciplinary way.

Another structural constraint shared very candidly was, that, “There is a mass production of teachers, no time hence. Students are coming not by choice but by chance, reducing the status of the profession, it is seen as a professional course, no genuine thought to help.” Thus while there may be a unison in belief between the student teachers and the educators, but there are clear gaps in implementation owing to the above mentioned factors.

4. Challenges in the teacher’s practice with regards to socio-emotional aspects:

Interestingly, during the initial survey, 17 out of 23 student teachers, responded with an ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ when asked if feeling well-prepared by the university preparation to identify and meet the socio-emotional needs of children. However, during interviews and the focus group discussions, what came through were strong articulations of struggles that the student teachers faced when catering to the diverse needs of children during their internship experiences. Each participant had a number of examples to cite about behavioral, emotional, social issues that children in their class faced that pushed their lesson plans aside. All the interviewees shared the spontaneous, need based handling of situations they needed to do in the classrooms.

Some statements shared were as follows:

“Before going for internship, thought I was prepared, but after going on the field, realized I’m not. Cried in the initial days because could not handle children, was not prepared to deal with adolescent issues.”

“Didn’t know how to deal with students getting too attached.”

“Meeting individual needs of children in a large classroom with syllabus to complete is difficult.”

“Confidence as a teacher is coming from content readiness and hence other aspects lower on priority”

They cited examples of strategies they used such as, creating a space for children to share emotions, using art for expression, spending informal time with students outside class to play with them and get to know them etc. ‘Group activity’, ‘Peer learning’ were the most common answers for when asked what they’d do in practice to create a positive classroom environment.

A clear sentiment and perspective across the board however was that, “Small or big students, if we cannot reach out to students, then somewhere problem with us not with students. Somewhere, we are wrong” It showed a lack of skill and time and not a lack of will.

Key Findings and Interpretations:

In response to the main research objective of, “understanding participant perspectives on the socio-emotional learning component within the pre-service teacher education program”, the above mentioned four themes, enable us to cull out three overarching types of perspectives.

The three types of participant perspectives on the socio-emotional learning component:

Type 1: These were perspectives which in theory stated socio-emotional aspects as important but lacked clarity and depth in the rationale, indicating a focus on pedagogy and strong teaching of lessons in practice over understanding children. These were held by those who believed that content knowledge gives a teacher the confidence to face students over being friends or showing empathy to children. These were perspectives of satisfaction with the course without questioning, believing it had prepared them well for working with children on the whole. These included seeing teaching including disciplining children from time to time, punishing or glaring to quieten them sometimes as inevitable and acceptable to conduct classes. Socio-emotional aspects weren’t considered or reflected upon much by those with type 1 perspective and hence they didn't seem to have strong opinions on the curriculum, its implementation and their own practices. This type of perspectives spoke generally of loving all children, treating them all as equal and the like kind of broad stroke statements but conversations revealed biases and labelling of children based on ability done in unawareness.

Type 2: These were perspectives which saw socio-emotional aspects as important part of their work, with a clear rationale about it being necessary for holistic development of children. This type of perspective held socio-emotional understanding as understanding children beyond their behaviour in the class, included building strong relationships with children, building peer relations among children and getting to know their home situations. However it majorly brought in the socio-emotional aspects in relation with handling the 'difficult', deviant children, 'troublesome' children, thus it indicated a 'fixing a bad situation' mind set for the classroom. Those with this type of perspective were questioning their preparation in B.Ed through reflecting post their internship when nudged through questions; feeling shaky. These were perspectives that could identify the loop holes in the institute's implementation of the curriculum, the lack of spaces and opportunity as well as weak relationships with faculty to reflect on difficult classroom situations for support, but they still saw it as something coming in the way of actual learning and not an integral part of learning itself.

Both type 1 and 2 perspectives, saw 'understanding the learner' and 'teaching the learner' as separate, isolated components which needed differential focus.

Type 3: These were perspectives which saw socio-emotional aspects of a classroom being cared for as integral to the holistic development of children. This type saw 'All' children's social and emotional wellbeing as an important matter and not just that of the 'troublemakers' in a class. They had spent time reflecting on their practices realizing that more experience was needed to keep trying different ways of understanding children's needs. These were perspectives that saw 2 years as a short duration for building strong teachers and believed in theory and practice needing to be strongly inter-linked and immersive. It held a broader vision of a teacher as seeing 'understanding the learner' and 'teaching the learner' as needing to go hand in hand. This was a reflective perspective and its bearers seemed to have a strong will to be teachers who care for the child's holistic development. They saw the B.Ed experience as a valuable starting point but also recognized its limitations and saw purpose in taking initiative to start dialogue and discussions among teachers and students regarding giving more importance to the socio-emotional aspects of children.

While only few participants can be said to fall under the Type 1 and Type 3 of the typology, majority of the student teachers seem to be holding Type 2 perspectives based on the observations, interviews, discussions, findings and analysis of survey responses.

Discussion on Key Findings:

A deeper look into the three types of perspectives highlighted above, shows that participant perspectives on the socio-emotional aspects, differ with increased reflection. The ability and willingness of student teachers to become aware of their own biases when working with children, to consider children's holistic development as integral to learning is crucial when in a preparatory program. It also reflects the institute's responsibility of creating opportunities and spaces for this introspection to take place and new perspectives to get built. The NCFTE stresses on building a 'reflective and humane' practitioner through the teacher education program. The institute visited, shows how theoretically it strives to be a reflective space, due to systems and processes like maintaining reflective journals, giving peer-feedback etc. being in place but in implementation, content knowledge and pedagogy continue to take precedence in the hierarchy of focus.

The fact that it is a government run institute, brings with it, its pros with regards to actually having a rigorous, intensive two year course but also its cons, that to make any shift in perspectives would require making shifts across the set bureaucratic system which is difficult if not impossible. But a change from the clear segregation between 'Perspective courses' and 'Content and Pedagogy' courses to a more integrated approach between theory and practice, to strengthen the view that understanding the learner is as important as teaching the learner, is needed across the pre-service teacher education institutes.

Scope for further study: It will be interesting to understand the role of 'teacher motivation' and 'strong purpose' in working with the socio-emotional aspects of children. Observing perspectives/ beliefs play out in actual practice may also change the typology and give a different picture of the held importance of socio-emotional aspects in pre-service teacher education.

Conclusion: Thus the study shows how a strong majority of participants have a clear understanding of socio-emotional aspects of children and its importance, of the lacunae in the B.Ed curriculum and its implementation as well as reflections on their struggles in the classroom; but they see it majorly as a way to 'handle the miscreants' peacefully and avoid any emotional outbursts in the classroom; they do not yet see it as an integral part of learning itself.

How Theatre fulfils major pedagogical goals for the all-round development of children.

- Saesha Pillai

I would like to start with mentioning a couple of deliberations given the strange, new global situation we are in, when writing this article.

1. With schools and the concept of exams as we know them, changing indefinitely; with parents feeling exhausted or struggling with their own issues within homes; with teaching and learning expected to happen through a screen for those who can afford it and becoming almost absent in the lives of those who cannot; how does this pandemic, its lived experience, its learnings get processed by children, who are probably the most affected in this all?

2. How different is the experience of those children attuned to the arts right now? Children who have the means to process events around them, learn and express themselves in more ways than one? Ashley Miguel, in her thesis, quotes Elliot Eisner who believed that schools must be places where multiple ways of knowing and learning are acknowledged, encouraged and honed as it would nurture the inherent diversity in children, thus giving each child the opportunity to realize their potential and excel in their expression of knowledge. Learning then would closely mirror life and not some regurgitation of words from a textbook. (Miguel, 2010) Unfortunately not many of our schools are such spaces. The mind and the intellect are still valued more than the whole being and its various multiple means of knowing and communicating with the world. It isn't surprising then to see that final exams, entrance exams or ways to stick to the curriculum and complete it, are on the minds of school authorities and teachers, than ways to work with the emotional confusions within children or the lack of creative stimulation due to restricted touch and access to the outside world. Art, whether drama, music, dance, painting or any other form has often been used as a means to an end within schools and not as a worthy end in itself. Art has stayed in the fringes, been called 'extra-curricular' for the most part of the year, until now when it has become the central life-force for those actively engaged in it for its own sake.

That art lives and thrives through both pain and joy in the world is known; (giving solace and a form of expression for the artist and the non-artist alike), but I wonder about its importance for children, now, more than before. And that, brings me to consider what I believe would be possible to accomplish pedagogically, through theatre, with children, so as to enable them to be attuned to the aesthetic experience of learning and carry it with them beyond the classroom and into their lives.

Synopsis of the Script: Bears Don't Cry - Charles Alverson

Link to the script: <http://www.lazybeescripts.co.uk/Scripts/script.aspx?iSS=1788>

The 15minutes play is one for 9-13 year olds (I'm considering 10 year olds here) and is about a girl (Shanni) lost in the woods, who is searching for her way back to her father, and while in the woods, makes an unlikely friend in a kind bear who acts very tough. Their adventures involve eating blackberries off the trees, making fun chants that they sing together and both managing to save each other from things each is afraid of. It is a short, simple play that speaks to the heart in relation to themes of friendship, trust, fear and showing of emotions (bears don't cry is close to the popular thought of 'boys don't cry' touching upon the pressure on boys to act tough) and it does so with a light hearted humour, ending on a poignant note of Shanni finding her hunter father and the bear retreating, being uncomfortable around humans with guns and yet shedding a tear when watching his friend (Shanni) go away from him.

The play, played to my heartstrings simply put, as I saw opportunities in it for children to work with larger themes viscerally, understanding and personifying characters that are grey, through making sense of themes of friendship, hunting, fear (emotions) that are grey too.

Pedagogical goals that get accomplished when children work on the above script:

The goals given below although seem linear are actually accomplished parallel and in conjunction with each other. They thus flow and spill into each other seamlessly.

1. Creation of a safe space for expression.

One of the, (if not the) most crucial pedagogical opportunities here, is the creation of a safe space for us together, when working with theatre and this script. I do strongly believe that we focus so much on creating efficient, able, smart economic agents in our classrooms from a young age that we miss the point of education entirely. What would be the purpose of an education that does not enliven and nurture the humanness within children; that does not create space for their hearts and bodies to express along with their mind? Working through the script then would give us that opportunity to come together and bring our whole selves into action.

A safe space would mean a space where children are allowed to 'talk' and are not silenced in the name of discipline. Young children very often are talked 'to' or talked 'at' but not talked 'with'. Treating their observations, their thoughts, their comments and drawings and creative movements as important, valid

and welcomed into the class would be the first step to beginning work on the script. I envision a space where, months before the actual performance of the play, we begin conversations around the themes of ‘friendships (with humans and with nature/animals)’; around ‘trust as key in friendships’; conversations about ‘our individual fears and how we deal with them’ leading us to talking about ‘crying (showing of our emotions) without shame’ and thus creating a space where we together express our authentic selves without the fear of judgement. It would mean facilitating the conversations, so that no one feels ridiculed or judged or overly praised when sharing. The idea being simply to acknowledge and hold one another’s personal experiences, thoughts and opinions together in the space. The script’s themes would help to be the starting points of the conversations but not limited to it. The capacity to genuinely ‘listen’ as part of ‘communicating’ would then become important as well (and gets covered in the below goals). With these conversations, we would have the opportunity to build a sense of self-confidence among the children, to share and assert their thoughts among each other respectfully. We could then move onto deep dive into the actual reading, understanding, interpreting, debating and discussing the nitty-gritties of the play.

2. Exploring the literary components of character, setting and plot and the larger process of theatre.

The script would provide ways for children to understand the characteristics of Shanni and of the bear and the lion and her hunter father, thus opening up conversations around character traits and psyches to think about when performing. It would open up a world of imagination and fantasy, when working through the ideas of talking animals and of getting lost in a jungle. Understanding the ups and downs in the story when the shady lion enters or when the bear realizes the father is a hunter with a gun, as well as decoding the humour in the dialogues, would help children to read into a text with depth. The script could also lend itself to some changes till we collectively feel excited and invested in the idea of finally performing it for an audience. This though would be the initial and basic levels of prep but important nonetheless as performing confidently, would firstly require ten year olds to feel thoroughly well-versed with the details of the script.

Along with devouring the script, would come the opportunity to understand and intellectualize the basics of theatre before actually experiencing it themselves. Thus I envision us spending time watching plays (either live or recordings), reading about some known theatre artists from their own cultures and discussing the various aspects of putting up a play for an audience.

From stage setting to lights and costumes as well as to art and prop design; it would be a learning experience to ideate and contemplate the work within the diverse roles in a theatre production (both on-stage and back-stage). Children in the class would then take on these roles and work towards the common goal of the performance. Then, for them to be thinking seriously of how best to put up a stage and a background of a jungle? What materials to use/reuse/recycle for using as the stump in the jungle or to make the costumes of the bear and the lion; would involve learning strong problem solving skills and resourcefulness.

3. Building mindfulness and care.

In my opinion, the opportunity for ten year olds to engage with a 'care ethics' concept of 'engrossment' (Noddings, December 2012) where their environment is built on the core principle of tuning in and listening attentively to the needs of their classmates and thus responding from a deeper, internal place within; is doable and needed in today's times. Using various techniques of mindfulness involving the breath and through learning to attend to each other carefully during class conversations and play times; sows the seeds to grow into attentive, caring adults.

4. Building effective, eloquent, meaningful communication using the whole body.

The core aspect and purpose of theatre is communication. We are communing together to share with an audience a story, a thought, an emotion through our bodies. Evoking emotions in the other through our own visceral selves is a learned skill. The ability to harness the voice, the gestures, the body and its movements to embody a 'kind yet tough bear' or a 'cunning lion' or a 'scared girl' in an honest manner would need immense practice. Ten year olds working on the above script hence, would first involve exploring aspects of themselves, such as their body movement, posture, facial expressions, rhythm and voice that are otherwise hardly paid attention to. Like Ashley Miguel's intervention involved intense work on stretching and readying the body and the psyche through vocal and physical games and exercises, memory exercises, attention games, creative movement techniques, exploring body rhythms etc. (Miguel, 2010) Here too the aim would be to facilitate experiences to help children stretch themselves physically, emotionally and mentally to slide into their performative roles with ease. To pitch and throw their voices, to confidently stride, glide or jump across a room, to stand in front of their classmates and deliver their scenes eloquently with meaningful vocal inflections, dramatic hesitation well-timed to convey the smug humour in the play will all be a part

of the learning. It is important to remember that these are young children who may or may not have developed many of the facades and protective walls around themselves like adults; and hence the task then, is to ensure that there is nurturance of confidence in themselves, their own instincts; their bodies and the confidence in what they have to say and how they wish to say it in front of a large audience. Wouldn't we say that one of the aims of education is to enable children to have a voice of their own? These processes would align perfectly with that. To effectively and evocatively communicate in any relationship requires one to become vulnerable and authentic in our expression. As growing children, the opportunity to tap into these depths of their selves are sure to impact their lives beyond a theatre performance. These are life skills we struggle to learn later in life.

5. Building Co-operation.

Working on the above script together would, if nothing else, build a strong sense of camaraderie and togetherness among the children. Within education, we also speak of the kind of character we hope to build in children, the kind of values we wish to develop and building strong relationships that endure, that are based on trust is one of the most important things we hope to do. When spending all the hours engrossed passionately in working towards that one performance, I envision opportunities for children to experience the highs and lows of relationships. They will experience the efforts they need to put in to make things work, just like in life. Navigating the messy work of holding friends accountable or resolving a conflict or rejoicing in a fantastic performance of a friend as though it were their own, can only happen if they all feel truly connected to one another. Playing blind-fold games for trust and learning to give each other constructive feedback will all be a part of the process. Miguel's thesis mentions 'contact improvisation' as a practice that helps build connections. This is something my personal experience too agreed with, when learning to be a dance movement therapy practitioner. The energy and connection through movement and touch, slowly but surely switches on an unspoken vibe that gets shared. Creativity even in theatre, requires one to be thoroughly present and thoroughly receptive to the cues of the environment to improvise and pull everyone forward together rather than blocking and pushing back on each other. Thus the aim will be to facilitate experiences for children where they want to help each other excel over and above just focusing on their own performance. This I believe is the hardest to accomplish, to go beyond the 'I' and focus on the 'we'; and hence the pursuit of these goals is not linear but parallel. From day one, envision that the children are expected to interact not just with their friends but also

with those who they do not get along with; imagine them collectively working irrespective of their core tasks to assist with making the costumes and learning to operate the light and sound console while also being the ones revising lines with each other as needed. When pushed to think about my classmate before me, it opens up avenues for both immense conflict and immense vulnerability followed with immense learning. But like in life, here too there won't be any short cuts and the rewards will be priceless and enduring.

Through working together to put up a play like the 'Bears Don't Cry', the class I imagine would have grown together to become more self-aware, more expressive of their thoughts and emotions without shame or fear of judgement, more attuned to their relationships with people, and animals around them and would grow into critical thinkers who confidently raise questions, seek knowledge and richer experiences to reflect and learn from. This sufficiently evidences that art for the sake of it, without any force-fitting of subject matter, is a powerful tool of learning.

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