

Contemplative Education Practices for enhancing Empathic Communication among Prospective Primary School Teachers

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Abstract - Contemplative education refers to the ideas and activities that foster awareness in individuals and lead to transformation as part of learning. Contemplative education activities are designed for the self-awareness of the learner in the context of existing knowledge, the methods suited to learning, and the nature of new knowledge. In the book ‘The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People’, Stephen. R. Covey mentioned the ‘principles of empathic communication’ as one of the seven principles of effectiveness in an individual. This study attempts to bring insights into contemplative education activities and their impact on empathic communication among the students of the teacher education course Diploma in Elementary Education of Kozhikode district, Kerala. A semi-structured interview schedule is used for data collection in this qualitative investigation. Reflections of these prospective primary school teachers can be directed to bring sensible innovations and suitable modifications to our teacher education programmes. Inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development are part of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Thematic analysis of feedback from student teachers in this study presents indications of how teacher preparation can be improved to achieve those goals of the UN for India as well as the world.

Keywords - *contemplative education, empathic communication, principles of empathic communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of the act of teaching cannot be imagined without assessing how much the message, content, knowledge and wisdom is communicated among the learners. Thus, upgrading the competencies related to communication was always a hidden or explicit part of teacher preparation. These preparations were often done based on self-analysis, using methods or techniques relevant to the context of different cultures and societies. Due to the evolution of research activities of various styles, we reached new conceptual devices like empathic communication, effective communication skills and interpersonal communication, with a broader vision of better humanity and fruitful education. This study focuses on enhancing empathic communication among student teachers. Empathic communication and empathy-based teaching should be part of teacher training (Biswas,2024). Any transformation in life requires awareness about self and the role selected to do in a specific context. Contemplative education is a stream suitable for attempts to aim for positive changes in an individual based on self-awareness. The inclusion of contemplative practices into teacher preparation will equip future teachers with more tools to be change agents (Larson et al., 2024). Contemplative practices

connected to mindfulness, writing and self-reflection can be supportive in developing various skills and qualities in life (Wang & Flory,2024; Webster-Wright,2013).

This qualitative research article is presented with a structure constituting five sections namely introduction, review of literature, methodology, results and analysis and future scope of the study. A very brief background to the study is given in this first section of the introduction. The idea of the variables contemplative education and empathic communication along with the relevance of this study is described in the second section of the review of the literature. The objectives, sample of the study, tools used for data collection, techniques used for data analysis, and research procedures are mentioned in the third section of the methodology. Five themes with their codes are briefly displayed in the section on results and analysis with the help of examples of codes given in tables. Further research possibilities based on the results of this study and variables are briefly reported in the final section of the future scope of the study.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Contemplative Education is defined as “a set of practices that may foster particular forms of awareness in students, forms conducive to the conscious motivation and regulations of learning and also to freedom and transcendence in life more generally” (Roeser and Peck, 2009). Chano (2012) expresses Contemplative Education as “Learning infused with the experience of awareness, insight and compassion for oneself and others honed through the practice of sitting meditation and other contemplative discipline”. Contemplative education practices like Mindfulness-based education, relaxation response, neuro-feedback, peacebuilding versus anti-bullying, wellness versus disease programs, exercise and stress relieving movements, spiritual retreats, and deep listening are chosen to practice frequently in Higher Education scenarios as per the study conducted by Pizzuto(2018). Integrating ideas of connectedness, inclusion, self-awareness, and self-examination in the higher education system will value interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning processes along with learning outcomes. Pizzuto also describes integrative education, Satipatthana (mindfulness)framework, introspection and socio-emotional learning theory as four conceptual foundations of contemplative education practices.

According to Covey (2013), the principles of empathic communication are one of three key dimensions to be aware by an individual to evolve from a state of independence to interdependence to attain public victory. Principles of interpersonal leadership and principles of creative cooperation are the other two dimensions. The concept of Empathic communication can be helpful in communication with other individuals as well as in team interactions. Covey represents principles of empathic communication with a habit namely ‘Seek first to understand, then to be understood’. Life practices based on the Habit 'Seek first to Understand, then to be Understood', the role of character in communication, empathic listening, listening to understand, autobiographical responses and openness to be understood are connected with the term Empathic Communication. Evaluate, probe, advise and interpret are the four autobiographical responses connected with this principle and the habit ‘Seek first to understand, then to be understood’. According to Mincemoyer, Perkins & Munyua (2001), “Communication is the dynamic process by which people exchange thoughts, ideas, and messages. Listening is the act of interpreting sounds and/or visual stimuli and using those interpretations to give them meaning” (Duerdan et al., 2012, para.6). Effective communication skills enable an individual to express and share information both in verbal and non-verbal forms for adjusting in existing cultural and social differences. It helps one to share or exchange ideas, opinions, thoughts, desires, beliefs, values and knowledge in congenial ways.

If the World and India want to attain the Sustainable Developmental Goals(SDGs) of the United Nations[UN](2015), all citizens have to develop the ability to analyse their thoughts and actions at the individual level. Sustainable development systems can be created in a society when realisations at the individual level are converted to something useful for self, others and society in general. Self-awareness and communication are two important aspects in this regard. Continuous efforts of citizens are required to create such systems and have to start from a young age to make it a habit. Thus, investigating contemplative

education practices and empathic communication among prospective primary school teachers can help in shaping the next generation from childhood from the point of view of SDGs.

3. METHODOLOGY

Objective of the study

To analyse the feedback of D.El.Ed. students on contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication practices

Sample of the study

Thirty-two students enrolled in the course of Diploma in Elementary Education [D.El.Ed] who follow the D.El.Ed syllabus of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Kerala.

Tools used for data collection

- 1.A module titled contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication Practices
- 2.Semi-structured Interview schedule for D.El.Ed students on feedback of contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication practices

Techniques used for Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Procedure

A module titled contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication practices was developed by the investigators and implemented among 112 D.El.Ed students of Kozhikode District, Kerala. It was designed for 10 hours and took 11-14 hours to execute during implementation. Opinions and experiences of existing primary school teachers, suggestions from experts in the related field including teacher educators, clinical psychologists and educational researchers and reviews in the related subject area were considered while developing and planning the module. Mindfulness meditation, introspective journaling, mindful writing, vision board, brainstorming, diary writing and mindful body movements are the activities selected, to design as per the theories of Contemplative Education for executing to enhance Empathic Communication among D.El.Ed students. The programme was transacted for 4 different D.El.Ed batches, belong to two Government Teacher Training Institutes(TTIs).Two batches, belong to the first year and another to the second year of the D.El.Ed course ,are selected from each TTI. Semi-structured Interview schedule for D.El.Ed students on feedback of contemplative education Programme for enhancing empathic communication practices is administered to 32 students selected out of 112 students. Eight students were randomly selected from each Batch. Twelve questions with an option of adding additional feedbacks and comments were included in the interview schedule.

Thematic Analysis is done to identify codes and themes to represent the feedback of the students. Codes were identified based on interview responses and formed themes as part of analysing the nature of feedback of the contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication practices. The inductive thematic analysis process is used for the identification of themes and reflective thematic analysis is executed. Six phases of reflective thematic analysis(Braun & Clarke,2022) are as follows:(1) familiarisation with the data set(2)coding(3) generating initial themes(4)developing and reviewing themes (5)refining, defining and naming themes (6)writing up. In this research investigation, thematic analysis steps are organised based on the above six phases and changes are made based on the nature of this study. Based on these reflections insights are derived to understand the impact of the programme.

4. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Inductive thematic analysis of the responses to the semi-structured interview schedule identified six themes: Self-Awareness, Character as a Part of Communication, Empathic Listening, Autobiographical Responses, Sensible Self-expression, and Imagination based on Introspection. Each table below lists the codes and examples of the associated theme, along with a brief description of the respective theme under the table.

TABLE I.

Theme: Self-Awareness	
<i>Codes</i>	<i>Example</i>
Existing Patterns of Conversation	"Often, I cannot stop sharing with friends, even if I know they are not ready to listen."
Usage of words	"When I get angry, I automatically use bad words for relatives"
Feeling created for self	" I felt proud when I spoke on stage confidently ”
Feeling created for others	“classmates feel awkward having conversations with me, thus they avoid it”
Expectations from a talk	"I wish to be a boy of friendly conversations”
Strength and weakness	"I want to overcome stage fear before teaching practice starts”
Nature of verbal and non-verbal Interactions	“ unable to understand the introverted communication of my husband"
Nature of written and oral Interactions	"I never got comfortable replying to the messages I posted in the Whatsapp groups"

The theme of Self-Awareness is formed based on the codes namely Existing patterns of conversation, Usage of words, Feeling created for self, Feeling created for others, Expectations from a talk, Strength and weakness, Nature of verbal and non-verbal interactions and Nature of written and oral interactions as mentioned in TABLE I . Participants were motivated to look at how their thoughts, language usage, communicative patterns, feelings associated with interactions, success in interactions and depth of clarity evolved in conversations. Some students expressed their efforts to shape themselves as a creative communicator, as prospective teachers and also among friends and family members. Practical difficulties in having regular self-observing practices and journaling were mentioned along with insights derived from these practices.

TABLE II.

Theme: Character as part of Communication	
<i>Codes</i>	<i>Example</i>
Commitment to values	"Words of the teacher in the classroom must support shaping qualities among students”
Sustainable objectives	“As a woman, I like to mould confidence in students especially girls to face challenges”
Principle-based interactions	“If I talk about football without having true experiences and authentic knowledge in it, that may appear fake to students."
Genuineness	“My friend asked me, am I truly interested in knowing how children learn?”
Honesty	"I like to ask questions if I do not understand the concepts”

The theme ‘Character as part of Communication’ is formed based on the codes namely Commitment to values, Sustainable objectives, Principle-based interactions, Genuineness and Honesty as mentioned in TABLE II. The long-term impact a casual communication can make on the life of an individual in some situations is emphasised by the participants and few explained how some activities given in the sessions helped to be aware of this. Few shared the positive spirit created through the vision board to critically review their life values in forming long-term and short-term goals and how they can be connected with present activities in life. Students shared their attempts to overcome laziness in achieving true commitment over procrastinating behaviour and the necessity of finding ways to resolve these types of issues. How character building can complement healthy communication patterns, is reflected and the positive feedback of related efforts is shared in the perspective of building fruitful relationships.

TABLE III.

Theme: Empathic Listening	
<i>Codes</i>	<i>Example</i>
Selective listening	"when Binu talks about techniques to make a classroom interesting, then only, we listen carefully."
Active listening	“from Amala’s words, I am aware of the issues she is facing in class completely, I listen to her always"
Curiosity with empathy	“Meera says she wants someone, just to listen to her. I listen and I can relate to what she says too. She is facing several difficulties

Theme: Empathic Listening	
Codes	Example
	of her own including health. Even though I do not talk to her always, once in a while I enquire about her status”
Compassion	“Shibin sir knows issues in my family and financial problems. He always encourages me to be confident and talks to me personally. Sometimes, he supports me by all means. He respects me. I wish to be such a good teacher in future.”

The theme ‘Empathic Listening’ is formed based on the codes namely Selective listening, Active listening, Curiosity with empathy and Compassion as mentioned in TABLE III. Participants shared supportive views on, starting a conversation to know rather than fake as if interested in listening. One participant said that true connection with students in a primary classroom can only be cultivated when the child feels he is attended honestly by his teacher. Patience, the ability to stay interested in the relevant topic of discussion, skills of compassionate criticism and the capacity to give scientific suggestions became the goals of several participants. D.El.Ed students who completed teaching practices shared about the interest developed through the program and how it helped in experimenting with different ways of communicating with young minds.

TABLE IV.

Theme: Autobiographic Responses	
Codes	Example
Patterns of failed experiences	“Father gives suggestions based on his understanding of education, but situations changed much these days.”
Concerns of society	“My way of conversation is criticised by friends and teachers due to social reasons.”
Expectations of stake holders	" Teacher trainees are expected to communicate perceived values of parents and teachers to students."
Childhood school experiences	“We have to be aware of the new generation kids, they do not have shy issues with anyone including their teachers.”

The theme ‘Autobiographic Responses’ is formed based on the codes namely, Patterns of failed experiences, Concerns of society, Expectations of stakeholders and Childhood school experiences as mentioned in TABLE IV. Participants mentioned how people make perception errors about young people and women based on their personal experiences especially while advising on topics like career, relationships, culture, habits and social media. Few participants observed that some teachers try to mould children based on outdated ideologies. Some shared that they want to become a teacher who can identify unique talents in children and motivate them to attain qualities and prepare for careers based on their true potential. Many participants agreed on the importance of enhancing scientific spirit in classroom communication and shared their plans for the future.

TABLE V

Theme: Sensible Self-expression	
Codes	Example
Openness to talk	“Sajiv sir shares his experiences in class, this gives us understanding about real situations to be faced in school”
Rational self-revealing	“As a girl, I have to be careful while talking with anyone. But at the same time, if I do not share my views and opinions how will others know my stand? Thus, I present my views in the right situations.”
Effective sharing of information	“Instructions related to group activities of a lesson plan have to be communicated clearly to students. It requires skills to manage a classroom of young kids to give directions of that kind.”
Synergy of silence and flow	“Nivin talks with a good momentum to all. Everybody feels friendly with him too.” “Just being present at that moment with somebody, who feels emotional issues is a great support .”

The theme ‘Sensible Self-expression’ is formed based on the codes namely Openness to talk, Rational self-revealing, Effective sharing of information and Synergy of silence and flow as mentioned in TABLE V. Participants expressed their dislike of individuals who are interested in the matters of others but not willing to share about themselves. Trustworthiness will be under doubt while interacting with such people. Students shared their attempts to communicate based on honest experiences, knowledge formed out of self-initiated investigation and critical analysis without bias. Some participants felt mindfulness practice helps to be comfortable while interacting with people and motivated a few to showcase their talents and skills in various circles.

Theme: Imagination based on Introspection	
<i>Codes</i>	<i>Example</i>
Non-judgmental attitude	“If we deal with a 3rd or 4th standard student with a prejudiced mind, based on family background, Annual income of parents and other reasons, we are blocking our self a possibility to build positive changes in him.”
Awareness of possible conclusions	“I can say that dialogue can end by creating several impressions. If we are clear about the objectives of a meeting, we can lead the conversation to the required output.”
Manifestation of effective outputs	“My relationship with friends and teachers improved a lot after I initiated conversations with them.”
Understanding as a communication goal	“Sahal asks doubts to friends till he understands the concept.”
Feeling as a communication goal	“Rigidly planned and artificial interactions can kill the joy and block the natural evolution of relationships among people. I prefer honest and natural conversations.”

The theme ‘Imagination based on Introspection’ is formed based on the codes namely Non-judgmental attitude, Awareness of possible conclusions, Manifestation of effective outputs, Understanding as a communication goal and Feeling as a communication goal as mentioned in TABLE VI. Students agreed upon the importance of investing time to understand strengths, weaknesses and areas to improve through Mindful writing and Journaling. Fifteen participants shared their positive results on transforming classroom execution style and how they visualised the classroom through contemplative methods. Members shared how the vision board helped them deeply to initiate conversations step by step with confidence. Some added that they got the inspiration to overcome stage fear. D.El.Ed students shared how they organised educational tours, field trips and other academic activities successfully with great moments by making plans including suggestions of all.

The impact of the contemplative education programme for enhancing empathic communication among D.El.Ed students can be displayed as a field of 6 themes based on 30 codes. Various contemplative practices helped to boost internal attitudes leading to self-initiated efforts to improve the practice of habit ‘Understand first, then to be Understood’ rooted in the principles of empathic communication among the student teachers. Feedback collected from the participants indicates their thinking patterns on how to improve communication skills and how it is connected with one’s self and the situation of others for reaching team goals. Contemplative practices enhance self-awareness, enabling us to be present to others; empathic listening helps clients explore themselves, participate in the therapeutic process, and feel understood and heard (Karas, 2021). A positive shift in thoughts on valuing communicating with authenticity and compassion is evident from the responses. Learning and using contemplative practices had a positive impact on helping participants feel more empathetic and compassionate towards one another (Bacquet Quiroga, 2024). Identified themes have deeper implications which can be useful for developing, implementing and improving interventions designed for enhancing capacities similar to empathic communication for prospective teachers and other samples.

5. FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Contemplative education practices can strengthen the habit of ‘seek first to understand, then to be understood’ if given a long-term effort and properly designed follow-up procedures. Positive Internal changes in the aspect of principles of empathic communication among prospective primary school teachers especially at the thinking and feeling level are evident in this study. Efforts to improve empathic communication capacities can contribute to life skills, especially in fostering effective communication, interpersonal relationships and empathy in individuals. Strategies to improve empathic communication competency can be formed, enriched or better equipped by adding contemplative education practices. Innovative and flexible types of contemplative practices can be formed by learning and researching more in this area to develop programmes specifically on skills and competencies connected to communication. Sustainable development requires finding sustainable communication strategies for citizens to implement the projects together as a family.

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