

Creating A Participatory Learning Space: A Reflective Case Study of an Embodied, Dialogic Workshop with Rural Preschool Teachers in Sri Lanka

Deepa Fernando

Holy Family Association, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a reflective case study of a one-day participatory workshop conducted with thirty preschool teachers from the Mundalama area of the Puttalam District, Sri Lanka. Rather than positioning the facilitator as an expert transmitting knowledge, the workshop was deliberately designed as a dialogic, embodied, and strengths-based learning space in which the participants' own experience was treated as a legitimate source of professional knowledge. Drawing on Freirean critical pedagogy, transformative learning theory, drama-based experiential methods, mindfulness-based body awareness, and the narrative Tree of Life tradition, the workshop moved participants through a structured sequence: dialogic contracting and circle seating; body-awareness and gratitude practice; creative embodied expression; symbolic representation of "the child"; disclosure of trauma and abuse encountered in practice; a trust-based empathy exercise; and a Tree Analysis exploring the structural roots of children's difficult behaviour. The paper situates this sequence within recent literature on critical pedagogy, trauma-informed early childhood education, embodied and drama-based teacher learning, narrative and strengths-based group methods, and the documented effects of parental migration on left-behind children in South and Southeast Asia. Based on the facilitator's reconstructed field observations, the participatory structure appeared to be associated with a shift, within the group's own discourse, from a deficit-based, symptom-level description of children ("aggressive," "dirty," "slow") toward a more compassionate, structurally aware framing of children's behaviour as communication of underlying adversity. Because this is a single-facilitator, single-session account without independent observation, participant interviews, or systematic coding, this shift is reported as an interpretive finding rather than a demonstrated outcome, and no claim is made about whether it persisted beyond the day. The paper discusses implications for the design of teacher-training programmes serving community-based early childhood educators in low-resource, post-conflict, and migration-affected settings, and it considers the limits of a single-workshop, practitioner-reflective design. It suggests, cautiously, that participatory, embodied pedagogy may be a useful precondition for surfacing the tacit, experiential knowledge that community-based practitioners hold, while noting that this claim awaits testing through more rigorously triangulated designs.

Keywords: participatory learning, critical pedagogy, embodied practice, dramatherapy, trauma-informed education, early childhood teachers, Tree of Life, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Teacher-training programmes for early childhood educators are frequently designed around a transmission model in which an outside expert delivers content to practitioners who are assumed to lack relevant knowledge. This model tends to be least appropriate precisely where it is most often applied: in rural, low-resource, and community-embedded settings, where preschool teachers typically possess many years of direct, situated experience with the children and families of their own communities, but little formal recognition of that experience as a form of professional knowledge. This paper documents and analyses an alternative approach, undertaken in a one-day workshop with thirty village-based preschool teachers in the Mundalama area of the Puttalam District, Sri Lanka, working under the administrative umbrella of the

Divisional Secretariat with programme support from World Vision. Collectively, these teachers were responsible for the care and early education of approximately 250 children under the age of five.

The workshop was designed and facilitated on the premise that people learn most deeply when their voices, experience, and existing knowledge are recognised and valued, rather than when they are cast as passive recipients of an external curriculum. This premise is not new; it echoes decades of scholarship in critical and dialogic pedagogy, adult and transformative learning theory, and community-based, strengths-oriented practice. What this paper offers is a close, reflective account of how that evidence was operationalised through a specific sequence of embodied, creative, and narrative techniques, and an analysis of what changed, methodologically and substantively, in the participants' understanding of the children in their care over the course of a single day.

The workshop unfolded through several linked stages. It began with an explicit dialogic contract and a circular seating arrangement intended to dissolve the customary trainer–trainee hierarchy. It proceeded through a guided body-awareness and gratitude exercise designed to re-orient participants, many of whom spend their working and domestic lives attending to others, toward their own embodied experience. A creative movement activity then served as a bridge from self-awareness toward the awareness of others, followed by a symbolic drawing exercise in which participants represented “the child” as they experienced that child in daily practice. Group discussion of these symbols revealed a strikingly deficit-saturated vocabulary aggressive, traumatised, dirty, slow which in turn opened into candid disclosures of the abuse, neglect, and family instability that many of the teachers encounter, and are trusted with, in their communities. A trust-and-empathy exercise using touch and blindfolded pairing extended this theme experientially, and the day concluded with a Tree Analysis exercise in which participant groups moved from the visible symptoms of children's difficult behaviour to an analysis of underlying structural causes, including parental labour migration, poverty, and inadequate family support systems.

This paper has three purposes. First, it offers a structured account of the workshop as a case study in participatory pedagogical design, situating each stage of the sequence within the relevant contemporary literature. Second, it analyses the substantive findings that emerged from the workshop itself what the teachers revealed about the children and families they serve, and how their own framing of that material shifted over the course of the day. Third, it discusses the broader implications of this approach for the design of professional development programmes with community-based early childhood educators, particularly in settings marked by economic hardship, labour migration, and the aftereffects of family and community trauma, as is common across rural Sri Lanka. The paper proceeds with a review of the relevant literature, an account of the reflective case-study methodology employed, a presentation of findings organised around the workshop's sequential stages, a discussion of their significance, and a concluding statement on the implications and limits of this approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participatory and Dialogic Pedagogy

The workshop's foundational premise that a facilitator's task is not to transfer knowledge but to create the conditions under which participants recognise and share knowledge they already hold draws directly on the tradition of critical and dialogic pedagogy associated with Paulo Freire. Freire's distinction between a “banking” model of education, in which learners are treated as passive receptacles for deposited knowledge, and a “problem-posing” model, in which dialogue and lived experience generate critical consciousness, remains a live reference point in contemporary scholarship (Giroux, 2020; Darder, 2018). Recent applications of Freirean thought emphasise that critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, develops through a collaborative process in which the facilitator relinquishes sole authority and the group becomes a site of mutual, dialogical learning (Jan, 2020). This is precisely the contract offered explicitly to participants at the outset of the workshop: an invitation to “participate actively, ask questions, share your ideas, and contribute your experiences,” combined with an acknowledgement that the facilitator had “come to learn” as much as to teach.

Contemporary scholarship also emphasizes that Freirean method depends on more than verbal invitation; it depends on structural and spatial choices that materially reduce hierarchy, since seating arrangement and the physical organisation of a learning space are substantive determinants of whether genuine dialogue, rather than a modified lecture, takes place. The decision to seat participants in a circle rather than in rows removing, in the facilitator's words, "as far as possible, the traditional distinction between the 'trainer' and the 'trainees'" reflects this understanding and is consistent with critical pedagogical practice more broadly (Giroux, 2020).

Embodiment, Mindfulness, and the Body in Adult Learning

A second body of literature concerns the role of embodiment and body-based mindfulness practice in adult learning, particularly for populations whose working lives are organised around caregiving for others. Mindfulness in professional and educational contexts has been widely described as the cultivation of non-judgemental, present-moment attention (Mindful Staff, 2017), and its application to early childhood educators has been linked to improved self-regulation, reduced stress, and stronger relational capacity in the classroom. Practice-based guidance from the Greater Good Science Center explicitly recommends the body scan combined with gratitude as a means of helping practitioners "deepen awareness of their bodies" and "experience a sense of gratitude for all that their bodies allow them to do" (Greater Good in Education, 2020) an almost exact structural parallel to the gratitude-based sequence used in the present workshop, in which participants were guided to bring attention successively to the brain and mind, the heart, and the legs and feet, expressing silent gratitude to each.

This attention to the body is particularly significant for caregiving populations. Research on caregiver wellbeing consistently finds that those whose occupational role centres on caring for others are at elevated risk of neglecting their own embodied and emotional needs, and that structured mindfulness and gratitude practice can restore caregivers' sense of their own worth as a precondition for sustained, compassionate care of others (Lee, 2020). The logic embedded in the workshop's opening exercise that "before we can care deeply for others, we need to become aware of and care for ourselves" is consistent with this literature, and its placement prior to any discussion of the children themselves appears to have been a deliberate structural choice rather than an incidental warm-up.

Beyond mindfulness, a growing literature on drama-based and embodied experiential learning demonstrates that using the body as a medium of expression can generate forms of understanding not readily accessible through discussion alone. Evaluations of drama-based experiential learning programmes for professional groups show that embodied enactment and improvisation foster "situated learning" through enacted perspective-taking, producing gains in mutual understanding that verbal discussion alone did not achieve (Dave et al., 2022). Research on playback theatre as pedagogy with pre-service teachers similarly found that embodied, improvisational performance was a primary vehicle through which participants developed empathy, describing theatrical ritual and artistry as conditions that actively "inspire empathy by creating an atmosphere of equality, respect, and inclusion" (Ma et al., 2023). Research comparing nursing and drama students found that drama-based pedagogy was more effective than conventional instruction in transforming an abstract, cognitive understanding of empathy into an embodied, practice-relevant capacity (Reeves et al., 2021). These findings provide a strong empirical rationale for the workshop's use of creative movement the waterfall, the tree, the insect, the rock as a deliberate bridge between self-awareness and the capacity to imaginatively inhabit another's experience, in this case the experience of the preschool child.

Seeing the Child: Teacher Perception and Trauma-Informed Practice

A third relevant literature concerns how early childhood educators perceive and interpret children's behaviour, and the consequences of that perception for practice. A substantial and growing body of trauma-informed education scholarship demonstrates that children affected by adversity frequently present with behaviours aggression, withdrawal, inattention, hypervigilance that are easily, and often inaccurately, read by educators as wilful misbehaviour or a fixed trait, rather than as an expression of underlying, often undisclosed, adversity (Loomis, 2021). Teachers who hold trauma-informed attitudes are significantly less

likely to resort to punitive or exclusionary responses, particularly with children whose presentation is externalising (Loomis, Curby, & Zinsser, 2023), and randomised evaluations of trauma-informed training with preschool teachers show that such training can shift teacher-reported child outcomes, including relationship quality and behaviour (Loomis, Rabuka-Conklin, & DeSilva, 2025). At the level of teacher preparation, scholars argue that trauma-informed practice must be built into initial teacher education itself, since foundational assumptions about the meaning of a child's behaviour form early and resist subsequent revision (Brown et al., 2022).

This literature illuminates a pivotal moment in the workshop: participants, invited to represent “the child” through symbol, produced an overwhelmingly deficit-saturated vocabulary aggressive, traumatised, violent, dirty, unhygienic, slow to learn with only a minority offering positive descriptions. Read against the trauma-informed literature, this pattern reflects a widely documented tendency for educators working with adversity-affected children to encode behavioural symptoms as identity in the absence of a framework connecting behaviour to underlying cause (Loomis, 2021). The facilitator's naming of this risk that a child's behaviour “becomes the identity through which the teacher sees the child” anticipates this literature directly, and the subsequent reframing, from “What is wrong with this child?” to “What may have happened to this child, and what is this child trying to communicate?”, operationalises trauma-informed pedagogy's central recommendation: to treat behaviour as communication rather than fixed trait.

Disclosure, Trust, and the Preschool Teacher's Position

Closely related is a body of research on children's and families' disclosure of abuse to trusted adults, and the particular position occupied by early childhood educators as recipients of such disclosure. Research on barriers and facilitators of sexual abuse disclosure has found that disclosure is significantly more likely where a trusted, non-judgemental adult is available, while fear of negative consequences and self-blame remain the most significant barriers (Lemaigre, Taylor, & Gittoes, 2017). This helps explain a striking feature of the present findings: several teachers reported that mothers disclosed experiences of family sexual abuse to them directly, because mothers perceived preschool teachers as trusted adults closely connected to their children. Research on early childhood educators' role in child maltreatment more broadly confirms that childcare providers occupy a uniquely trusted, yet under-recognised and under-supported, position, frequently receiving disclosures without adequate training or institutional support to respond (Simsar & Çapar, 2022) underscoring the importance of a workshop structure capable of eliciting such disclosure safely in the first place.

Parental Migration and the Structural Roots of Children's Distress

A further literature, directly relevant to the causal analysis that emerged during the workshop's Tree Analysis exercise, concerns the effects of parental labour migration on children left in the care of relatives. Migration for overseas or internal employment is a defining feature of household economic strategy across South and Southeast Asia, and recent literature documents its consequences for children who remain behind. Qualitative research on Indonesian left-behind children finds that parental migration is associated with fractured emotional bonds and a cluster of negative outcomes including stress, anxiety, sadness, loss of motivation, and self-imposed isolation, compounded by unmet basic and educational needs where financial hardship persists despite remittances (Fauk et al., 2025). Complementary research on the caregivers who remain responsible for left-behind children typically fathers or grandparents, as reported by teachers in the present workshop documents elevated mental and physical health burdens among these caregivers, with direct relevance to the “lack of adequate parental care and attention” identified by participants as a root cause of children's distress (Fauk et al., 2025).

This pattern is corroborated by research specific to Sri Lanka. A hospital-based case-control study examining the long-term consequences of parental emigration in childhood found a measurable association between experiencing parental emigration and increased risk of self-poisoning presentations in adulthood, while noting that Sri Lanka's extended-family structures may partially, though not fully, mitigate the emotional impact of parental absence (Knipe et al., 2021). This finding lends empirical weight to the

teachers' recurring concern that children whose mothers had migrated for work "become withdrawn, stop playing, seek isolation, or display changes in their behaviour" a concern that aligns closely with a documented evidence base on the consequences of parental labour migration in the Sri Lankan context specifically.

Narrative, Strengths-Based, and Tree-Based Group Methods

The workshop's culminating Tree Analysis exercise draws on a distinct but related tradition: narrative and strengths-based group methodology, most closely associated with the Tree of Life approach originally developed by Ncube (2006) for work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa and subsequently adapted internationally across more than sixty countries. Contemporary applications of Tree of Life and related tree-based narrative methods demonstrate their value as a strengths-based alternative to deficit-focused assessment, using the metaphor of the tree roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves, and fruit to help participants externalise and reorganise difficult material without direct, potentially retraumatising, verbal disclosure (Kasmani, 2021). Randomised evaluations of tree-based narrative interventions with vulnerable adult populations document measurable, durable improvements in participants' sense of meaning and psychological resource following group-based tree work (Chow & Fung, 2021). While the exercise used in the present workshop was adapted for a specific analytic purpose moving professionals from the visible "symptoms" of children's difficult behaviour toward an analysis of underlying structural "roots," rather than working directly with participants' own life narratives, it draws on the same core insight underlying the broader tradition: that visual, metaphorical, collectively constructed representations can surface complex, trauma-adjacent material in ways direct verbal questioning frequently cannot.

Transformative Learning Theory

Finally, the overall arc of the workshop from an initial disruption of the teachers' habitual, deficit-based framing of children, through emotional disclosure, to a reworked, structurally aware understanding can be usefully read through the lens of transformative learning theory. Mezirow's original formulation, still widely cited and extended in contemporary adult-education scholarship, holds that adult learning is most profound when it proceeds through a "disorienting dilemma" that destabilises a learner's existing frame of reference, followed by critical reflection on assumptions, and culminating in a reorganised, more inclusive perspective (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Recent applications of the theory continue to emphasise that critical reflection and structured group dialogue, rather than the simple transmission of new information, are the primary mechanisms through which such perspective transformation occurs (Kurnia, 2021). The symbol-drawing exercise, in which teachers were confronted with the collective, deficit-saturated pattern in their own descriptions of children, arguably functioned as precisely this kind of disorienting dilemma: a moment in which participants were invited to notice, and then to question, the interpretive frame they had been applying, largely without conscious reflection, to the children in their daily care.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Rationale

This paper adopts a reflective, single-case qualitative design, in which the facilitator functions simultaneously as practitioner and researcher, documenting and analysing a single, naturally occurring professional development workshop. This design sits within an established tradition of practitioner-reflective case study research in dramatherapy, adult education, and community-based facilitation, in which the primary evidentiary base is the facilitator's structured, first-person observation of a bounded episode of practice, analysed against relevant theory and prior empirical literature. The design was chosen because the phenomenon of interest how a specific sequence of participatory, embodied, and narrative techniques shapes participants' framing of their professional experience over a single day is process-oriented and context-dependent, well suited to close qualitative case analysis and poorly suited to controlled designs that would require altering the workshop's naturally occurring structure.

Setting and Participants

The workshop took place over one day in Kitulgala, at a venue away from participants' home area, and involved thirty women employed as preschool teachers in villages across the Mundalama area of the Puttalam District. The workshop was held off-site, in Kitulgala, at a venue organised by World Vision, with the explicit intention of giving participants a change of environment away from their everyday working setting. Participants ranged in age from approximately 30 to 55 years, and most had worked in their respective preschools for a number of years, collectively serving approximately 250 children under the age of five. Some of the preschools operated under the administrative supervision of the Divisional Secretariat; the wider programme of which several preschools were part received support from World Vision. The facilitator was invited to design and deliver the workshop as a professional development session for this group; it was not, at the time it was conducted, designed or approved as a research study (see Section 3.5).

Procedure

The workshop proceeded through a sequence of participatory activities, described in detail in the Findings section below: an opening dialogic contract and circle seating arrangement; a guided body-awareness and gratitude exercise; a creative embodied movement activity; an individual symbolic drawing exercise followed by small-group and whole-group discussion; open group discussion of trauma, abuse, and family circumstances encountered in participants' professional practice; a trust-and-empathy exercise involving blindfolded pairing; and a concluding Tree Analysis exercise conducted in five small groups. Each stage was facilitated live by the author, who also modelled full participation in each activity (for example, removing her own footwear before inviting participants to do so).

Data and Analysis

The primary data for this case study are the facilitator's field observations of the workshop. These were not recorded verbatim in real time; rather, the facilitator made brief contemporaneous notes during and between activities (principally the specific descriptive vocabulary offered during group presentations, and short phrases used by participants in discussion) and reconstructed a fuller narrative account within 48 hours of the workshop's conclusion. No audio or video recording, independent observer, or participant interview was used, and no formal qualitative coding procedure (e.g., line-by-line coding, inter-rater checking) was applied. This is a material limitation, and it is addressed directly in Section 3.6.

Because the evidentiary base is a single facilitator's reconstructed notes, we distinguish throughout the Findings section between two kinds of statement: (a) direct observations what participants said, drew, or did, drawn as closely as possible from the facilitator's contemporaneous notes (for example, the specific words teachers used to describe children during the symbol-drawing exercise); and (b) the facilitator's interpretation of those observations claims about what a pattern of behaviour or language means, or what shift it may represent. Statements of the second kind are flagged explicitly as the facilitator's reading of the material, not as an independently verified finding.

The analytic process itself was as follows. After the workshop, the facilitator reviewed the contemporaneous notes and grouped the descriptive vocabulary and disclosures under broad categories that emerged directly from participants' own language (for example, "deficit/symptom-level descriptions of children," "disclosures of abuse or family instability," "structural/root-cause explanations"). These categories were then organised according to the workshop's sequential stages, consistent with the presentation of Findings below, and read against the literatures reviewed in Section 2. This process approximates a light, single-coder thematic categorisation rather than a formal, auditable qualitative coding procedure, and no second coder or member check was used to verify the categories or their application. Where the Findings report a proportion of participants or groups (e.g., "a majority," "several"), these are the facilitator's retrospective, approximate impressions rather than counts tallied at the time; this is a further respect in which the account should be read as practitioner-reflective rather than as systematically quantified qualitative data, and quantifying language is used sparingly and qualified accordingly in the revised Findings below.

Consistent with practitioner-reflective case study methodology, the aim of this analysis is not statistical generalisability but an analytically useful account of a pedagogical process that may usefully inform the design of similar interventions in comparable settings a claim we return to, with appropriate caution, in the Discussion and Conclusion.

Ethical Considerations

This workshop was commissioned and delivered as a professional development session for preschool teachers, under the administrative umbrella described in Section 3.2, and was not originally designed, approved, or consented to as a research study. This paper is a retrospective, reflective case account written after the fact, and that sequencing has direct ethical implications that we address explicitly below rather than treat as a neutral backdrop.

Ethical approval. As this paper reports a reflective, practitioner-authored account of a professional development workshop rather than a prospectively designed research study involving the collection of data from human subjects for research purposes, formal ethical clearance was not sought or required at the time. The analysis presented here is accordingly framed as a retrospective case reflection, consistent with practitioner-reflective case study methodology in dramatherapy and adult education, rather than as a study governed by a research ethics protocol.

Consent for participation and for publication. Participants consented, implicitly through their participation and explicitly through the dialogic contract described in Section 4.1, to take part in the workshop as a professional development activity. Verbal informed consent for the use of workshop material in this publication was obtained from participants. Participants were informed that thematic, de-identified material from the workshop including the descriptive vocabulary generated during the symbol-drawing exercise, the general content of group disclosures, and the outputs of the Tree Analysis exercise might be used to inform a written account of the workshop, and that no individually identifying information about themselves, the children in their care, or the families they referenced would be reported. Consent was not documented in writing at the time; this is noted as a limitation, and the de-identification and safeguarding measures described elsewhere in this section are intended to protect participants in the absence of a signed consent record.

De-identification. No individually identifying information about participants, the children in their care, or the families referenced during disclosure is presented in this paper; all accounts of abuse, migration, or family circumstance are reported at the level of thematic pattern across the group rather than as identifiable individual case material, and no single account is reported with enough combined detail (role, location, and circumstance) to be attributable to a specific teacher, child, or family.

Managing disclosures of possible child abuse. No formal safeguarding or child-protection protocol was established in advance of the workshop. The workshop was commissioned and designed as a professional development session rather than as a research or clinical intervention, and the possibility that it would surface spontaneous disclosures of child sexual abuse and family violence was not anticipated in its planning. No specific disclosure was formally referred on for follow-up at the time, and no structured debrief or psychological support was offered to teachers beyond the facilitator's in-session handling of the material as it arose.

Facilitator positionality. The facilitator's positionality as an invited outside expert who explicitly renounced the position of sole authority at the outset of the session is treated as a methodologically significant feature of the intervention, consistent with reflexive practice in dramatherapy and participatory action research. This positionality does not substitute for the procedural safeguards described above, and we note it here as interpretive context rather than as a resolution of the ethical questions this case raises.

LIMITATIONS

This is a single-workshop, single-facilitator reflective case study, and its findings should be read as an analytically suggestive but non-generalisable account of one instance of participatory pedagogical practice, not as a demonstrated effect. Several specific limitations follow from the methodology described in Section 3.4. First, the data are facilitator-observed and reconstructed after the session, rather than independently observed, recorded, or triangulated with participant self-report collected through separate instruments; this raises a real possibility of facilitator bias, both in what was noticed and retained in memory and in how it was subsequently interpreted. Second, the account does not distinguish, with the precision a coded qualitative study would allow, between what participants directly said or did and the facilitator's interpretation of its significance; we have attempted to mark this distinction explicitly wherever possible, but the underlying data do not permit independent verification of either. Third, quantifying terms used in the Findings ("a majority," "several," "a number of") reflect the facilitator's retrospective impression rather than a systematic count, and should be read as indicative rather than precise. Fourth, the workshop occurred on a single day, and the paper is consequently unable to assess whether the shift in framing observed among participants during the session persisted, or translated into changed classroom practice, beyond the day itself; language elsewhere in this paper describing that shift ("apparent," "as observed by the facilitator") should be read consistently with this constraint, and should not be taken to imply a durable or verified change in attitude or practice. Fifth, as discussed in Section 3.5, this workshop was not originally designed or consented to as a research study, which limits what can responsibly be claimed from it and underscores the importance of building formal ethical review, informed consent for publication, and safeguarding protocols into any future, similarly designed workshop from the outset. Finally, because the setting, population, and facilitator role are highly specific, caution is warranted in extrapolating the approach directly to other cultural, linguistic, or institutional contexts without adaptation.

FINDINGS

Establishing a Participatory Space

The workshop opened with an explicit dialogic contract. Participants were told directly that the facilitator had "not come here simply to teach" but "to learn from each one of you," and were invited to "participate actively, ask questions, share your ideas, and contribute your experiences at any moment." This verbal contract was reinforced structurally: participants were seated in a circle rather than in rows, a spatial choice intended to dissolve, as far as possible, the conventional distinction between trainer and trainees. In the facilitator's observation, participants who were initially somewhat formal became visibly more relaxed and willing to contribute as the morning progressed, and the customary distance between facilitator and participants appeared to diminish. This impression is the facilitator's own interpretation of participants' visible behaviour rather than a measured or independently verified change, and no attempt was made at the time to record it systematically (for example, through timed observation or a structured rating). This opening phase functioned, in effect, as the establishment of the workshop's operating principle for the remainder of the day: that participants' own experience constituted legitimate professional knowledge, and that the workshop's purpose was to make that knowledge visible, both to the group and to the individuals who held it.

Body Awareness, Mindfulness, and Gratitude

The second stage of the workshop introduced a structured body-awareness and gratitude exercise. Participants were invited, without pressure, to remove their footwear and move freely around the space at their own pace; all thirty chose to participate. As participants walked, they were guided to attend to their thoughts, feelings, breathing, and bodily sensations, before being invited to stand still, close their eyes, and enter a guided sequence of embodied reflection. This sequence moved systematically through the brain and mind (reflecting on the range of experience happiness, difficulty, pain, and decision-making that the mind had carried across a lifetime), the heart and upper body (reflecting on the emotional range the heart had carried, including love, fear, hope, and compassion), and finally the legs and feet (reflecting, both literally

and symbolically, on the distances travelled and the life journeys undertaken). At each stage, participants were invited to express silent gratitude toward the corresponding part of the body, culminating in a collective silent statement of thanks: “Thank you, my body, for carrying me throughout my life.”

This exercise was explicitly designed to do more than induce physical relaxation. As the facilitator observed, many of the participating women “spend much of their lives caring for children, families, and communities, often paying very little attention to their own physical and emotional needs,” and the exercise was intended to establish, early in the day, the principle that “before we can care deeply for others, we need to become aware of and care for ourselves.” This principle recurred as an implicit organising theme across the remainder of the workshop.

From Self-Awareness to Seeing the Child

Following the body-awareness exercise, participants engaged in a creative movement activity in which they used their bodies to represent a sequence of images a waterfall, a large tree, an insect, and a large rock each associated with a number, with participants required to recreate the corresponding image spontaneously when their number was called. The activity generated substantial laughter and energy, and functioned, in the facilitator’s analysis, as a demonstration that the body could serve as a medium of communication, imagination, and collective expression, distinct from its role in participants’ habitual daily activity.

The subsequent group reflection on this activity produced an unexpected and significant finding. Several participants reported that, for the first time, they had consciously thought about their own bodies as something requiring care and attention, rather than as an instrument in continuous service to others. A number of participants articulated a personal commitment to begin practising greater self-regard and self-love. This moment functioned, in the facilitator’s account, as a deliberate bridge between self-awareness and the awareness of others: having been guided to pause, observe, and value themselves, participants were then positioned to be invited to pause, observe, and attempt to see the children in their care with comparable attention.

Seeing the Child Through a Different Lens

Participants were then asked to work individually, using paper and colours, to draw a symbol rather than a realistic image representing how they perceived the preschool child they encounter in daily practice. Working in groups of five, participants shared and discussed their drawings around the question, “How do we see and understand the child we encounter in our preschool?”, before each group presented its reflections to the whole workshop.

Direct observation. Across the five group presentations, the descriptive vocabulary offered by teachers included the following terms, recorded in the facilitator’s notes: aggressive, traumatised, violent, slow learners, inactive, sleepy, unable to concentrate, preferring isolation, dirty, unhygienic, untidy, and malnourished; a smaller set of terms were positive in character, including healthy, cheerful, active, and happy. The facilitator did not tally these terms systematically by group or by speaker at the time, so no precise count or distribution across the thirty participants or five groups can be reported; the retrospective, approximate impression — offered here as an impression rather than a count — is that language of the first, deficit-oriented kind predominated across most of the five group presentations, with positive characterisations offered by a smaller number of participants.

Facilitator’s interpretation. Read collectively, these descriptions suggested to the facilitator something beyond a simple catalogue of individual children’s behaviour: that the group’s presentations, taken together, disclosed a great deal about the “social, emotional, physical, and family circumstances surrounding many of the children” served by these preschools. This is the facilitator’s reading of the pattern, not an independently verified finding. On this reading, the exercise also surfaced an important interpretive risk: the possibility that a child repeatedly perceived through the lens of a single difficulty “aggressive,” “slow,” “dirty” comes to be identified by that difficulty, such that the behaviour itself becomes the lens through which the child as a whole is seen. This observation prompted an explicit reframing exercise, moving the group from the

question “What is wrong with this child?” toward the question “What may have happened to this child, and what is this child trying to communicate through this behaviour?” The facilitator’s assessment is that this reframing, from a deficit, trait-based reading of behaviour to a communicative, adversity-informed one, functioned as a pivotal turning point in the day’s structure, establishing the interpretive foundation for the disclosures and analysis that followed; this assessment should be read as the facilitator’s interpretation of a single day’s events rather than a demonstrated causal claim

Listening to the Teachers: Trauma, Abuse, and the Need for Empathy

As group discussion continued beyond the drawing exercise, participants moved from describing children’s behaviour to disclosing the circumstances underlying it. An unrecorded but, in the facilitator’s recollection, more-than-isolated number of teachers reported direct encounters with cases of abuse, including disclosures of sexual abuse occurring within children’s own families and involving people close to the children. As with the vocabulary reported in Section 4.4, no precise count of how many teachers, or which of the five groups, contributed these particular disclosures was recorded at the time, and the figures implied here (“a number of,” “many”) are retrospective impressions. Teachers explained that mothers frequently disclosed such situations to them specifically because they regarded preschool teachers as trusted adults with a close relationship to their children. Teachers further described children carrying the visible effects of these experiences into the preschool setting, presenting as aggressive, withdrawn, fearful, inattentive, restless, or unusually quiet, and noted more broadly that many children in their care lacked a stable or healthy developmental environment.

In the facilitator’s interpretation, these disclosures retrospectively illuminated the deficit-saturated vocabulary that had emerged during the earlier symbol exercise: descriptions such as “aggressive,” “violent,” “traumatised,” and “slow to learn” could now be understood, at least in part, as behavioural expressions of experiences the children were unable to communicate verbally, rather than as discipline problems or fixed developmental limitations — a connection the facilitator draws analytically rather than one that was established through any independent assessment of the children concerned. The facilitator observed that participants were direct and open in sharing these accounts, with all five small groups contributing presentations and building on one another’s contributions in the ensuing discussion. The facilitator reads this openness as suggestive of a group that had, over the course of the morning, developed a level of collective trust and confidence sufficient to voice realities that are often difficult to discuss in more conventional training settings, while noting that this reading cannot be separated from the facilitator’s own investment in the workshop design succeeding.

Building Empathy Through Experiential Learning

Interspersed throughout the day were shorter energising and trust-building activities intended to sustain group cohesion and to offer additional avenues for experiential, rather than purely intellectual, learning. One such activity, involving participants briefly holding hands in pairs before being blindfolded, separated, and asked to relocate their original partner using non-visual cues, proved especially vivid: participants located their partners with notable speed and accuracy, generating considerable laughter and enthusiasm, and demonstrating the extent to which information conveyed through touch, bodily memory, and non-verbal cues can substitute for visual recognition.

This activity was used as the empirical basis for a subsequent discussion of empathy, framed around the distinction between asking “Why is this child behaving like this?” and asking “What might this child be experiencing?” Participants discussed the proposition that bringing positive change to another person’s life and particularly to a child’s life requires a deliberate effort to understand that person’s experience from the inside, rather than to interpret or judge their behaviour from the outside. This discussion functioned as a conceptual bridge between the disclosures of the previous stage and the structural analysis of the workshop’s final stage, reinforcing the shift from a behaviour-focused to an experience-focused understanding of the children in participants’ care.

Tree Analysis: From Symptoms to Root Causes

In the workshop's culminating activity, conducted after a break, participants were divided into five groups and asked to identify a significant issue related to their work with children, representing that issue through the parts of a large tree: the visible problem, its underlying roots, and its consequences. As with the earlier exercises, the account below draws on the facilitator's notes on each group's verbal presentation of its tree, and reflects the facilitator's after-the-fact synthesis of five separate group outputs rather than a verbatim or independently coded record of each tree. Groups again identified children's aggressive behaviour, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal, and low participation in play as visible concerns, but the subsequent analysis of roots produced a considerably more complex account than the earlier symbol exercise had done in isolation.

A central theme concerned maternal labour migration. Teachers reported that, in many families, mothers had migrated for employment, leaving children in the care of fathers or grandparents, and that this separation was frequently associated with withdrawal, cessation of play, self-isolation, and behavioural change among affected children. Teachers also returned to and extended the disclosures of the previous stage, describing distressing accounts of alleged sexual abuse within families, including one account of a child repeatedly referring to a father's inappropriate behaviour, and other accounts of children allegedly experiencing abuse by members of their immediate family environment. Teachers connected these experiences directly to the behavioural and physical symptoms children displayed in the preschool setting, including emotional distress and withdrawal. Additional concerns raised included disengagement of parents from children's lives, and the displacing effect of excessive mobile phone and social media use on meaningful parent-child interaction.

From this material, the five groups collectively identified a set of structural root causes, including economic hardship and poverty, parental migration and family separation, inadequate parental care and attention, cultural barriers and traditional patterns of thinking, limited educational opportunity, unmet basic needs, family instability, inadequate awareness of children's emotional and developmental needs, and insufficient support systems for vulnerable families. Participants were also notably critical of existing external interventions, observing that religious institutions, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations frequently addressed the visible symptoms of social problems rather than their underlying structural causes, and that many well-intentioned projects lacked systematic evaluation, follow-up, or a clear pathway for sustaining change once external funding or attention moved on. This critique marked a further shift in the group's analytic register, from describing what was happening to individual children toward asking why it was happening and what would need to change at a systemic level for the situation to be different. Facilitator's Observations of Participant Capacity

Across the day, the facilitator recorded a consistent set of observations regarding the participants' underlying capacities. These are reported here as an integral finding of the case study rather than as incidental commentary, while being explicitly the facilitator's subjective assessment, formed through a single day of contact, rather than a measured or independently corroborated evaluation of capacity. Participants demonstrated considerable courage, directness, and experiential authority in discussing difficult professional realities, grounded in years of lived engagement with the families and children of their own communities. Their close relationships with these communities appeared to be the mechanism through which mothers, and in some cases children, felt able to disclose difficult experiences to them.

Participants also displayed strong mutual empathy, encouragement, and collaborative capacity within the group itself, and considerable creative talent in singing, dance, and embodied expression, which became especially visible during the day's experiential activities. The facilitator's overall assessment was that these teachers possessed substantially more knowledge, capacity, and latent leadership potential than may have been formally recognised, grounded not in credentialed expertise but in years of situated community experience precisely the form of knowledge that the workshop's participatory design was intended to surface and validate.

DISCUSSION

In the facilitator's interpretation, the sequence of participatory, embodied, and narrative techniques employed did not function as discrete, merely engaging activities, but as a cumulative pedagogical architecture in which each stage created the preconditions for the stage that followed. This is a plausible reading of the day's structure rather than a claim that has been tested against an alternative sequence or a comparison condition. The opening dialogic contract and circular seating established a baseline of relative equality and safety; the body-awareness and gratitude exercise extended that safety inward, consistent with the literature on mindfulness and self-care among caregiving professionals (Lee, 2020; Greater Good in Education, 2020); the creative movement activity then redirected that embodied attentiveness outward, functioning, consistent with drama-based experiential learning literature, as a rehearsal for perspective-taking (Dave et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2023). Only after this trust-building and embodied preparation were participants invited to represent, and then interrogate, their existing understanding of the children in their care an ordering that appears, in retrospect, to have been a precondition for the candour of the disclosures that followed.

The pattern of deficit-saturated description that emerged in the symbol-drawing exercise is consistent with, and helps to substantiate at a qualitative level, the broader trauma-informed education literature's account of how educators working with adversity-affected children can come to encode behavioural symptoms as fixed identity in the absence of a framework connecting behaviour to underlying cause (Loomis, 2021; Brown et al., 2022). What is analytically significant in this case, however, is not merely that this pattern existed, but that participants' own language appeared, within the facilitator's observation of the single day, to move toward a more compassionate, communicative framing once given a structured opportunity to notice the pattern collectively. We describe this as an apparent shift in the group's discourse during the session, not as evidence that the underlying pattern was durably revised. This is broadly consistent with transformative learning theory's account of perspective transformation as proceeding through a disorienting dilemma followed by structured critical reflection (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Kurnia, 2021): the moment at which the group's collective vocabulary was reflected back to itself functioned, in effect, as the disorienting dilemma, and the subsequent reframing exercise and Tree Analysis functioned as the structured reflection through which a more inclusive perspective was consolidated.

The disclosures of abuse and family instability that emerged during the workshop, and their connection to parental labour migration in particular, corroborate at the level of lived professional testimony what recent epidemiological and qualitative research has documented at the level of population data: that parental migration for employment is associated with a documented cluster of adverse emotional and behavioural outcomes among children left in the care of relatives (Fauk et al., 2025), and that in the Sri Lankan context specifically, this association carries measurable long-term consequences extending into adulthood (Knipe et al., 2021). This convergence between the teachers' situated professional knowledge and the empirical literature lends weight to the workshop's central methodological premise: that community-based practitioners, given a structure that recognises and elicits their experience, are capable of generating an analysis that aligns closely with, and in some respects anticipates, formal research findings. It also lends weight to the teachers' own critique of externally designed interventions that address symptoms rather than structural roots a critique that mirrors ongoing scholarly debate about the limits of programmatic, output-focused development interventions that do not engage with underlying structural determinants of family and child wellbeing.

The Tree Analysis exercise itself illustrates the practical value of narrative and metaphor-based group methods, in the tradition established by Ncube's (2006) original Tree of Life approach, as tools for moving a group from individually held, fragmented observations toward a collectively constructed, structurally coherent account. Although the exercise as adapted here served an analytic rather than a directly therapeutic purpose, its capacity to surface material connected to trauma and social adversity without requiring direct, potentially retraumatising disclosure is consistent with the broader evidence base for tree-based narrative methods (Kasmani, 2021; Chow & Fung, 2021).

Several implications for the design of professional development programmes with community-based early childhood educators follow from this case. First, programme designers working in similar settings should consider treating participatory structure circle seating, an explicit dialogic contract, facilitator co-participation in embodied exercises not as a stylistic preference but as a methodological precondition for accessing the kind of candid, experientially grounded material that emerged in this workshop. Second, embedding a self-directed body-awareness or mindfulness component prior to content-focused discussion may be a low-cost, high-value design choice for programmes serving caregiving professionals who are otherwise rarely invited to attend to their own wellbeing. Third, symbolic or metaphor-based group exercises, such as the symbol-drawing and Tree Analysis activities used here, appear to offer particular value in settings where direct verbal disclosure of trauma or family difficulty may be inhibited by stigma, mistrust, or the constraints of a single, time-limited session. Fourth, and more broadly, programmes intended to support teachers working with vulnerable children should build in structured opportunities to move participants from behaviour-level to structure-level analysis, given the apparent tendency, documented both in this case and in the wider literature, for symptom-level framing to dominate professional discourse in the absence of such structured reflection. Fifth, because a workshop of this kind can be expected to elicit spontaneous disclosures of possible child abuse, programme designers should treat an explicit, pre-agreed safeguarding and referral protocol, together with prospective ethical review and informed consent for any subsequent research use of workshop material, as a precondition for running or documenting such a workshop — a requirement this case illustrates by its absence rather than by its fulfilment (see Section 3.5).

At the same time, this case study's limits should temper these implications. As a single-workshop, facilitator-observed account, it cannot establish whether the reframing observed during the day persisted beyond the session, translated into changed classroom practice, or proved sustainable without follow-up support a concern the teachers themselves raised, with some prescience, in their critique of interventions lacking systematic evaluation and follow-through. Future work building on this case would benefit from a longitudinal design incorporating follow-up observation or interview with participants some months after the initial workshop, alongside methodological triangulation using participant-generated rather than solely facilitator-generated data, in order to test whether the shift documented here proves durable and practice-relevant beyond the boundaries of a single day.

CONCLUSION

This case study has documented and analysed a one-day participatory workshop with thirty rural preschool teachers in Sri Lanka, designed around the premise that meaningful professional learning depends on structurally recognising, rather than overriding, participants' existing experiential knowledge. Through a carefully sequenced combination of dialogic contracting, embodied mindfulness and gratitude practice, creative movement, symbolic representation, group disclosure, trust-based empathy exercise, and narrative-based structural analysis, the workshop appears, on the facilitator's reconstructed observation, to have been associated with an apparent shift among participants: from an initially deficit-saturated, symptom-level account of the children in their care toward a more compassionate, structurally aware framing of children's difficult behaviour as an expression of underlying adversity, including poverty, parental labour migration, family instability, and abuse. This is offered as a single, non-generalisable case observation that resonates with, rather than substantiates, a substantial body of recent scholarship on critical and dialogic pedagogy, embodied and drama-based experiential learning, trauma-informed early childhood practice, and narrative, strengths-based group methods; establishing whether the workshop caused this shift, and whether it lasted beyond the day, would require the triangulated, longitudinal design described in Section 3.6.

The case also illustrates the considerable, and often under-recognised, professional and analytic capacity of community-based preschool teachers themselves: women who, over years of embedded practice, have accumulated experiential knowledge of family and child adversity that in several respects anticipates and corroborates the findings of formal research literature on parental migration and childhood adversity in South and Southeast Asia. The central methodological claim of this paper is that such knowledge is not simply present and waiting to be extracted through conventional instruction, but requires a deliberately participatory, embodied, and trust-generating pedagogical architecture in order to be surfaced, recognised,

and put to productive use. For those designing professional development for community-based early childhood educators, particularly in contexts marked by economic hardship, labour migration, and the aftereffects of family trauma, this case suggests that the design of the learning space who speaks, who is seated where, whose body participates, and in what order disclosure is invited, is not peripheral to the educational content of a workshop, but is itself among the most consequential pedagogical decisions a facilitator can make.

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