

## Reflective Letters to Navigate the Pandemic: Exploring Emotions to Strengthen our Leadership Practices as Educators

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### ABSTRACT

*Two South Asian educators from the neighboring countries, Nepal and India, embarked on a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry into the emotional dimensions of teaching during the time of the pandemic using reflective letter-writing as a method of generating data. We have used a narrative dialogue method to analyze our reflective letter-writing method and draw attention to the themes that emerged throughout the process of generating data. Our research points out the significance of affective understanding through listening and sharing each other's narratives as a way to build resilience as teacher leaders during times of crisis to improve our practices and gain insight into each other's lived experiences.*

**KEYWORDS:** autoethnography, letter-writing, reflexivity, emotional intelligence, teacher leaders, teachers as researchers

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The importance of understanding emotions and reflections based on emotions for teaching-learning is being highlighted by multiple research (Frenzel, Daniels, & Burić, 2021; Gkonou & Miller, 2020; Nocetti et al., 2020; Shoffner, 2009). The documentation of emotions and their reflection help the teachers understand their identity, helping them strengthen their leadership skills (Shrestha, 2021). Lieberman and Miller (2005) argue that teacher leadership is the cosmopolitan response to the changes in the world through their continued efforts in learning, teaching, and modeling lifelong learning, they are influencing and impacting the community as a whole. As teacher leaders, they bring “a range of experience, understanding, and emotion to their university preparation, drawing on their apprenticeship of observation, their practical theory, and their personal stories of schooling to make sense of pedagogy, theory, and issues addressed in teacher education” (Shoffner, 2009, p. 783). Thus, the need for continuous reflection by paying explicit attention to the role of emotions in their practice is important for teachers for their improvement in practice.

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We are two teachers working in two neighboring South Asian countries, Nepal and India, who connected through a teaching fellowship called Teach For All, a network of 61 independent partner organizations that borrows the notion of teaching as leadership to foster change around the globe (Teach For All, 2021). The first author, Bhawana is a Teach For Nepal alumna who had been a part of the fellowship from 2013 to 2015 and is currently a Ph.D. student of educational leadership, exploring how she can improve her practices as the founder of an education initiative working on emotional intelligence in Nepal to support educational leaders. She is based in Kathmandu and works with teachers and students to help them critically self-reflect on their emotions. The second author, Kavita is a Teach For India alumna who was part of the fellowship from 2020-2022 and maximized the learnings of students in a government school in New Delhi and is now working as an Academic Advisor at an Ed-Tech company that is invested in providing modern pedagogy to affordable schools in rural and urban areas. She founded different projects for the holistic development of students and one of them is building Social-Emotional Learning where she executed the curated curriculum of Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning (SEE Learning), findings from research of Dr. Daniel Goleman and Dr. Carol S.Dweck. She is now joining a new journey of working with school leaders and teachers in implementing practical-based education to bring transformation and contribute towards SDG4 in India. We both were part of a virtual research conference in June 2021 and found mutuality in our interests and values through our presentations and started writing to each other. The upsurge of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had limited mobility, and both of them were working virtually at that time and were in need of self-expression and community during the difficult times as the role of teachers had become more demanding (Shrestha, 2021). This paper explores our journey of navigating our teaching journey amid pandemics through hope and courage by expressing our emotions through reflective letter writings.

Our shared interest in the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning stems particularly from the gender-based discrimination we both had to grow up with in our respective countries. Though gender was not our initial focus when we started using social-emotional learning in our teaching-learning practices, we gradually, through our informal conversations and letters, figured out that socio-cultural realities, especially gender played a significant role in what emotions we were experiencing and how we were reflecting. Olson et al. (2019) argue that the influence of gender is unavoidable during the process of critical reflection as it is one of the important factors that sets guidelines about our expressions of emotions. Feeling more connected through our informal conversations and reflective letter writings, we decided to embark on an exploratory, collaborative inquiry into the emotional dimension of our teaching experiences during the pandemic.

In this article, we engage in a critical dialogue and reflection by providing a brief South-Asian context during the pandemic, opening a discussion on our collaborative autoethnographic methodological stance by explaining the research process we had done in two phases through narrative dialogue. After writing each letter, we also wrote another letter reflecting our thoughts as a response to the last letter received. Here, we also bring forth our reflections, which were an important aspect of our letter writing that we had throughout the process. We then present our collective findings broadly categorized into three themes: Listening and introspecting on our emotions, engaging with our emotions and sharing them, and building resilience by strengthening our hope and courage during the pandemic. Finally, we deepen our understanding of the research question we had constructed to guide our research journey - how might an increased awareness of emotions through reflective expression be helpful in improving our practices as educational leaders?

### **South-Asian Context During the Pandemic**

As the lockdown tenure increased, the academia in South-Asian countries too started to change the mode of classes to cope with the crisis without giving enough time for both the students and the educators to prepare (Gautam & Gautam, 2021). Anxiety, trauma, and psychological stress were high both because of the pandemic and also because of the sudden change in the mode of teaching and learning practices with no time to prepare and less infrastructure and resources. Although a global crisis, COVID-19 differently affected certain parts of the world. With the majority of the infection among the young population in the South Asian region, it affected the financial parameters heavily. When access to education is already very limited in the South Asian context, the disruption due to the pandemic and the financial implications brought severe impacts on the emotional well-being of the educators. According to the World Bank (2023) report, between April 1, 2020, and March 31, 2022, in South Asia, schools were fully or partially closed for 83 percent of the time, which is significantly longer than the global average of 52 percent of that same period because of the ineffective remote learning measures. Reviews of thirteen research studies concluded that there was a prevalence of psychological symptoms that co-related with the complaints of fatigue and pain, somatic concerns, alcohol-related disorders, pre-anxiety, and insomnia amid multiple socio-cultural barriers in South Asia (Banerjee et al., 2020).

### **Our Collaborative Auto-Ethnographic Research Stance**

To explore the emotional dimensions of our teaching journey amid the pandemic, we used collaborative auto-ethnographic (CAE) inquiry as our methodology to research our interactions and experiences. We, the two authors of this paper, share the idea that our sociocultural settings are crucial for our academic identities, especially our identity as an educator. Thus, for us, collaborative inquiry of our teaching-learning process as co-inquirers by sharing and studying our lived experiences in relation to our culture was significant (Coia & Taylor, 2009). We resonate with Blalock and Akehi (2017) with their claim that intentional and purposeful dialogues through collaborative autoethnography can be a pathway for transformative learning as they help foster friendship and an ongoing narrative about the researchers.

With its methodological and theoretical genesis in autoethnographic research, it is important to understand the rigor of autoethnography for critical reflection (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Hernandez et al. (2017) claim autoethnography not only as retelling stories but also as a medium that allows both the researchers and the readers space for critical reflection by incorporating cultural and personal aspects of the individual narratives. Given that ethnography research usually explores the behavior against the background by emphasizing the meaning-making of the situation, autoethnography can be understood as researching the researcher's own life within a particular culture or social group (Chang et al., 2016). Thus, autoethnographic inquiry is academic research that views multiple layers of consciousness by placing the researchers themselves as participants in their culture by writing about their personal narratives in relation to culture.

Our choice for CAE was driven by the belief that an affective understanding of ourselves during the pandemic is helpful for our improved self-awareness and management of our emotions in achieving our goals as educational leaders (Shrestha, 2021). In our CAE approach, we set our journey in a complex everyday context by acknowledging the assertion that a pandemic is a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to document our personal experiences and reflect it through our socio-cultural lens (Cornwall, 2020 as cited in Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 384). Then, we examine and question our lived experiences and ourselves as co-researchers in order to adapt and move ahead amid the pandemic (Gist-Martin et al., 2010). In this paper, we engage in our autoethnographic

exploration of our emotional experiences of researching about and within the context of our teaching-learning process amid the pandemic with the aim to critically reflect on ourselves as an educator to improve our practices. We believe that creating our auto-ethnographic texts and collaboratively reflecting on them is a crucial step in helping to change the world (Holaman-Jones, 2005).

## **Our Research Process**

At the time of the inception of our inquiry, we were located in two different countries (India and Nepal) and didn't have many opportunities for in-person interactions due to COVID-19 restrictions. Though we booked tickets once for Bhawana to visit Kavita's classroom in India in March 2022 but with the second wave of COVID-19, both countries again went into the phase of lockdown, making us cancel our booking. Indeed, we have not been able to meet together even up until now though we have collaborated on several other projects even after this. Therefore, as collaborative inquirers and autoethnographic researchers, for us, reflective letter-writing became the most feasible option for us to bring into dialogue our experiences, voices, and perspectives. White and Epston (1990, as cited in DeCino et al., 2019) argued that the narrative forms of reflective letter writing can be a crucial tool for transformation as the words in the letter will not disappear through time and space and will later on work as a therapy. Thus, we decided to move ahead with our email conversations as our inquiry and considered our emails and subsequent reflections as our data source (Lee & Gregory, 2008).

This article is the representation and examination of our collaborative autoethnographic method as we embark on our self-reflexive inquiry into our affective understanding as an educator during the pandemic. Reflective letter-writing as a form of a qualitative method for self-reflection and transformation has been used by a number of scholars to re-examine their lived experiences for heightened self-awareness and emotional management (Channa, 2017; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Rosin (2015) categorized self-reflection into five dimensions; content reflection, process reflection, premise/critical reflection, affect and primary emotions reflection, and heightened emotional intelligence self-reflection. We have also followed through the same process where we started with the basic form of self-reflection by sharing our details of the setting and the people we work with. Then we moved on to process reflection, where we started sharing evidence of our thought processes, feeling, and how we acted in any particular event. We reflected on our socio-cultural background and how it has shaped us as a part of our critical reflection. While doing so, we also shared our early childhood experiences that shaped and influenced our current emotions. This was part of our affect and primary emotions reflection. While writing this research paper, we used the component of heightened emotional intelligence for our reflection process. Here we have reflected on our overall process and analyzed our emotions and experiences using the components of emotional intelligence.

To enrich our reflection, we decided to move ahead with the medium of narrative dialogue through written conversation in order to build a reflective space for our identity reconstruction and negotiation. Inspired by Channa (2017), we take our reflective letter-writing as an arts-based approach to self-inquiry for us to manifest our critical reflection and self-growth. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) argue that letter-writing is an important field of text that can display autobiographical reflection through creative expressions. For us, narrative dialogue is a way to reflect on our evolving selves as research participants and also as educational leaders working during challenging times as we shuffle and shift and transform our perspectives. Letters and the simultaneous reflections that we sent to each other for us meant our reflective human behavior that showcased our thinking during our activity, which Schon (1983) considers as reflection-in-action.

Meanwhile, the narrative dialogue, for us, is our reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983), where we recount our experience and access our letter-writing to help understand our growth in affective understanding. For this, we have used the excerpts of our email conversations and our written reflections. As the lead author, Bhawana created a Google document with an initial framework for the dialogue, including the field texts and the drafts, and emailed it back and forth to Kavita in order to develop the final version. Though we have not used all the narratives and the reflections from our letters, we have edited them in such a way that it remains true and does not lose their original tone while they fit in to answer our guiding research questions. The dialogue presents our conversation with our collaborative autoethnographic account by drawing the key insights from our reflective letter-writing experience. Through this, we not only reflect critically on our leadership journey as an educator but also explore the nature, importance, and challenges of the letter-writing process as a research methodology. For the clarity of the readers, we have also used brief explanatory notes in italics whenever necessary.

## **A Narrative Dialogue in our Reflective Letter Writing Method**

### **Phases of the Reflective Writing Process**

#### ***Phase One: Beginning of the Collaborative Autoethnographic Inquiry Process***

After the completion of the conference, we wrote an informal introduction email to each other. That started turning into informal sharing about our well-being and how we were managing ourselves and our classrooms during the pandemic. Later on, as the conversation progressed and we felt psychologically safe with each other, we thought of taking our conversation into a formal process of inquiry. Heightened psychological safety helps us to move away from our default way of thinking and doing and helps us unfreeze ourselves by making us critical and building blocks of learning and reinforcing each other (Weiner et al., 2021). We began our research inquiry with a guiding question, that is, how can the increased awareness of our emotions during a time of crisis be helpful for our improvement as educational leaders? Then over several Zoom and email conversations, we discussed and explored our experiences as educators and how we are already focusing our awareness on our emotions. We were reflecting on our emotions on a personal level and were curious how would that turn out if we involved each other in our reflection process and share our introspection with each other as critical friends. Dewey (2015) highlights the significance of serious consideration in deliberate and intentional reflective practice on the actions of educators. For that, Costa and Kallick (1993) highlight the significance of critical friends when there needs a reflection on challenging experiences. Thus, it led us to the thinking that writing a letter to each other will help us answer our guiding question. For us, in letters, we could reflect using the 5R framework; reporting (descriptive account of what happened), responding (emotional response to the situation), relating (drawing the relationship to the situation in personal and theoretical terms), reasoning (exploring or introspecting on the issue further), and reconstructing (drawing the conclusion and developing the future plan according to the reasoned understanding) (Hemans et al., 2019).

#### ***Phase Two: Writing Our Letters***

We wrote our letters fortnightly. The letter used to have two contents; one was the reflective thoughts after reading the letter, and the other would be our response.

**Bhawana** My letter started with me sharing my experiences of being harassed and with the expression of the need for safety as a woman. Then it slowly shifted to sharing about my socio-economic background and expressing how it impacted what I dreamed for myself. I shared about my mother being concerned about the limited resources that we had and being worried about me not finding ways to fulfill my goals. The feeling of being safe and the recurrent feeling of loneliness is what I shared in my first two letters. My third letter was about the emotional experience that I had when I was working as a Teach for Nepal fellow and had to convince one of my adolescent students' mother not to get her married unless she completes her school. The letter mostly had my feeling of hopelessness as a teacher working in a remote village, but then again, not giving up and seeking joyfulness amid the chaos. It also had the story of my wedding and the struggle with my family to not get married before I completed my Master's degree. In the letter written on 9th December 2021, I wrote

*The fear of getting married started right after I turned 15. I was at one of my cousins' weddings. I usually did not use to attend weddings but that day I thought that I would because she was one of my best cousins. However, I did not know that my presence would be taken as my readiness for my marriage. I was in grade 10 then and was eager to start a new high school life after a few months. The number of marriage proposals that started coming in made me so fearful that I eagerly by hook or by crook wanted to leave my home if possibly my community as a whole. I felt unsafe there. I left my home after two years for a job and that kind of help me not get affected by all the marriage proposals. Sometimes, I just used to turn my phone off or I used to fight with my mother just to get rid of that. I am glad that I could hold up my marriage till I was 29 years old when I felt that I was ready. I fell in love with a wonderful man at my work and was able to get married to him.*

Then, I went on to share how religion is seen in my culture and how it has impacted so many aspects of our lives in other letters. As Christmas was around the corner, I also shared some of the stories from my high school and college days when we used to be fearful of talking to the opposite gender just because he was from the other religion than ours being fearful about not having a future with them. Amid all these sharing, all of my letters had my the then feelings and contexts that I was in when I was writing those letters. We mostly talked about COVID-19 and how we were dealing with it, especially the fear associated with my health and my family members' health and how I was coping with it. I also shared the difficulty that I was going through because of my period cramps and shared a story of one of my students who was bullied just because she was carrying a sanitary pad with her. My letter on 5th January 2022 also shared one of the problems I faced as a teacher because of the superstition associated with menstruation in Nepal.

*I use sanitary pads during my period and that became a problem while I was living in the village as most of the women used old clothes as pads and reuse them after washing. It's not that I had never used clothes as pads before, I had but I used to get rashes around my vaginal area whenever I used them. So I had shifted to using sanitary pads. So the problem was I did not find a place to dispose of them. The villagers would think that if they get disposed of and somehow get acquainted with plants or the soil they would not bear fruits or wouldn't be fertile anymore. The women who*

*used sanitary pads there would then flush them in the toilet which would, later on, block the toilet. So, I decided to collect those pads in a huge bag for months inside my room and carry it to the city to throw them in a dustbin.*

All of my family members except me got infected with COVID-19 around the end of January and my letters afterward were mostly about the challenges that we had to go through because of that. I was vulnerable in those letters but I also felt safe and was expressing myself authentically in all of those letters. Then slowly, my letter also was about the challenges that I was facing as a Ph.D. student. My doctoral study explored the experiences of educational leaders and as I was in the phase of data collection during that point through multiple workshops on emotional literacy, the letters also included my reflections after those sessions. In my letter, I also described the frustrations of teaching online and then expressed my joyfulness as slowly the institution that I am affiliated with transitioned on-site. My letters had my deep feelings of anxiety, shame, fear, joyfulness, as well as frustration. Those were unprocessed raw emotions shared without any hesitation. It also was like listening to my own experiences while I was sharing that with a friend.

**Kavita.** Bhawana's first letter gave me immense courage to share the several sexual harassment incidents that happened from childhood till now. The first author's blog on the same subject made me feel safe, and writing my own experiences helped me to make peace with the past. The letter also expressed how I still feel unsafe while traveling in public transport buses. This was followed by sharing an experience where I took my students out of school to shoot Delhi as a city for one of the international projects we were doing with Teach For Brazil. The letter explains how students saw for the first time the difference between privileged and underprivileged sections of society. Then the conversation got inclined towards 'the right age for marrying girls and how it changes in a privileged society,' which influences the decision-making power of a female for her own life. On November 27, 2021, a section of the second letter says,

*One student asked my age and was shocked that I am still not married whereas her 20 yrs old sister is already off to the village to meet a boy for her marriage. This student reasoned that they are from the lower class and no one would marry her if she turns so-called "old" which the second author didi is already but the second author didi can marry at any age as she is not from their class or society. Such incidents leave me speechless and helpless at the same time and remind me of how I am struggling with my family right now on the same topic- Marriage and passing no government exams. I, as a teaching fellow of TFI, plan to move for higher studies or get through any reputed government exam in India to earn my respect and a say in decision making for my future i.e. marriage. Having no financial strength means having no individuality or right to decide for yourself in my family/society and I find it hard to marry my loving boyfriend who is a Muslim against me as a Hindu if I end up being a teacher.*

The third letter admitted gender-based discrimination at the personal and community level in India. One strong evil "Dowry" was mentioned and its frequency at the National level in newspapers and how one of my student's sister, who is well educated, is getting married to a non-educated person as the boy asks for no dowry. The conversation circled around the worth of a woman at the time of marriage due to dowry. The letter also focused on how I was struggling with my mother at that time on the issue of marriage, age, and a well-paying job. The following fourth

letter talked about Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations organized by us as a classroom. The letter talked about cultural and religious integration, which detailed the fact that students celebrate every festival with the same enthusiasm, even if they belong to a different religion or creed. It talked about how the students from minority and majority communities have made one classroom for all and there is no space for alienation. On January 1st, 2022, a section of the letter admits,

*My class celebrated Christmas in a community park near the school where we organized games, a dance competition, and food at the end. They all cooked one favorite dish of theirs and I cooked Fruit Custard with their help only. One of my flatmates was generous enough to be their secret Santa to give a hamper with Coffee mugs, Chocolate, Toffees, and Goodies to each of them. This was done with 3 days of preparation and it was their happiest day of December. My Class has only 3 Christian students out of 63 students and the thought did not occur to anyone that it is not their religion's festival. Again on New Year's Eve yesterday, we had another small party in my room with 1/3 students who could join at a short notice. They are aware that this New Year is for English people and Indian New Year is in March but their energy is worth watching for every festival. My class has a ratio of 49% Hindu and Muslim students each and 2% Sikhs, and Christian. However, if you go to small towns, or villages in India you will not be able to find this celebration due to religious differences.*

The next letter took a deep dive into Menstruation and conservative practices aligned with it. It talked about how miserable experiences I had in my teenage years when I had my periods and countless embarrassing moments due to lack of awareness. It reflected upon the condition of Indian women in periods how they are stopped from entering temples, kitchens, and other places of worship even after rulings of the Supreme Court. The letter also explained the challenges we were facing in imparting education and students' lagging behind in reading levels and numeracy due to the lockdown happening again due to the surge in COVID-19 cases. It also talked about finding a balance between studies and virtual fatigue which we all were facing due to prolonged screen time when the schools reopened with limited capacity. The sixth letter focused on another important topic, empathy, where I put insights into our first workshop conducted on empathy in my classroom and its impact on students. The result of the workshop in bringing students close to each other was huge; especially on those who were alienated by previous teachers with some unwanted labels. The letter on January 18, 2022, notes,

*I conducted one of the workshops of Empathy Week with my classroom and everyone (except one kid) felt connected and need of the hour activity demanding more such spaces. This was our second workshop based on Empathy week material. I missed this Saturday's workshop and feel such regret now looking at the needs of students. Students anonymously wrote answers for one of the questions 'what is happening in their lives recently' and responses were read as group students were shocked to hear the responses of their classmates. The answers were so emotional that it didn't take another second to be friends with each other who were not getting along with each other before. What I could takeaway is that Kids are like flowers and they keep blooming more and more with constant support. One of the students wrote after the workshop that she never had such spaces so*



*far in life and asked to make it more regular where they can find at least one person as their lifelong friend. Need to mention that most of these students are studying in this class since 2014 and were not able to connect with each other because in the past teachers tagged some of my students as 'bad girls' who need to be kept separated in order to save the rest of the kids from influence and many more not so good steps. However, I filed a Child Protection Policy violation last year against one specific teacher as asked by students last year but haven't got much progress on that front due to Covid surges time and again and schools getting shut in between. For now, I conduct safe spaces as one-to-one conversations with my class where they vent out whatever troubled them or is still troubling and help in their healing. I just hope that the Covid situation doesn't worsen by the time of your visit and we are really hoping to learn from you. Closing this letter with the thought that whatever I say to students, impacts them so I am on the journey of being a conscious speaker now.*

The following letter talked about the happiness of students, teachers, and the school system in reopening schools to full capacity. It highlighted how a lot of challenges got solved on their own with everything happening in physical spaces. The next two letters, letters eighth and ninth, talked about my struggle with post-fellowship opportunities as my fellowship was about to be completed and the job market was suffering due to COVID-19. One great thing that happened was that with the sustained efforts of all of us, my classroom was nominated for National Discussion Day at Teach For India, which boosted the morale and confidence of my students. My students worked hard and aced in interviews, multiple tasks, and other activities conducted to get the final selection in the National Discussion Day, whose results are yet to be declared. Another pressing challenge persisting at that time was the spread of Tuberculosis (TB) cases in my classroom, which brought my attention to health intervention and finding the root cause of this spread. I also explored the similarity with the first author with our common interest in cinema and ongoing movies and web series. It brought us closer when I knew that Bhawana is fluent in Hindi and watches the same movies of Hindi in Kathmandu that I watch in Delhi. The final letter brought me back to the issue of the impact of COVID-19 on the learning of students. My worry on how to rebuild the foundational literacy in students since the pandemic has undone so many years of learning was admitted. The hope for a better future for my students and I was alive and made me explore multiple arenas in the interest of my classroom and myself. The result of all this brought flying colors in being conscious about my choices and actions steps towards renovating the learning environment for my students.

## **Key Features of our Reflective Letter-Writing Process**

### ***Listening and Introspecting on Our Emotions***

Writing letters helped us bring out our taken-for-granted frames of reference by helping us listen to our complex emotions by ourselves and with each other. Frames of reference include our values, affective dispositions, paradigms, learning preferences, and sense of self. Mezirow (2003) argues that the process of bringing out the acquired frames of reference in the process is tacit in which our experiences become our reality as we typify them as we associate our experiences with our personal needs for justification, validation, and convincing our real sense of self. Listening to our emotions was challenging, given the responsibilities we had as educators during the pandemic,

and more challenging was to understand our emotions. Jones and Kessler (2020) argue that teachers were busier than before as the expectation from them was higher creating a challenge for them to take a step back and reassess their emotions amid the mounting pressures. Both of us struggled in our own ways in our home countries. However, we found our letters as a safe space to pause and reflect on our emotions that would perhaps have gone unattended unconsciously.

**Bhawana.** Writing letters first seemed like a challenge to me amid the multiple responsibilities that I was having at that point in time when I was trying to navigate how I could help my students better virtually. I had the feeling that I would miss writing Kavita a letter if I do not dedicate a fixed time for that. Thus, I thought of keeping Wednesday as my letter-writing day when I would write even if I am extremely busy. The first letter as I wrote her, I was a little reluctant to sit down and write and wanted to postpone it. However, as I actually sat down to reflect on what I was thinking and feeling at that moment, it brought a sense of relief to me. In the next couple of days, when I received her response, I was joyful that we started writing to each other. Wednesdays then became my days for taking a pause and then reassessing my emotions and listening to them and expressing it to her. Since I had to write to her to express myself, I was particularly aware of the environment that usually used to be a quiet space and that was also a phase when I was giving time to myself. There were also times when I shared my personal experiences that I hadn't shared with anyone, I could feel as if I was processing my repressed emotions. Those times I would just stop typing and take a long deep breath. But every time I used to sit down to write to her, I used to start with a thought what am I feeling at the moment, and how can I express it to her as clearly as possible to her? That helped me build my vocabulary on emotions and helped me gain more clarity about myself.

**Kavita.** Writing reflective letters was a brand-new experience for me. I was very excited to write my first letter but was not sure how to write it and what should the content be so I sincerely waited for Bhawana's first letter and, when I received it, I read it thrice of joy, curiosity, and with a sense of attachment. I wrote a big response first letter, and the first email itself uncovered my suppressed emotions related to the sexual abuse that happened to me so far. The process felt somewhere easy and overwhelming too at the same time but it made me feel content. As I started writing and responding to Bhawana's letters, a safe space was built in my life, and found a corner for which I was looking until now. Having no elder sister and culture being not too emotionally expressive in my society and family always kept my emotions unexpressed and the hunt for such space was always there, which eventually was accomplished from letter writing. Sometimes, the hectic schedule at school due to blended learning and students getting sick made me feel tired, and hard to process emotions for writing. But then Bhawana's letters used to rejuvenate me, and the best thing was that our 10 letters were based on 10 different subjects with comprehensive details, which acted as energy drinks at my such low moments. A time came when I felt as if letter writing had become such a pious and personal part of my life that I can go back and feel relaxed, guarded, and loved. Due to COVID-19, strained moments came, and the response of Bhawana to certain things, such as turmoil in the job market and fear of TB spread in my class, helped me reaffirm my belief in myself and work harder with patience towards my solutions. There were a lot of similarities in experiences we had despite being women in different countries, which in due course brought us closer, and strengthened our emotional connection. The reflections in the process guided me for my classroom practices in Social-Emotional Learning sessions and Empathy building classes for students.

### *Engaging with Our Emotions and Sharing Them*

The engagement with our emotions came as another challenge for us. We started out in a state of confusion as to what to start writing and how to start sharing. There were times when we couldn't share what we were actually feeling as it was difficult to put our thoughts into words. Some events when we were recollecting were triggering that it was difficult for us to engage with our own emotions as we couldn't connect to them. That made expressing them more challenging. However, making the letter-writing structured by setting date and frequency forced us to help ourselves connect with those unpleasant emotions and engage with them as well.

**Bhawana.** The whole process felt as if two educators have found a non-academic space where they could feel safe with their emotions. Reconnecting with memories and the socio-cultural challenges associated with them was difficult to navigate at first, especially going back to the details of the experience when reflecting on the feelings was challenging for me. However, as I started the conversation with Kavita, the validation that I started getting from her and how non-judgmentally she took my expressions, I felt motivated and found comfortable sharing. Since Kavita was still in her TFI fellowship while I am an alumna of the TFN fellowship, listening to her experiences and emotions brought back memories of my fellowship days, especially the earthquake of 2015 in Nepal. The challenge that she was going through resonated with what I went through at that point. It was as if I was reliving my emotions. However, this time I was looking at them differently. I was able to see how far I have come in my journey as an educator and how far the students that I had taught then have come along. The feeling of fear and anxiety that I had then have now turned into joyfulness. Similarly, I also noticed that I was trying to shield myself when I was sharing the incidents of harassment with Kavita. First, it was quite difficult for me even to acknowledge that something as brutal as the incident had happened in my life. But gradually, with the acknowledgment of my vulnerabilities and with shared empathy from Kavita, I was able to share them in the letters later. Then, I felt I had found a release for these repressed emotions.

**Kavita.** Engaging with my emotions and then sharing with someone who is running a whole organization on its core concept itself eased me gradually and candidly. Jotting down difficult moments of my life, viz., harassment, absence of emotional connect, gender-based discrimination, and much more, felt mentally laborious, but a little internal push brought psychological safety and boosted exhaustive sharing. I realized that Bhawana paved the way to bring outside old hidden experiences to contemplate them, to which my response was digging deeper into the hidden self and accepting the harsh realities, and securing peace with them. In the entire process, incessant acknowledgement from both the educators for each other widened the field of expression to liberate the sentiments and we experienced the shield around us.

### *Building Resilience by Strengthening Our Hope and Courage During the Pandemic*

Listening to our emotions, introspecting on them, engaging with them, and expressing them in a safe space helped both of us acknowledge how gradually we had been able to build resilience within ourselves. The collaborative inquiry started to impact us positively by fostering courage and hope within us, even during uncertain times. We were not only reflecting on our experiences and emotions but were also getting insights from our co-inquirers' experiences and reflections. Sharing our challenges and problems, we were, on the one hand, building our resilience by acknowledging our problems while, on the other hand, getting alternative solutions.

**Bhawana.** Writing letters to Kavita filled me with hope amid the pandemic. When there were only a few things to look forward to, I found myself looking forward to her letters. Her expressions used to take me back to my earlier days as a school teacher while, at the same time,

also made me more courageous to see how she was trying her best to figure things out for herself, making sure her students were not left behind. I felt deeply connected with her even though we belonged to two different countries and never met in person. The hope that she brought helped me explore new routes in my leadership journey as well. She was making me a part of multiple opportunities and connections wherever she was getting involved and that made me feel connected to a larger movement. I was getting insights into her thoughts, feelings, and observations and was able to relate to myself. Reading about her life journey and how she had been to the place where she is, I was moved by her strength. The journey as an educator was difficult but the hope she has for herself was contagious.

**Kavita.** Being a part of the collaborative letter writing with Bhawna brought a spark, sense of possibility, and liveliness in my life, which is long-lasting now. Bhawana's approach of acknowledging and recommending solutions to the existing challenges empowered me to take action steps on certain occasions to which I was reluctant before. Her experiences felt relatable, nevertheless having different cultures and circumstances encouraged me to keep going and look for hope and positivity. Her sense of inquiry and curiosity to know more about my journey, along with sharing her own story, built a vulnerable space that assisted me a lot to explore myself and note it down. Sharing experiences with Bhawana made me identify, acknowledge and actively look for solutions to construct resilience amid the pandemic. Her guidance in my career journey and the naming of opportunities became a light to pursue my passion. The letter writing with her has made me a conscious observer, courageous, and more reflective in terms of taking any actions personally and professionally.

## Discussion

In this article, we have explained how collaborative autoethnographic inquiry through letter writing helped us enhance our affective understanding and navigate our life as an educator during the pandemic. We have shared our two phases of the data generation process, beginning with our agreement to collaborate and then write autoethnographic letters along with reflective letters in the second phase. In this section, we revisit our research question: how might an increased awareness of emotions through reflective expression be helpful in improving our practices as educational leaders and address that question?

Our experience of understanding our emotions and expressing them through letters helped us by providing new insights into our contexts and our lives. For us, it worked as a reflective journal that had the collection of our thoughts, feelings, and hopes and worked as a map of our learning journey (Mansor, 2011). Thus, this worked as a tool for our active learning by helping us examine our events and experiences and reflect on their emotional impact. This, in turn, helped us take into account others, especially our students' experiences and emotions. Thorpe (2005) argues the importance of reflective writing to improve teaching. With recent advances in the neuroscience of emotions, the relationship between cognitive and emotional functions is being seen to have the potential to revolutionize the understanding of teaching-learning (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2011). Our collaborative inquiry heightened our awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, gender inequality, and social inequality on the one hand, while, on the other, helped us feel more connected as we make each other a part of our lived experiences living and working as females in two different countries.

The overall process exposed us to powerful emotions, some related to the pandemic while others from our previous experiences even before the pandemic, however, with the reflection, we as inquirers were able to make sense of our emotional experiences through our dialogues. Self-reflexive engagement as a process was physically and emotionally draining at times as we were

exposed to unpleasant emotions, which also made us vulnerable. Having each other to support, even though virtually, was helpful for us to acknowledge our vulnerability and find courage in that. The importance of it was that once we were able to find comfort in our emotional experiences, we were comfortable noticing and even helping the students navigate their unpleasant emotions. Mortiboys (2002) argues that acknowledging the affective understanding of educators is necessary as it develops genuineness, acceptance, trust, and empathic understanding in them.

### **Implications of Our Study**

Although teacher emotion has been considered interrelated to job satisfaction, burnout, identity, and growth, the reflection of their emotions has been left disregarded and, in some cases, unattended (Atmaca et al., 2020). Within this complexity, our approach of reflection and the learning about ourselves that helped us navigate challenging situation like the lockdown during the pandemic can be an effective tool for other educators to acknowledge the complexity of their emotions. This will, in turn, help them reduce emotional exhaustion and better their relationship with their students and with themselves, helping them to feel further motivated in their work (Frenzel, Becker-Kurz, Pekrun, & Goetz, 2015). Moreover, how the educators responded to COVID-19 and the emergency transition to virtual teaching and learning has been integrated into their identity formation and thus helps them in their self-awareness and relationship management (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Through our collaborative inquiry via reflective letter writing, we, both authors, were able to share our autoethnographic narratives, listen to our physical sensations, label our emotions, and express them. That helped us acknowledge our vulnerability, process them, and acknowledge them. The new insights that we gained through the process helped us find our courage within our vulnerability and helped us find alternative strategies to become hopeful even during the pandemic for ourselves as educators and for our students. Apart from that the inquiry process helped us connect more with each other as educators even though we were working in two different countries.

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