Grassroots Level Scenario of Contextualized Curriculum

Dr. Talmeez Fatma Naqvi
Assistant Professor, College of Teacher Education Bhopal, Maulana Azad National Urdu University
Hyderabad.

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ABSTRACT  A successful working of contextualized curriculum depends upon the teachers’ and learners’ knowledge of the immediate locale. In a way, this demands pre-acquired and incessant acquisition of knowledge of the things local, the readily available learning material, whether existing on its own or created through human efforts. The NCERT has ensured availability of contextualised textbooks. But the issue goes far beyond the textbooks, much beyond the four walls of classrooms and the schools. The issue necessitates the school system providing its learners required opportunity and scope for observation, for making survey, prediction and understanding of local context to sensitise the learners of their natural surroundings. With this consideration in focus, a field based study was conducted to look into the students’ observation power as mirrored through their observation-based knowledge, studying in standards VI to X in urban and semi-urban schools of Bhopal. With this objective in view, Sample was selected from randomly selected 100 students spread over 10 schools each from urban and semi-urban locations. To collect the information a questionnaire was given consisted of 30 open ended questions regarding the noticeable things in their surroundings. An interviews schedule and focus group discussion was also done with the teachers with the main focus contextualization of curriculum in view. Classroom observation was done with the objectives in mind. A qualitative view of the respondents’ responses revealed that they were somewhat well aware of the things that their textbooks contain and describe. But their knowledge of the immediate surroundings was found to be more than missing. On the whole, the teachers neither asked nor motivated the students about things as are visible in their immediate surroundings. The fact emerged that the students are hardly taken for outing, and as and when it occurs they are left alone to move around on the site being visited. As such the students are only exceptionally motivated and hardly given opportunity/scope for making observations.

Keywords: Contextualization, Curriculum, Observation-based knowledge,

In India curriculum planning and development takes place at centre and at state level with the involvement of concerned agencies, which strive to ensure its relevance. The concept of relevance of curriculum necessitates its contextualization. The exercise of contextualisation brings in the context to the learners’ experiences and the situation it is transacted in. Contextualization of the curriculum embraces the content, the teaching learning process, situations and the materials meaningfully relevant to the learner’s lives. National Curriculum Framework 2005 acknowledges the significance of a contextualized curriculum and, therefore, lay due stress on its contextualization. Likewise, National Curriculum Framework 2005 the subject matter in post--2005 school textbooks came to be presented in a manner that opens up the curriculum to the social and personal experiences of the learner. Embedded in the socio-cultural milieu, the textbooks knowledge is constructed, probed, and reconstructed. In this frame, ‘culture’ is placed on a learning—pedestal transforming it into a means of meaning—making as well as an epistemological object for interrogation and reflection (William, F. Pinar 2015). In a contextualized curriculum, the child’s previous and immediate life experiences acquire the significant status of ‘starting point’ in the teaching learning process. Every effort is made to help the students to correlate all of his/her learning with his/her everyday life. Dewey’s argument lies behind the present concern for contextualizing the curriculum. For John Dewey, education is life itself. Ambissa Kenea (2014) stresses the need to promote the meaningfulness of what is learned to the learner here and now, and in support of her argument, cited John Dewey’s concept of ‘Education as life itself’ along with David Kolb’s ‘Experiential learning’ (Kolb, 1984) and Paulo Freire’s ‘Humanizing education’ (Freire, 1970). Contextualized education motivates the learner and serves as a bridge between school and society. A contextualized curriculum helps the child learn to relate what he/she learns to his/her experiences and uses what he/she learns to ask question about his/her environment. In the process the child comes to see purpose in attending schools, a purpose which may link him/her to school.

Equally emphatically Taylor (2003) states that “... the aim of strategies such as contextualization is in fact to increase the chance of success, since by understanding abstract concepts better, pupils should perform better in examinations.” Learning is a function not only of the activity itself but also of the context and
culture in which it takes place. Serving as links between the learners, the curricular resources and the instructional environment, the teachers play central role in contextualizing the curriculum. It is the teacher who has to recognize if there is any gap between the espoused curriculum element/material and the situation of the child. For this, teachers have to have knowledge of the learners and their situation.

A successful working of contextualized curriculum is dependent upon the local knowledge of those who teach and learn. In a way, this necessitates utilisation of pre-acquired and continued acquisition of knowledge of the things local and readily available learning material, whether existing on its own or created through human efforts. With these prerequisites in focus, the NCERT ensured availability of contextualised textbooks. But the issue goes far beyond the textbooks, four walls of classroom and the school. But the issue remained whether the school system functions in a way as to provide the learners required opportunity and scope for observation, for making survey, prediction and understanding of local context to sensitise the learners of their natural surroundings. Answer to the question may appropriately be ascertained by acquiring first hand information through field based data. The present study, therefore, tried to look into the practice of contextualization of the curriculum by accessing the field of its actual operation.

The study addresses the following objectives at its core:

a) To examine the students’ observational ability of their surroundings.

b) To investigate the attempts made by school to contextualize the curriculum.

c) To suggest the measures to the teachers to contextualize the curriculum teaching purposes

Methods of the study

The study examined the current status of curriculum contextualization in urban and semi-urban primary schools in Bhopal using qualitative approach. In the following lines the sources of data, the tools used for data collection and the methods of data analysis are briefly outlined.

Sources of data and sampling: Teachers and students from Bhopal constituted the sources of data for the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the schools. In all, ten schools were selected. These schools consisted of the government run and private ones, and located in urban and semi urban areas. Overall 100 students were selected from the ten schools. The researcher visited all the selected schools for the data collection.

Tools of data collection and analysis: To collect the information regarding the ability of the students to observe their surroundings, which is the base of contextualization, a questionnaire was given. It consisted of 30 open ended questions regarding the noticeable things in their surroundings. An interviews schedule and focus group discussion was also done with the teachers with the main focus contextualization of curriculum in view. Classroom observation was done with the objectives in mind. Data was transcribed and organized and then descriptive coding was done. Thereafter conclusions were derived.

Analysis and Discussion

An analysis of the students’ answer sheets revealed that not a single student was able to write more than seven birds’ names, which too comprised even of otherwise well known ones, like sparrow, parrot, crow, kite, peacock and pigeon. The fact remains that Bhopal is not only a niche of many local birds but also a seasonal home for a number of migratory birds, such as black neck stork, Garganey duck, water hens, ducks, storks, herons, etc. The students too might have had a look, cursory indeed, at all these but they seem to have lacked in the interest and ability to be thoughtful observant of their surroundings. The students were unable to name the feeding plants of butterfly, the timing of sparrow lying eggs, etc. In most part, the students could answer book-based questions. It is interesting to note that students draw the firefly with lots of fire either his head or in his tail. Students have never seen firefly whatever they draw it was based on their imagination. Among the yellow flowers, they had mentioned three of them i.e sunflower, rose and yellow oleander (kaner). But they failed to name the flowers of vegetables, such as cucumber, pumpkin, tomato, lady’s finger, green chilli, etc., which are all yellow and which all the students had seen. But they mentioned only those flowers which they had memorized in the early years of schooling. Since the students did not make observation they could not tell the time period of tree blooms, when the leaves fall, when it produces fruit, how birds preen, clean, call, and the feeding plants of butterflies and so on. Thus, they could identify Canary as the singing bird as mentioned in the textbook but most of them failed to name Koel, the local singing bird, to cite a representative example. The students having family kitchen gardens and those hailing from semi-urban locations were better informed of the kitchen based agro produce in comparison to the rest. The others who could answer somewhat well volunteered that they knew of it because their parents acquainted them with the item under reference. Needless to recall the fact the teachers are...
supposed to find ways to encourage acquisition of the knowledge, which had nothing to do with textbooks or examinations. The above mentioned answers and non-answers of students divulge the extent students observe. Is it because of erosion or loss of natural instinct to observe? Helen Keller, the blind, deaf and dumb described in ‘The story of my life’ how nature taught her. She beautifully explained how she learnt through the touch only as to how the grass grows, how birds find shelter in their nests or how the lily flower slowly bloomed. She appreciated the way leaves and buds of the plant opened and spread loveliness and fragrance. She understands that every process is systematic and in order. But our students who are having five functional senses are unable to observe that. Is this something to do with our education system or rather our textbook culture, as Krishnakumar says? Krishnakumar in his Origins of India’s “Textbook Culture” points out how the curriculum was alienated during the time of colonial rule and “any specific or locally relevant knowledge of social affairs, politics or even one’s own life and surrounding was debarred”. Textbook culture dominated and continues to dominating our whole system of education. The system of education in India is geared towards exams, which only recognize textbook knowledge. Therefore, teachers and students tend to stick to the textbooks.

Most often teachers are focused on traditional methods of teaching and resources for the sake of comfort and convenience. Students and teachers are usually inclined to have high dependency on the textbooks and the knowledge provided by them. Research regarding science pedagogy suggests that textbooks fail to provide the hands-on, inquiry-based learning that is necessary to master scientific concepts (Foley & McPhee, 2008).

In 1939 the visionary leader and educator Gandhi ji said that “if textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living word of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils. He himself becomes a slave of textbooks and has no opportunity or occasion to be original. It therefore seems that the less textbooks there are the better it is for the teacher and his pupils” (Gandhi. 1939). The tendency to excessively rely on the textbooks seems to be killing children’s observation skills.

The second objective of the study was to investigate the school level attempts to contextualize the curriculum. A successful working of contextualized curriculum is dependent upon the local knowledge of the teachers and learners. In a way, this demands utilisation of the pre-acquired as also acquiring continuously the knowledge of the things local, the readily available learning materials, whether existing on its own or created through human efforts. In the class room teaching the contextualization was conspicuously absent. In the ongoing practice, teaching meant the teacher and students reading out the entire chapter followed by answering questions and doing other exercises as given in the prescribed textbook. Even the word ‘contextualization’ much less the concept of ‘contextualization’ was found to be quite alien for teachers and the learners. The teachers found alibi in the alleged flaws amongst students, such as their lack of interest in teaching-learning process, their socio economic milieu and their non-learning preferences. Overall attitude and body language of the teachers was conclusive enough to underline that whatever they were doing was the best possible. Nonetheless, parents and students were unhappy and aggrieved with the teachers and schools. On the whole, contextualization was found almost outright missing from their teaching. Teachers neither asked nor motivated the students to know of things as existing in their immediate surroundings. Students are hardly taken for outing, and as and when it occurs they were left alone to move around on the site being visited. As such the students were on the whole neither motivated, nor given opportunity/scope for making observations.

To make the curriculum contextualized teachers may persuade students and support them in making observations, at least on the textbook-based lessons. Teachers can assign tasks, which necessitate observations and share their observations on a duly provided platform. The students can be asked to present their observation in the form of drawing, writing, or through charts. The teacher will have to budget time for such activities in his/her lesson plans. Such studies always kindle curiosity and questioning. The students can also present their small observation based studies in the school assembly or on the notice boards. Other forums for presentation like the school magazine, writing a small article for the local newspaper about their study, creating a school newsletter to publicise children’s work can also be explored. Recognition of students’ work motivates them and in turn helps build their confidence (Indumathi 2011).

Conclusions

Learning aims at preparing for life, which demands learning even after schools and colleges; that is to say the process of learning has to be kept up much beyond the four walls of classrooms. The concept of
contextualised learning is embedded in overall milieu of life that keeps on changing. Thus, learning process and ways have to address the issue by being compatible with change and, therefore, innovative because “If you’re teaching today what you were teaching five years ago, either the field is dead or you are” (Noam Chomsky). The idea of contextualised process and way of learning, through self--observation, responds to the issues in a realistic manner.

The present study sought to delineate if the students acquired the ability of observing their surroundings that is the desired objective/outcome of contextualised learning as gleaned from their observation-based knowledge, studying in standards VI to X in urban and semi-urban schools of Bhopal. The outcome obviously depended on the processes: a duly framed curriculum and transaction of the contextualize curriculum, right down to school level.

National Curriculum Framework 2005 embraced concept of a contextualized curriculum and likewise the NCERT ensured availability of contextualised textbooks.

A qualitative view of the respondents’ responses and teachers’ attitude revealed a dismal picture of the transactional processes. The students were somewhat well aware of the textbook based knowledge but their knowledge of the immediate surroundings was more than missing. The cause lay in the realities at grassroots level: The teachers only exceptionally motivated their students and hardly provided them the much needed opportunity/scope for making observations. Most often teachers followed traditional methods of teaching for the sake of comfort and convenience. Students and teachers were usually inclined to have high dependency on the textbooks based knowledge. Even the word ‘contextualization’ much less the concept of ‘contextualization’ was found to be quite alien for teachers and the learners. Teachers neither asked nor motivated the students to know of things as existing in their immediate surroundings.

The concept of contextualization of learning may presumably be translated with success only if the teachers are motivated and effectively oriented to make a shift from traditionalist modes to new ways of teaching and learning. The schools need to interact with the local communities and environment far more often and in a pro-active manner so as to establish live relations with what is locale specific. Examination system too has to fully and appropriately accommodate the new method, particularly in framing questions.

REFERENCES