

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

Learning for whom? The Need for an Intergenerational Dialogue in Curriculum Formulation and Revision in India.

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Introduction and Rationale

Globally, education is a key area in which there is a pressing need for an intergenerational dialogue. School and higher education systems across the world, the laws that govern them, the pedagogies and learning goals for students will only make sense if they are in sync with the needs, expectations, and value systems of the children of today who will be the adults of tomorrow.

In this paper, I attempt to look at the need for such a dialogue in India primarily looking at the curriculum and learning methods that schools across the country are adopting today. The paper draws its arguments from available data, research articles and press coverage regarding the issue. But more significantly, it stems from my own experiences and observations of having covered the Education Beat across prominent daily newspapers in India and having taught in

I argue that the curriculum that forms the very core of learning in schools across the country, is not developed keeping in mind the needs and aspirations of the students that it caters to. With key stakeholders such as parents, NGOs working in the field of school education and students themselves left out of the process of curriculum revisions, there is barely any synchronization between what students learn and what they need to learn in a post- globalized, modern world. I also try to suggest that the curriculum is less diverse- with people from the socially and economically marginalized sections hardly finding any representation in its content and presentation.

The paper is divided into four parts- first I explain the context, then I look at the problem at hand and then outline the larger ramifications of the same. In the end, I offer a few solutions to address some of the concerns raised.

The Context

The Indian school education system is a mix of several educational boards- some offering a state or national curriculum (state/national boards) and others offering the international curriculum (Cambridge International, International Baccalaureate). A total of 264 million students are enrolled in the school education system in India from Nursery to Grade 12 as of 2020 under 1.5 million schools (UDISE+, 2020).

While state board schools are governed by the respective states (a regional province), those affiliated with the national boards are governed by central boards such as the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE).

International schools are governed by the respective international bodies.

Government schools make 70% of total schools (UDISE+, 2020), which makes learning in these schools a key focus area for studies in the field. For the said paper, my arguments will be

based on the national and the state curriculums that govern government schools in the country.

The Problem

The National Curriculum Framework forms the basis for the curriculum framing and revision in national and state boards across India. While the framework was designed in 2005, it is now being realigned with the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 which is currently in the

process of being implemented in a phased manner in the country. Like curriculum committees in the past, the new committee under the NEP consists of

educationists, former vice-chancellors of universities and bureaucrats. "The committee will be free to invite subject experts, scholars, educationists, etc. to decide upon the course of actions..." said the government.

Ironically, 'students' who are the most important stakeholders

in the process, are not represented in the entire exercise from its planning to implementation.

This is in line with the classic problem that plagues the Indian education system today- "Citizens of tomorrow are studying the syllabus prepared by the leaders of today as per their knowledge from yesterday."

Curriculums under the different state boards are designed and revised by committees formed by the incumbent state governments and mainly consist of senior educationists and academicians. Students and teachers are seldom involved in the process of revisions.

The Ramifications

Lack of participation of students in the curriculum revision exercise and, to make it worse, the sheer lack of consideration towards their voice and agency has far reaching ramifications on the entire teaching-learning exercise. This paper discusses some of the resultant issues such as

lack of inclusion and diversity, poor understanding of the changing global market, ignorance towards the changing needs of learners and the syllabus being vulnerable to saffronisation and politicization.

1. Lack of Inclusion and Diversity

In India, textbooks often represent a hegemonic view of society wherein dominant identities always take centre-stage while explaining key concepts, depicting situations etc. For instance, most children depicted in textbooks are fair skinned (even as most Indians are brown), most women are shown doing household chores and young girls wearing a bindi (vermillion on the forehead). The patriarch or the father in most depictions is overtly masculine and authoritative.

Women's roles are often limited to areas pertaining to cooking, fashion and hospitality while doctors and lawyers are almost always men (UNESCO, 2020).

Majority study material used across boards in India takes a unidimensional way of the Indian family system which consists of parents, grandparents and two children. This has drastically changed across the world and similarly in India as one sees a variety of families- single parent run families, families with adopted children, those with live in couples and families without children. And then there are families with non-heteronormative, same sex relationships (Sooryamoorthy, 2012)- which are seldom included in textbooks.

Even within the Indian context, the state and national curricula only consider the worldview of the cis Hindu male. Women and people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and their issues, lives and experiences barely make it to the curriculum. This is deeply problematic especially considering the rising number of these students in Indian schools year on year. For instance, there is an 18% jump in the number of female learners in higher education in India between 2015 and 2020 (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Children of today who are the active citizens of tomorrow need to imbibe the values of diversity and inclusion and this would only happen if the systems that govern our curricula open doors of a more liberal, assimilative world for students. Topics such as homosexuality, mental health concerns, surrogacy and live-in relationships which were earlier considered to be taboo but are now a part and parcel of everyday living in the modern, liberal world need to be part of our learning materials. What is also needed is a constant democratic dialogue between the teachers and students. For instance, sex education remains a taboo in India and despite the inclusion of its scientific concepts in textbooks, it is almost always taught in hush-hush tones and in a convoluted manner inside the classrooms.

2. Little understanding of the changing global scenario

The Indian curricula is largely driven around certain static definitions of concepts, which is a detrimental thing to learning in an ever-evolving global world. For instance, globalization is explained as a concept in the context of opening of the economy² while contemporary conversations around transnational corporations, startups and entrepreneurship, debates around equity due to privatization are not touched upon. Concepts including fake news, use of social media and its larger ramifications in the post truth world are similarly unexplored and so are issues around environment and climate change. This makes the curriculum less relevant to the changing needs and ambitions of students.

In 2015, eminent Indian scientist CNR Rao said that 90% of the universities and higher educational institutions in the country had an outdated curriculum, keeping them from making into the top institutes of the world. "We talk about increasing funds and infrastructure but there is no improvement in the content we are teaching in our hi-tech classrooms," Rao had said (Times of India, 2015). Experts like Rao suggest that the Indian education system needs to ensure that curriculum committees consist of industry leaders from across generations to make the curriculum in sync with the changing global scenario. It also needs to align itself with sustainable development goals, climate action goals etc. to cultivate and foster values of responsible citizenship among young learners.

3. Ignorant towards the changing needs of learners

Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant school closures, it is evident that the Indian curriculum needs to adapt as per the changing needs of learners. A UNICEF survey revealed that merely 24% households had access internet in India highlighting the poor access to e-learning in the country (UNICEF, 2019). Similarly, lakhs of students in the country missed school as they migrated from cities to their hometowns due to economic distress (Iftikhar, 2022).

Despite these staggering numbers, the government neither realigned its curriculum nor charted a long-term plan for covering up the possible learning loss.

While some prior experiments in pedagogy including the Teaching at the Right Level (TARL) model (Pratham, 2022) by NGO Pratham are excellent examples of catering to student's learning needs by focusing on foundational skills, the curriculum is not flexible for such initiatives. There needs to be a robust mechanism to track the learning needs of its students and their evolving socio-economic contexts which can be used as a baseline for curriculum revisions. Especially as the pandemic has exposed the inequalities in learning even further, there needs to be a plan that goes beyond sporadic measures such as reducing the syllabus to ensure better learning outcomes.

4. Vulnerable to Saffronisation and Politicization

In India, education in general and curriculum in specific, has always been vulnerable to politicization. Ruling governments at each time have tried to use the curriculum to further their political agenda. Especially in the last decade, with the popularity of right wing and fascist ideologies, there have been attempts to saffronise the curriculum on many occasions.

There have been attempts to erase real historic references and present a convoluted, alternate version of history. For instance, the Maharashtra State Board removed all references to Mughals in textbooks for Grades 7 and 9 and excluded historic monuments such as Taj Mahal and Qutub Minar as they were built by Mughal rulers (Gaikwad, 2017). Lack of involvement of stakeholders such as parents, students and activists in curriculum framing make it vulnerable to such attempts of politicization. The bigger threat is an erasure of history which has disastrous consequences for the current and upcoming generations whose common sense is built on wrong, misleading and convoluted historicities.

Summing up

The abovementioned issues highlight the sheer absence of an intergenerational dialogue and cooperation in a crucial aspect of learning in India- syllabus formulation and revision. Any such exercise or pedagogical intervention needs to ensure that scientific temper, rationality and global values are at the base of it. Not allowing interventions and dialogues makes the learning process deeply hierarchical and archaic.

How can we ensure that this situation improves? How do we bridge the gap between children's expectations from learning and the education system today? Answers are complex but mainly lie in three words: initiative, collaboration and dialogue.

Students should collectively take initiative and voice their concerns, grievances and feedback

to the authorities which would help frame student-friendly models of learning. This can be done through participatory forums organized by non-governmental organisations, schools, universities or the government. Schools and universities should be given the autonomy to offer learning choices to students- currently there is no mechanism in India for students to tailor their courses as per their interests and requirements. Collaboration and dialogue should be encouraged between various stakeholders and student voices should be respected. The tendency in India has been to discard student resistance and discourage students from asking questions. This can have far reaching consequences on the future of learning because the critical faculties of students are not developed as per the needs of the global society.

Lastly, governments should allow student participation in policy making in education by offering internships and fellowships to give them a first-hand experience of how policy works and seek their insights in the process.

What students learn and how that learning penetrates to the lowest level forms the very basis of an evolving education system in a country like India. This makes intergenerational dialogue not just crucial but indispensable to the curriculum development exercise. We need to create an ecosystem that encourages dialogue and facilitates collaboration to prepare our children for the challenges of the future world.

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