

Extending the Idea of the Textbook through Writing

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Introduction

What to teach in a school classroom has never been a challenge in mainstream schools as there is always a prescribed curriculum especially when the words *curriculum* and *textbook* have become synonymous. But the contextualisation of the curriculum has always been a challenge. As teachers, we are required to follow a prescribed curriculum for our children in the school. We are the part of a diverse nation and thus it is not possible for any institution to develop a curriculum which accommodates the diverse needs of the people living in this country. The role of the school and the teacher becomes extremely important in the contextualisation of curriculum.

In the following paragraph, Winch talks about the importance of grounding of the curriculum in children's context so that the curriculum caters to the need of a diverse group of people:

'Grounding is necessary if young people are to be prepared for adult life. But the kind of life that someone will lead depend on a great variety of factors, and it is desirable that many of those factors should be under the control of the individual concerned. It is particularly desirable that people should live a life that makes the best possible use of their abilities to enable both them and other people to flourish. Given the variety of possible occupations and the variety of different abilities and interests that people have, it is most unlikely that they would all benefit from exactly the same preparation for adult life.' (*Winch C, P;51*)

We transact curriculum through the textbook and the textbook culture is very dominant in India. Reflecting upon the state of education in India and the dominance of textbook as the mode of prescribed curriculum, over a century ago M K Gandhi wrote:

'If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education the living word of the teacher has very little value, a teacher who teaches from textbook does not impart originality to his pupils, in fact, he becomes a slave of textbook and has no opportunity or occasion to be original. It, therefore, seems that

the fewer textbooks, there are the better it is for the teacher and his pupils.' (*MK Gandhi, Harijan September 9, 1913*)

Explaining it further Krishna Kumar (1988) writes: 'In the education system based on textbook Culture, teachers are given no choice in the Organisation of Curriculum, pacing and the mode of final assessment. Textbooks are prescribed for each subject and the teacher is expected to elucidate text lesson by lesson in the given order. She must ensure that children are able to write answers to questions based on any lesson in the textbook without seeing the text for this is what they will have to do in the examination when they face one.' (*Kumar, pg 452*)

However, NCF (2005) speaks for the teachers who could bring life to the curriculum

'A child constructs her/his knowledge while engaged in the process of learning. Allowing children to ask questions that require them to relate what they are learning in school to things happening outside, encouraging children to answer in their own words and from their own experiences, rather than simply memorising and getting answers right in just one way — all these are small but important steps in helping children develop their understanding.' (*NCF 2005, p 17*).

What is interesting to note is that, in most of the definitions given for curriculum, the voice of children is missing. The knowledge of the adult world seems to be imposed upon students. But it can be observed that teachers and students have no voice in the making of the curriculum.

The arguments in favour of the voice for children and teachers in the making of the curriculum are also supported by the critical discourse in education.

As a teacher, I always felt that reciting the text from the textbook is like a ritual and serves no purpose. I always tried to develop some mechanism which would help students construct their own meaning. In this context, I introduced daily writing work for

my students.

How does it all begin?

Teaching in one of the government schools of Delhi, one of the major challenges I face as a teacher in the school classroom is that the children are not able to express his/her ideas through writing. Traditionally, what they are being trained for in the name of writing is basically copying the text from the blackboard or from the textbook with some help from a book or from the notebook of another student. If the students are asked to write a few sentences independently, they find it very difficult and most often they come with the excuse that they have not memorised it.

I wanted my students to learn how to write. I do not mean how to write sentences or how to write grammatically correct sentences. What I mean by writing is enabling my students to express their opinions and ideas through writing.

What I did

I believe that asking the students to write on the topic of their choice would make it easier for them to start writing a page on daily basis. I was aware that there are few students in the class who do not know how to write and can only write by copying from somewhere. Keeping in mind the challenge of such students, I allowed those students to copy from somewhere, but I stated that I would prefer and encourage writing without copying. At this stage of the work, I had clearly two objectives in my mind:

to encourage students to write on regular basis to enhance their writing skills, and

to enable them to learn, how to write independently and thus making it easier for them to answer in the examination.

Since students were not habituated to this kind of work, they found it very difficult and they insisted that the topic should be given to them to write on, but I was adamant in not giving the topic. I believed that giving a topic to write about has certain limitations. One, that it would encourage all the students to write on that one topic which some may be comfortable writing about, some may not be comfortable. Two, I discovered that thinking in order to write about a topic in itself is a wonderful journey as it is the beginning of their thinking process. Many of them have shared through their writing how painful it is to find a topic to write about! I guided them at the beginning about the

kind of things I expect them to write and suggested that they start with the story of a movie they may have seen, the story of a serial show or to write about what they see while coming from home to school and while going back from school to home, the kind of talk around them, etc.

They started writing on such things and gradually they kept updating the writing skills based on the kind of feedback I was providing. Here, we see a sample of the difficulties they face in doing this activity.

We have a chapter in the class 7 textbook *Growing up as Boys and Girls*.

The idea is to make students aware of gender stereotypes and how to build a society based on gender equality. This chapter brings out the story of a boy and a girl growing in one of the small Pacific islands-Samoa. The same chapter also brings the story of a boy growing in a village in Madhya Pradesh in the 1960s.

I felt that these stories should help students reflect upon their own life realities related to gender and I encouraged them to write it. However, it was not easy. Then I shared my own story that how I perceive gender and how I see the discriminatory practices around me and in my family. I also read a book for them written by Kamla Bhasin *Ladka Kya Hai Ladki Kya Hai*

With these interventions, some of the students started writing. One was about a personal experience in the neighbourhood about differences in treatment of a boy and a girl, titled *Apne aas paas ladke tatha ladkiyon se bhed bhav*

‘Once upon a time, an uncle and aunt were living in my neighbourhood. They had two sons and a daughter. The girl was 12 years old, one boy 11 years old and the other boy was 14 years old. They allowed their daughter to study till class 7 only. Their son studied in class 9. Once, a fight broke out in their family. On that day people came to know that her daughter wanted to study but she was not allowed to. They were only allowing their sons to study. Then, they always took their son for the outings. The daughter was never allowed to go out’.

In 15 days, I could see that students were able to relate what they see in their surroundings with what they are taught in the class. However, it takes a lot of time for students to start reflecting upon their own life experiences.



Sometimes I have seen that they have written about the discriminatory practices they face during the period in their family and they questioned their mothers for these discriminatory practices. What is important to note here that this is a process and students only start reflecting on life experiences when they see their teachers doing the same.

How did I ensure that they all are writing?

I took a variety of steps to ensure that all the students wrote everyday.

It became my daily ritual to see the compositions of the students as my first work in the classroom. Gradually, students discovered that the first thing sir asks is whether you have written a page or not!

I asked students to maintain a checklist so that we could track who is writing and who is not writing. I asked for the reason if a student failed to write on a particular day and, through the checklist, I could discover that a particular student was not writing for several days.

Sometimes, I called the parents to share the wonderful write-ups their wards had written and congratulated them. I asked the students if they wanted me to read out their writing to the whole class. If they agreed, I used to share it with the class and sometimes even in the school assembly. I used to click pictures of those write-ups and share it on the WhatsApp group of the teachers. I also started the practice of reflecting upon the write-ups, which were brought by the students.

Since the write-ups of the students were discussed in the classroom, it enhanced their engagement in the classroom processes. Their opinions, ideas

and knowledge were used as valid content for the classroom discussion. This practice established them as important agents who could contribute to the formation of knowledge and in that context, this process transformed them from passive receivers of knowledge to contributors in the *formation* of knowledge.

Their writings throw light on the various challenges they face in their lives and show their critical awareness about such challenges. Since they were free to write on the topics of their choice, many of the write-ups could not be seen as the extension of curriculum, but established their growing critical consciousness about the life around them and this is what the ultimate objective of a curriculum is. This process also influenced the power dynamics in the classroom: the power dynamics which exists between the teacher and the student and between the students themselves, though at times they questioned my unconventional method of teaching in their write-ups.

In my experience as a teacher, I have seen teachers divided into two groups. One group believes that textbooks are sacrosanct and nothing can be done with them. The other group believes that they are completely useless as they do not care about the needs of the children. I propose: let the textbook be *one* source of information, but not the *only* source of information. Extend the ideas raised in the textbook by your own intervention and by extra readings! Whatever qualities a textbook may have, its value depends upon the teacher who uses it.

References

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