

# Localised Learning in Rural School Context: Problems and Prospects

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## ABSTRACT

*Although the approach of localised learning being advocated in school curriculum frameworks, its implementation has not been widespread. Nonetheless, localised learning tends for the most part to be dominated by issues, while the method of making learning localised remain comparatively neglected. Considering the issue of low quality of school education, particularly in rural areas, it is presumed that only the teachers with positive motivation, skill and professionalism can make the localised learning successful with the availability of proper educational resources.*

*This paper interprets the concept of localised learning and presents the author's own past experience as a rural school teacher as well as her identification of different issues that constrains localised learning and views on the roadmap for implementing localised learning.*

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## Introduction

Education is recognised as significant for economic growth and poverty reduction whereas the school is assigned with the task of inculcating knowledge, skills and values among future citizens and promising for 'promoting education for all'. But, the school system and the teacher being guided by the socio-economic-political ethos of the society do not play in the same way all over the country. Considering the ASER report (Rural) (2012) it is inferred that despite high investment there is low participation and under-achievement of students in many aspects, particularly in rural areas. The report

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found that the proportion of out of school children has increased, especially among girls in the age group of 11 to 14. Across rural India, 48.9 per cent children enrolled in Std. V could read English words or more, and 22.5 per cent could read simple English sentences. For improving the accessibility, availability and quality of school education in India, major reforms including improvement of schooling facilities through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, National Curriculum Framework 2005(NCF 2005), decentralisation of examinations, Right to Education Act 2009 and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan for Universalisation of Secondary Education have been introduced. The curriculum reform (NCF 2005) advocating for a facilitating role of teachers in children's learning and approaching the curriculum as flexible and integrated, allows the teachers for relating teaching-learning to the local environment or community of the children. In this manner, the recent curriculum framework promotes a localised approach for curriculum transaction as teachers have the flexibility to utilise the immediate experience of the children gained from their home, community as the basis of learning for dealing with the prescribed content. Although this approach to the learning being advocated, its implementation has not been widespread. Observing the problems faced by rural education sector, the complexity related with the success of localised learning is lack of availability of appropriate learning resources and teachers with lack of skill, motivation and professionalism. This article interprets the concept of localised learning and presents the author's own past experience as a rural school teacher as well as her identification of different issues that constrains localised learning and views on the roadmap for implementing localised learning.

### **Concept of Localised Learning**

The concept localised learning emerged in relation to globalisation. Localised learning contributed with an account of contemporary industrial transformation that emphasised how the current economic development of a specific region or country cannot be separated from the particular endowment of social, cultural and institutional patterns with which it is intimately related (Malmberg & Maskell, 2006.) The general assumption underlying the localised learning argument is that with the increasing speed of globalisation (i.e. growing exports of both finished and semi-finished goods, and ubiquitousness of production factors), differences in regions learning abilities matter still more (Amin and Thrift, Maskell et al., Garnsey,

Amin and Wilkinson in Lorenzen 1999). Localised learning outlines how local conditions and spatial proximity between actors enable the formation of distinctive cognitive repertoires and influence the generation and selection of skills, processes and products within a field of knowledge or activity (Malmberg and Maskell, 2006).

As far as my view is concerned in educational perspective localised learning means connecting the learning to real-life situations and associating the contents of the curriculum to the local surroundings of children. The curriculum and teaching learning process need be based on the local needs and relevance for the learners.

In order to enhance a child's learning, it is imperative to relate the contents of the curriculum somehow to the child's own real life experiences, and accordingly to assimilate the whole learning experience. Learning becomes unproblematic when outside school experience that the child gains in home and community is related to school experience through the formal curriculum. In this way the learning should be localised or contextualised.

The aim of this strategy of localised learning is to inculcate better understanding of concepts, well organised application of local knowledge in formal learning, better performance in examinations, increase in achievement rate and ultimately making the learning effective. Localised learning takes place when the content of the curriculum, the approaches and the learning materials are connected directly to the immediate experience and environment of the learner. Learning can be localised when teachers tend to use the experience of the learners as a basis for learning in dealing with the prescribed content. Localised learning can place the learner in the heart of learning process and assist to maintain the links among school, home and community, enhancing the effectiveness of learning in the school in rural areas. National Curriculum Framework 2005 advocated for integrated approach to curriculum development, which is encouraging to the use of localised learning in schools, as teachers can connect learning to the local context.

### **The Education in Rural Context**

The rural context is characterised by complexities associated with socio-economic factors. The income of rural people is very low. In rural areas, parents being less educated give low importance to schooling of their children. Children are frequently expected to assist their parents in earning for their bread, and so are irregular in attending the school. Schools in rural context fail to meet the needs

of children's learning. Sometimes children come to school undernourished. The disadvantaged children in rural areas having limited background of language and learning experiences in their home and community face difficulty in understanding the language and the concepts used by their teachers and in books. There by children lacking the appropriate experience are less interested in learning. Students are passive listeners in the classroom without getting any learning assistance at home. Hence the contextual factors in rural areas reinforce the vicious circle of poverty and illiteracy. Taylor and Mulhall (2001) citing Ader advocated for a system of education which would develop the learning potential of rural children and take care of rural needs in relation to resources and future changes.

The adverse situation resulting from deprivation of parental support in learning is further worsen when teachers being uninformed of the poor academic background and support at home initiate teaching with unknown and inexperienced, but not with known to unknown. This is due to the lack of training of teachers in rural pedagogy. Sometimes teachers from urban areas are appointed in rural schools. They have small or no familiarity with the background of their students and have less to dedication for work as they have to travel a long distance to school. Being demotivated to the profession, their pedagogical practices are likely to be poor.

### **Education in Rural Odisha**

The National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-06) shows that in Odisha, only 65 per cent of children ages 6-17 years attend school. School attendance in Odisha is 12 percentage points higher in urban areas (75%) than in rural areas (63%). Eighty-six per cent of primary-school age children (6-10 years) attend school (96% in urban areas and 84% in rural areas). The drop in school attendance with an increase in age is somewhat larger in rural areas than in urban areas. In urban areas, school attendance is almost the same for boys and girls in the age groups 6-10 years (95-96%) and 15-17 years (36-37%), and slightly higher for girls than boys in the age group 11-14 years (81% of girls compared with 78% of boys). By contrast, in rural areas, girls in all age groups are less expected to attend school than the boys, with the differential increasing substantially with age. In rural areas, at age 6-10 years 86 per cent of boys and 82 per cent of girls are attending school; by age 15-17 years, only 32 per cent of boys and 13 per cent of girls are attending school. However, the extent

and direction of this gender inequality in schooling varies significantly by age and urban-rural residence. The various factors as identified above in rural context may be the cause of this deplorable condition of schooling in rural areas of Odisha.

### **My Experience of Localised Learning**

From my teachership experience in government schools, both at elementary and secondary stage in rural areas in Bhadrak district of Odisha, I felt that the usual pedagogical approach for teaching in rural government schools is chalk and talk and lecture method. But many times we (I and my teacher colleagues) used to narrate the contents to the real life experiences of students. Health and Food topics were narrated by exemplifying home circumstances. Environmental pollution, soil erosion, soil conservation and land use etc. topics were often taught by relating to children's experiences in agriculture. It was realised by us that children understand the abstract concepts well by familiar and real life examples. Learning can be localised when contextual (both home and community) experience of children applied to school learning. But I as a teacher confess that neither I nor my colleagues didn't practice this pedagogy in a regular manner. Planning of such strategies was rare.

There are many reasons behind the reluctance of teachers in practising this pedagogy of localised learning. Teachers lack the required skills to connect school learning to the daily life experiences of students, as they were trained neither during pre-service nor in-service professional development programmes. The curricula, syllabi and textbooks are basically theory oriented, with rare reference to practical activities. The curriculum is unrelated with the daily life experiences of the students, and it includes some content areas which cannot be related to practical real-life circumstances. There is no flexibility for schools to include some input in curriculum. The responsibility of preparing school curriculum is at the state level agencies. The teachers have no flexibility in adopting appropriate teaching strategies as they move with tremendous anxiety of covering the syllabus in accordance with the prescribed plan and the requirements of the examination system. On the other hand they undergo less pressure by teaching through lecture method using books, requiring no immense effort or imaginative and innovative planning of teaching-learning experiences. The teachers in rural areas are demotivated and less accountable as there is little prospect for appreciation or admiration of excellent and creative work by them for professional development.

### **A Step for Localising Early Learning through Farming**

In rural schools, most of the students have thorough familiarity with farming, either from direct observation of their locality or from the self participation and contribution to the family earnings. If farming would be used as a means for localising some portion of the formal syllabus, children would get an opportunity to learn by the help of their repeated experiences. In this perspective Taylor and Mulhall (2001) advocated that agriculture and the local environment can be the basis of integrated projects incorporated in the school curriculum, with academic activities chosen for their locally relevant, experimental attributes. The 'Landcare in Schools' programme in the Philippines is an example of using agricultural experiences in a way that is innovative, learner-oriented, and strongly linked to the realities of pupils, parents and communities (Vandenbosch, 2002).

Farming practice can offer the greatest means for localising learning in all subjects, together with languages, mathematics, science, social studies etc. in rural contexts. The learning of language would be localised by motivating children to make descriptions and resemblances using their own language and their own farming experience. Locally relevant examples could be brought into the lesson along with the use of vernacular languages and terms, hence meaning would be better communicated and the text would be better understood. In this way children will be assisted in understanding the concepts and contexts of different locations interpreted in the formal curriculum. For localisation of learning in Science, farming presents many practical and problem solving activities that are based on scientific procedures. Farming also contributes for localising mathematics teaching by allowing children to conceptualise mathematical rules and formulas by associating familiar farming related experiences. Farming adds value as a way of teaching social concerns. The issue of population explosion, poverty, unemployment could be comprehended by examining the impact of increase in rate of population on farming production and explaining the involvement of rural people to farming systems. The use of farming as a means of transacting the curriculum can be helpful in this manner. It would persuade the parents for schooling of their children when they would understand that their environmental knowledge is useful for learning and appreciate that the approach facilitates the children's learning in a more useful way.

### **Problems of Localised Learning in Rural Context**

The researcher's experience as well as review of literature shows that there are numerous problems persist in the teaching-learning settings of rural schools.

- The problems relating to the facilities available in rural school context are overcrowding and large classes, few information and communication facilities and no regular access to electricity supply, frequent non-attendance of students and teachers, lack of reading materials for the pupils, lack of teaching aids, shortage of classrooms and school furniture.
- The problems relating to curriculum are lack of re-orientation of teachers with the new curriculum introduction, lack of preparation and wide availability textbooks and teachers' handbooks with the curriculum development, heavy burden of curricular contents to be covered during stipulated time period, a gamut of content having irrelevance to rural living.
- The problems relating to rural teachers are presence both untrained, de-motivated teachers in rural schools as generally they remain unnoticed from educational authorities, lack of incentives or special facilities for teachers serving in rural and deprived areas, limited opportunities for professional development teachers in rural schools, low and irregular salaries, poor transport conditions in rural areas, overloaded work due to shortage of teachers.
- The problems relating to rural home environments are poverty, poor health and malnourishment of children, no parental awareness about the children's schooling, lack of academic support from parents etc.

### **Prospects of Localised Learning**

However, the prospects of localised teaching and learning in rural schools include:

- Policymakers and educational personnel at school level have to look for the strategies for using the local environment as a resource of learning and thereby making the content and approaches of curriculum more realistic and useful.
- Appropriate training and support for teachers are significant factors for adoption of localised learning in rural schools. Efforts should be taken to reorient teacher education programmes to localised learning using natural resources can empower teachers in making education relevant for students in rural context.



- There is need for more flexibility in leaving scope for supplementary content based on the local situation in the national curricula and more support in decentralised curricular interpretation.
- Teaching-learning materials used by the teachers for comprehending the contents need to be related to the local context and real life experiences of learners.
- Initiatives need to be taken to invite local experts whose vast experience in appropriate knowledge and proficiencies as resource persons to schools and assist both the teachers and students in learning about the local environment in a detailed and comprehensive manner.
- The school authorities need to create a collegial atmosphere in school campus where staffs can freely discuss the problems and difficulties of teaching with each other and get suggestions from each other.
- Parents need to consider that orientation of the local context in learning is not reducing the importance of schooling; rather as a substitute it is constructing the capabilities of their children for learning.

### **Conclusion**

Although the attempts by the NCERT in the form of curriculum frameworks for reorienting the contents of the curriculum towards contextualised learning or localised learning have been recognised, comparatively less importance has been given on the development and dissemination of proper transaction strategies and approaches involving use of local context. While the process of localised learning enables teachers to comprehend the contents by associating learning to the local environment and making the decentralisation interpretation of the curriculum, many teachers apply the practices rarely. And even if when they adopt localised learning by exemplifying the real life situations, they are uninformed of the appropriate approaches. Teachers can initiate and apply creative curriculum transaction practices when they would be well-awared about the suitable approaches. In this context, the task of curriculum development and its transaction need to be decentralised from curriculum developers to teachers, teacher educators and ultimately to learners. The success of this approach necessitates a new-vision, dedication, devotion, persistence, sustenance and co-operation among educationists, policy planners, educational administrators, teachers, students, parents and community as a whole.



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