

Curricular Intention, Teachers' Comprehension and Transaction of Contemporary EVS Textbooks: A Study

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Introduction

Enriched by emerging insights into children's learning, educationists are increasingly and universally acknowledging the importance of locating knowledge in the immediate contexts of children. The need for early learning to be holistic, immediate and unconstrained by artificial boundaries of disciplines is also being paid due heed to in framing the school curricula. In India since quite some time the need for early learning to be 'integrated' has been voiced at various fora and in different documents. Despite the policy rhetoric, however, actualising the idea of integration remained and still remains a challenge in a system too used to the 'subject' lens of looking at knowledge. Quite often, the efforts at creating 'integrated' textbooks culminated in isolated, insulated and atomistic concepts drawn from different areas and bound in a single cover. Environment a Studies for long was construed mostly as the study of natural and physical environment, heavily underpinned by the 'conservation education' or 'plantation' perspective. NCF-2005 was a documented endorsement of the contemporary and academically mature outlook in education. Significantly and critically informed by the reports of 21 Focus Groups, it touched upon crucial dimensions of school education and its processes. It forcefully brought into Indian academic discourse of school education the issues such as those of work and education, gender, curriculum, heritage crafts, marginalization, etc. It is not only the inclusion of these issues but the criticality, pointed focus and the studied minuteness in which they were addressed that calls for collective attention of the academia. For instance, instead of the paternalistic perspective on

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'work education' that considers promotion of 'dignity of labour' as its primary objective, the position paper of the Focus Group on 'Work and Education' goes beyond to consider work as a pedagogic medium and as an instrument of challenging the dominant groups' 'hegemony over curriculum'. In the same paper, the subtle usage of the term push outs instead of the traditional 'drops outs' for out of school children manage a radical shift in onus and orientation. Similarly, articulation of gender issues in the position paper of the Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education goes beyond the enrolment and retention concerns to evolve a feminist critique of the disciplinary knowledge and processes of schooling. The Focus Groups, taken in totality, thus created the intellectual firmament which was intended to serve as the edifice of ensuing structures and systems of teaching learning.

The curricula and syllabi framed by this perspective and the textbooks developed against this academic world view mirrored and expanded upon the intellectual insights offered therein. With such evolved sophisticated understandings having nurtured the curriculum and textbook development process, it is imperative that the thread of thought is carried forward in its truest sense and spirit by the implementers of this curricular idea if we are to have any hope for its influencing the system in any significant way. The present study is an attempt to ascertain the extent to which the curricular intentions inform the teaching learning process in classrooms by exploring the role of the teachers' understanding as the crucial mediating link and teachers as the interface between the intended and the enacted curriculum.

Environmental Studies: Scope and Perspectives

The Environmental Education has always been emphasised as an important component of school curriculum. The notion of Environmental Studies (EVS), however, has been developed on a wider canvas and with a much broader perspective. While it most certainly engages itself with sustainability and conservation concerns pertaining to the natural environment, it also includes within its purview the study of the issues of the socio-cultural environment. It further meanders beyond the 'what' of the study endeavour and carries with it the connotational implication as to 'how' the environment is to be studied and so it has come to be understood as—Learning about the environment; Learning through the environment and Learning for the environment. Following an

Integrated approach to teaching learning in early years has always been widely advocated in various documents. Kothari Commission (1966) recommended undifferentiated course of general education for all for the first seven years of schooling.

EVS has thus evolved as a composite curricular area that draws upon knowledge of different aspects of the world and it is premised on our understanding of young children. Young children begin to attempt to understand the world around them as soon as they enter it and interact with it holistically. They do not categorise, compartmentalise or label knowledge on the basis of its structure or form. It is therefore only rational that the early school curriculum also does not fragment knowledge but presents it as a seamless whole. However this leads to two other issues related to structuring of EVS curriculum—First, if Environment in EVS is understood as the entire social, cultural, physical and natural setting then the area of study becomes too vast and extensive and some kind of categorisation becomes inevitable to be able to do justice to it. The second issue that arises is that when EVS is regarded as the total environment of the child, how is it that mathematics and language continue to be taught separately and whether they do not exist in the environment of the child or whether there is some justification in terms of their being naturally different forms of knowledge.

Objectives of the Study

The overarching objective of the study was to examine the teachers' understanding and implementation of EVS textbooks in light of their curricular intention.

The broad objective consisted of the following sub objectives—

- i. To study the curricular objectives of EVS as stated in the syllabus,
- ii. To observe the transaction of the EVS textbook by the teachers,
- iii. To understand the teachers' comprehension of the intended curriculum,
- iv. To analyse the role of teachers as the crucial mediating link between the intended and the transacted curriculum,
- v. To identify the gaps, if any, between the intended, comprehended and transacted curriculum, and
- vi. To analyse the reason for these gaps.

Methodology of the Study

The study was analytical in nature and followed the following broad steps —

- Curricular objectives as stated in the NCERT syllabi for Class V were studied.
- Authors and the advisors of Class V textbook were interviewed to understand the philosophical backdrop of these books.
- Based on the above two steps, a template highlighting the various aspects of the textbook whose comprehension among teachers were observed.
- 100 EVS classes of six different schools were observed.
- Six teachers were interviewed regarding their understanding and assessment of the various aspects of the textbook.
- The data collected was reflected upon to understand any gaps in intention, transaction and comprehension of these textbooks.

The tools and techniques used were guided by the characteristics of the present study. Those were—Interview schedule for the advisor and author, Interview schedule for the teachers, classroom observations and analysis of NCERT syllabus for EVS for Class V.

Results and Discussion of the Study

The present EVS textbooks of NCERT, written in light of NCF-2005, may be seen as a culmination of the long cherished perspective of an integrated view of studying environment that does away with contrived compartmentalisation of knowledge into science and social science which young minds cannot be expected to appreciate. Taking a holistic perspective, these textbooks embed social and scientific understandings in specific contexts and it is the context which lends meaning to the tasks that would otherwise appear to be meaningless, decontextualise and as having little bearing on our real lives. The learner and her/his context is the absolute focus of these books. Children are encouraged to freely articulate their ideas and the teachers are also cautioned not to lay too much stress on the usage of the formal school language by the children. The books are socially responsive and raise some critical contemporary concerns that our society is presently staring at and the children are also most naturally drawn into the discussions and debates that centre around such live issues as full conservation.

Children are constantly encouraged to tap different sources for information. These sources could be their immediate environment, people around them—elders in family, people from the community, friends or the media. The teaching learning material that these books advocate and provide is authentic which means that the children are made to observe, handle and learn from real objects and experiences, the visuals are often real photographs or drawings which resemble realistic settings and the activities suggested require active interaction which the world outside of school and textbooks.

The present study yields some pertinent insights that have far reaching implications for the educational processes. The observation shows that classroom teaching learning is entirely based on the textbooks in all the observed classes, often reduced to reading out the text by the teacher/students, translating and understanding of literal meaning. Except for one case, there were no efforts to go beyond the textbooks. On the contrary even the textbook was not always followed in entirety. Pedagogically laborious activities like surveys or experiments were often glossed over or rushed past or students were asked to do them 'at home'. This points to the need to evolve mechanisms that could encourage and empower teachers to transact the textbook purposefully. There is a lack of systemic view on EVS. EVS is often taken to be equivalent to 'science'. In one of the schools the EVS teacher kept asking her students to take out their science books. One of the teachers, in his interview, specifically mentioned that EVS was essentially science and textbooks needed to reflect this. One of the teachers consistently lamented that the textbook lacked 'content'. These observations are symptomatic of a larger problem. In schools of Delhi Directorate of Education there are two separate books prescribed for SST and EVS which militate against the integrated perspective and conforms to the 'subject' view of knowledge. The inability of the system to develop a coherent view on EVS is problematic.

Across the schools, learner came across as a 'consumer' instead of as constructor of knowledge. Though teachers differed in the way they took the textbook to classroom, there were some patterns that could be identified—students rarely asked questions; there were only a few occasions where students actually said something original or shared a personal insight and when that happened, their responses were almost never built upon in a way that it meaningfully carried forward the chapter; ordinary

classroom material, such as the black board is almost solely used by the teacher; hands-on activities performed during the course of teaching-learning are rare and if performed they are largely teacher centric (even if they include use of ICT-based learning material); there were no occasions created for meaningful school-society interface). The communication of ideas and thoughts is thus largely one way grossly undermining the intellectual capacity of students.

On the face of it teachers appeared to be functioning on the premise that teaching to primary grades was a task that did not merit any special academic preparation. Two teachers cited the length of their teaching experience as reasons as to why there was no need for them for any preparation or for accessing any helpful resources other than the textbooks. A few of the teachers expressed unfamiliarity with the content of the chapters that they had 'not done in class as yet'. This is indicative of a lack of motivation on their part to beforehand engage with and prepare for the content they would to transact in their respective classes. There is a need for the system to take responsibility for providing the teachers with simulating intellectual challenge in their work that constantly spurs them to learn more, widely share and regularly update their knowledge.

The textbook in question carries many finely nuanced understandings that teachers may need to be facilitated with to appreciate. For instance while all teachers identified the picture task (p. 57) as being communicative of the understanding about sources of water, its conservation and difficulties faced by the people, no one really put the finger on the underlying issue of unequal distribution of resources in our society. However, sensitivities like gender concerns or helping others in times of distress, etc., are easily recognised. Then again while teachers used words like 'interesting' and informative to describe the purpose of narratives, such as that of Ronald Ross, no body mentioned it as being indicative of the dynamics of development of human knowledge in general and of science in particular. Also teachers were largely unaware and unappreciative of children's view and perspective of the natural and asocial world and its implications for teaching-learning. Indeed evolution of such insights requires protracted engagement with an exchange of ideas and opportunities will need to be created for this purpose.

School context also does seem to indirectly influence the transaction of the textbook. For instance, there was less of a tendency to read the textbook line by line and para by para in the school which had ICT availability and access. The Power Point slides

and videos supplemented the textbooks. ICT resources provided a context for discussion and interaction among students. All the teachers observed seemed to have a distinct pattern of textbook usage and curricular transaction in a given context. For instance one of the teachers was more given to reading the textbooks, explaining, sharing personal anecdotes and making frequent references to elements of popular culture, such as films and daily soaps. There was another who liberally peppered her classes with ICT resources and made attempts to go beyond the textbook and provide additional information. All the teachers, across the schools, felt the syllabus was too vast, chapters too many and some too long. This concern needs to be carefully considered and appropriately addressed.