

'Best Interest Principle' for the Education of a Child

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Abstract

Our education system is going through a very important phase where its inadequacies are being revealed by various national and international educational outcome comparisons. While many states are taking up innovative educational experiments and practices, the overall picture of our educational outcomes still needs improvement. In this scenario, we need to clarify the guiding principles for the processes and practices of our education system with focus on the main goal of successful educational outcomes for all children. This article presents a framework called the 'Best Interest Principle' for the education of a child. This framework brings together three major factors that can be thought of as providing guidance to the processes and practices in our educational system.

The right to education is a major right that children in our country have (National Policy on Education, 1986, 1992; Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 specified the curriculum and evaluation procedures in elementary education in its section 29, sub-section (2), clauses (a) to (h). In these, it specifies, in clause (b), that curriculum should take into consideration 'all round development of the child', in clause (c) 'building up child's knowledge, potential and talent',

in clause (d) 'development of physical and mental abilities to the fullest extent', in clause (e), it says "learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centred manner" and in clause (g) 'make the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety and helping the child express views freely'. In addition, chapter III, section 2 directs the schools to provide free and compulsory education to students with disabilities as per guidelines in the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection and Full Participation) Act of 1995.

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This Law has provided the policy direction for implementing good quality education (chapter III, section 8 (h) from class 1 to class VIII for all students in our country, irrespective of their challenging conditions such as disability and low socio-economic status. The RTE Act (2009) has also laid down specifications on 'good quality education' which would be as per the Schedule of the RTE Act (2009).

However, educational outcome statistics at national level (ASER-2011 and Midterm Assessment Survey, 2000) and global levels (PISA-2010) have shown that the learning outcomes even in foundational skills such as reading ability are very low for Indian students. These statistical findings reflect that the guidelines in the NCF (2005), NPE, (1986) and the RTE Act (2009) are yet a long way from the classroom. In view of the current scenario, we, as a nation, need to revisit the processes and practices in our school education system. School education is an important part of a child's life as it develops in her/him foundational skills and higher order thinking abilities. Foundational skills are the skills of reading, writing, mathematics and basic cognitive skills such as observation, understand from situations and value systems. These skills are 'foundational' because, they make a student capable of deriving knowledge and information about the world through their application to instructional materials and other media. Higher order thinking processes enable students to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of the world and its processes through the content areas such as science and social science.

Lack of foundational skills development in early years of elementary school can negatively impact academic performance and achievement as students move from class to class. This creates an achievement gap between the two groups of children - those that develop the foundational abilities at their class level in early elementary years and those that don't. This achievement gap widens as students proceed to the higher classes. This phenomenon can be seen in the graphical representation of the achievement gap (Stanowich, 1986) and is shown in figure 1.

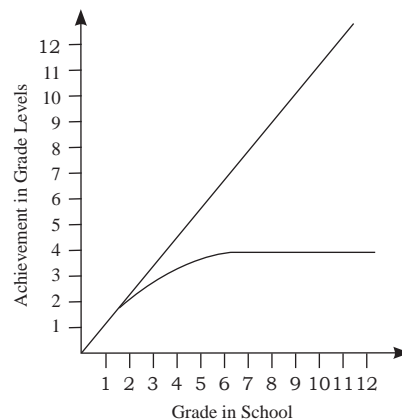


Figure 1: Achievement Gap

Who are the students who lag behind? These are students who have more challenging needs due to a variety of reasons. Additionally these students are most often found in our government schools. Our government schools are typically tasked with the job of providing education to students at low costs and are the main place of education for children from the lower socio-economic classes who constitute a major

proportion of children in our country. Children with disabilities and children from dalit, tribal, female headed families, landless families, and girl children form a majority among these marginalised children (De et. al., 1999; Sainath, 1996).

A lot of work needs to be done in terms of building effective instruction for developing successful learning outcomes in foundational skills and content knowledge in our children during their school going ages of 6-14 years. Such outcomes can prepare them for independent, productive and responsible adult life. An important question to ask at this juncture is 'What would constitute a school education programme that would be in the 'best interest' of the child?' This question is very important because while the law puts the onus of education of our country's children on our government, it is critical that these crucial years of education (age 6 to age 14) be delivered in the best interest of the child. The best interest of the child should be such that the education the child receives in these eight years successfully lays strong physical, intellectual, cognitive and affective foundations that enable the children to build their citizenship effectively for themselves as well as for their country.

The age group 6-14 years includes elementary education or primary education and middle school or lower secondary school education. Of these, the elementary education has to be strong as it captures students at their critical ages of development of the brain which is during the first decade of life. Development of the higher order thinking

skills can be done efficiently during the middle school years. Both these then will go hand in hand as the students' progress through high school and beyond. An important task before our education system is therefore to ensure appropriate development of foundational and higher order thinking skills in these elementary and middle school years. Students need to be able to use their knowledge and thinking to address problems in society and find productive vocations and careers as they become future citizens. These aims and functions of education are also enumerated in the National Focus Group's Position paper on 'Aims of Education' (National Focus Group, 2007).

An education that fulfils the above-said purposes needs to be a common goal of all the personnel concerned with the education system. Figure 2 represents the education system at three levels. It shows these levels as three concentric circles where the outermost circle is the entire system, the middle circle is the school, the innermost circle is the classroom within which is the student. At each level, educational philosophies, ideologies and knowledge about the student's nature and needs should guide curricular decisions and practices. Through these three factors - both individual and collective, the personnel at each level such as the government officials in the departments of education, school heads and the teachers impact the educational experiences of the child and thereby the child's learning outcomes. This is reflected in the overall educational outcomes of our country.

In the next section, this article presents a framework of '*best interest*

principle' for the education of a child which would enable all concerned with the education system to work effectively towards the educational needs of the children in their care. In this framework, 'high quality education' is the central goal of the educational system as it addresses the fulfillment of the aims and functions of education in our country. 'High quality education' is envisioned as educational outcomes arising out of successful educational experiences and measured by attainment of highest possible learning outcomes in the various life skills, academic skills and knowledge areas for all students irrespective of their marginalising conditions such as disability and low socio-economic status. It also includes experiences that help students learn good values and translate values learned to values lived.

Framework of 'Best Interest Principle' for education of the child

The framework of the 'best interest principle for the education of the child' has, in its centre, students with successful educational experiences. This situation is the best situation for the child and should be provided for all children irrespective of caste, social class, gender and ability. It depends on three major factors - *philosophy* (or the system of inquiry) to construct the educational processes, *ideology* (or the set of ideas) that directs curricular practices and *knowledge* about the students' learning needs that have to be attended to (see figure 3).

Successful educational experience for 'high quality education' for a child is like a three-legged stool that is supported

by the three factors as each leg. Successful educational experiences are the main stage or central manifestation of the educational processes. Such experiences will lead to the achievement of the goal of high quality education. This is so because, it will provide intrinsic motivation that can facilitate retention of students in school, choices to engage in learning activities, and faith in the educational system. Various efforts to retain students have shown to be problematic in their efficacy as many times, while enrolments have increased retention has been a challenge (Shirname, 2007). Successful educational experiences will play a motivating role for students to stay on in school and increase their faith in education as a liberating force.

The three factors which are shown as the three vertices of the triangular framework are the philosophy of critical pedagogy, ideology of constructivist pedagogy, and knowledge of students' needs. If the educational processes and practices of goal setting, curriculum planning, instruction and assessments are guided by these factors, they would take us towards providing successful educational experiences for all our students, which in turn would lead to successful educational outcomes both at an individual level as well as at the national level.

Each of these three factors has equal importance in enabling the education system to facilitate successful educational experiences for all children. When any one of them is not taken into account, it affects the educational experiences and outcomes for the children. They can be compared to the

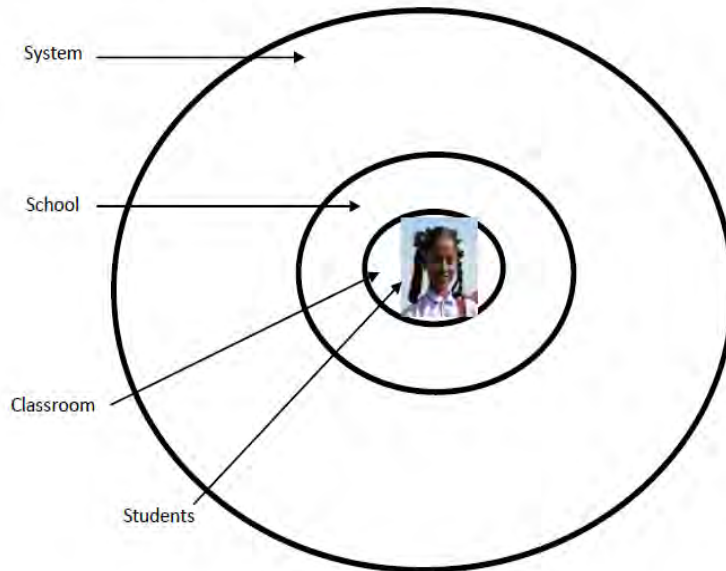


Figure 2: *Our Education System – a diagrammatic conceptualisation*

three legs of a three-legged stool whose seat is the successful educational experiences of the child.

Philosophy guides the overall processes of education and educational philosophy has been purported as a knowledge field with rigorous analysis of every aspect of the system (Sheshadri, 2008). Critical Pedagogy is a science and art of the teaching learning process, which enables development of attitudes and values of social consciousness, and responsibility through development of cognitive skills of critical thinking (Panda, 2006; Ramesh Babu, 2007). These skills are in the higher cognitive domain and include analysis, inferences, application, revisiting and reconsider existing unjust and improper practices in the society. Attitude of society reflects attitudes of people in schools and vice versa. In doing so, education acts either

as an agent of status quo maintenance or an agent of change through social transformation. Since critical pedagogy, as a philosophy, has multi-dimensional potential, leading to creation of reflective and responsible democratic citizenship, it has to be the main guiding philosophy in our education system.

Ideology guides the educational processes emphasising 'how' knowledge should be understood. Constructivism is an ideology that originated in the 1700s and has been shown to be concerned with understanding of what is knowledge and how it develops. According to constructivism, knowledge is constructed by the knower using the society and the student's own experiences as the reference points for construction of knowledge. Such learning leads to purposive solutions for meaningful problems (Pandey, 2007).

Knowledge of students' needs guides the educational process regarding the different ways in which curriculum can be transacted. Knowledge of individual differences has increased owing to the increases in information in the fields of cognitive developmental neuroscience (Munakata, Casey & Diamond, 2004) and neuroscience research which can help education of children by understanding how the brain works at different ages and for different activities (Goswami,

Practical implication of the 'Framework of Best Interest Principle for Education of the child'

Traditionally, our pedagogical practices have involved the 'one size fits all' idea where there is a lecture method and students who follow the teacher within the time frame stipulated in the timetable progress while those that don't get left behind. Further, those who get left behind would be detained in the same class leading to negative social, emotional and psychological effects. Currently, we

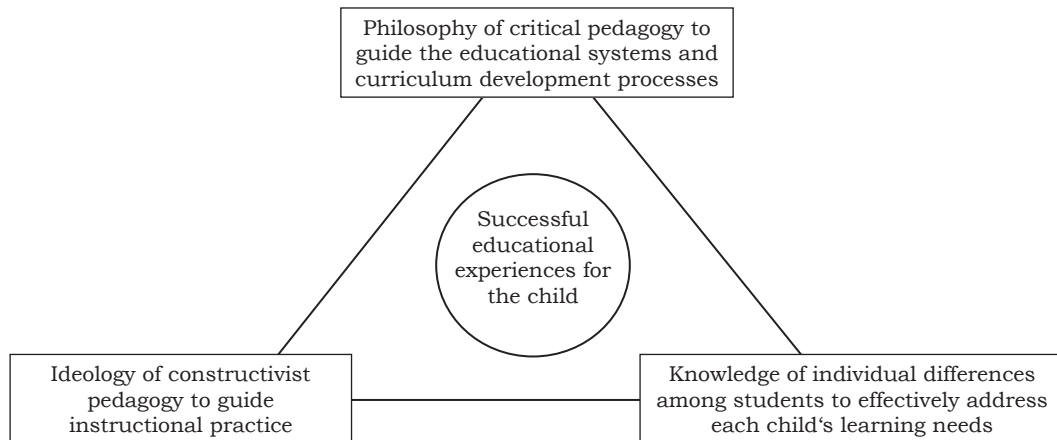


Figure 3: Framework of 'Best Interest Principle' for education of a child

2004). Further theories of multiple intelligences (Howard Gardner, 1983) and Universal Design for Learning (Rose, Meyer, Rappolt & Strangman, 2002) have shown that students actually vary in their intelligences and learning needs. In addition, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds also predispose children to differences in learning readiness and privileges, all of which contribute to individual differences among students.

have a no-detention policy. This policy, although it addresses the negative effects of being detained, has brought about another set of negative consequences, which relate to the academic outcomes for the children and their preparedness for higher school and beyond. According to the National Sample Survey, many students who were not enrolled in school gave reasons as 'not interested' (Shirname, 2007). This clearly indicates the lack of enriching and motivating

experiences school needs to provide to students.

Although educational initiatives such as activity based learning used in elementary schools in Tamil Nadu have attempted at tailoring instruction to different levels and let students vary in their rates of progress, they still have not been able to lead to improvements in educational outcomes. Through such educational experiences, schools can become agents of social transformation as proposed in the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and in the earlier Kothari Commission Report (1964-66). Till date, our educational indicators are mostly in the levels of enrolment and retention ratios, literary levels and educational innovations have focussed on infrastructural innovations e.g., Operation Blackboard. More recently,

new initiatives such as activity-based learning had some pedagogical innovative component also, however, due to lack of appropriate research, here too a sharp focus was on materials development leaving aside the component of educational experiences and learning outcomes.

Further, the RTE Act (2009) has listed infrastructure and hours of work as requirements for 'good quality education', but not requirements about educational outcomes, which also needs to be specified. The 'Best Interest Principle' for the education of the child proposed here hopes to provide a guidance for all individuals concerned with our education system at any level in their efforts towards developing educational processes and practices.

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