

# Searching the Missing Link for Assuring the Quality of Enacted School Curriculum

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## Abstract

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*Today's fast-paced globalisation has put schools under extreme pressure to transform learners into an efficient workforce and to deliver quality education and quality learning outcomes. Although rigorous efforts have been made to ensure educational quality and students' learning by prescribing an elaborate curriculum for general school education, wide gaps exist between the prescribed curriculum and how it has been enacted in schools that is, what has been stated in the face of prescribed curriculum is yet to be implemented in the true sense of the word. Although the schools and stakeholders in education are investing so much in terms of time, effort, and resources to assure the quality of enacted school curriculum, they are still in search of the missing link for assuring the educational quality. Their major concern is what more could be done to assure the quality of enacted school curriculum? The present paper proposes that the quality of enacted school curriculum could be assured by making the students' learning engagement an integral component of the learning process. Students' learning engagement is the active involvement and participation of students in learning activities of the school. It is a crucial academic construct which has great potentiality to assure educational quality and to deeply engage students in the cognitive and co-cognitive activities of the school. However, the potentiality of this construct is often overlooked during curricular transactions in the classroom. In this regard, the present paper puts forth a theoretical model for assuring the quality of enacted school curriculum through students' learning engagement.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is the process of learning and knowing, which is not merely limited to the academic curriculum. It is an ongoing process which incorporates the mutual necessities and demands of the person, the society, and the country. It is a holistic endeavour which continues throughout the individual's life and is successfully passed on to further generations through knowledge and experience. In a broader sense, education is characterised by the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of an individual or what is rightly said as the all round development of an individual. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the existence of human beings would be worthless without education.

In the past few years, the educational scenario of our country has changed for the better. Our country has recognised education as one of the core objectives which needs to be accomplished successfully for the overall development of the nation. Rigorous efforts are in progress to expand the periphery of education, to improve educational quality, and to ensure equity and equality in providing access to educational opportunities to all the individuals in the society, irrespective of caste, class, region, religion, or race. All these efforts are majorly directed towards strengthening the foundations of education at the grassroot level that is, at the school education level.

## GENERAL SCHOOL EDUCATION

The education imparted during the first ten years of school has been envisaged in the national curriculum of our country as 'general education'. The aim of general education is to provide an opportunity to the students to study all the basic subjects so that they acquire knowledge and awareness of the disciplines essential for their overall development. This will help build a base for their further education as well as enable them to become mentally, spiritually, physically, and socially efficient members of the society. The structure of general education in our country is as follows.

- *Primary school*—Five years duration from standard first to fifth (for six- to ten-year-olds)
- *Middle school/upper primary school*—Three years duration from standard sixth to eighth (for 11- to 14-year-olds)
- *Secondary school*—Two years duration for standards ninth and tenth (for 14- to 16-year-olds)
- The objective of primary school is to impart an adequate level of knowledge and learning to students so that they successfully proceed from primary to middle school level. It aims to provide academic literacy (reading, writing, arithmetic) to students, develop their thinking ability, and work towards their mental, spiritual, and physical development, which is essential for their future learning.

- The objective of middle school is to acquaint students with various aspects related to the physical and living components of nature and of the society. It aims towards spiritual and moral development of students and makes them competent and skilful enough to successfully transit from middle school to high school.
- The objective of high school is to enrich the knowledge that students have acquired over the previous years of education and enhance their skills and competencies so that they either choose to continue education at the senior secondary level or move to an institute of professional education.

### **QUALITY IN EDUCATION**

Quality is the utmost and highly anticipated aim in any human enterprise including the field of education. Mukhopadhyay (2005) states from various authors that, quality is an optimistic thought, that can be strategically realised with meaningful investment. The Quality Council of India Report quotes from an author that quality is 'meeting, exceeding and delighting customer's needs and expectations with the recognition that these needs and desires will change over time'. Winder (1993) says that 'quality is the ongoing process of building and sustaining relationships by assessing, anticipating, and fulfilling stated and implied needs'. Mukhopadhyay (2005) states from another author that quality

being an optimistic thought, has indefinite potentialities to evolve and expand while making a progressive journey, with the aim of manifesting itself in every realm of human pursuit through clearly stated goals and plans, rather than marching towards reaching a hypothetical destination that is, perfection.

In the past two decades, 'quality' has become the epicentre of the field of education and a catchphrase for every stakeholder who aims to provide better educational services. It has transfused into almost every aspect of education, ranging from quality teaching-learning process to quality learning experiences and outcomes to total quality management (Riley 1994). One of the major concerns of the present education system is that all children, irrespective of their caste, class, region or place in the society be provided with education of a comparable quality. The immediate demands and expectations of the society, its values, beliefs, and the community concerns determine the aims of education and these aims have a deep impact on the quality of education. In terms of quality, schools aim to prepare students who aspire for higher education and successful careers, who become deep learners with the ability to transfer competencies and skills from one learning domain to another, who have exceptional reading and writing skills, who can speak eloquently, reason out things based on evidence, and can come up with novel ideas

and solutions to face challenges and complexities.

Although quality is a buzzword in the field of education, it is a relative term which lacks agreement, is difficult to be defined in few words, and is highly convoluted when aimed to be measured (Bhat 2006). Riley (1994) also states from an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on schools and quality that rather than outlining a single definition of quality in education, the need is to understand what role contextual factors such as school community, material and human resources, curriculum, pedagogical strategies and techniques, and evaluation and assessment of students, play in improving and sustaining the quality of education. Hence, it is elusive to reach a consensus when trying to state what makes an education 'quality education'.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF 2000), states that quality education is a complex and multidimensional concept which includes:

- learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials

for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;

- processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities; and
- outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society'.

### **Programmes and Interventions for Assuring Quality in School Education**

Education has since long been recognised as a 'fundamental human right' which supports the enactment of all other human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 lays down in Article 26(1) that every individual has the right to education. Since then, the right to education has been given an important place in the constitutions of different nations, various conventions across the globe, and development plans.

The founding members of our Constituent Assembly also recognised the importance and significance of the right to education and placed it under the Indian Constitution. The aim of universalising elementary education was acknowledged in the

true sense of the word when the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 was enacted giving every child between 6–14 years of age, the right to gain admission in school to receive eight years of elementary education. The Right to Education Act, 2009 states that ‘the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine’ (MHRD website).

The Central and State Governments of India have initiated a series of programmes and interventions to ensure that children receive quality education at the elementary and secondary levels of education and become better learners. These programmes aim to make school communities more inclusive and student-friendly, cater to diverse needs of each child and enhance student learning outcomes. Some of the programmes and interventions are as follows.

- A flagship programme for the universalisation of elementary education, the ‘*Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*’ (SSA) has been initiated with the aim to provide elementary education of a comparable quality for eight years to every child upto the age of 14 years, focusing mainly on providing quality education to the disadvantaged groups and girls. The primary interventions supported by the SSA to infuse quality in elementary education include: to revive the curriculum

in accordance with the National Curriculum Framework 2005; to provide free textbooks to students from Standards I to VIII; to introduce and implement continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE); to facilitate teaching-learning process with the efficient use of information and communication technology (ICT); to increase the availability of teaching staff; to enhance skills and competencies of teachers through in-service training; to orient head teachers for better management of academic, financial and human resources; to establish Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) to provide training and supervision to teachers, and to design learning enrichment programmes for improving and enhancing student learning (NUEPA 2014).

- Another flagship programme, the ‘*Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan*’ (RMSA) has been launched with the aim to expand the accessibility to secondary education, to improve the quality of secondary education, and to ensure equity. Its vision is to assure the availability, accessibility and affordability of quality education to every young individual in the age group of 14–18 years. One of the key objectives that RMSA is working towards is ‘to improve the quality of education being imparted at secondary level by making all

secondary schools conform to prescribed norms.’ The primary interventions supported by RMSA to accomplish this objective include: to upgrade upper primary schools to secondary schools; to strengthen the existing government secondary schools; to open new secondary schools in areas with a majority of SC/ST/Minority population; to ensure the availability of better infrastructural facilities in schools; to recruit post graduate teachers, particularly female teachers; to provide in-service training to teachers and head teachers; to facilitate efficient use of ICT in teaching-learning; to introduce and implement continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE); to make certain curricular reforms, and; to provide hostel facilities for teachers in remote and hilly areas (NUEPA 2014).

### **EXISTING GAPS BETWEEN PRESCRIBED CURRICULUM AND ENACTED CURRICULUM OF GENERAL SCHOOL EDUCATION**

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 was put forward with the vision to bring uniformity in the education system of our country, work towards improving the quality of education, and cater to the diverse needs of the learners and the society. It aims to establish a ‘secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society’ by reforming the school curriculum to:

- ‘connect knowledge to life outside the school,
- ensure that learning is shifted away from rote methods,
- enrich the curriculum to provide for overall development of children rather than remain textbook-centric,
- make examinations more flexible and integrated into classroom life, and
- nurture an over-riding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country’ (NCF 2005, p. 5) .

Even after so many years of enactment of the National Curriculum Framework, 2005, wide gaps exist between what is prescribed in the curriculum for general school education and how it has been enacted in schools. The vision of NCF 2005 to reorient the perception towards ‘learners and learning’ and to follow a holistic approach towards their development seems to have been realised only partially. The curriculum also talked about experiential learning in which a teacher would only facilitate students’ learning by actively engaging them in the process of knowledge construction and encourage their creativity. However, still in most of the schools, teachers play the conventional role of communicating textbook information to the students and students are expected to simply memorize it and reproduce it in their exams. Many other aims such as



reformation of assessment system, emphasis towards development of 21st century skills and competencies among students, effective use of ICT and other learning resources, etc., have also been accomplished only to some extent.

Thus, the vision of the framework is yet to be achieved to its fullest form because the focus of education in schools is still more on rote memorization than knowledge construction.

### **SEARCHING THE MISSING LINK FOR ASSURING THE QUALITY OF ENACTED SCHOOL CURRICULUM**

An ever-changing society has led to transformations in the kind of skills and efficacies required by today's workforce. This has posed a massive demand on schools to transform students into a group of skilled individuals who are efficient to perform diverse tasks. Schools need to prepare students not merely to acquire readymade tidbits of knowledge, but to become analysers, synthesizers, and appliers of that knowledge in real-life situations so that they become capable and confident to face the challenges and generate novel ideas and solutions to deal with them effectively.

For the production of an efficient manpower, schools need to rethink the curricular and pedagogic strategies and techniques to emphasise upon the inculcation of skill-based competencies. In this respect, the stakeholders of

education around the globe are striving towards renovating education at the curricular and assessment level to gear up students to become critical reflectors of knowledge rather than rote learners. Schools are now focusing on providing diverse learning experiences to students. These experiences are more engaging, more problem- and discovery-based, more interdisciplinary, and more productive to develop skills, attributes, a critical and reflective mindset, a strong character and value system among students so that they can achieve success in every sphere of life and become life-long learners.

Although schools and stakeholders of education are investing a great deal of time, effort, and resources to assure the quality of education, they are still in search of that 'missing link'. Their major concern is 'what more could be done to assure the quality of enacted school curriculum?' The present paper proposes that the quality of enacted school curriculum could be assured by making the students' learning engagement an integral component of the learning process.

### **STUDENTS' LEARNING ENGAGEMENT**

Engagement in learning pertains to the ways in which students associate with the academic and social dimensions of learning. Engagement in learning has been denoted by a wide range of terms such as '*student engagement*', '*school engagement*', '*academic*

*engagement*”, “*educational engagement*”, “*engaged time*”, “*student learning engagement*”, “*student engaged learning*”, “*academic responding*”, “*engagement in class*”, “*engagement in school work*”, etc. (Fredricks et al. 2011). Cooper and Jacobs (2011) state that a positive educational engagement encompasses the complete range of social, emotional, and behavioural operations pertaining to learning and development. This involves creating a school and classroom environment that facilitates the state of emotional well-being, nurturing cognitive skills for efficient organisation and interpretation of information, cultivating favourable social relationships and inculcating positive self respect.

The Glossary of Education Reform (2014) defines student engagement as ‘students’ attentiveness, inquisitiveness, and curiosity’. Wellborn (1991) defines engagement as ‘the extent of a student’s lively participation in a learning activity’. The term ‘learning activity’ may denote engagement in a short-term task or a long-term event, as the learning activity may occur for a short span of time (such as classroom activities) or over some months or years (such as a specific course). Reschly and Christenson (2012) refer to engagement as the ‘energized, directed, and sustained action, or the observable qualities of students’ actual interactions with academic

tasks’. Thus, students’ learning engagement is the active involvement and participation of students in learning activities.

Students’ learning engagement supports students’ voluntary and active involvement in curricular and co-curricular learning by providing them conducive learning environment and appropriate presentation of the contents. This is done so that they develop positive relationships with teachers and peers and learn to work together respecting and representing each other’s thoughts, which in the broadest sense may improve the quality systems of the institution and quality of education at large (Dunne and Owen 2013).

### **DIMENSIONS OF STUDENTS’ LEARNING ENGAGEMENT**

Fredricks et al. (2004) and Reschly & Christenson (2006) consider engagement as a ‘multidimensional construct’ which is highly influenced by the interventions of contexts such as teachers, families, peers, etc. They recognise students’ learning engagement as a pathway to desired learning outcomes across the cognitive and co-cognitive domains. They characterise engagement into three types as listed below.

#### **Behavioural Engagement**

It denotes student’s participation in academic and social activities of the institution. It is an important factor to achieve desirable academic outcomes and prevents dropout.



**Emotional Engagement**

It relates to student's behaviour towards teachers, peers, and the institution, and denotes a sense of belonging towards the institution and willingness to fulfill its requirements for better performance.

**Cognitive Engagement**

It points towards student's personal investment in learning, incorporating thoughtfulness, self-regulation strategies, competence, and willingness to master advance learning skills and comprehend complex ideas.

Skinner et al. (2008) have found that the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects of students' learning engagement significantly affect each other and magnify themselves over time. Also the multidimensionality of 'students' learning engagement' lies in the fact that students' behaviour, emotions, or cognition are not water-tight compartments and are insufficient indicators of student's learning engagement in themselves. Li & Lerner (2013) justify the interrelationship between the three dimensions of students' learning engagement by giving examples that a student may show active participation in learning in terms of regular attendance, spending adequate time on learning tasks, and putting rigorous efforts to accomplish the academic goals, all of which indicate student's behavioural engagement. However, they do not represent the extent of

student's personal investment and commitment to learning (cognitive engagement) and their emotions and feelings attached to various contexts of learning as well as willingness to learn (emotional engagement). Also, a student who likes and enjoys coming to school and behaves amicably with teachers and peers may be regarded as an 'emotionally engaged' student, but nothing could be said about their level of concentration and meaningful effort invested in learning (cognitive engagement) as well as the determination to achieve desirable learning outcomes (behavioural engagement). Mere participation in learning activities of the school cannot alone be taken to describe all the three dimensions of students' learning engagement. Thus, it could be inferred that a student can only be said to be deeply engaged in learning when the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive components of engagement come into play simultaneously.

Several studies have also found significant relationships between the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of students' learning engagement. Emotional engagement has been found to significantly contribute to the behavioural aspect of students' learning engagement (Skinner et al. 2008, Li et al. 2010). Students who show positive emotions and liking towards school tend to exhibit appropriate behaviour while participating in the learning activities of the school. Li & Lerner

(2013) also report from various authors that significant relationships exist between students' positive emotions (emotional engagement) and their increased well-being, effective coping, creative thinking and enhanced thought process, all of which are indicators of cognitive engagement. Studies also suggest that the emotional engagement may be considered as the initiating point which in its utmost capacity facilitates students' behaviours and actions (behavioural engagement) and their meaningful efforts and deeper commitment to learning (cognitive engagement). In their study, Li & Lerner (2013) have found that early emotional engagement significantly predicted behavioural and cognitive engagement, and behavioural engagement was a significant predictor of later emotional and cognitive engagement. They have further reported that bi-directional relationships exist between behavioural and emotional engagement and between emotional and cognitive engagement.

**STUDENTS' LEARNING ENGAGEMENT:  
A MISSING LINK FOR ASSURING  
THE QUALITY OF ENACTED SCHOOL  
CURRICULUM**

'Students' learning engagement is an appropriate predictor of students' behaviour in the teaching-learning process' and is an essential requirement for assuring the quality of education and achieving the desired

learning outcomes (Sumaiya & Masih 2016). It constitutes psychological events which may be observable (for example, active presence in class) and unobservable (for example, commitment to learning) and it links the student with the school, home, parents, and peers (Reschly & Christenson 2012).

In the past few years, the goal of education has shifted from the prevention of dropout to high school completion, and the aim of successful school completion has broadened to meet the cognitive, affective, and behavioural standards of schooling so that success in school paves way for accessibility to post secondary enrolment options (Reschly & Christenson 2012). Students' institutional success could be ensured only when students are actively engaged in learning—such an engagement could be observed when they participate in learning activities with keen interest, put rigorous efforts towards task accomplishment, and maintain sound interpersonal relationships at school.

Students' learning engagement is a crucial academic construct which has great potentiality to assure the quality of enacted school curriculum and to deeply engage students in the cognitive and co-cognitive activities of the school. However, the potentiality of this construct is often overlooked during the curricular transactions in the classroom. Students' learning engagement needs to be made an integral component of the enacted

school curriculum. More emphasis needs to be laid upon providing engaging activities and meaningful interactions to students that promote their active engagement in both cognitive and co-cognitive activities of the enacted curriculum. Engagement activities include, but are not limited to academic effort, higher-order thinking skills, academic integration, diversity-related experiences and practical experiences such as academic challenge, learning through collaboration, student-teacher interaction, and student effort (Kearsley and Shneiderman 1998)

In the light of the aforementioned concerns, the present paper proposes a theoretical model for assuring the quality of enacted school curriculum by making students' learning engagement an integral component of the learning process (Figure 1). In this model, 'students' learning engagement' is conceived as students' active participation and involvement in learning, and is constituted by three essential components viz., the learner, the school, and the teacher. In facilitating learning engagement in teaching-learning process—

- the role of a learner is to actively participate in teaching-learning activities by collaborating with co-learners (peers and teachers); coordinating with them to co-create a common meaning out of individualised meanings; demonstrating leadership skills while working in groups; and maintaining sound interpersonal

relationships with peers and staffs.

- the role of a teacher is to design a suitable plan to transmit the curricular contents in a way that benefits every learner; use innovative pedagogical practices and strategies to make learning a joyful experience for the students; adopt appropriate assessment and evaluation techniques that rightly measure students' learning rather than their memorization; and provide motivating feedback to them so that they learn from their mistakes and grow as better learners.
- the role of a school is to formulate plans, programmes, strategies, and interventions which best cater to students' individualized needs; implement them in day-to-day teaching-learning situations, orient teachers and students to benefit most out of them, make frequent transitions across various plans and strategies to sustain better teaching-learning, and judiciously invest in student learning in terms of human and material resources. All these efforts should be directed towards achieving the goals of student retention, their persistence in teaching-learning process, and achievement of desired learning outcomes.

The learners are the central entity in the domain of education around whom all the efforts of the teachers and the schools are directed. It is for

their benefit that schools are investing so much in terms of physical and human resources. Teachers and other stakeholders of education are striving hard to create a conducive learning environment where the students can learn efficiently and achieve desirable learning outcomes which eventually would lead to enhanced quality of education. Hence, in the model (Figure 1), the role of the learner is placed at the centre and the roles of the teacher and school are placed on either sides suggesting that their roles and responsibilities are directed towards enhanced learning and well-being of the learners.

The model proposes that the quality of enacted school curriculum could be assured by renovating certain aspects of students' learning in relation to the three dimensions of students' learning engagement.

### **Behavioural Engagement**

The behavioural aspect of students' learning engagement could be improved by providing a physically and psychologically conducive learning environment to the students. This would include proper infrastructural facilities and sufficient learning resources, creating engaging learning activities to provide hands-on experience of the theoretical contents, regularly monitoring students' learning through appropriate assessment, and motivating them to achieve the desired learning goals.

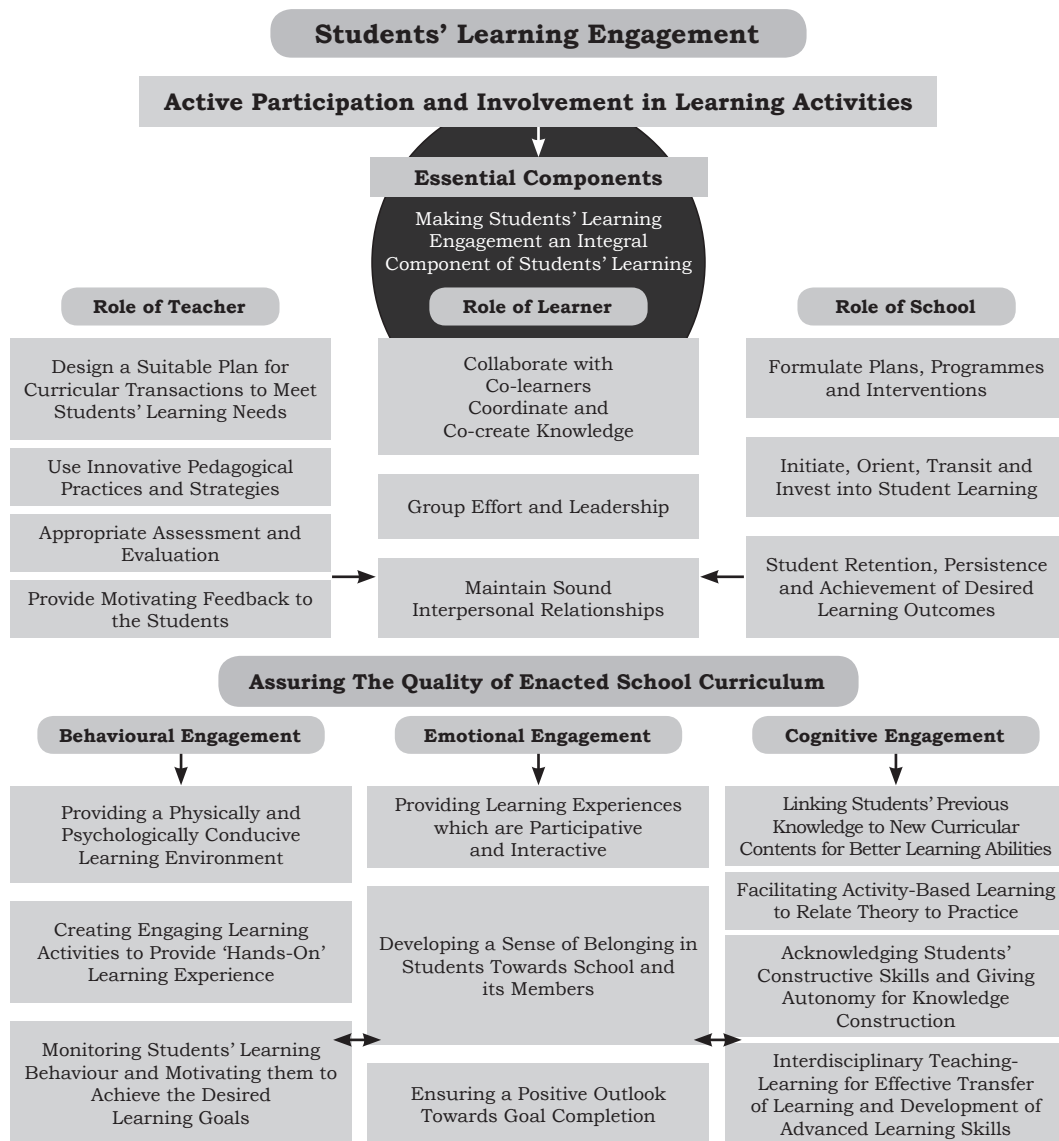
### **Emotional Engagement**

The emotional aspect of students' learning engagement could be improved by providing learning experiences to the students which have more scope for active participation and interaction; developing a sense of belonging in students so that they feel an important part of the school community and share cordial relationships with its members; and engaging them in learning activities with a positive outlook towards goal completion.

### **Cognitive Engagement**

The cognitive aspect of students' learning engagement could be improved by efficiently linking students' previous knowledge and experiences to new curricular content for better acquisition of new knowledge. This could also be done by creating activities which facilitate activity-based learning among students to effectively relate theory to practice, acknowledging students' constructive skills and encouraging them to engage in individualised meaning-making process by giving autonomy for knowledge construction, and teaching through interdisciplinary approach to help students transfer learning from one discipline to another and to develop advanced learning skills like critical thinking and problem solving.

Since all the three dimensions of students' learning engagement are related to each other, simultaneous efforts must be made to improve all



*Figure 1. Assuring the Quality of Enacted School Curriculum through Students' Learning Engagement—A Theoretical Model*

the three dimensions to facilitate students' efficient learning which would ultimately assure the quality of enacted school curriculum.

The proposed theoretical model holds value to academicians, educational policymakers, and educational administrators to reform curricular and pedagogical strategies for assuring the quality of enacted school curriculum.

### CONCLUSION

Today's learners need to be thoroughly engaged in learning. Institutions that strive to provide quality education facilitate student learning by designing and supporting meaningful activities that cause deep engagement frequently. By means of quality education, the need is to instill such skills and competencies in students that are coherent with the demands of the dynamically progressive society. The emphasis of education needs to be on transforming

the learners from 'passive absorbers of information' to 'active constructors of meaning' (Janosz 2012). The need is to acknowledge students' learning engagement as a potential academic construct which can facilitate quality learning. Lastly, for enhancing the quality of enacted school curriculum, the mundane classroom teaching-learning process needs to be alchemised into a meaning-making process that would actively engage learners in the ongoing learning tasks, direct them to utilise their on-task experiences to transform a piece of information into individualised meanings, facilitate them to merge 'hands-on' with 'minds-on' experiences to develop their own knowledge, and give them opportunities to explore the functionality of that knowledge.

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