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Child-centered Education in Indian Schools: Policies and the Practice

Abstract

Child-centered education has been a long-held dream for Indian schools. It has occupied an important place in formal schooling since the National Policy on Education -1986 was introduced. During the last few decades, several initiatives have been taken through the curriculum framework, teachers' training, and various plans and policies to make the teaching-learning process child-centered. But a large number of schools in India are yet to practice child-centered education. The National Education Policy-2020 has set a target of five years to develop the foundational learning and numeracy of the children by restructuring the pedagogy and teacher education. This paper is an attempt to highlight the barriers to implementing child-centered education in Indian schools and suggest an effective pedagogical approach for inclusive school education.

Keywords: Child-centered education, inclusion, policy, pedagogy, Indian schools

Introduction

Children are a valuable resource which impacts the future of the nation. Consequently, the nation must provide the necessary facilities and a conducive environment to fulfill their needs and to protect their rights. Through context-specific education, children can be prepared for the future. Realising this fact since independence, the Indian government has been striving to formulate various plans and policies to provide every child appropriate education in a safe and joyful environment. Over the last three decades, a large number of initiatives aimed at universalizing elementary education in India have been taken, and the country has attained significant growth in enrolment, retention, and infrastructure development. Between 2001 and 2011, the literacy rate has increased by 9.21 per cent from 64.83 per cent in 2001 to 74.04 per cent in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). But the quality of education remains a major concern. As per the findings of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2019), only 73 per cent of children who are enrolled in Class VIII can read Standard II level texts; this has largely stayed unchanged since

2016 (Pratham, 2019). Research reveals that unpleasant and bitter experiences at the school level have stopped children from actively participating in the teaching-learning process (Sharma and Kamath, 2015). In India, there is a predominant notion among teachers that students are like a blank slate upon which anything can be written. Teachers infuse the information and knowledge of what they want, and students, as passive learners, digest everything. Students learn things either from teachers or by reading the textbooks and learning moves from outside to the inside (from teachers to students) of the learner (Mishra and Singh, 2013). A power nexus is prevalent in the classroom situation. Teachers often exhibit their power over students and presume that they have complete mastery over knowledge which can enhance students' learning. But they forget that children cannot be taught and they can only be facilitated. There is a misconception among teachers that students only learn in the teaching-learning process and they have nothing to learn from them. Teachers have many things to learn from the students regarding pedagogies, classroom techniques, and so

on (Banerjee, 2015). To make the teaching-learning process interesting and learner-friendly, the Government of India (GoI) has focused on child-centred education for a long time. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 has recommended adopting "a child-centred and activity-based process of learning" (MHRD, 1998, p. 14). The National Curriculum Framework 2005 appreciated the reform of curriculum to make education inclusive and meaningful experience of children and emphasised a child-centred pedagogy which gives predominance to "children's experiences, their voices, and active participation" (NCF, 2005, p. 13). In 2009, the GoI made education a fundamental right by introducing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009). Considering the importance of children's learning the Act in Section 29 (2) has mentioned making learning interesting through activities, discovery, and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centred manner (Government of India, 2009, p. 10). But despite these decades of plans and policies, child-centred education in many Indian schools is yet to be practiced (Brinkmann, 2020). Long paragraph. Please split into three

Child-centred Education—Perspectives from Indian Thinkers

The importance of child-centred education is reflected in the educational philosophies of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi (Sriprakash, 2009). According to Swami Vivekananda, self-learning and self-actualized knowledge is real education. The main role of teachers is to encourage and motivate students to gain knowledge. He was against bookish learning and rote memory education (Vivekananda in Pal, 2019). Rabindranath Tagore also promoted child-centred pedagogy. According to him, "...For true education is to realize at every step how our training and knowledge have an organic connection with our surroundings" (Tagore

in Ferrer, 2018). Mentioning Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Ferrer wrote that they were not contented with the teachers who had a negative attitude towards students and who include some alternative word??? education with compulsion. Children's delinquent behaviour could be changed through love and not through threat and punishment. They may be encouraged to reflect positive behavior.

Jiddu Krishnamurti is one of the greatest Indian educational philosophers of the 19th century who has immensely contributed to alternative education. Though he was not an educator in the formal sense, and he has not contributed directly towards child-centred education, his philosophy has relevance in contemporary society. J. Krishnamurti in his book *Education and the Significance of Life* (1953) has described the right education and the role of parents and teachers. In Chapter II (Right Kind of Education) he has talked about the meaning of true education which is to gain an understanding of oneself and make an individual 'complete' and capable of dealing with life as a whole. Contemporary education, which is based on the accumulation of information and knowledge from books and prepares students mainly to be competent for job markets, prepares the learners to be subservient, mechanical, and insensitive. A mind that has merely been trained is the continuation of the past and can never discover new things. The current school system trains students to learn some techniques which will enable them to earn future livelihoods. Krishnamurti stated that no method or system can bring the right kind of education as strict adherence to a particular method and leads to lethargy on the part of the teachers. Only love, care, and compassion can bring true education. Further, in Chapter IV (Parents and Teachers), he has mentioned that the problem does not lie with the child but instead with teachers and parents. The mistake that teachers commit is that they do not try to understand themselves or their relationship with the learners; they merely facilitate students to pass the examination



with the help of prototype knowledge. The idea is that children need to be guided and helped. If the teachers are themselves confused and stick to the taken-for-granted or prototype knowledge children cannot benefit (Krishnamurti, 1953).

Gijubhai Badheka, a pioneer in the field of primary education has immensely contributed to children's education. He has written several short stories, songs, rhymes, plays and newspaper articles placing the child at the centre of education. He believed that knowledge could be gained through games and co-curricular activities. Moving away from rote learning and examination-oriented teaching, he had encouraged children to explore and learn for self-development. Giju Bhai believed in the experiment and first-hand experience. According to him the real purpose of education is to enable and orient children in such a way so that they love their schools and teachers. If children are treated reverently with love and affection none of them will remain absent in schools (Jass, 2009). Child-centred education has been inbuilt and reflected in the contribution of many such Indian thinkers.

Challenges

Studies and reviews have revealed that teacher-centred education mainly promotes repetition, memorization and recitation (Barrett, 2007, Vavrus et al, 2011). This style of learning prohibits students from constructing their knowledge from the environment. As per the conventional practice in India, students are expected to be obedient and submissive towards their teachers. That is why students cannot raise their voice in many situations and consider teachers as their authorities. They simply receive what their teachers instruct and believe that as absolute knowledge. Teacher-centred education has made school education boring. Now efforts are being made to accommodate the needs of learners. The government has taken various initiatives to train teachers through in-service training

and orientation programmes to make classroom learning child-centred. Despite these initiatives, many Indian schools are not practising child-centred education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 focuses on redesigning teacher education and early grade curriculum to develop foundational literacy and numeracy of the children (Government of India, 2020).

In developing countries like India, one of the main challenges in implementing educational policies and reform, is the lack of financial resources. The teaching-learning process requires infrastructures, training of teachers, teaching aids, etc., which require a huge amount of money with higher budget allocation. Implementing learner-centred education becomes a challenge for policymakers (Lall, 2011). In-depth studies on challenges in practising learner-centred education are required to bring out some possible solutions.

Lack of Infrastructure and Teaching Aids

Better infrastructure facilities can facilitate teachers to plan for activity-based and joyful learning. A study was conducted among in-service teachers of Odisha and Chhattisgarh to find out their experiences on various issues and challenges at the level of elementary schools. The majority of teachers of the study areas viewed that lack of infrastructure, teaching-learning materials and shortage of teachers are the key factors of lower learning achievement of the children (Pradhan, 2015). Despite several initiatives, a large number of Indian schools lack sufficient infrastructures like playgrounds, classrooms and teaching aids. At the primary level, the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) should be 30:1 whereas at the upper primary level it is 35:1. In many schools the number of students exceeds per classroom; some students are even asked to sit in the verandah and these students cannot concentrate and participate in the teaching-learning process. Teachers also cannot conduct any activities due to lack of sufficient space.

Attitude of Teachers

The teachers' world view and relationship with their students play a significant role in the teaching-learning process. Many teachers in India believe that the lower caste, poor and girl students are incapable of learning. They believe that the educational backwardness of parents prevents such students from receiving education at all. The main role of teachers is largely considered to be to pass on information without having ideas on how much the students have received or benefited. For some others, education is one of the important means of getting a good job. Teachers often control the students thinking that otherwise, they will be spoiled (Brinkmann, 2020). The hegemonic attitude of teachers as well as the educational administrators prevents them to adopt a learner-centred approach to education.

Activity-based Learning

The method of teaching in classrooms differs among teachers. For instance, the empirical study of Konantambigi (2013) revealed that for most of the teachers activity-based learning means singing and dancing. This is the idea of most of the school teachers in India. Parashar and Singh (2013) conducted a study in three eastern states—Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal to know the infrastructural facilities available for classroom transactions, strategies used by the teachers during teaching and the perception of students towards classroom transaction of science textbooks. The study has revealed that there were hardly any activities conducted for the teaching-learning process. Apart from this, in many Indian schools, some teachers are noticed to have introvert personalities and feel shy to face a large group, feel nervous and hesitate to speak. But true learning starts when teachers and students share their experiences without any fear. Hence personality of teachers and their ideas towards activities-based learning influence the learning process. For child-centred education, teachers need extra time for the preparation of teaching material

which is usually not availed by them because of the extra works (Mishra and Singh, 2013).

In rural and tribal areas in India, schools are generally set up in a pleasant atmosphere having the space to play. But in urban cities schools are located in congested areas without much scope for extra-curricular activities. Teachers have more scope to use play methods for teaching in rural and tribal areas (Konantambigi, 2013).

Language Issues

Language is one of the important elements of learning through which children communicate and think. Lack of language proficiency lowers the confidence of children which results in poor participation in classroom discussion. In India, the mother tongue is used by a majority of children but it has been largely ignored and not considered in the case of tribal children and linguistic minorities and others (Gandhi, 2014). Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) have asserted that language is one of the important forms of exclusion. A qualitative study was conducted by them in six Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to assess the inclusion and exclusion aspects of schools. It was found that students from tribal districts and the western part of Odisha faced difficulties in learning because the teachers' language or official language of Odisha was different from the mother tongue of children.

Suggestions and Policy Implications

Rapid social change is witnessed across the globe and education is one of the appropriate mechanisms to cope with this fast-changing global environment. Thus, a new and context-specific approach to learning is essential. Education of the younger generation needs to be considered one of the topmost priorities for the holistic development of the nation. Child-centred education can be encouraged to enhance the learning ability of the children



and strengthen the foundation of learning. This learning is based on the constructivist approach which enables students to think about the problems from various perspectives and encourages them to construct their own knowledge (Agrahari, 2016).

Students' Feedback System

In India, teachers' performances are mainly evaluated based on the number of classes taken, the number of activities conducted, the number of responsibilities handled throughout their professional careers. But students' learning process, difficulties encountered during classes, challenges to comprehend the topics taught, etc. are largely ignored. Consequently, teachers do not consider teaching with seriousness and focus on non-academic activities. Through introducing a feedback system in the classroom teaching-learning can be enhanced. In this process, students can give their constructive feedbacks to the concerned teachers after the completion of the class. The feedback may involve the effectiveness of class, students' understanding, their difficulties in understanding, the effectiveness of teachers' teaching style and implications of learning.

Promotion of Indigenous Education

India is famous for the indigenous knowledge base practised by many native communities. During ancient times the relevance of indigenous knowledge was more prominent. The country's philosophers and intellectuals had already gained knowledge of astronomy, *Ayurveda*, architecture, water management and life skills (Bhatia, 2014). In India, rural and tribal communities possess unique knowledge of farming, environment, economy, medicine, architecture and so on which can be included in the current school curriculum to make the teaching-learning process more creative, context-specific and interesting. The pedagogical approach should be contextual and local.

Experiential Learning

In a classroom situation where the teacher delivers a lecture and students listen passively, teaching becomes uninteresting and monotonous thus, affecting the learning of the students. In this situation, children with special needs (CWSN) suffer a lot (Krishnaswami and Shankar, 2003 in Das et al., 2012). Through experiential learning, the teaching-learning process can be made interesting and joyful. Hence, the teachers should create an atmosphere where students will learn by doing activities, interacting with others, playing roles, etc. School education can be associated with the real world of the children so that they can equip themselves to use acquired knowledge in real life.

Mode of Assessment of the Learners

Assessment of the learners is mostly done by testing basic literacy and numerical skills which promotes rote learning and ignores a child's creativity and hidden potential. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) has been periodically publishing information on the classroom performance of children (Kumar, 2015). The Indian school system needs a paradigm shift from testing of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) to Emotional Quotient (EQ). The importance of emotional intelligence is deeply felt by educational psychologists. Emotional intelligence would enable children to cope with various situations, make wise decisions and control emotions when the situation demands (Srivastava, 2007). Consequently, the present curriculum can be restructured to incorporate contents by which children's EQ can be tested. Life skills can be added as a subject in the school curriculum.

Making the Classroom Interesting through Innovation

Listening is one of the important cognitive processes that require interest, energy and motivation and plays a vital role in the teaching-learning process, whereas hearing is a passive physiological activity which may

not require serious efforts (Sultana, 2016). Very often students are seen as passive and distracted in the lecture method of teaching. Through the help of creative pedagogy and teachers' innovative ideas, their listening skills can be developed. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic situation, technology can be used effectively for generating interest among students. These days numerous learning videos with diverse languages are available on YouTube. These videos can be used as learning material; teachers and students can be engaged in discussions at the end of the video. Through this method, the motivation of students can be enhanced and their thinking ability can be developed. Care should be taken to include all children in digital learning by bridging the digital divide.

Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy

The culture and experiences of teachers and students significantly affect the teaching-learning process (Rana and Culbreath, 2019). India is a land where we find diverse cultural groups who are distinct from each other in terms of belief, style of living, language, needs and so on. In India, tribal children come to schools with rich experiences and their attitudes, belief and values may differ from other groups. If teachers teach all students in the same manner throughout the country, certain groups may get excluded. A culturally inclusive pedagogy would be helpful where teachers are expected to know the cultures, perceptions, values and experiences of children (Gandhi, 2014).

Foundational Learning and Literacy

In India, over 5 crore children have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy that is, the ability to read and understand texts, solve basics of additions and subtractions (GoI, 2020). The current school system in India is planned by age and grade system. Elementary education starts from age six (Grade I) and ends at age fourteen (Grade VIII). However, as per the New Education Policy 2020, the foundational

learning is planned to continue for five years which is three years for pre-school education and two years for Standard I and Standard II (GoI, 2020). The difficulty level of the curriculum also increases according to the grade. Through continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE), children's performances are being measured and there is a no-detention policy at the primary level. Generally, in Indian classrooms, children sit in a row and listen to their teachers, which is a passive engagement. Children can be made to sit in a circle so that there will be effective communication among students and teachers. To develop basic literacy and numeracy skills, children should be shown diagrams and charts and be made to read them aloud so that their difficulties can be identified. Through group work, play method, and experiential learning, their numeracy, literacy skills, and creativity can be developed (Banerji and Chavan, 2016).

Internship Programme for Teachers

Teachers' knowledge and experiences in classroom management and pedagogical implications influence the teaching-learning process. They have an important role to play in a child's intellectual, moral, social and emotional development (Rajashree, 2019). To upgrade teachers' knowledge of child pedagogy, an internship programme can be initiated for the concerned subject teachers. Through this program, teachers would visit various educational institutions, research institutes and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are working on innovative education and doing experiments to develop new teaching methodologies and teaching-learning materials.

Conclusion

Teachers play a vital role in implementing child-centred learning and inclusive education at the elementary level. Teachers' belief system, attitude, values, perception, interest and skills largely influence the classroom transaction as well as the learning of the students. Through appropriate teaching



methodology and effective pedagogical knowledge, they can facilitate students to achieve learning goals. They can also help the children to learn basic skills of life and shape their personalities desirably. Adoption of appropriate learning strategies and attitudes of the teachers play a significant role in the overall development of school children. The teacher must understand the relevance of child-centred education that has been encouraged in the country through various policy documents. They need to change

their mindsets and adapt their world view in a manner that they start to see the inner abilities of children. To achieve the targeted goals of developing child-centred learning, a culturally inclusive pedagogy is needed and training modules for teachers can be appropriately designed. The teacher can adopt cooperative learning, brainstorming, experiential learning and other effective approaches to teach students so that they can construct a world of learning.

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