

Lessons Emerging from Curriculum Practices

Abstract

This article rests on the premise that activities form the source of learning experience. It outlines the key ideas gained by the author during his participation in the formulation and implementation of National Curriculum Framework(2005) and Kerala Curriculum Framework(2007). The ideas centering on the connectivity of curriculum and, individual and society, and the different meanings of process perspective are outlined here. Illustration of theorising of specific instances observed during curriculum implementation, as well is another feature. This speaks of the meaning of experience and adds on to the richness of curriculum.

My involvement¹ with the process of curriculum management; formulation of curriculum and its implementation tells that it provides a variety of professional experiences. Curriculum, in reality, is a roadmap for formulating and structuring learning experiences. The content and methodology, and the way these two are woven together to generate activities and experiences for engaging the learner mark the professional approach followed by the teacher. The entire process has wider and deeper implications for the fact that it binds both the teacher and the learner together on a specific relation. The relation between the two is defined in terms of learning and the relation is mediated through curriculum. The strength of relations formed depends on the nature of activities formulated by the teacher for providing experiences. Experiences are closely linked to the variety of activities that are created. When I reflect on the idea of such experiences, I find four ideological² sources of their origin. They consist of scholar academic ideology, social efficiency ideology, learner centred ideology and social reconstruction ideology. Reflections on these ideologies

would help us in capturing the meaning of curriculum in the life of people and society.

Curricula Roots

Scholar academic ideology is constructed on the idea that our cultures over the centuries have accumulated knowledge that has been organised into academic disciplines. The purpose of education is to help children learn the accumulated knowledge. The primary focus is on initiating children into the knowledge base of the discipline. It means acculturating students into a discipline. Each discipline has distinct traditions of knowledge and thinking, and the students move from lower to higher level of knowledge hierarchy. Teacher is seen as the transmitter of knowledge and the learner becomes the receiver of disciplinary knowledge. When I turn to the social efficiency model what I find is the thrust placed on the productive functions of the society. The model holds the idea that young members of the society need to be prepared to perform the productive functions of the society. The purpose of schooling is to prepare the young to become the contributing members

of the society. This ideology, rooted on utilitarian perspective, outlines functional education. Vocational or technical education, for example, reflects the utilitarian principles and provides for gaining functional connectivity between education and society. This ideology seeks to provide learners with job training skills that allow them to function constructively in a society.

Departing from these, child centred ideology places focus on meeting the children's learning needs and interests. School becomes a place of activities where experience forms the medium for children to learn and develop. The ideology rests on the premise of developmental stages where the child grows through a sequence of distinct developmental stages. Each stage has its own behavioural and thought patterns. The focus here is not on the content but on the child, his or her development. Education is meant for stimulating and nurturing growth among learners. Learning is seen from the constructivist perspective and recognises three conditions as essentialities for learning to occur. They consist of the learner, the environment and the learners act of involvement in the process of learning. Teachers are not the givers of knowledge, instead, they are the facilitators of knowledge construction. On the other hand, social reconstructionists believe that our society is crisis ridden. They are conscious of the injustice originating from religious, racial, caste, gender, social and economic inequalities heaped on to the members. They consider education from a social perspective and hold the view that education is the pathway for addressing the social issues. The key assumption is that since the society is ridden with crisis it follows that good person, good education, truth and knowledge are also undergoing

crisis. The implication is that we need to decentre our focus from traditional ways of viewing and conceptualising the world to critical reflection. Critical theory assumes that dominant social groups use political, economic, cultural and educational decisions affecting the lives of those who are less powerful or less privileged in the society. The less powerful becomes powerless and dependent. Their emancipation from the prevailing political, economic, cultural and psychological practices is a major concern. Using a value system based on social justice and equity, social reconstructionists think of actions to transform individual and society through education. For them critical pedagogy is an effective tool for transforming the individual and society. Such a pedagogic shift allows people from diverse situations recognise how social crisis affect their lives. Marginalised children, for example, feel that they are discriminated on getting access to quality education. Further, the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and Kerala Curriculum Framework (2007) sense the meaning of human problems that occur in our society. Recognising this reality, both these documents provide space for covering a range of problems related to inequalities based on religion, caste, class and gender. The issues stemming from adolescent sex, public health, environment and economic productive capacity of the individuals as well are recognised. Social reconstructionists view learning from the perspective of constructivism. Constructivism aided by critical pedagogy provides the pathway for the transformation of individual and society. Teacher needs to think and act, and provides a facilitating role. Obviously, we need thinking teachers, if our concern is on the transformation of individual and society.

My reflections on these ideologies suggest a common thread that runs across them and it is the relations between curriculum, and individual and society. When we centre our attention on our society's effort to accumulate knowledge (scholar academic) or productive functions of the society (social efficiency) or children's learning needs and interests (child centred) or transformation of individual and society (social reconstruction), what we find is that the curriculum stems from individual and society, and also, in-turn, contributes to the enrichment and transformation of individual and society. It means that there is connectivity between curriculum and, individual and society. The connectivity speaks of reciprocal relations between the two. Though the relations can be interpreted in many ways, it is a field reality. This reality is a lesson that can be easily felt and is quite visible. It cannot be ignored.

Process Perspective

One may think that these ideologies stand as separate islands from each other. But in reality, they are not. The underpinnings of these ideologies are such that connectivity among them is quite natural. Reality tells that teachers hold more than one ideology at a time and also shift from one to another depending on their professional interests. It means that there are instances where teachers free-float on these ideologies. It can also be seen that a composite of ideologies, though the magnitude of each may differ, influences the teacher during his or her professional practices. As the teacher becomes familiar with these ideologies he or she sharpens his or her professionalism. However, the concern for content and pedagogy drives the teacher to scholar academic, child centred and social reconstruction

ideologies. As the teacher moves to child centred and social reconstruction ideologies he or she starts sensing the meaning of constructivism. This naturally entails the teacher to turn to the process perspective of learning. The process perspective provides for active engagement of the learner in the process of construction of meaning. Active engagement opens up the path for the involvement of learner thinking. Infact, the process perspective is rooted on the conditions of formulation of activities, active involvement of learner, learner thinking, learning experience and construction of meaning or learning. When I reflect on curriculum framework, what I sense is that it is a document of policy statements on curriculum. National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) and Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF-2007) are specific examples. Both these documents articulate their ideas centring on the process perspective of learning. In a democratic society, the key concern of a system of governance is that all children learn and develop. When the attention is on all, without any discrimination, it is a logical essentialism to choose a pathway that would provide for learning and development. The pathway is process perspective of learning and it is rooted on constructivism.

Thus, the process perspective means the learner's active engagement in the process of finding meaning or learning. It involves manipulation of materials or activities that are designed for learning the content. Let me cite an example based on a textbook developed as part of the curricula reform initiated following KCF (2007) in Kerala. Tea-Shops in Malayalam Cinema, is a lesson in Class X, English textbook. The text reflects the socio-economic and cultural life in Kerala and its role in the narrative of Malayalam films. Kerala was a caste- ridden society

in early twentieth century. Caste dominance and discrimination were quite visible. Sensing the prevailing social practices, social reformers initiated 'panthibhojanam'- dining together by people of different castes or communities- to reduce caste differences and dominance of one caste over another. Village tea-shop is set on this background and seen as public space for freedom of the people. Tea-shop never discriminates people by caste or religion. Anybody can get into the shop and get tea and eatables by paying money. It is a secular space where the entry criterion is possession of money. It is the meeting point for all. A wide range of people including hawkers, fishmongers and local postman are regular visitors. Some of them do their business in the vicinity. It also becomes centre for reading newspaper, discussing politics and also gossiping. Tea-shop is also a source of information about people and families of the village or the neighbourhood area. The meeting point has a meaning in the sense that anyone can enter the tea-shop without the caste or religious label. At times, it gives the image of a reading centre or a club. It also becomes a venue for airing the conflict that erupts within the family or between families or people. Its history is the history of our culture and also depicts our way of life. With such significant features of tea-shops the text shifts its focus to the role of tea-shops in Malayalam movies. The narratives depict the scenes of tea-shop in different Malayalam movies and specify the roles of different characters. Its recurring presence in contemporary Malayalam films indicates the role of cinema in the life of people and society. It is significant to state that the text is closely linked to certain activities the learners need to perform while learning each passage. Some of these activities consist of learners' reflections on their image of tea-shops in their locality,

connecting the meaning of tea-shop with panthibhojanam, reflections on the central theme in each passage, finding the meaning of freedom in public space, elaborating the idea of tea-shop as secular space, searching the relevance of tea-shop's continuing role in Malayalam films and outlining a tea-shop scene from a film that the learner has seen. These are a few though the list contains a variety of activities which can be performed individually or in group situations. Learners are required to do and also express their ideas. Infact, the structured activities open the pathway for the learner to find the meaning of the text on tea-shop. Obviously, each activity seeks involvement of the learner, particularly his or her thinking. It implies that the process perspective covers both the activities provided for the engagement of the learner and the process of manipulation of such activities. Manipulation naturally requires the engagement of thinking process of the learner. In short, the process of manipulation of activities and the thinking process involved are the critical components of the process perspective of learning.

Apart from the meaning related to learning, the process perspective has another meaning. The second meaning that depicts the process of generating ideas indicates the other side of process perspective. Curriculum material can be developed by one or two individuals as was the practice in the past. However, the process perspective does not subscribe such a practice and, instead, it focuses on the process of generating ideas. Our efforts in the formulation of curriculum framework or the design of textbooks and the related learning materials in the recent past were done through a well designed process. Such formulations are done through forming groups consisting of teachers and experts where the members generate ideas through discussion, reflection

and review. Well, the group did consult various stakeholders from the public. For instance, in the formulation of National Curriculum Framework-2005, a national steering committee and 21 focus groups consisting of experts drawn from various parts of the country were formed. Focus groups generated ideas through wide ranging discussions and also held consultations with various levels of stakeholders. Besides the ideas generated through internal discussions, the inputs from focus groups and also from stakeholders, helped the steering committee in the formulation of NCF (2005). Later, the document was circulated in all States and UTs for discussions and gathering ideas. With these inputs the document was finalised. Obviously, the framework comprises of shared ideas, shared by experts, teachers, and stakeholders including parents through discussions, critical reflections, consultations, letters and e-mails. Likewise, textbooks were also developed by forming groups consisting of experts and teachers, and they formulated the ideas through discussion, reflection and review process. With regard to KCF (2007) too, the ideas were formulated through the process perspective. There were only 14 focus groups in this situation and a core group was set up for the formulation of curriculum framework. Ideas generated by the core group along with the ideas from the focus groups helped in shaping KCF (2007). Subsequently, textbooks and related materials were developed following the group process. What is significant here is the point that whether it is curriculum framework or textbook or related materials, the ideas related to all these are generated through the process perspective. It means that the process perspective has two meanings where one implies the process of finding meaning or learning, and the other denotes the process of generating ideas for the formulation of

curricula policies and materials. This is a lesson derived from field reality and it has wider implications for ensuring curricula quality, and strengthening teacher professionalism.

However, the process perspective has yet another dimension that is closely connected to textbook formulation. The conventional notion is that content alone (scholar academic ideology) is adequate enough for the development of text lessons. When we turn to child centred and social reconstruction ideologies what is strikingly visible is the point that the relations between content and pedagogy define the text lessons. Such an understanding naturally seeks integration of content and pedagogy while developing the text of a lesson. If we return to the lesson; Tea-Shops in Malayalam Films, discussed earlier such an integration can be observed. Pedagogy is woven around the content. While traversing through each passage the learner needs to engage with the pedagogic tools to find the meaning of content. The questions learners pose or the discussions they hold or the reflections they engage are directed to seek the meaning of the content. It speaks of the learner's engagement with the process of thinking. It means that how the content is structured by linking with the pedagogy is a critical condition for the formulation of text lessons that has greater consequences for learning and development of all, and certainly not, for a few. Thus, besides the process of finding meaning or learning and the process of generating ideas, the process perspective has, yet, another meaning that speaks of the integration of content and pedagogy. These three meanings of process perspective that can be observed in field situations have wider implications for curriculum management. It is a major lesson and also is a field reality.

Theorising

We may follow the principles of process perspective and construct a well structured curriculum. But the success depends on how well the curriculum is practised. The curriculum practice is naturally linked to the professionalism of teacher and it is a significant component of school quality. When we reflect on school quality, we find that it is spread across curriculum, learning materials, teacher professionalism, classroom transaction process, activities learners engage, forms of evaluation including assessment and the facilities available in the school. However, school authorities, sizeable number of teachers and even the members of public quite often look to outcome measures or achievement marks as the indicator of quality. For instance, while I was engaged with the curriculum management process in Kerala, one of my friends who was relocated due to transfer told me, "I am in search of a school for my daughter who is in class IX. I could find one and it is a good school. I did ask him, why do you call it a good school? My friend had a quick response saying, people tell that the school secures 100 percent result in board examination. No student falls below 70 percent in overall marks". My friend's words gave me a jolt for his view that the result or the product (achievement marks) is the lone indicator of quality. Unfortunately, we value the achievement marks or the product, instead of recognising the value of genuine productive processes that generate the marks or the products. In another occasion as part of my interactions with teachers, I did ask a group of teachers, why do students fail, say, in mathematics? The group had a range of responses covering, lack of student motivation, low intelligence, lack of study habits, irregular attendance and social origin

background. All these are student related factors. It is quite depressing to find that teachers attribute reasons or factors of failure to students alone. The implication is that teachers view school failure as individual deficiencies on the part of students. McLaren³ (2007) points out that the tendency to mark failure as individual deficiencies is the teachers' effort to psychologise student failure. Psychologising student failure amounts to blaming it on individual trait or series of traits of students. Teachers' failure to see their role in students' failure did surprise me. Seeing the response patterns of teachers, I changed the question and asked them, why does the school fail children in mathematics? Suddenly, I could see a glow in their face indicating that they could sense the role of teacher in students' failure. This indicates that when the teachers are given situations to critique their role, they decentre their focus and recognise the reality. Infact, this attitude of psychologising student failure has compounding effect because the teachers are unaware of their capacity in its debilitating effects. Psychologising student failure is part of hidden curriculum that keeps teachers free from engaging in any serious critique of their professional role within school. However, we need to consider the psychologising tendency from another angle. This tendency need not be confined to students' psychological traits alone. It may include student's social origin backgrounds too for the reason that social origin exerts its influence on individual behaviour. Infact, teachers' tendency to psychologise students' failure may also be seen as a human nature. Man does not like to accept failure because failure implies pain. In other words, failure inflicts pain to self and no person likes to inflict pain to the self, and he or she attributes failure to others. What it means is that

the teachers' tendency to psychologise student failure can be meaningfully interpreted when we consider the human nature of teacher as well. The idea of human nature provides a broader frame for the objective treatment of teachers' tendency to psychologise student failures. It is important to note that critical pedagogy may help to decentre the teachers' focus and sense the reality. What I consider critical from the domain of curriculum management is the point that whenever we come across certain specific events (eg. Student failure, incongruence between curriculum reform ideas and classroom practices) during curriculum implementation or practice, we need to reflect it with a theoretical lens so that we may clothe such events by giving theoretical frames. Theoretical frames add on to the richness of curriculum.

Summing up: The ideas outlined here are based on the field experiences gained from the process of curriculum implementation. Though the experiences are personal, certain

emerging patterns from the field situations seek reflections. In my view, we must reflect on the emerging lessons; connectivity between curriculum and, individual and society, meaning of process perspective in terms of process of learning, process of generating ideas and process of integration of content and pedagogy, and theorising. It is significant to note that curriculum is not neutral and has ideological roots. Curricula reform efforts in Kerala, for example, witnessed opposition from certain groups. They along with a few political parties initiated a protest movement, saying that critical pedagogy is for questioning the religious belief and God. Likewise, the story of ideas of Copernicus and Galileo too faced stiff opposition from certain groups. This paper neither intends nor makes an effort to cover the ideological roots and explanations of curriculum; probably that can be done separately. What is significant here is the idea that lessons emerging from field situations add on to the richness of curriculum.

Notes

1. Ideas articulated here are based on my participation in the formulation and implementation of NCF (2005) and KCF (2007).
2. For details of various ideologies, please see Schiro, M.S. Curriculum theory: conflicting visions enduring concerns. SAGE Publications: Los Angeles, 2008.
3. For theorising of experiences and critical pedagogy, please see McLaren, P. Life In Schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education. Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 2007.

(Author was Professor in the faculty of N.C.E.R.T, New Delhi)

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