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Diversities and dualities to pedagogical realities: An analysis of early childhood curricular beliefs in the Indian context

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Abstract

Early childhood education curriculum has long been a subject of philosophical discussions and debates. Owing to tremendous diversities in children's needs, cultural traditions, parenting practices and family contexts a variety of assumptions surround its conceptualization and practice. Little attention has been paid to examination of the assumptions of national early childhood documents and views of educators, practitioners and parents regarding curriculum and the role these might play in early childhood education curriculum and pedagogy. A inquiry into meanings ascribed to purpose and aims of early childhood education, views regarding children, concepts of learning, thoughts on knowledge, views on teachers/teaching and views on assessment would throw light on where preschool goals and practices comes from, what and whose purposes they intend to serve and whether they are functional in the local context.

The research aimed to gain deeper insight into understanding the way in which indigenous knowledge enters into thinking about children and which guides practice with children. Data was collected through a semi structured open ended questionnaire (Adapted from Schiro, 2008) [44]. The qualitative descriptions were subject to content analysis. The results revealed significant points of departures in the assumptions of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children regarding early childhood education curriculum. Significant points of convergences were identified with the basic philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice, yet major departures were also evident. Critical investigations of assumptions to the foundations of curriculum revealed the potential within the existing philosophy underpinning early childhood curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate and strengthen its position to suit the cultural context, more so in terms of organisation of knowledge and practice with children. The results also throw light on the finer nuances of application of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in the Indian context and build a guiding framework which better equips the practitioner to create a curriculum which is able to respond to the cultural realities of children.

Keywords: Early childhood curriculum, pedagogy, curricular beliefs, indigenous perspectives

Introduction

Very few researches in the Indian context have tried to examine how and in what ways curriculum beliefs are related to curriculum building and to instructional practice. Thoughts, policies and practices pertaining to early childhood education curriculum have long been a subject of philosophical discussions and debates. Owing to tremendous diversities in children's needs, cultural traditions, parenting practices and family contexts a variety of assumptions surround its conceptualization and practice. Often, the debates revolve around what education for young children actually is or should be. Childhood education might be favoured as primarily a preparation for later schooling, while some might view it as a support to children's learning and development.

There has been a global recognition of the early years of a child's life to be the most critical for lifelong development. Recent research in the field of neuroscience has provided convincing evidence that "experience-based brain development in the early years sets neurological and biological pathways that affect health, learning and behaviour throughout life". (Mustard, 2006) [26] Research also suggests that in the absence of enriching environment/experiences the chances of the brain developing to its full potential maybe irreversibly reduced. Learning and development are naturally cultural (Rogoff, 2003) [30].

A great extent of children's learning is shaped by the context and culture they live in. Thus, if early childhood education programs aim to create conditions in which children can thrive, a basic prerequisite for learning must be addressed. Cultural appropriateness thus assumes equal importance along with developmental appropriateness. Increasing importance is now being paid to optimization of programs to address not only the child, but also the child's milieu.

There is world-wide acknowledgment to the validity of local, indigenous ways of knowing about, and working with, children. This is evidenced in the goals for quality education formulated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Education for All initiative. Many international development experts are calling for educational programs that are rooted in indigenous knowledge of local cultures while also providing the knowledge and skills the people may need to live in a global world. (Cleghorn & Prochner, 2003) [21].

From earliest years of their lives, children replicate the culture of their primary caregivers and peers. Curricula for early childhood education are cultural constructions grounded in the world views, beliefs, and norms of those who conceptualize the curricula. (Boven & Morohashi, 2002) [3]. The social ecologies of which children may be a part are continuously reflected by teachers, parents and significant elders. This is evident through their encouragement of particular response styles, forms of interaction, ways of understanding the events, and enactments of implicit beliefs.

Culture is embodied in processes of communication. The meaning and value of cultural knowledge and practices are always reinterpreted within cultural communities, implicitly and explicitly, individually and in dialogue. Encouraging recognition of the value of indigenous knowledge should be understood as valuing the social process of knowledge transmission and the ongoing social construction of individual and group identities (Boven & Morohashi, 2002) [3].

Individuals creatively and selectively recall, use, and shape both the accumulated wisdom and traditions of their culture of origin and the process of their own enculturation (i.e., of their own valuing, learning about, interpreting, and reproduction of that culture perhaps in traditional or in new, hybridised forms). Thus, encouragement should be given to emphasizing the 'generation of indigenous knowledge' or the 'social reconstruction of indigenous knowledge,' rather than the 'transmission of indigenous knowledge.' (Boven & Morohashi, 2002) [3].

National or state/provincial ministries in most countries typically issue only guidelines about early childhood programming and do not mandate a rigid national curriculum for teachers to deliver. The reluctance to offer detailed requirements is closely related to the nature of early childhood education curriculum and our understandings of society, young children and their learning (Bennett, 2004) [1].

On one hand, the early childhood education curriculum is expected to be holistic and include children's overall development. On the other there are dramatic diversities in children's needs, cultural traditions, parenting practices, and family expectations from one context to another. Very few current theories of early childhood care and education would advocate an instructional curriculum and yet in many education systems there is an emphasis on such an approach (OECD, 2006) [28].

Early childhood education is a conceptual framework, with the potential for being interpreted as creating unique learning environments or cultures for learning. They have the potential

to instigate both positive and negative consequences for children. The contemporary characteristic of early childhood education imparts it a certain ambiguity, especially when it intersects with current societal assumptions, concerns and expectations. Thus it is crucial to examine where early childhood education goals and practices come from, what and whose purposes they intend to serve and whether they are functional in the local context.

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 [49] asserts that in the present day educational discourse of India the term 'curriculum' is one of the most ambiguous. It may be used to denote a mere subject-wise list of topics to be taught in a particular class and something that encompasses, "the total experience provided to the children in as well as out of school. In India there is a tendency to take too wide a definition of curriculum in much of recent literature. (NCF, 2005) [49].

Now, more than ever before, there is a realisation of the fact that by intellectual standards, India cannot flourish merely by importing or borrowing what is happening abroad, or by showing proficiency in solving problems that have been faced abroad. In concrete terms, this shift in thinking calls for evolving an approach to curriculum preparation based on thinking, experiences and innovations rooted in its indigenous tradition.

Ball (2010) affirms that the point is not to eschew an imported approach just because it is foreign or to favour a local approach just because it is indigenous. Rather there is a need for a critical examination of the perspectives of educators, practitioners and parents on where various preschool goals and practices have come from, what and whose purposes they are intended to serve, whether they are functional in the local context.

An overview of the existing literature reveals the importance understanding early childhood education curriculum from an indigenous perspective. There is a need to gain deeper insight into understanding the way in which indigenous knowledge enters into thinking about children and which guides practice with children. Reviews indicate that little attention has been paid to a critical analysis of curricular assumptions/ideologies as evidenced in examination of the curricular beliefs/ideologies and assumptions of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children and the crucial role these might play in conceptualization of early childhood education curriculum in context.

There is a need to analyze current curricular thought and understand the ways in which it influences thought and practice with young children. Examination of conjectures surrounding early childhood education curriculum from a broader conceptual scaffold would throw light on where educational goals and practices come from, the purposes they intend to serve and whether they are functional in a local context. There is also a need to better understand the origins of curricular disagreements that occur amongst stakeholders and attempt to explain the reasons for the same.

The present study was thus conceptualized to examine the assumptions underlying 'early childhood education curriculum' from a broader conceptual scaffold. It aimed to examine the perspectives of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children with respect to the following

- purpose of early childhood education
- views on children
- perspectives on learning
- concepts of teaching

- conception of knowledge
- beliefs about assessment

Concerns about education for young children are not new and have been debated for long. However, the study attempted to portray how underlying assumptions, personal educational/curricular philosophies shape beliefs and thinking and consequently impact the education of young children in myriad ways. The study tried to go beyond highlighting the varied visions of education for young children as they might exist today and tried to consider them from the historical context in which they emerged. The study further attempted to understand how these assumptions might be utilized to inform current discourse in Early Childhood education in the Indian context.

Method

Selected literature on curricular theory and ideologies/visions helped shape part of the study which relied on mapping preferred curricular ideologies of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children. The framework was adapted from the work of renowned curricular theorist Michael Schiro's (2008) [44] philosophical approach on curricular beliefs/ideologies. The approach was subjected to a careful scrutiny and was applied with modifications and permission from the author.

Schiro's work highlights four curricular ideologies/visions or curricular philosophies; namely

- Scholar academic ideology
- Social efficiency ideology
- Learner centered ideology
- Social reconstructionist ideology

The four ideologies advocate very different goals of education and very different methods of achieving those goals. Each of the four visions of curriculum consists of distinct beliefs about the purpose of education, views regarding children, views on how children learn, how children should be taught, the concept of knowledge and how children should be assessed. Each of these ideologies has a long history and have been known by different names in the field of education. These ideologies can influence people's way of thinking about curriculum in powerful ways and consequently shape and direct curricular thought and practice with children.

The four visions of curriculum provide intellectual perspectives on how ideological struggles dominate curricular work in a social context and help understand the seeming disagreements about curriculum that occur amongst and even within the views of national early childhood documents and thoughts and practices of educators, teachers and parents of young children.

The research design was thus exploratory in nature. The study utilized a qualitative approach.

Purposive sampling technique was used to identify the samples of the study.

- Educators
- Early childhood teachers
- Parents of young children

Educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children were chosen from two cities of Gujarat, namely Vadodara (where the investigator was based) and the city of Bhavnagar, which is considered as the birthplace of the Early Childhood Education movement in India.

Sample size and distribution

The sample size and distribution of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children is depicted in Figure 2

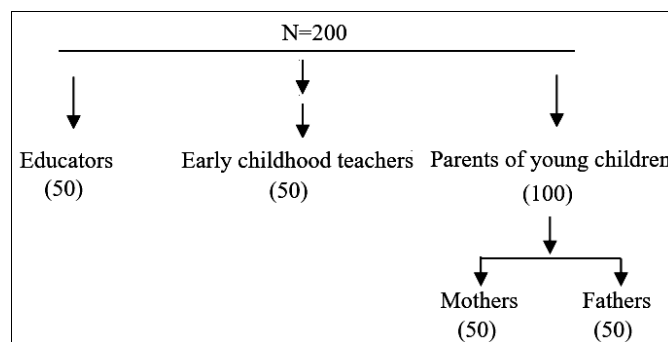


Fig 1: Sample distribution

The tool used was semi structured interview schedule based on the Curriculum Ideology Inventory, adapted from Schiro, 2008 [44]. The tool was adapted and modified for use in the Indian context with due permission and acknowledgement from its author.

The inventory presents and contrasts the respondent's belief about instructional purposes, teaching, learning, knowledge, childhood and assessment from four ideological positions as posited by Schiro, 2008 [44]. The respondents' beliefs did not have to fall entirely within the confines of only one ideological position, as the ideological positions are ideal types rather than mutually exclusive belief systems, and focussed on the following themes:

- Early childhood education: purpose of early childhood education and its importance for young children
- Teachers/teaching: what should teachers of young children be like and their role in education of young children
- Learning: concept of learning and in what different ways young children learn new concepts
- Knowledge: how is knowledge conceptualized
- Children/early years: why are early years important and what is a child like during the early years
- Assessment: purpose of assessment and different ways in which young children can be assessed

The interview schedule was translated in the local language Gujarati and was administered in English and Gujarati as per the preference of the respondent.

The analysis of qualitative data helped cull out the assumptions related to selected domains of early childhood education curriculum. Verbatims obtained through interviews were reported and Inter coder reliability was established. Spradley (1979) [45] Universal Symantic Relationships were applied to the data, to ascertain inclusion or exclusion of data within the domain boundaries. Placement of data in comprehensive categories and sub-categories helped build an understanding of a phenomenon from the perspectives of multiple social actors. The analysis of data through symantic relationships helped the investigator understand perspectives in the context of larger, socially produced patterns.

Results

Purpose of early childhood education

82% educators (41 of 50 respondents) and 86% EC teachers (43 of 50 respondents) emphasized that the purpose of early years education was to stimulate growth by providing children with stimulating environment. While majority of fathers 94%

(47 of 50 respondents) and 82% mothers (41 of 50 respondents) felt the purpose of early years education was to lay the foundation for future adulthood. However, in terms of the sources of aims of education for young children, early childhood teachers perceived themselves to be the 'transmitters' of aims as setup by agencies 'external' to the child.

This pattern replicates in their views on ideals which must be achieved by young children. Stark distinctions are observed in the perceived links between educational and psychological development of the child, with educators' reporting that educational development leads to psychological development, whereas parents felt that psychological development was influenced in part by educational development.

A distinction is made between the 'self-expressed needs of the child' and the 'needs of the child as inferred by the adults' i.e. what adults think the needs of children are (Noddings, 2003)^[27]. Overall, the assumptions' regarding purpose of early year's education seems to be guided by needs of children as inferred by the adults. Whereas, the 'self-expressed' needs of the child seem to play little role in deciding the aims of education at large.

Views on children

50% educators (25 of 50 respondents), 72% EC teachers (36 of 50 respondents) and 72% fathers (36 of 50 respondents) feel that children are active agents in their world. They view children as having something of worth. They reported that education should be concerned about processes which are internal to the child. They view children as integrated organisms and feel that children themselves should be the focus of educational efforts and not the acts or attributes of children. They feel that children should be accepted as the way they are and that children are thought to exist for themselves and not to further ends external to themselves. They reported they viewed children as unique individuals and within a particular social context.

48% educators (24 of 50 respondents) and 82% mothers (41 of 50 respondents) reported that children are passive agents in their world, are missing something of worth and that education should be concerned about process internal to the children. They view children as atomizable organisms and felt that the acts and/or attributes of children should be the focus of educational efforts and not on children themselves. The respondents felt that the purpose of education is to be concerned about making children as they ought to be rather than accepting them as they are. They think that children exist not for themselves but to further ends external to themselves. The respondents viewed children and their education in relation to standardised norms of the society and in the broader context of academic disciplines.

Thoughts on learning

56% educators (28 of 50 respondents), 44% EC teachers (22 of 50 respondents), 52% fathers (26 of 50 respondents) and 56% mothers (28 of 50 respondents) view learning from the perspective of the receiver. Learning is viewed primarily as a function of natural growth of young children. They consider learning as an integrated process, wherein the children learn multiple constructs in a holistic manner. The respondents primarily viewed learning as change in mind and that the desired result of learning is also a change in mind. The respondents reported that the primary actor during learning is the learner itself rather than any other agent. The respondents stated that learning can best proceed when that which is to be

learnt is in harmony with the stages of the growth of the child and when individual development of the child is facilitated.

40% educators (20 of 50 respondents) and 44% mothers (22 of 50 respondents) view learning from the perspective of the transmitter. Learning is seen primarily as a function of societal transmission, and is considered as an atomistic process. The respondents feel that learning primarily changes the behaviour of a person and that the desired result of learning is a change in behaviour. The respondents feel that the primary actor during learning is the agent as well as the learner. The respondents felt that learning can best proceed when children are provided with guidelines as to what behaviours are expected from them. The respondents felt that learning will also proceed best when all children are given a standard task but the variations in learning rate and styles are recognised.

44% EC teachers (22 of 50 respondents) and 48% fathers (24 of 50 respondents) view learning from the perspective of the transmitter. Learning is seen primarily as a function of societal transmission, and is considered as an atomistic process. The respondents feel that learning primarily changes the mind of a person and that the desired result of learning is a change in mind. The respondents feel that the primary actor during learning is the agent. The respondents felt that learning can best proceed when children are provided with subject content which is simplified, especially those themes which are difficult. The respondents' felt that learning will also proceed best when all children are grouped together in terms of achievement and then taught accordingly.

Thoughts on teaching/teachers

42% educators (21 of 50 respondents), 42% early childhood teachers (21 of 50 respondents) and 40% mothers (20 of 50 respondents) felt that the intent of teaching was to stimulate the growth of the child and be concerned about the holistic development of the child. They also reported that teachers' own attitudes, beliefs and visions regarding teaching and children play a significant role in the life of the child. The respondents' felt that the role of teacher is that of a facilitator to children's growth and development. They reported that teachers are preparers and supervisors of the classrooms. They felt that teacher effectiveness can be measured by observing the child's growth and the ways in which teachers facilitate the growth of the child. The respondents' felt that within classrooms teachers must encourage diversity amongst the students and modify and creatively adapt curriculum based on children's needs and situations. They felt that teachers and curriculum developers must plan the curriculum by accommodating children's individual differences. During teaching teachers must encourage the interactions of children with the environment.

46% educators (23 of 50 respondents), 38% EC teachers (19 of 50 respondents), 68% fathers (38 of 50 respondents), and 44% mothers (22 of 50 respondents) felt that the intent of teaching was to acculturate children into the vision of education as setup by educators and at the same time be concerned about the holistic development of the child. They reported that teachers own attitudes, beliefs and visions regarding teaching and children play a significant role in being good teachers. They felt that the role of a teacher is that of a companion, to whom children can look upto and be guided by. They reported that teachers are preparers and supervisors of the classrooms, and that the effectiveness of the teachers can be measured by observing whether the teacher is able to effectively transfer to children the vision of education

as envisaged by the society. The respondents' felt that while teachers may accept individual differences in performance of behaviour, the ultimate aim was to stimulate uniformity in terms of values and the kind of human being we want children to be. The respondents' reported that teachers should plan the curriculum and adapt the curriculum based on the social concerns and expectations. During teaching teachers must encourage children to build cohesiveness with the group and act according to the group dynamics.

Thoughts on knowledge

58% educators (29 of 50 respondents), 42% EC teachers (21 of 50 respondents), 40% fathers (20 of 50 respondents) and 44% mothers (22 of 50 respondents) view knowledge as personal meanings accorded by individuals to things around themselves. The respondents feel that knowledge gives the ability to make own decisions and meanings about the things surrounding themselves. The respondents feel that the source of knowledge is individuals' personal and creative response to his/her own experience. It is unique to each individual. The respondents reported that knowledge derives its authority from the meaning it has to the one who possess the knowledge. The respondents feel that learning and growth both lead to increase in knowledge.

42% educators (21 of 50 respondents), 44% EC teachers (22 of 50 respondents), 42% fathers (21 of 50 respondents) and 52% mothers (26 of 50 respondents) reported that knowledge is the capability for action. The respondents feel that knowledge gives children the ability to do things. They feel that knowledge arises from reality as it is interpreted by the members of society. Knowledge derives its authority from the impact it has in perpetuating society by providing individual with the skills that they need to function within society. The respondents feel that apart from the ability to do things, knowledge is something that corresponds to the society's view about reality and how things should be.

Thoughts on assessment

88% educators (44 of 50 respondents), 84% EC teachers (42 of 50 respondents), 80% fathers (40 of 50 respondents) and 82% mothers (41 of 50 respondents) reported that the purpose of assessment is to diagnose the abilities of the child and consequently help in the growth of the child. They reported that the purpose of assessment is to inform the evaluate about their progress. They felt that assessment and designing assessment is not a part of the curriculum development. They reported that the assessment should be informal and stress free, which measured the child's potential against his/her own capability. They felt that assessments for children should be subjective and not objective. They considered evaluation to be a holistic process and that the child should be the one that should most benefit from it. The respondents also felt that during assessment, the focus should be on individual norms rather than group norms or fixed criterion. They also felt that students should be evaluated during the period of instruction, rather than after the instruction. They felt there should be no set definitions for a good assessment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The conceptualization of early childhood education curriculum must recognise the presence of curricular disagreements and competing images as they exist in the views of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children. The key dispositions and assumptions of primary stakeholders regarding the broad aspects of

curriculum must be recognised for the role they play in practice with young children.

Curricular decisions regarding children seem to be characterised by ideological struggles amongst the current educational discourse and amongst the views of educators, early childhood teachers and even within the views of mothers and fathers of young children. Increased awareness of the direction these struggles assume, would perhaps lead to better decision making and place the curriculum in resonance with societal values, beliefs and practices.

Effective curricular and pedagogical decisions for children must be 'located' within the distinct images that surround the notion of purpose of education, views on children, thoughts on teaching, conceptions of knowledge, views on learning and beliefs about assessment. While acknowledging the presence of multiple childhoods, families in different circumstances and cultures; more attention needs to be paid to the possible conflicts and power relations emerging out of these contrasting images and the ways in which it might influence pedagogical practice.

It seems likely that a unified conception of early childhood education curriculum may not exist, however; efforts should be made to build a strong and effective partnership by implementing wide varieties of strategies which can serve as a 'bridge' between the thoughts and expectations of national documents and the views of educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children. Thus, the nature and scope of curricular interventions for young children must acknowledge its political as well as cultural impact on children as well as educators, early childhood teachers and parents of young children. The results of the study suggest that these ideas can be useful and selectively appropriated in creating an early childhood curriculum framework from an indigenous perspective.

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