

Students' Perceptions of Improving Secondary School Curriculum in Pakistan

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Abstract Students' voices are rarely heard in curriculum development especially in Pakistan. There is also dearth of research in exploring students' voices. The present study intends to fill this gap by finding out the perceptions and suggestions of secondary school students about changing the content of the National Curriculum. The project was carried out in Gujranwala (Pakistan). For data collection, the students were asked to select two subjects which he considers should be improved. Students' views on improving the National Curriculum at secondary school level were collected through interview. They were asked to name two subjects which they think that needs change more urgently. The students were enthusiastic at being involved in the study. English and Mathematics were the main subjects which students selected for change, The respondents suggested that "students should pay attention towards spellings" and "learn the lesson by heart" and the teacher "Assign maximum practice questions" and "should develop better expertise in subject to make it easy for the students".

Keywords National Curriculum, Policy, Practice, Students' Perceptions, Suggestion, Secondary Education, Pakistan

1. Context

This study examines the secondary school National Curriculum (NC) in Pakistan. Pakistan shares its western border with Iran and its eastern border with India; Afghanistan lies to the north and north-west while the Peoples' Republic of China stretches from the north to north-east alongside Gilgit & Baltistan. Pakistan comprises four provinces: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtoon Khaw (KPK) and Balochistan, and some federal units which include the Islamabad Capital Territory, Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA)[1].

According to[2] it is difficult to provide a simple dictionary definition for this term because of its complex nature. Simply it can be considered as the list of topics taught in the school or in an institution. In wider view it encompasses all the experiences that the student undergoes through while being part of that institution. Reference[3] has elaborated on this concept "a curriculum is a sophisticated blend of educational strategies, course content, learning outcomes, educational experiences, assessment, the educational environment and the individual students' learning style, personal timetable and the program of work".

The curriculum is prescribed to respond to the school

structure within any educational system. In Pakistan, the school structure is clearly demarcated into the following four tiers[4]:

Class 1 to 5 - Primary School

Class 6 to 8 - Middle School

Class 9 to 10 - Secondary School

Class 11 to 12 - Higher Secondary School

Pakistan is determined to respond positively to emerging needs, opportunities and challenges of globalization through education[5] it has become inevitable that every country has to respond with the emerging trends in the world. It means every country has to respond the change through education. Secondary education is accompanied by the need to respond to the twin challenges of "increasing access to" and, at the same time, "improving quality and relevance of" secondary education[6].

So keeping in view the importance of secondary school education, and its curriculum both should respond to the change prevailing in the world as[7] says, Pakistan curriculum urgently needs change.

Constant effort is needed to make this tool (curriculum) useful and to evaluate its effectiveness. Therefore, revision and improvement in curriculum is necessary for making provision for the challenges and demands of the society. Reference[8] said that curriculum of a subject is said to be the throbbing pulse of a nation. By looking at the curriculum of a subject, one can judge the state of intellectual development and the state of progress of a nation. The world has turned into a global village, new ideas and information are pouring in a constant stream. It is,

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therefore, imperative to update our curricula by introducing the recent developments in the relevant fields of knowledge[9] Secondary education is of two years duration comprising Grades: IX-X. It covers 13-15 year cohorts of children. There is a Secondary Schools Certificate (SSC) examination at the end of the 10th class and is conducted by the Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education throughout the country.

High school represents a critical phase in the educational development of K-12 students. High school also is a kind of "launching pad" into adult life. Students mature a great deal during these later teenage years, developing important work habits and attitudes as they become more independent[10].

Streaming of children starts at this stage. Students opt for a group of their choice such as Science, Humanities, and Technical. Urdu, English, Pakistan Studies, Islamic Studies and Mathematics are compulsory subjects. A group of the elective subjects determines the specified stream[11]. Whenever curriculum is designed, or developed; some steps should be followed as follows. What is the rationale or purpose of the curriculum of any subject?[12]

- What are the broad aims?
- What are the 'big ideas' that need to be understood, both by the teacher in delivering the curriculum and by learners?
- What is the nature of knowledge, understanding and skill in the subject area?
- How might learning in this area aid development of the general capabilities?
- How will the content (knowledge, skills and understanding) best be organized for any grade? i.e. what will the key content organizers or structures look like.
- Which of the other general capabilities can be naturally and explicitly represented in the content, how?

There is always room to analyze and identify the factors influencing on the process of curriculum development because it is directly related to student's achievement and their lives "Identifying factors influencing student achievement and academic performance is a quest for most teachers and a primary goal of most educational researchers"[13]. Students' views are of great importance because it is directly related to their achievement.

Student evaluations of teaching are now commonplace in most institutions and the empirical analysis of this student-based approach to appraisal proceeds apace; whereas the validity of student ratings has been sufficiently well established by[14][15].

Throughout the world whenever curriculum is designed or other learning activities are being planned, student's opinion or voices cannot be ignored. e. g. a curriculum which equips students for the challenging world of the twenty-first century needs to ensure that students are supported to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, their physical, personal and social wellbeing, their relationships with others and their role in the local, national and global community.

The notion of 'student voice' helps meet the objectives of developing the interdisciplinary skills vital for such a curriculum. It also ensures that the needs of individual students guide the design of personalized learning plans.

In its modern interpretation, student voice is focused predominantly on the design, facilitation and improvement of learning[16]. While in Pakistan, the process of curriculum development is as follows: the Curriculum Wing (CW) Ministry of Education (MoE), Pakistan requests the Provincial Centers to prepare draft curriculum for each subject taught in various classes up to class XII. Provincial centers call in committees of experts, teachers, subject specialists on each subject. Provincial committees prepare curriculum plans. The draft plans are sent to the CW. The CW circulates these drafts to the selected teachers, subject specialists in schools, colleges and other agencies concerned and invites their comments. The National Curriculum Development Committee (NCDC) in CW scrutinizes the drafts in the light of the comments. The committee submits its recommendations to the Ministry of Education (MoE) i.e. Secretary of Education, for approval. The curriculum schemes duly approved are passed on to the Provincial Textbook Boards (PTBs) for preparation of text books[17].

In Pakistan Central/National Bureau of Curriculum and Textbooks (NBCT), commonly known as the Curriculum Wing; supervises curriculum and textbooks development/appraisal and to maintain curriculum standards from the primary to the higher secondary levels. As a logical sequence to this action, four counterpart provincial curriculum centers (one in each province) help to ensure provincial collaboration and evolve consensus in all activities falling within the purview of the Federation. Within their respective jurisdictions, these PTBs are responsible for preparing, publishing, stocking, and distributing and marketing school textbooks[18]. But after 18th amendment the maintenance of curriculum standards has been transferred to provinces.

The present study intends to find out students' views/suggestions on improving National Curriculum Subjects. The study may contribute to make the curriculum more students' centered by exploring the perceptions and suggestions of secondary school students about changing the content of the National Curriculum.

2. Methodology

The researchers used interview to explore the students' views on improving the National Curriculum by students at the school level. The procedures and analysis are explicit, replicable and available to any interested parties. Formal permission from the head of the institution was sought for the smooth collection of data. The students were asked to select two subjects of their own choice they wanted to improve the curriculum. One hundred students were asked two questions:

1. What teachers can do to improve the curriculum?
2. What students can do to improve the curriculum?

3. Sample

Four classes of students from four schools (total N=100; M= 56; F= 44) were selected by the co-researcher from National Curriculum Year Group (NCYG) 9 (N=21) and (NCYG) 10 (N=79). They were selected because each student had been studying 9 to 10 years respectively the school application of the full National Curriculum

4. Results

English and Mathematics were selected by most of the respondents for improvement. Suggestions given by the respondents were categorized as follows:

The suggestions for the improvement of different subjects' curriculum given for the staff were as under:

Table 2. Suggestion by respondents to improve curriculum by staff and School

No.	Comment	f	%
	Assign maximum practice questions	8	3
	Teacher should have expertise in his subject and also make it easy for the students	77	31
	Teacher should do lesson planning on daily basis	29	12
	Teacher should use appropriate AV aids	5	2
	Written work should be promoted	7	3
	Check students' understanding/learning verbally	7	3
	Teacher should conduct more practice tests	5	2
	Repeat/clear the pronunciations and practice	12	5
	Teacher should make the lesson /curriculum easy to understand for students	22	9
	Curriculum should be according to daily needs	14	6
	Assign and check homework daily	16	6
	Teacher should guide every student personally and observe students keenly	8	3
	Refresher courses for staff should be more informative	25	10
	Maximum practical work	8	3
	Teacher should give maximum time subjects/students	4	2
	Total	247	100

The suggestions for the improvement of different subjects' curriculum given for the staff were as under:

Table 3. Suggestion by respondents to improve curriculum by students

No.	Comment	f	%
	Pay attention towards spelling	4	2
	Learn the lesson by heart	21	10
	To do daily home work	35	17
	Will use rough note book for practice	3	1
	Will obey teacher	17	8
	Will do hard work	47	23
	Will improve hand writing	4	2
	Will take interest in studies	52	25
	Terminology in books must be in Urdu to understand	6	3
	Self-study/ self-struggle	17	8
	Total	206	100

Table 1. Showing the choice of subject selection one and two for improvement

No	Subject	Choice		Total
		1 st	2 nd	
	English	34	10	44
	Mathematics	24	19	43
	Biology	12	10	22
	Islamic Studies (Compulsory)	03	13	16
	General Science	09	07	16
	Urdu	05	07	12
	Physics	03	08	11
	Education	04	06	10
	Pakistan studies	05	02	7
	Chemistry	01	06	7
	Punjabi	00	05	5
	Home Economics	00	03	3
	Total	100	96	196

5. Discussions

The scheme of studies approved by the Government of Pakistan for secondary level consists of 49 National Curriculum Subjects. The study-sampled students opted only 13 of their own choice, which they were being studied. Therefore, the data interpretation, conclusions, discussion are restricted to the same subjects. However, keeping in view the conclusions the recommendation can be more or less the same for rest of the subjects.

1. The members of staff at the school in Pakistan are in the best position to consider and interpret the findings of this study. They can collectively discuss whether the techniques that have been used could be of the value to them in better understanding the individual student's perceptions of aspects of the NC for which school staff have, respectively, collective and individual responsibilities.

2. The students suggested that the teacher should have better understanding/ expertise in his subject and also make it easy for the students and should do lesson planning on daily basis. The school should arrange more effective refresher courses for staff.

3. The students suggested that the students should "take interest in studies" "do hard work", "do home work daily" and "learn lesson by heart".

6. Conclusions

The analysis and presentation of data hold messages for curriculum development policy, school and staff and students. The outcomes of the research resonate with government initiatives for curriculum improvement, training of teachers through the organization of refresher courses and provision of facilities in the project of education sector reforms. Eliciting the views of students proved both illuminative and valuable. Such practice encourage greater involvement and sense of ownership among the students in issues that affect their learning and educational process.

We consider the techniques used could, to advantage, be used in relation to extending and eliciting views of students of other schools in order to generalise the outcomes of this study.

The research demonstrates the value of involving students in a dialogue with teachers regarding curriculum development. It also provides instruments whereby both Institutional decision-making and Individual decision-making can be made explicit and developed.

1. The students suggested that the teacher should have better understanding/expertise in their subjects and make it easy for the students and should do lesson planning on daily basis. The school should arrange effective refresher courses for staff.

2. The students suggested that the students should "take interest in studies" "do hard work", "do home work daily" and "learn lesson by heart".

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