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TEACHERS' VIEWS ON EVS CURRICULUM

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Abstract:-Teachers' content knowledge, understanding of the nature of subject, and their widely held views, beliefs and attitudes about the school curriculum influence how they transact curriculum and what pedagogic practices they employ. Since past 7 years, most of the government and government-aided schools at Delhi have been using NCERT's present EVS (Environmental Studies) textbooks in their primary classes. These textbooks are based on NCF (National Curriculum Framework)-2005 guidelines and henceforth promote active learning. However, the EVS classrooms have not changed much in terms of teaching-learning activities. This paper presents insights gained during a pilot study conducted with 15 primary school teachers of MCD schools at Delhi using a questionnaire. The findings of this pilot study informed a larger ongoing-research in the same direction. The study indicates that primary school teachers do not seem to grasp the nature of Environmental Studies curriculum and its transaction as envisaged by NCF-2005. Hence, there is a need to reshape their views on EVS curriculum by the relevant in-service inputs.

Keywords: Environmental Studies , National Curriculum Framework , social sciences and environmental education.

INTRODUCTION

According to the latest National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005), Environmental Studies (EVS) has been visualised as an integrated subject in the elementary school curriculum which draws upon insights from sciences, social sciences and environmental education. The core idea of teaching EVS in primary classes is to expose children to the actual outside world they live in. Thus, learning EVS provides children with an opportunity to explore and connect with their natural as well as social surroundings. EVS, by helping children to explore, understand, appreciate and value their environment, facilitate them to connect meaningfully with their immediate environment, natural world and the community. This enables children to employ processes of learning science, social sciences and environment to comprehend and resolve environmental issues at local, national or global levels.

The syllabus for EVS (classes III-V) in the presently used NCERT textbooks is woven around six common themes – Family and friends, Food, Shelter, Water, Travel and Things we make and do. Each theme begins by helping children explore their immediate 'self' and expands in a spiral nature across the grades to include child's family, neighbourhood, the locality and then the country. Such a structuring of the content has been visualized to help the child locate himself/herself in immediate context and then gradually in a larger context. Because of this holistic approach in there are no separate text books for science and social science subjects for primary classes (3 to 5).

Following are the key objectives of teaching EVS as envisaged by the present NCERT syllabus for elementary classes (NCERT, 2006)-

To train children to locate and comprehend relationships between the natural, social and cultural environment;
To develop an understanding based on observation and illustration, drawn from lived experiences and physical, biological, social and cultural aspects of life rather than abstractions;
To create cognitive capacity and resourcefulness to make the child curious about social phenomena, starting with the family and moving on to wider spaces;
To nurture the curiosity and creativity of the child particularly in relation to the natural environment (including artefacts and

people);
To develop an awareness about environmental issues;
To engage the child in exploratory and hands-on activities to acquire basic cognitive and psychomotor skills through observation, classification, inference, etc.
To emphasize design and fabrication, estimation and measurement as prelude to the development of technological and quantitative skills at later stages;
To be able to critically address gender concerns and issues of marginalization and oppression with values of equality and justice, and respect for human dignity and rights.

Given the unique nature of EVS as a subject and its objective laid down by NCF (National Curriculum Framework)-2005 as discussed above, it becomes imperative for the primary school teachers to plan their teaching-learning activities accordingly. Teachers' content knowledge, their understanding of the nature of subject, and their widely held views, beliefs and attitudes about the school curriculum undoubtedly influence their pedagogic practices. For the effective implementation of EVS curriculum, it requires a change in the mindset of teachers from mere content transmitters to that of facilitators and co-learners. Teachers need to play a pivotal role in enhancing necessary abilities and competencies in children for exploring, understanding, appreciating and participating in environmental protection.

Most of the government and government-aided schools at Delhi have been using NCERT's present EVS textbooks (*Looking Around / Aas Paas*) in their primary classes since they had been introduced in 2006. However, the EVS classrooms have not changed much in terms of teaching-learning activities. It is generally seen that the teachers are still following traditional methods of teaching in their EVS classrooms, regardless of the vision of new EVS curriculum. It is not surprising to find a primary school teacher following traditional textbook reading approach instead of engaging children in performing exploratory activities or some teacher using guide/key material to make children write some set question-answers that they will have to memorise for exams. Is it because of their resistance to bring in changes in their pedagogical practices, or due to lack in comprehending demands of new curriculum or the reason lies somewhere else? This small scale study was employed by the author to understand teachers' perceptions about EVS curriculum to ascertain what kind of beliefs and opinions are predominating teachers' pedagogy in EVS.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This paper presents insights gained during a small scale study conducted in November, 2013 with 15 primary school teachers of 5 MCD schools at Delhi. Since the author is associated with department of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed. programme) of University of Delhi, therefore, in this study she included teachers from MCD schools selected for internship of B.El.Ed. undergraduates. The teachers included in sample were having around 8 to 14 years of experience in primary school teaching. Teachers were interviewed using a questionnaire inviting their views about-

Nature of EVS as an integrated area of study
Significance of teaching EVS at primary school level
Appropriateness of EVS textbooks by NCERT (Aas Paas / Looking Around)
Methods of teaching-learning EVS
Use of teaching-learning material in EVS
Assessment strategies employed in EVS

Teachers' responses were accepted in both English and Hindi depending on their preference for particular language. The idea was to make them feel comfortable in expressing their opinion and views regarding different aspects of EVS curriculum. Their responses were recorded mainly in written form simultaneously with interview going on. However, five of them easily permitted to record the interview on mobile voice recorder.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The data was analysed thematically under the themes as mentioned above. The quoted responses are mainly the translations of responses given in Hindi by the teachers. Only two teachers gave interviews in bilingual mode. Therefore, all of those responses were first translated in a single language for purpose of documentation.

NATURE OF EVS AS AN INTEGRATED AREA OF STUDY

The present study showed that although the teachers have a basic idea about the nature of EVS but a comprehensive understanding of the same was not found. Responses of 9 out of 15 teachers indicated that in EVS a child learns about his or her natural environment and social world. They knew that EVS now bring together the insights from sciences and social sciences together. For instance, a teacher said- *"earlier we used to teach mainly science content in EVS but now it gives importance to social sciences also. Teaching only science content to primary school children is not much useful as they don't understand it*

completely at this young age. We say it environmental study.... because we link science as well as society and environment in this."

Another teacher told that- *"EVS is all about teaching environment related things. It can't be considered just science or social science. Now we have a single textbook..... that is it. We teach immediate environmental issues in EVS.... that can be problem of water scarcity or water pollution or conserving plants and so on...."* Teachers emphasised that learners' own contextual experiences are given place while teaching EVS. Such as, one teacher told that *"here we are supposed to connect children's own environment and experiences through various activities."* One other teacher also mentioned that "*EVS subject is very much interrelated to child's life and society."*

However, 6 of the respondents were not very clear about the nature of EVS and they were only emphasising that it is more of social in nature. Such as, one teacher said- *"I find EVS similar to social studies as it mainly includes content based on social and environmental issues. Such as there are topics like family, relationships, water pollution, crop production and different types of houses etc. There is very less inclusion of science concepts in present EVS textbooks.....which is not right..... As we find lot of impact of scientific development on our daily life routine, therefore, children should be taught science concepts also in primary classes."*

Similarly, another teacher told that- *"Earlier we used to teach science and social studies in primary classes also. But now they have replaced it with EVS which is mainly social sciences. It is very difficult to find science concepts in these books. All general topics are given only those are mainly connected to our life and outside environment."*

SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING EVS AT PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL

The teachers were asked about the significance and objective of teaching EVS in primary classes to ascertain whether they are aware of the objectives of teaching EVS or not. 4 out of 15 teachers did not consider teaching EVS important for primary classes as they feel absence of typical science concepts and loosely specified topics make the subject useless for children. One of them stated that- *"Teaching of EVS is not as significant for children as would be in case of teaching science. It does not help children understand lot of scientific developments happening around us. How would then they be able to connect with outside world in real sense?"* Another teacher mentioned that-

Rest of them (11 out of 15) considered EVS to be an important area of study that makes children aware of their environment and related issues. One of the teachers stated that- *"Teaching EVS is very important to help children look around and know about their own environment."* Another teacher said that-*"EVS is a subject that helps primary school children to link with their environment and make them aware of important environmental issues. This will help them to think better ways to resolve environmental issue in future life."*

To bring it all together, it was found that the teachers mentioned only certain objectives while others were not even talked about. Except the importance of EVS in developing awareness about environmental issues among children, other objectives of teaching EVS as specified by NCERT's syllabus were not mentioned by the respondent teachers.

APPROPRIATENESS OF EVS TEXTBOOKS BY NCERT (AAS PAAS / LOOKING AROUND)

Majority of the teachers (11 out of 15) appreciated the NCERT textbooks but everyone pointed out that there is a need to improve these textbooks to make them appropriate for teaching children. One of them said that- *"The books are fine but they lack explanation of concepts and there are no clear cut question answers... certain chapters are so confusing that I don't get how to deal with them. "*

Another teacher mentioned that- *"EVS textbook is nice and it has lots of activities for encouraging discussions in classroom. But it should also include question answers. It should be like.....children learn from the textbook on their own without the help of a teacher. Or else, what is the use of a textbook for children?*" Similarly, one of the teachers stated that- *"No doubt, these textbooks are made interesting by including lot of stories and activities. But, tell me, how many activities we can do throughout the year. Ultimately, we need to teach something concrete to the students. Otherwise, what will they do in exams? There is lack of information and explanations in the EVS textbook and so, we find it difficult to use them at times."*

4 out of 15 teachers did not find these textbooks much useful and were dissatisfied with the EVS textbooks. One of them stated that- *"I think that present EVS textbook (Aas Paas) is not much useful for children. First of all, children are not able to read it on their own and even if they could read, it is very difficult to make out what is to learn out of it. Second thing is that these books have such kind of questions those do not have specific answers... and most of the time these questions are not even related to the children."*

Another teacher also emphasised that –"*I don't like NCERT's EVS textbooks much. Children are not able to understand anything from these books. There is nothing useful given in these books that will help children build foundation for higher classes. There are no definitions, no explanations and no proper exercises. Only activities and stories are given. Children can't learn any science or social science from these textbooks."*

Hence, one can see mixed responses of teachers on the appropriateness of EVS textbooks. Some aspects of the textbooks are well received but the teachers felt that an overemphasis has been placed on the activities and practical aspects and theoretical facts and information have been subsided.

METHODS OF TEACHING-LEARNING EVS

Teachers were also asked about the methods preferred by them for teaching EVS. All of them favoured reading textbook chapters and supplementing them with occasional discussions. Use of other innovative methods and exploratory learning strategies were not suggested by any of the respondent. One of them stated that- *"I read aloud the chapter from textbook and explain children. They are not able to read it on their own. After that I make them write the question answers based on chapter."*

Another teacher mentioned that- *"there are different methods that can be used for teaching EVS like discussion, observation, experimentation and data collection etc. But we don't have much liberty and time to use all such methods. Generally, I use textbook reading and using discussions with children."* Similarly, one more teacher stated that- *"I think textbook reading and classroom discussion are the only suitable methods to teach EVS. Where is the space for other methods and activities? Anyways, it is not science subject for which experimentation and practical would have been more important."*

The teachers in the study did not mention about use of other strategies such as games, puzzles, investigations, stories, role plays, field work, survey, craft work or project work in EVS pedagogy. Although, all of these strategies are included in textbook activities, but it seems that textbooks are used by teachers only for reading and not for engaging children in various activities. This perhaps defeats the purposes with which NCERT textbooks for EVS were planned. If teachers choose to restrict teaching EVS through reading then hands on experiences can't be provided.

USE OF TEACHING-LEARNING MATERIAL IN EVS

Teachers were asked to tell about what kind of teaching-learning material they use in their EVS classroom. The textbooks and chalk-board were the preferred teaching-learning materials for all of them. None of them mentioned about the use of any supplementation with other concrete material like worksheets, story books, photographs, charts, posters, newspapers, material kits, specimen, etc. Moreover, some of them attributed the cause of not using variety of material to teach EVS to limitation of time and non- availability of resources at their schools.

For instance, one of the teachers stated that- *"I use textbook and board work in my EVS teaching. Any other method is not possible to be used as we don't get much time. In case, there is time available to us.....I think observations in surroundings may be used as an important method to teach EVS." Similarly, another teacher mentioned that- "I read aloud the chapter from textbook to children, discuss important things with children, then, I give them time to read book on their own..... Also, I use blackboard to write question answers so that children can write in their notebooks."*

ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN EVS

Our school system is, traditionally, examination driven system. It means, assessment is one of the significant dimensions of a school curriculum and hence, can't be ignored. NCERT has proposed a list of learning indicators in EVS on which children may be assessed. Sourcebook on assessment in EVS (NCERT, 2008) is a well prepared document that guides teachers to undertake authentic assessment in EVS classroom. However, when teachers were asked about the ways used by them to assess children's learning in EVS, then it was apparent that none of them ever heard of such document. However, two of them specifically mentioned that they evaluate children according to CCE.

12 out of 15 teachers reported that they assess children on the basis of written tests and examinations only. One of them stated that- "I take written exam and tests etc. to assess children. We do it as per CCE. And then marking is done and finally report card is prepared." Another teacher stated that- *"I give them to write question answers and fill in the blanks from the chapters of books. Whatever the marks are obtained by them in this are entered in their report cards." Similarly, another teacher mentioned that- "After every chapter is covered, I make them write question answers in their notebooks. They learn it so that they can write in their class tests and written exams. This is how, I get to know how much they have learnt in the subject."*

Rest of them (3 out of 15) included other criteria of assessing children such as, oral test and classroom performance, etc. For instance, one of these teachers stated that- *"I evaluate children on the basis of written exam, oral tests, their performance in class throughout and also their attendance. In a way, I include all possible ways of assessing children."*

CONCLUSIONS

Findings of the study indicate that primary school teachers do not seem to grasp the nature of Environmental Studies curriculum and its transaction as envisaged by NCF-2005. Majority of them have a preliminary idea about integrated nature of EVS in terms of having some concepts brought together from sciences, social sciences and environmental education. But overall, there is not much clarity of how this integration is being done in its correct sense. However, they do believe that EVS is all about teaching children about their environment and bring their outside experiences in classroom. Teachers seem unaware of the objectives of teaching EVS in primary classes those are clearly spelled out in the NCERT syllabus. They just consider making children aware of environmental issues as one important objective of teaching EVS. Other significant objectives of EVS curriculum are not given their due recognition by the teachers.

As far as teachers' views on NCERT's textbooks for EVS are concerned, it is found that they are not completely in agreement with the appropriateness of these textbooks and want them to improve in terms of including definitions, explanations, exercises etc. Teachers exhibit a lot of dependency on textbooks to teach EVS but they hardly understand the vision of new EVS textbooks. Majority of them appreciate the books for making them interesting and incorporating various activities in them. But, it does not mean that they find textbooks easy to use. One probable reason is that the teachers are not equipped to teach with these textbooks. Since, the EVS textbooks are not conventionally written, therefore, teachers must also get proper orientation to go beyond traditional ways of teaching-learning. The activities given in EVS textbooks should be performed in classroom, not just be read.

EVS curriculum emphasise on active exploration of environment through processes like observation, classification, experimentation and analysis. But these strategies are not used by teachers in their classroom. Teachers are still adhered to traditional chalk-board method and textbook reading predominantly, leaving space for only occasional discussions on certain topics. Use of variety of teaching-learning material is not practiced by teachers. Present EVS curriculum recommends use of valid and unconventional ways of assessing children's learning but the teachers seldom go beyond the conventional written tests and examinations.

Overall, the picture is very gloomy and this has obvious implications for teachers' preparation and training, i.e. at both pre-service as well as in-service levels. Only specifying a progressive curriculum and providing with innovative textbooks do not ensure quality of school education. Ultimately, the problem starts when the curriculum is transacted at school level. If the teachers are not aware of curricular goals and not well equipped for using curricular material, then nothing great can be achieved. It is, thus, essential to orient school teachers about contemporary changes in school curriculum and provide them hands on training of how to transact the given curriculum. This directly impinges upon the need of capacity building programmes for in-service teachers so that they could understand the demand of curriculum and bring in vital changes in their attitudes, skills and pedagogical practices.

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