Students as Contributors: Reflections on School Education Curriculum Construction Experiences

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Abstract

The grassroots-level approach to curriculum construction is innovative, emphasizing the acceptance of valuable insights, comments and suggestions from teachers to draft school education curricula. Building on this approach, the Indian state of Kerala has started involving students in curriculum creation processes. This article examines students' participation in Kerala state school curriculum development procedures. Reflections on curriculum construction experiences and students as contributors to curriculum creation were analyzed in this longitudinal study conducted from 2013 to 2023. Instructors' field notes and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) reports were utilized to organize the material. Portfolio analysis was also employed to examine the data. Students' contributions in the curriculum development processes are explained with a comparative analysis from a global viewpoint. The study highlights the potential of students to creatively contribute towards constructing their school education curriculum.

Keywords: *Curriculum construction, grassroots approach, students as contributors, curriculum-building process, curriculum experts, reflections*

Introduction

Ever since the investiture of learner-centered education, the involvement and participation of students in various stages of classroom pedagogical procedures have been widely accepted and appreciated. However, the idea of students playing a significant role in curriculum building for a state's school education programme has rarely been given precedence. Presently, a shift in this policy is being epitomized. The Ministry of Education, Government of Kerala, while releasing the Kerala Curriculum Framework (KCF) 2023, echoed this approach about engaging students in curriculum construction. The state government's decision to involve students in shaping the nature and features of education is new and unprecedented, having never been attempted since the formation of the unified Kerala state. Whether evaluated as a success or failure, this concept is new to Kerala's education landscape.

The grassroots-level approach to curriculum construction is a globally recognized and comparatively new approach. It emphasizes that all aspects of curriculum development should begin at the lowest level of the education system. This approach includes the design, expansion and implementation of the curriculum based on the needs, experiences and perspectives of students, teachers and other grassroots-level stakeholders involved in the field (Iyengar & Iyengar, 2023). This model of curriculum construction has been followed in many countries in recent years. The decision to include students in the process of curriculum construction in the Kerala state school education system was a proactive step aligned with the grassroots-level approach.

The concept of student agency in curriculum construction began gaining ground only in the

early years of the new millennium. Student participation in curriculum construction is a complex and layered category with multiple shades (Mitra & Gross, 2009; Ruddock & Flutter, 2006). To guard against the possible extension the term may take in diverse educational contexts, the researchers have confined the role of students to building the content and structure of the curriculum. The engagement of students in the curriculum preparation processes aligns with the management theory called 'Participatory Design Project', which ensures the involvement of the end user in the decision-making process (Levin, 2000).

Background, Review and Significance of the Study

As a prelude to the main arguments of the research, it is pertinent to discuss the key elements related to the question of learner participation in curriculum construction. In the process, the analysis undertaken is not cursory but conscientious. This would equip readers with the key moments of larger debates surrounding the curriculum-building process for a state's school education system. This approach would enable a meaningful connection to broader global trends in curriculum development.

Taylor (1975), a major theoretician on curriculum in its modern sense, presents a rigid and hierarchical approach to curriculum construction. Despite its traditional orientation, Taylor assigns a seminal role to students in curriculum development and exhorts teachers to engage students creatively in the curriculum construction process. This study is significant as it argues that the sustenance of student engagement in school-level curriculum construction will be a highly acknowledged method that can be copied by any agency in the field.

Aloki (1993) views curriculum as a lived experience in the classroom as opposed to the static view of it. Curriculum, for Aloki, always maintains a special space for the "otherness of others". Freire (1993) debunks the banking mode of education and presents a radical alternative in his libertarian education, where students have key roles in engaging with and addressing various issues affecting society, which in turn would positively impact their consciousness and worldview. The Kerala school education system significantly took forward Aloki's (1993) and Freire's (1993) views on curriculum construction and implementation to build a new approach.

Freire (1993) challenges the projected binary roles of teachers and learners by re-imagining them as simultaneously being teachers and students during the active learning process in problem-posing education. Eisner (2003) focuses on the roles of students in curriculum design and implementation. He conceives a renewed role for students in formulating objectives for their studies and materialising them collaboratively within the classroom. He also expresses concern about how the pressure of assessment expectations adversely impacts the pedagogic procedures of teachers, and the genuine needs and aspirations of students. The conceptual framework of Eisner's ideals in the curriculum construction process is envisaged in Kerala's school education system to engage students in the process of developing the curriculum.

Besides the vibrancy of debates about engaging students in the curriculum-building processes, two academic positions are popular about this progressive step. The first is related to the nature of education, while another concerns the academic confidence about students' participation. Research focusing on the positive outcomes of the process is relatively new and scant in academic circles. Studies on University education (Klein & Kuh, 2006; Alber, 2009) have extended the benefits of better learning and engagement to enhanced learning outcomes like critical thinking skills among students. Educationists, over the years, have become more sensitive about the exclusion of students' voices in curriculum construction. Thomson (2009) reflects on this issue, stating: "Through mass education, children became passive and just docile recipients of adult knowledge."

Levin (2000) posits that learner agency, common goal and teamwork in school settings would lead to significant achievements, similar to those seen in global work settings. Ruddock and Flutter (2006) argue that if students are not connected to the curricular objectives of a programme, they may become barriers through destructive practices. Koning, Saskia and Jeroen (2010) caution that if children are unable to communicate their perceptions on teaching and instructional changes, their achievement levels will be severely impacted. Their research, conducted in school settings, provides valuable insights into the whole process. Crawford and Kunjack (1998) conducted an educational research on middle school students. The researchers found that when students initiate a task, it increases their interactions, productivity, sense of responsibility and ownership. It was also found that real-world questions energised students more than typical topic-bound questions. Thomson (2009) studied teachers' perception of the process and identified three types of teacher roles—proactive, managerial and constrained, based on their attitude towards the classroom process. Thomson (2009) also observed that students were more comfortable with active, reciprocal and managerial teachers, as they were able to build genuine trust and relationship with students.

The education department at the University of Alberta, Canada, (Alberta Report, 2008) launched a series of innovative programmes under the Inspiring Educational Initiative to incorporate students' views on the curriculum process. As part of this initiative, the education department launched a website called 'Speak Out', designed exclusively for students to express their views and aspirations regarding the proposed curriculum. Besides, focus group discussions with students were also given due importance in the curriculum reconstruction process. But despite all these interesting initiatives, the education department was criticized for failing to materialise students' debates and insights in the form of a template for curriculum planning at the University of Alberta. This evaluation of the Alberta initiative raised concerns about pursuing similar research. It emphasised that valuable insights shared by students and their active involvement could enrich the construction processes and improve the curriculum.

Scope of Student Participation in Curriculum Construction Processes

The presentation of ideas by key scholars and major studies conducted in this area do not mean that the process of student engagement in curriculum construction is smooth and hassle-free. Many issues abound that need to be addressed at the earliest. The first relates to the clarity and definition of the phrases 'student participation' and the 'stakeholders' expectations of students and teachers'. Thomson (2009) posits that teachers should view students as capable and respectable. Mitra and Gross (2009) endorse Thomson's view by saying that if teachers' voice is artificial and the school does not have a policy of respecting children, students will become alienated and disengaged. The second issue is systemic, as the present system of education and training programmes for teachers are not adequate to equip teachers to support students in participating in the curriculum development processes.

Besides, the poor system and weak communication of expectation, students themselves sometimes contribute to the complexity of the issue. Their predilections for surface learning over deep learning often makes them to view the entire process as cumbersome. Crawford and Kunjack (1998) reiterate this concern, stating, "University education enables students to have a philosophical understanding of education, but when they set in the school context, they come to be carried away by other external expectations in the form of high stake standardized examinations."

The history of curriculum development in Kerala, especially over the last few years,

reflects a slow but gradual initiative to equip students to participate in the complex process of curriculum construction. Various theoretical insights, key research findings, practical experiences in the state and academic guidelines of the National Council of Educational research and Training (NCERT) have enabled Kerala's education ministry and teachers in the state to invest in this student-oriented initiative. A series of learner-friendly initiatives were pioneered in all previous curriculum-building processes in the state.

Objectives of the Study

After acquiring knowledge about curricular experts, who have emphasised student participation in curriculum building, and some key studies presenting the advantages and challenges involved in this innovative procedure, this research proposes to study student participation in the curriculum-building process in Kerala. Following are the objectives of the study.

- To examine the grassroots-level approaches for curriculum construction in Kerala state school education
- To assort the suggestions and experiences of students as curriculum constructors, and explain them for the benefit of the school education academic circle

Methodology

The information and data to realize the objectives were collected by administering three methods and materials. The data collection was carried out using field notes and focus group discussions. Each focus group, comprising students and teachers, had six participants.

This curriculum development team of the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Kerala, is responsible for monitoring the curriculum construction processes conducted in schools, block-level resource centers, district-level centers, and SCERT itself. As part of their work, the researchers visited certain centers and schools where the curriculum construction processes were being carried out. The field experiences were recorded and compiled as field notes. The precise content in these field notes serve as material used for the analysis.

The SCERT, with the help of the Department of Education, Kerala, posted trained teachers at schools and cluster sessions to activate and monitor the curriculum development and transaction procedures. They were designated as supervisors for the programme. Their responsibilities included maintaining a report of each day's work and observing developments in the field. These reports were collectively called 'supervisor descriptions'. For the present research, 12 supervisor descriptions were used.

Procedures of Information or Data Collection

This longitudinal study organised information from different sources collected between 2013 and 2023. The data collected by the researchers, based on their efforts with SCERT and District Institutes of Educational Training (DIETs), Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and schools, was supplemented with information from other sources. The respondents included resource teachers, supervising teachers and students. These groups maintained data on the variables, though not initially for research purposes.

The resource teachers were responsible for conducting orientation programmes at different levels, collecting responses and preparing reports on the process to ensure grassroots-level contributions to curriculum construction. The supervising teachers were responsible for conducting such orientations and discussions at schools. Besides, they also had to prepare reports to be submitted to higher authorities. This academic work provided them the experience of orienting students, enabling them to contribute towards enriching the school curriculum. Their experiences were collected as field notes for this study.

Additionally, focus group discussions with students and teachers were conducted

separately, and the information gathered was utilised to avail the result of the research. These discussions aimed to accumulate and organise the views of students on the proposed curriculum. The insightful suggestions provided by the students gave impetuous to several path-breaking transformations in Kerala's educational landscape.

The focus group discussions were conducted at two government schools—GG Higher Secondary School, Chalappuram- Kozhikode, and GHSS, Kattilangadi, Malappuram. Most students in these schools come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, while a significant portion belongs to economically moderate and upper strata of society. Since GGHSS, Chalappuram, is situated in the heart of Kozhikode city and GHSS, Kattilangadi, is located in a village in Malappuram district, the sample included students representing both rural and urban regions. The views expressed by the students in the focus group discussions were used in excerpts to define and interpret the accumulated data.

As mentioned above, field notes from 12 supervising teachers were considered for the analysis. The field notes serve as a type of record of minutes documenting the conducted processes. They explain the teachers' experiences during the curriculum-related academic sessions conducted to collect students' opinions. The sessions were organised by teachers as directed by the Department of Education, Kerala. During these sessions, the teachers engaged in participatory observation, documenting students' responses from the purposely conducted discussion programmes, informal discussions, interactive opinions and common viewpoints. As resource persons for SCERT, Kerala, the researchers participated in various workshops in different parts of the state. These workshops provided them the opportunity to interact with many teachers, who shared their insights, which helped the researchers broaden their perspectives regarding student participation in the curriculum construction process.

The student orientation for collecting information regarding curriculum construction and transactions began in 2013. The then state government decided to collect the views of students on the proposed draft curriculum document, allotting two periods in all schools of Kerala, from -2 to +2, using specially designed student-friendly materials. There were certain stipulated programmes to implement this strategy of collecting student information. They were as follows.

- Class teachers and their assistants conducted class-level workshops to collect students' opinions and suggestions. These teachers were trained by educators who, in turn, were trained by SCERT and BRCs at the grassroots level.
- The ideas generated at the school level were reviewed by BRC- and district-level meetings before being submitted to specially constituted focus groups working in various areas, including language and mathematics education. Despite initial apprehensions regarding the fitness of students for this task, the participating students made interesting suggestions during the discussion.
- Resource persons at the BRC level organised workshops for students both at the school and BRC levels. These workshops provided students with opportunities to submit suggestions and opinions to reframe or restructure the elements of the curriculum designed for them.

The field experiences of these teachers were analysed to prepare the output of this research.

Analysis and Findings

The information collected from field notes and reports of focus group discussions were analysed qualitatively. The information collected reveal the following.

- The students were supportive to grassroots-level curriculum construction. They provided suggestions to draft the curriculum.

- The BRCs could effectively orient the curriculum construction processes at the grassroots level.
- The policies regarding school subjects, content orientation, syllabus formation and methods of teaching were discussed at the grassroots level, and suggestions were formulated.
- The teachers and students were enthusiastic to contribute creative suggestions for designing the curriculum.
- The grassroots-level suggestions focused on the syllabus for teaching arts, sports and fine arts; the need for vocational training; language teaching; teaching quality; and teacher–student relations.

The excerpts based on the information gathered from the focus group were used to trace the specific findings. The contents of the field notes are assorted into four titles: (a) suggestions regarding activities of students like sports, arts, scientific exhibitions, soft skill development and personality development (b) content orientation (c) methods of teaching and (d) school atmosphere and morale.

The analysis of the collected information helped the researchers assort the students' suggestions on curriculum construction. These suggestions revealed that students have the potential to contribute to the development of the school curriculum. The analysis of field reports from teachers and curriculum constructors illustrated that grassroots-level approaches to curriculum construction in Kerala state schools are effectively implemented in the academic process.

Excerpts

When the tentative proposal for a gender-neutral uniform and gender equality sparked a storm in Kerala's social sphere in the years 2021 and 2022, attracting the attention of national dailies, students were hesitant about proposing not only gender equality but also the need for comprehensive sex education in schools. This issue was discussed in the focus group with students at the school level. The participants in the focus group unanimously suggested the need to include sex education and gender equality in the school curriculum. Some students even sought menstrual leave for girls, as practiced in progressive societies. Some of the suggestions proposed by the students are as follows.

- The existing course books are designed with teacher orientation, creating academic challenges for students. Hence, the learning material must be rewritten, keeping students as the center of the teaching-learning process.
- Schools should be transformed into a happy space for students, allowing avenues for all to grow and flourish, irrespective of their social, economic and cultural backgrounds.
- Rather than focusing solely on the theoretical framework of pedagogy within a curriculum framework, teachers must address complex pedagogical issues in a simple and clear manner. They should be entrusted with the responsibility of pedagogic integration, rather than centralising it within the curriculum.
- The concern of underperforming students was significant, and they were dissatisfied with the way teachers treated them in classroom. The surveyed students expressed unhappiness with the practice of isolating underperforming children and labeling them in the guise of remedial and special support programmes organised in schools.
- Teachers must be equipped for conducting classes in this digital era. They should be provided adequate training programmes.
- Teachers need to acquire technological knowledge and apply it in the classroom to ensure effective teaching.
- Students should be allowed to use technological devices in classrooms, with learning opportunities provided through technological and computer-assisted tools. The prohibition on using mobile phones in schools must be diluted, and

students should be given the opportunity to use mobile phones for learning purposes during classes.

- Students should be given the opportunity to prepare and submit assignments, homework and such related tasks online.
- The students opined that learning the scientific names of plants and animals is not necessary. Instead, the syllabus should focus on explaining what scientific names are, their significance and relevance. Students can learn the scientific names on their own later. There is no need to include questions about these in exams. Students in the focus groups opined that learning the scientific names of plants and animals is a redundant exercise. Hence, the content in the syllabus of science subjects must be modified.
- The students felt that the topic of trigonometry in mathematics was dull and stand-offish. They suggested that appropriate changes be made to the mathematics content so that it can be understood by students more smoothly.
- They opined that English language learning should focus on communication rather than literature. Communicability should be the focus of learning English and Hindi, in particular. Malayalam should be given importance in literature.
- Kerala's Department of School Education organises a variety of extracurricular activities at the school, educational district, revenue district and state levels. The activities include cultural days, science and social science programmes, athletic competitions and art festivals. However, these programmes minimise the significance of academic pursuits, serving only a small number of students. Moreover, some teachers devote more time to these activities, affecting the effective functioning of schools. The students feel that the school administration should prioritise academic activities during regular school hours. Extracurricular activities at the state, revenue and educational district levels should be scheduled only during school breaks or holidays. Besides, schools must ensure that academic activities and school working days are not interrupted by the schedule of extracurricular activities.
- The new generation of students is dissatisfied with the existing evaluation procedure used by teachers to assess them. They feel that the existing assessment regime gauges their competence in a narrow and restricted manner.

Conclusion and Generalisations

Kerala's Department of Education has published a volume of documents on students' discussions on the curriculum draft, along with KCF 2023. It has also decided to use it as a benchmark for learning material developers and for evolving a strong institutional mechanism to ensure that textbook and other curricular material developers adhere to the philosophy and principles of KCF 2023.

The curriculum must be learner-centered and students are the focus in the classroom. These concepts emerged from discussions with students. Learner-centered classrooms provide space and voice to students, but the notion of a learner as a curriculum developer has challenged traditional beliefs about learning outcomes, materials, methods and evolution procedures employed in the classroom. This, in turn, empowered the students both as learners and as individuals.

The study enabled the researchers to explore and experience the intersection of theory and practice in academic settings. While students may not be equipped to prepare a curriculum framework at the school level and the academic community need not expect this from them, it is amazing that students, as the grassroots of educational processes, can contribute innovative, learner-friendly, socially-oriented and academically-enriched addenda to an already drafted curriculum. This needs to be acknowledged by educational administrators and policymakers.

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