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Understanding Primary Curriculum from Philosophical Perspectives

Kiran Ram Ranjitkar

rkiranram@yahoo.com

Associate Professor

Central Department of Education

Tribhuvan University

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand philosophy / ideology hidden behind the present primary education curriculum of Nepal. The study was based on analysis of written curriculum published by Government of Nepal, Curriculum Development Center; Sanothimi. I applied the conceptual content analysis approach for the purpose of this study. My literature review consisted of general philosophies namely idealism, naturalism, realism, pragmatism and existentialism and also educational philosophies such as perennialism, essentialism, progressivism and reconstructionism. Although the study focused on four elements, namely objectives, contents, teaching learning activities and evaluation process of curriculum, I made a brief analysis of aim, and contents of primary level as a whole. The current primary education curriculum is the mix of more than on philosophies emphasizing traditional ones, perennialism, and essentialism. I found negligible importance is given to critical components of learning therefore this component should be given more importance.

Key Words: *Educational philosophy, Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, Reconstructionism. Conceptual analysis,*

Context

Everyone behaves according to how s/he sees or experience s/he lives. “In reality all of us engage in philosophizing as we make the decisions on which the course of our lives depend” (Zais, 1976). Likewise, education and curriculum is also influenced by one or another philosophy. Education and thus curriculum work is value based activity. Value is drawn from the philosophy. Philosophy and philosophical assumptions are basic to all curriculum foundations (Print, 1993). Then it can be said that every education or curricular question (decision) is the question of philosophy. Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) have divided curriculum philosophy in two broad groups’ namely traditional and contemporary ones.

Traditional/Conservative philosophies consist of perennialism and essentialism, both of which are “centered on intellectual training” (Tanner & Tanner, 1980) and claim that “path of intellectual power is to be found in certain academic studies (ibid).

Progressivism and reconstructionism represent contemporary philosophies of education. Contrary to intellectual centered, progressivism and reconstructionism are concerned with social, moral, and cognitive terms and whole child. Although we talk philosophy as basis of curriculum, no study has been found on what philosophy or philosophies are represented by school level curriculum. So this is a small attempt to understand primary level curriculum from philosophical perspectives.

Objectives

Objectives of this paper were:

- a. To analyze various components of school education curriculum of Nepal.
- b. To explicate the ingredients of the philosophical underpinnings upon which the primary education curriculum of Nepal is based.

Educational Philosophies

It is already mentioned that Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) have proposed philosophies of education into two broad categories, traditional and contemporary. Hence, according to them there are four major philosophies of education. Each of these philosophies is discussed below:

Perennialism

Perennialists relies on the past, the past asserted by agreed-by, universal knowledge and cherished values of society (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2008). These universal knowledge and cherished values of society can be taught through^{ss} ‘permanent studies’ consisting subjects like rules of grammar, reading, rhetoric and logic, and mathematics for the elementary and secondary level schooling and greatest books beginning at the secondary level of schooling (Tanner & Tanner 1980). Such ideology pervades school education and subjects related to this ideology are offered in every school education including Nepal .

Essentialists

As it is with perennialism, essentialist also value rationality. But unlike perennialist view, essentialist view knowledge as something to be acquired and stored for some future use. With this line essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. William Bagley (Ornstein & Hunkins 2004) holds that the curriculum must “consist essentially of disciplined study in five great areas: (1) command of the mother tongue and the systematic study of grammar, literature, and writing; (2) mathematics; (3) sciences; (4) history; and (5) foreign language (Tanner & Tanner, 1980) . In school level these types of curriculum such as foreign language, science are incorporated in the present school education.

Progressivism

Progressivism, developed from pragmatic philosophy as a protest against perennialist thinking in education (Ornstein & Hunkins 2004), believes that education should focus on the whole child, rather than on the content or the teacher. Learning arises through experiencing the world by child. It is active, not passive. Freedom and democracy are valued by this philosophy (LeoNora & Cohen, 1999). According to this philosophy, aims of education as Dewey viewed, is to make

student “learn and practice the skills and tools necessary for democratic living” (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004). Creative and expressive arts, optional courses in secondary level education are some examples of focused in learner’s needs.

Reconstructionism

Reconstructionism based on early socialist and utopian ideas of the nineteenth century (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004) emphasizes addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on social reform as the aim of education (LeoNora & Cohen, 1999). Some components of reconstructionist view can be found in social studies subjects in which some rooms has been given for inclusive society.

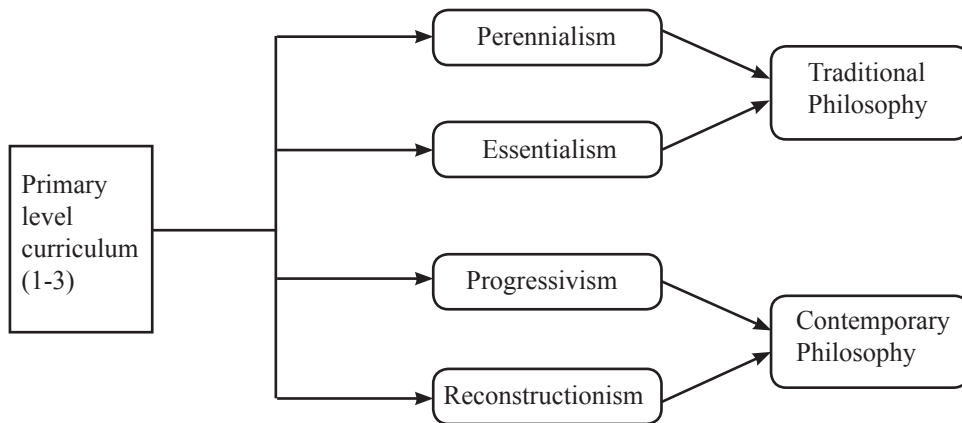
Let’s examine some similarities among these philosophies. Although how these philosophies explain world society and objectives of education differ from each other in varying degree, we find them concur in suggesting subject or subject matter for educating purpose. For example, perennialism and essentialism, although different, both suggest language, mathematics and other liberal education based subjects. Likewise contemporary philosophies, progressivists and reconstructionists are not against the subjects and subject matter. They suggest mathematics, languages, liberal subjects such as history, geography. But they differ in how to translate them in classroom delivery and who rules the classroom situation.

Analysis of related studies

Actually I could not find related empirical literature in context of Nepal. Fortunately I came across a PhD thesis of Ndichu Murira Francis (2013) of Kenya titled “Towards a national philosophy of Education: “A Conceptual Analysis of the Philosophical Foundations of the Kenyan Education System. Her study employs the method of conceptual analysis. According to her, although the ingredients of a philosophy of education are available but have neither been formulated into a philosophy statement nor effectively implemented in the Kenyan education system. She drew a conclusion in line with Plato’s utilitarian perception of education. As a result of study she identified the social function of education, namely: equipping individuals with necessary knowledge, skills and competencies that empower them to serve their society in a more meaningful manner, and thereby assist in national development. But it was not a study of level wise education and curriculum.

Conceptual Framework

Ornstein and Hunkins (2008) category of educational philosophy consists perennialism, essentialism, progressivism and reconstructionism. They further classified perennialism and essentialism under traditional philosophy and progressivism and reconstructionism under contemporary philosophy. With this understanding, I developed a conceptual framework for studying present primary level education as follows:

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study

With this conceptual framework in mind, I attempted to study, analyze and interpret the primary education curricula of Nepal. Moreover, for the methodology purpose I adapted the conceptual analysis approach applied by Francis (2013) in her work.

Methodology

In her study titled “A Conceptual Analysis of the Philosophical Foundations of the Kenyan Education System” Francis had used Conceptual analysis and Prescriptive approach. On usefulness of these two approaches she wrote that these two methods complemented each other in this investigation into the philosophical determinants of the Kenyan education system (Francis, 2013).

After going through her methodology, which is based on the current primary curriculum document of Kenya I was convinced that approach used by her is appropriate for my purpose too. Therefore I decided to apply conceptual analysis and prescriptive approach to this study.

Conceptual/content Analysis

Some believes conceptual analysis as a one type of content analysis. Content analysis, “simply defines the process of summarizing and reporting written data- the main content of data and their messages, in this case the curriculum” (Cohen, Minion, & Morrison, 2007). It defines a procedure for the rigorous analysis, examination and verification of the content of written data.

Since written curriculum is one form of authentic written document of school education this approach of study seems appropriate in this for my purpose. Besides, since the focus of this study philosophical or ideological issue, we can use the term philosophical analysis to refer the analysis method adopted here. Philosophical analysis is a general term for techniques typically used by philosophers in the analytic tradition that involve "breaking down" (i.e. analyzing) philosophical issues. One of the most prominent techniques of philosophical analysis is the analysis of concepts (known as *conceptual analysis*). Conceptual analysis is one of the main traditional methods of philosophy, arguably dating back to Plato's early dialogues. In Beaney's word Conceptual analysis consists primarily in breaking down or analyzing concepts into their constituent parts

in order to gain knowledge or a better understanding of a particular philosophical issue in which the concept is involved (Francis, 2013).

Prescriptive Study

The prescriptive method of philosophy seeks to establish the criteria (or standards) for assessing values, judging conduct, and appraising art. It critically examines what we mean by concepts such as good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly among others (Adelstein, 1971).

In this study as in with Francis's the prescriptive method was chiefly employed to explore what types of values were recommended as absolutely necessary, and which are desirable and profitable for the well-being of both the individual citizen, as well as for the common good. Likewise such values are variously referred to as ideals, goals, aims, fundamental principles and truths among other terms.

Limitations of the Study

Since not much research has been written on area of philosophy of education the literature review of the study faces lack of enough literature on the same.

This paper focuses on written curriculum only; it does not reflect the implementation part of the curriculum. Likewise, only Mathematics and Social Studies subjects were focus of the paper.

Findings

The objectives are directly in consonance with the traditional philosophy. Objective "Develop basic linguistic and mathematical skills" are concerned with the linguistic and mathematics skills. Both subjects, language and mathematics, are given importance since the ancient time to present by perennialism, essentialism and also by later philosophies such as progressivism. There are objectives which reflect Progressivists perspective of education (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004).

I found some space is given for reconstruction or reformation of society and objective five which reads "...developing inclusive society" is an example. However, such objectives seems only intended toward making students accept these realities as they exist. No objective seems to lead toward critical approach of learning.

The objectives as stated in curriculum is mix of various philosophies. We found objective related to subject based knowledge and skills (perennialism and essentialism), objectives that addresses the individual need and interest (progressivism), objectives that perpetuate the existing society (essentialism) objectives demanding reform and change in the society (Reconstructionist). For example objective, create interest in beauty and develop creative skills" is an example of progressivist ideology.

Subjects offered

It is difficult to categorize the subjects offered within particular philosophy since there are subjects which are commonly emphasized by all philosophies. We see languages, mathematics, liberal subjects such as history, are never fading subjects. But yes, how the subject matters are

organized, and presented may have different impact. It seems that language (*mother tongue*), Nepali, English, Mathematics come from the perennialist and essentialist line. Science, history (a part in social studies), foreign language such as English, are motivated by essentialist tradition. Because these subject of foreign languages subjects are deemed essential in present day life Subjects including social studies, Creative arts, health and physical education, local curriculum are meant for individual and social enhancement.

Subject wise Curriculum

Mathematics

Present mathematics curriculum of primary level also offers this subject as compulsory one.

Objectives

Although mathematics is believed to be neutral and universal subject and has no inclination toward any ideology or perspectives it carries value in one or another form. Mathematic objectives demand cognitive ability as well as ability of application in life situation. All these objectives require “academic discipline as belonging to its (*mathematics*) domain (Schiro, 2008). It can be said that basically these objectives represent traditional i.e. Perennialists and essentialist conception of curriculum which lead to the intellectual development of the students. Objective number one is concerned with ability of classifying, labeling, measuring various geometric shapes.

There are objectives which lead students toward solving daily life problems. For example objective number three reads as “ the students will be able to solve daily life problem using four rules addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division” As mathematics is believed to be necessary in solving existing daily life problem in the society, these objectives are in line with social efficiency view of curriculum.

Hence it can be said that objectives of mathematics subjects is the mix of Perennialists and essentialist and social efficiency ideology.

Content

As it is with the general objectives, content part comprises of subject matter dealing with knowledge and application of mathematical symbols, and formulas demanding intellectual ability. There are subject matters which demand knowledge and application of mathematical symbols which is direct linked to the mathematical logic demanding intellectual ability. Such content are from the very beginning of education and strongly advocated by traditional philosophies in the name of mathematics or one of the three R's and represents perennialist and essentialist perspectives .

Although not directly mentioned, there are subject matters which have connection with individual and social daily life thus have social efficiency values.

Teaching learning activities

The mathematic curriculum prescribes activities that may be applied in classroom. Although activities seem in neutral in nature as is with the content, the activities are guided by academic as well as social efficiency value.

Many activities included in the activities part of the curriculum require students to have knowledge of mathematical symbols, numbers, figures and formulas and use them in logical manner.” Constructing triangles (Grade three)”, “identify the different denominations indicated in coin (grade two)” are some of the examples. Such ability is emphasized by subject based traditional ideology. Since above activities require students to engage with number and figure, i.e. *symbols* these activities reflects perennialist and essentialist view of education demanding intellectual capacity.

The mathematics curriculum consists of daily life related objectives and contents. Such objectives and content requires activities in life situations. But all of the life related activities also requires working with accuracy. In this sense, the teaching activities reflect social efficiency perspective in which “the objective of teaching is to ensure that learning will be efficiently applicable in social life.

Evaluation process

As it is with suggested contents and activities, tasks presented for evaluation purpose also are drawn from these same content and activities.

The suggested evaluation methods or process are very much a traditional ones which uses rational thinking as demanded by Perennialists approaches.

There are some examples which attempt to make the problem life related. This and other examples used the name of person only from dominant society. Many other words from various social circumstances could have been used to raise awareness towards social differences.

With above analysis we can draw that although mathematics curriculum reflects more than one philosophy it is dominated heavily by subject or academic knowledge based view of curriculum since the content, activities and evaluation process suggested seem lead the students toward making the students use knowledge and skills to solve the mathematical problems. Very few spaces have been given to the daily life mathematical problems.

Social Studies

The present curriculum offers this subject as compulsory one throughout (1-10 grades) the school education. In this level “ the emphasis is given to the delivery of knowledge, skills and developing positive attitudes so as to create interest children in social and physical environment and to lay a foundation for becoming productive and active citizens” (CDC, 2008) .

Objectives

The social studies curriculum intends to develop ability in seven learning area. Most of the objectives are meant for indoctrinating the young with the existing social order. These objectives intend to help students understand presents status and history of society. “Introduce self, one’s family and neighbor” (objective one) , Demonstrate respects towards community life, customs, ethnicity, languages gender occupation, religions, festivals (objectives four) are some examples.

Many of the objectives seem motivated by “preparing individuals for their roles in society as it exists” and prepare students for social responsibility in the society” Likewise there are objectives which are in line with the reform or change in the society.” These objectives are in line with the reformation or reconstruction of the society. Although not many, some objectives reflect the reconstructionist view of curriculum. “To make aware of social evils” an example.

Content

Content seems directly in line with objectives. Many of the objectives seem motivated by goals of preparing individuals for their roles in society as it exists” and prepare students for social responsibility society”. That means curriculum consists of the content which conforms to the objectives intending to orient the students toward existing society. The curriculum also consists of contents which serves the objectives seeking social change of reforms. Hence, it can be concluded that the content of social studies are dominated by social efficiency view and there are also contents that serve reconstructionist or reformist objectives.

Teaching learning activities

In elaboration part, the curriculum suggests activities to be carried out in classroom.

Many of activities are conformist in nature which aim “to indoctrinate the young: help them understand the history of society, teach them to value it and educate them to function successfully in it” (Glathorn et.al.2005). Thus it can be said that a significant portion of teaching learning activities seek to prepare students to adapt in existing social order. The activities part of the curriculum also consists of value components demanded by reformist or reconstructionist view. Moreover, curriculum also suggested teaching learning activities in which students engage in creative works such as drama.. In this sense, the curriculums also involve learner based activity.

In sum it can be said that Social Studies curriculum is the composition of social centered, reformist and leaner centered perspectives.

Evaluation process

The curriculum presents tasks for students as means of evaluating their performance. Many of the tasks presented as means for evaluation require students to produce what they presently do in their family and community.

Likewise, evaluation process also consists of tasks demanding cooperation, help, and social reform. These processes involve value components of learning demanded by Reconstructionist ideology in the sense that social reformation is the major theme of reconstructionist ideology.

Conclusion and Implications

Although philosophy and philosophical assumptions are basic to all curriculum foundations I could not find any basic single philosophy behind the curriculum. I found post democratic curriculum to be mix of more than one philosophy. However, critical thinking or Reconstructionist value has been given negligible significance by the curriculum. I believe that children should be encouraged to think critically from the foundation age. This part is missing in the curriculum.

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