

Unveiling the Tapestry of Learning: Exploring the Pedagogical Landscape for Transversal and Academic Competencies through the Lived Experiences of School Teachers and Students

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Abstract

This research investigates the pedagogical approaches employed for the development of transversal and academic competencies based on the lived experiences of students and teachers. Despite the presence of qualified educators in educational activities, schools face numerous challenges in fully realizing the potential of students. In the context of developing nations like Nepal, schools and teachers encounter unpreparedness in facilitating activities geared towards enhancing students' academic and transversal competencies. Despite teachers' expressed commitment in workshops to adopt student-centered methods, conventional lecture-based approaches persist due to the impact of high-stakes testing. The absence of clear guidelines and motivation further contributes to the prioritization of traditional testing over competency-based education. Furthermore, inadequate facilities and an unsupportive environment hinder the implementation of practice-based education in schools. Recognizing that students excel when engaged in enjoyable activities, it is imperative to align educational activities with learners' needs and interests while progressing towards predefined objectives. This study advocates for a blended management model, incorporating both top-down and bottom-up approaches, to encourage teachers in adopting student-centered methods, thereby playing a pivotal role in nurturing both academic and transversal competencies. Given that both teachers and students tend to prioritize aspects that align with assessment criteria, evaluating assessments covering both competencies become crucial for a comprehensive understanding of their educational progress.

Keywords: transversal competencies, lived experiences, pivotal role, bottom-up approach

1. Introduction

Modern education is different from the traditional one because of its time-based demands. Modern education demands for 21st century skills that are not possible through the traditional way of teaching, the teaching that focuses on listening to teachers, memorizing the content taught, and preparing for high-stake testing. Traditional education is teacher-centered, theory-based and rote-learning oriented whereas modern education is learner-centered, skill-based, and interaction and action-oriented.

Traditionally, a person's academic achievement reflected from paper-pencil test determines his or her ability and status. The students with such learning outcomes are unable to cope up with 21st century opportunities. It demands both academic and transversal competencies, the competencies that empower students with the knowledge and skills needed to face the challenges of global opportunities. General competencies, also known as transversal, horizontal or generic competencies are ignored while measuring students' achievement. This trend is quite common in the Asian education system as UNESCO (2015) asserts, "Asian education systems focus on academic achievement and rote learning" (p.2).

This system directly or indirectly forces teachers to emphasize on content delivery and prepare students for paper-pencil test. Despite sound academic achievement, students, in lack of transversal competencies, have poor performance in their real-life situations. To empower students academically and generically, the concerned authority requires to provision for both competencies not only in the policy level but also at practice and assessment level. Therefore, we have attempted to fill the gap: how the academic and transversal competencies are perceived and practiced in the context of school education in Nepal.

2. Theories and Related Studies

Critical theory and social justice theory is a theoretical lens to interpret and analyze the information received from the field. Critical theory is used in order to understand underlying assumptions of educational practices and identify the participants' worldviews. Besides, "it posits a more comprehensive means to grasp social reality and diagnose social pathologies"(Thompson, 2017, p. 1). Social justice theory is used to see how equality and equity are maintained in community schools. Both equality and equity are pre-requisite to maintain social justice. Equality sees all the people equal with the concept that no one is different and should be treated in the same way. Everyone should have equal right, equal access and equal treatment. Equity on the other hand sees the difference between students and recommends to treat according to their need and interest to equalize them or to support them to meet the target. Accordingly, equity is the unequal treatment to make all equal. Both the theories have guided the study to explore practicable options for making educational practices student-friendly, justifiable, and goal-oriented.

3. Method of the Study

In the study, hermeneutical phenomenology was used as the research design and in-depth interview, persistent observation, and online communication were used as method of information collection. Out of twelve participants from four conveniently selected community

schools of suburban area of Kathmandu, three participants, one from parents, one from teachers, and one from grade eight students were purposively selected from each school. In order to maintain privacy, the student participants were pseudo-named as S1, S2, S3, and S4; the teacher participants as T1, T2, T3, and T4; and the parent participants were pseudo-named as P1, P2, P3, and P4. Besides, we talked informally with the participants and non-participants inside and outside the schools in order to make the description rich and dense. Information was collected assuring confidentiality and taking consent from the participants. The information collected was coded and thematized for interpretation and analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, I have presented the information received from the participants' lived experiences; developed themes from the codes developed from the information, discussed them with critical and social justice theories and related literature; fulfilled the gaps stated in the study; and finally, summed the conclusion up with the facts generated from the discussion.

4.1 Need and Practice of Competencies

Generally, competency is the ability to perform a task fruitfully and efficiently. The schools are for developing competencies in students. They are of two types: transversal and academic competencies. Transversal competencies (TVC) refer to the skills that are often not measured but are required for learners' holistic development. They encompass all the skills (soft skills, generic skills, and non-cognitive skills), values, and attitudes. Academic competency on the other hand, "is the belief that children can perform the necessary actions for an academic task or activity" (Dushesne & Larose, 2018; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009 as cited in Şenol, 2022, p. 284). It has a significant role to enable learners in their academic success. Along with academic competencies, transversal competencies empower students for their efficient personal and professional life.

Academic competencies are highly valued and indicators of a person's status. However, transversal competencies, as they lack reliability and trustworthiness, are often not measured as academic competencies although they are more supportive for real life situation. Also, transversal competencies as Care and Luo (2016) state, "refer to knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that are integral to life in the 21st century" (p. 1). However, they can be assessed from different activities that they perform in and outside the school. 21st century pedagogy focuses on both academic and transversal competencies. UNESCO (2015) states, "...transversal competencies are an essential part of learning and should be a formal part of the school policy and curriculum" (p. 23). Despite the provision for developing transversal competencies in curriculum, they are ignored and kept in shade due to influence of high-stake testing.

According to Care and Luo (2016), transversal competencies include competencies in interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, critical and innovative thinking, media and information literacy, global citizenship, and others. Popular methods for teaching transversal competencies include group work, field study, project work, and extra-curricular activities and report writing. They are planned and conducted by students themselves under the guideline of teachers. As these methods promote collaboration, team work and experiential learning,

students are self-motivated and engaged in learning. Since a school's role is to nurture students' talents and help them to achieve their dreams, they are less likely to feel inferior, bored and tedious in such activities. Empowering students to organize different club activities, teachers can sharpen students' performance. In order to make every day a new day, school should plan a variety of activities to launch them in diverse ways.

Teachers launch different student friendly activities at the beginning of academic session. The schools have yearly plan to organize and practice in the academic session. In spite of making curricular activities student-centered, the co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which are designed with the belief that they are completely student-centered, have also been conducted without making them meaningfully student-centered. S1 says, "*Whatever and how well we perform our role during the co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, it does not matter for grading. What matters is our writing during the paper-pencil test*".

All these activities are and should be equally valued from examination point of view as Pellegrino (2014) says, "the tasks and activities in the assessment must be models worthy of the attention and energy of teachers and students" (p. 3). The more valuable a learning text or a classroom activity is from examination point of view, the more motivated the students become to work on the text. Moreover, the students learn any knowledge or skill better when it is as per their level, need, or interest; when it is useful in their personal, professional, or social life; and when they become responsible from planning to performance level.

Due to the high influence of high-stake testing, the teachers make the classroom activities exam-oriented. As a result, the students' level, need, and interest, or the usefulness of the learning text are ignored. However, some teachers make classroom student-centered. They divide each topic into three steps: self-reading, understanding what is read so as to answer given questions and applying the acquired knowledge in a practical situation either in school or community or within their families; while some others link the learning content with student-friendly activities such as playing and singing and dancing. Such teachers are not encouraged and facilitated significantly as T3 says, "*The activities we make student-centered are not so controlled and managed as the classroom in our lead, so we are likely to disturb others so limit them and promote the class in our lead*". Their excitement to lead student-centered activities goes down. As time passes, they follow the traditional lecture method. On the other hand, the assessment system which embraces paper-pencil test as a dominant tool has discouraged schools, particularly the teachers to launch such student-centered teaching learning activities.

Due to lack proper facilities, training and proper guideline, and motivating environment to teach transversal skills, teachers prioritize traditional trend of educational activities. Such practice of educational activities has not prepared students for their life with transversal competencies though they achieved academic competencies in some extent. Teachers are still encouraged to use lecture method to disseminate knowledge because education system emphasizes academic competencies and emphasize less on the transversal competencies. They spend most of the time in the class to explain the text highlighting the important parts likely to be asked in the examination, give students notes- capsules for paper-pencil test and prepare them for high-stake-testing.

The students on the other hand, listen to the teachers, jot down the notes given by the teachers, and prepare for the examination through rote learning. Such classroom practices have demotivated the learners. In other words, they hesitate to work on the textbook outside the time of their class, exam-preparation, and assignment submission. Such practices cannot prepare students for life. Therefore, integration of academic competencies and transversal competencies is today's need both in classroom activities and evaluation process.

As transversal competencies are not the main part in the evaluation process, teachers emphasize less on transversal skills and more on academic part. Even in academic part, written examination is the main tool for assessment. Accordingly, teachers provide readymade answers and motivate students to memorize through rote learning and prepare for the examination. Such type of parrot learning is still in practice. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on transversal competencies from policy to practice level. For this, assessment system has a great role as it is the ultimate aim of whole educational activities. Despite the difficulties to break deeply rooted and widely accepted top-down model of education practices in the initial phase, development of curricular activities and assessment can encourage the teachers to focus on transversal skills, UNESCO (2015) claims, "Transversal competencies have a great influence on teachers' commitment and on school leadership" (p. 22).

When teachers are strengthened both with academic and transversal skills, they can engage students in different activities much more productively. Use of transversal competencies increases students' interest in learning as well. "Generic skills clearly correspond to TVC and serve as the foundation for teaching and learning" (Care & Luo, 2016, p. 15).

Freire (2005a) defines anti-dialogics as an instrument of oppression and dialogics as an instrument of liberation. "Conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion"(Freire, 2005a, p. 125) are the characteristics of anti-dialogics whereas, "cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis" (Freire, 2005a, p. 125) are the features of dialogics.

4.2 Top-down and Bottom-up Approach in Policy and Practice

Banking model of education, also known as top-down or traditional model of education is defined on the basis of information flow and making decision process. "In the traditional view of education, teachers are pillars of knowledge; they know everything and students know nothing" (Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011, p. 78). In other words, it is the system in which the information flows from top management down to the subordinates or grassroots. In this system, the manager or managing team has absolute power for making decision. Such model of management can work well only when the manager has sufficient knowledge and experience from grassroots and top management level.

However, the authority has been found to unsee the concerns of the grassroot people and cannot understand their experiences and changing demands. Such model of education system is highly dominant in community schools of Nepal although its reverse is demanded. For meaningful teaching learning, both the teacher and students should be assured of utopian environment. Talking about the connection between teaching and utopia, Lewis (2016) remarks, "utopia should become a central concern in educational debate" (p. 6). There is too

much talk on how to create utopian environment in the classroom. however, the concern authority has made rare meaningful efforts in the field.

In contrast, the Bottom Up approach as defined by Mpolomoka et al. (2018) is “a process by which management information flows from grassroots to top management” (p. 1). In other words, it is the system in which top management receives information from workers. Top management develops a plan on the basis of suggestion and information received from the grassroots. As the information from the grassroots guides the top management, the member staff are primarily specified. The work force is motivated for their best effort to improve the organization. The superior talks with the inferior and prepares the decision if they agree. As it is the plan and decision of the working staff, they work enthusiastically and become responsible and accountable. Community schools in Nepal require such practices of bottom up approach.

Black and Wiliam (2006) state Dubois’ (2002) argument that both approaches are found to have used in the organizations as they involve in decision making. Schooling and training for the managers guides to follow one or both of the models. The people in management may not have sufficient ideas of the problems that occur in different areas and their co-ordination and collaboration with all the members can provide them with key information for the betterment of the organization.

4.3 Teaching Learning Activities and Assessment

Teaching is an art and also a science that enables a teacher to lead students in learning. Black and Wiliam (2018) state Alexander’s (2008) definition of pedagogy as, “the act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications” (p. 4). If students learn perfectly what teachers teach, assessment is not necessary. Since students do not always learn completely what teachers teach, assessment is required. As assessment is the evidence to show where they are in their course of learning, they are motivated to learn more actively. Assessment is the process of identifying students’ level of proficiency and competency, that is to say, it is the process of documenting students’ knowledge, skill, attitudes and beliefs in measurable terms.

In order to promote students’ engaged-learning, we require to “practice an education that critically provokes the learner’s consciousness” (Freire, 2005b, p. 75). The learning content or skill, classroom activities and assessment should be inter-related. In other words, the learning content should be based on the students’ level, need, and interest. The classroom activities should engage them or lead them to enjoy working on the content or play with the content. The assessment is the one that reflects the classroom activities and provides feedback for reforming learning contents and teaching learning practices. As “without practice there’s no knowledge; at least it is difficult to know without practice” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 98), classroom activities should include sufficient practice-based activities so that they work out on the content, discuss on it, and interpret in their own way. Therefore, the content that the learners acquiesce should be modified to the one in which they work wholeheartedly.

Out of two types of assessment (formative and summative), formative assessment is employed during teaching learning process with the aim to improve students’ learning and refine the process; make it effective and updated. It evaluates students’ achievement and

weaknesses and provide feedbacks for improvement. Summative assessment on the other hand, is the process of evaluation for decision making. It determines what extent the students have achieved out of how much they had to achieve. Black and Wiliam (2018) state, “Formative assessment is about the details of instruction, and that it is only summative assessment that should feature in the broader study of pedagogy” (p. 1). For improving classroom activities, teachers should use all aspects of assessment in an integrated way. In other words, formative assessment should be practice-based whereas, summative assessment should be reflective based that reflects the students’ learning as well as the whole teaching learning process.

5. Conclusions

For all-round development, school management should create child-friendly learning environment, provide sufficient teaching learning facilities, follow both bottom-up and top-down model of management and make teachers responsible and accountable. Teachers’ role on the other hand, to create student-friendly and justifiable environment in the class; to embrace student-centered teaching learning activities; and to emphasize on both academic and transversal competencies in students is a must. For empowering students with 21st century skills, they also have to assess both competencies of the students equally. As a result, students become more enthusiastic and goal oriented.

The nexus between transversal competencies, academic competencies, and assessment from planning to practice phase is necessary for empowering students with the both competencies. Connecting transversal competencies with academic competencies in the meaningful student-centered classroom activities makes learning more engaged and goal-oriented. The assessment which reflects not only the process of teaching learning activities the students enjoyed but also the students’ level of both competencies and feedbacks for more student-engaged and goal-oriented teaching learning activities is essential to make educational activities student-friendly, learner-engaged, and goal-oriented.

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