

Designing Culturally Responsive Teacher Education System for Foundational Stage (3 Years of Pre-Schooling and Grades 1 and 2) of School Education: Five Essential Elements

Dr. D.D. Pandey

ABSTRACT

The paper emphasises on adopting a judicious mix of five essential elements in the foundational stage of the teacher education programme. These are culturally responsive teaching competencies, taking care of culturally fine-tuned child pedagogies, culturally generated contextual responsiveness, application of Information and communication technologies in multicultural awareness and culturally situated hands-on teaching experiences. By doing so, the students and teachers would be better equipped to manage the cross-cultural relationships of children.

INTRODUCTION

One of the influences of Indian society that has a direct impact on the foundational stage of school education is the children's diverse population in non-state initiatives, commonly known as private pre-school.

The National Education Policy, 2020 states that knowledge of the rich diversity of India should be imbibed and the preservation and promotion of Indian cultural wealth must be considered a high priority for the country as it is truly important for the nation's identity as well as for its economy. The policy further states that curriculum and pedagogy, right from the foundational stage of school education, will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos in terms of culture, traditions, heritage, customs, language, philosophy, geography, ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific needs, indigenous and traditional ways of learning to ensure that education is highly pertinent, interesting, and effective for children. The major objective of the National Curriculum Framework, which is one of the key components of NEP 2020, is to realize the highest quality education for all our children, consistent with realizing an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our Constitution.

Parents are considered primary agents of socialization for instilling basic human behaviour patterns, social norms, conduct, and fostering social self-awareness. After parents, teachers in centre-based pre-schools serve as secondary but formal socialization agents. They significantly influence social support, learning, and guide young children in acquiring social norms, societal values, and a sense of commonality in a heterogeneous society. Therefore, it is crucial to professionally train them to cater to a diverse demographic of young children and help them understand the design, creation, and practice of a culturally responsive classroom. Culturally responsive teacher education courses are essential for teachers in the foundational stage of school education to effectively engage with a culturally diverse group of pre-schoolers.

In the present paper, a small attempt has been made to design those five essential elements which have to be included in culturally sensitive early childhood teacher education programme.

1. Culturally Responsive Teaching Competencies

The National Council of Teacher Education (1998) has enlisted a set of nine teacher competencies to make the teachers professionally competent. These include

conceptual, content, cultural, transactional, evaluation, managerial, educational, designer, and rapport-building competencies. These can be further clubbed together into three basic categories of basic, application and cultural competencies to make the understanding of process orientation easier. As far as the development of the first set of basic competencies [conceptual and content] is concerned, the contemporary era is witnessing five grand and critical pillars of child development perspectives. These are maturational-developmental theory propounded by Arnold Gessel (1880-1961) based on the concept of a stair-step model of growing abilities, psycho dynamic perspective developed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), behavioral learning theory based on learning dynamics developed by John Watson (1878-1958) and Skinner (1904-1990), cognitive developmental view adopted by Piaget (1896-1980) and contextuality put in fore by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Bronfenbrenner's (1917-2005).

To translate these theoretical connotations during early years into real early classroom learning experiences, several teaching-learning transactional devices have been formulated by various child developmentalists like Montessori from Italy with emphasis on individualized teaching, Froebel with emphasis on sacrosanct nature of play and notions of child's unfolding potential. Besides this, the work of Macmillan's from England, and Dewey, Skinner and Bruner from America are also influential. Educational thoughts concerning the foundational stage of school education have also been developed by great Indian philosophers like Shri Aurobindo in the name of free and interest-driven learning, Mahatma Gandhi by way of pre-basic education and use of the immediate environment, including the mother tongue and work, as a resource for socializing the child into a transformative vision of society, Rabindranath Tagore through Joyful Learning and Swami Vivekananda emphasizing a holistic preparation of the body, mind, and spirit.

As all these perspectives and theories have different connotations and applications, have their viewpoints and merits, and have different degrees of interdependence and connectedness with each other and are

specifically suited to specific situations, thus no single theorization/perspective provides a truly complete explanation of construction and comprehension of childhood. Keeping this in view, each student teacher is required to be equipped with those basic teaching thinking competencies, which should make them able to innovate such type of early childhood education process mechanism in which a judicious mix of these multiple theories may be used simultaneously to have deeper and thoughtful insights to understand the complexities of essential nature of childhood and the child-centered pedagogical learning and actions.

The need for developing a second set of application skills is felt as student teachers at the foundational stage of school education are not only required to design new forms of learning experiences but also to translate other success models /best practices into culturally sensitive child pedagogies. As opposed to the science of Andragogy- the science of adult learning -, the student teachers should know the child pedagogy in general and micro ingredients of teaching-learning strategies in particular so that they should know how to design the learning centres suiting the cultural responsiveness of childhood as propounded by great Indian educationists from time to time.

The student teachers are also required to be equipped with productive and reproductive-teaching skills so that they may practice them by suitably adopting different sets of skills as delineated above in the culturally sensitive way of child pedagogy. Further, nearly all teaching skills come under the category of productive skills in the beginning, but in due course of time, convert into reproductive skills based upon practitioners' knowledge, attitude, and practices. This delineation has been made here to emphasize that while designing the foundational teacher education programmes, emphasis needs to be given to furthering productive skills, while during the on the job/refresher teacher training programs, they must be strengthened by supporting reproductive skills.

2. Evolving Multi-Cultural Child Pedagogies

The closing decade of the 20th century has revolutionized the perspectives of child development due to the gaining momentum of

Vygotsky's credible socio-cultural theory- as opposed to independent learning through maturation - and the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) pointing out that child learns the increasingly complex tasks through collaborative and interactive learning with peers. Learning at this Stage is, therefore, an active and interactive process in which children learn through play and interaction with other children and more experienced others. Children are actively engaged in their social and cultural experiences, and they constantly adjust and use new information to make sense of their perceptions and experiences (National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage, 2022). It is vital that the learning of children at this Stage is anchored by nurturing relationships with those around them. (op cit).

Thus, going beyond the supremacy of logical reasoning view of the universal child based on the process of cumulative assimilation, student teachers of the foundational stage of school education are required to pay proper attention to attaining a higher cognitive level through Instructional scaffolding, which, in turn, calls for developing cultural competencies to take care of interaction and operation of cultural variables forming an equally important range of information/perception.

The development of cultural competencies requires signalling out the contemporary model of visualizing teaching as applied science in favour of a new clinical-based model implying not only searching out culturally sensitive pedagogical solutions but also seeking appropriate teaching-learning practices in the consistence of multiple and varied socio and psychological perspectives of children.

In order to come true to these expectations, professional preparation skill opportunities are required to be provided to student teachers of school education for observation, reflection, and documentation of individualized information of every child build on their cultural strengths and richness. The key to supporting children is thus to plan learning activities and environments based on the understanding of each child's interests, needs and family and cultural experiences. Each child's varied experiential background, language spoken, abilities, beliefs, financial resource system,

idiosyncratic character, health and nutrition status, zest of learning, laws, customs, ways of living, and attitude etc. may be addressed realistically. Not only this, but the student teacher is also required to maintain anecdotal records and notes about the process setting as well as events. Development of culturally sensitive child pedagogies requires recording the original heartfelt comprehensive reactions of the children based on their inner experiences, beliefs, attitudes, deeper heart feelings, values etc. Thus, while scaffolding such culturally responsive early childhood teacher education programmes, every verbal and non-verbal reaction of the child's conversation in collaboration and dialogues with peers, adults and teachers have some meaning and due to which each of them must be photographed and video/audio taped by the teacher and later transcribed.

This whole gamut of primary and secondary data thus generated has to be processed and interpreted by the student teacher to explain the individualistic child's progress in terms of learning experiences, revisiting and expanding the repertoire of children's ideas by way of on-the-spot physical and social observations and seeking parents involvement in facilitating learning by exhibiting what transpired in school as input and process mechanism (Pandey,2004_a). As all of these apparently observed extraneous behaviour of the children can only be measured, recorded, analysed, interpreted and utilized by trained, experienced and skilled teachers in a scientific way so adoption of these five essentialities in favour of culturally sensitive child pedagogies transforms the status of teaching from merely applied science in favour of the research-based clinical mode of teaching.

3. Culturally Generated Contextual Responsiveness

The culturally responsive model of pedagogical concerns views child embedding in the complexity of psycho-social interactive systems. This frame of reference rotates around the fact that a child's amicable disposition is the outcome of his societal construction based on the contextual view of culturally and historically situated ideas. Under the impact of socially constructive influenced philosophy, as

theorized by Lev Vygotsky, the culture-responsive scaffolding is based on the supposition that the mutual bond and support of the five primary social institutions (family, economics, religion, education and state) based on social needs and culturally adopted practices (such as knowledge, attitude and behaviour) associated with a group of people belief, customs and skills enables the children to move further from lower order mental taxonomy towards higher one as originally conceived by Piaget. As supported by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 95, 99), the approach is based on viewing the child embellishing in a series of complex, interdependent and interactive systems of social institutions operating at the three levels of micro [family, school, day-care centre, peers], Exo [extended family, family friends, mass media, parents workplace, neighbours, community services] and macro [attitudes, beliefs, and heritage of the culture] system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 89, 95, 99). Thus, student teachers of school education should not only rotate around taking care of these multiple realities but also must keep an eye on the interaction and operation of culturally generated contextual variables, which form an equally important range of information/perception.

4. Multicultural Awareness: Use of Information and Communication Technologies

Children from an early start of their life are now well exposed to various forms of Information and communication technologies (ICTs), which not only act as a scaffolding tool for the construction of collective knowledge to be learned due to combining and converging of varied forms of convergent and divergent thinking skills but also collaborates the learning process as cooperative thinking and thus ultimately relieving the teachers from their classroom responsibilities. One may discern the multiple applications of ICTs in improving the quality of child pedagogical practices through varied visible outputs and multiple realities.

5. Culturally Situated Hands-on Experiences

India, which is a country of conspicuous diversities, is characterized by multifarious facets of cultural traits being operated by variegated castes, tribes, religious groups, and similar other assemblages in different walks of

life including childbearing, rearing and upbringing processes. Since there is no one universal way in which children learn, there is a strong need to investigate the cultural context in which a child is placed. A child in a tribal society may process information in an altogether different manner as compared to the one from the urban area and high socio-economic stratum. Pedagogy, therefore, should be culture specific. Instead of using one uniform, mechanistic way of student learning, cultural practices such as storytelling, dramatics, puppetry folk play, and community living etc. should become the strong basis of pedagogy. Cultural specificity should be embedded in the pedagogical practices, which should be evolved for tribal, rural, urban, and other ethnic groups and communities (NCTE, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Practicing the judicious mix of all these five elements [culturally responsive teaching competencies, taking care of culturally fine-tuned child pedagogies, culturally generated contextual responsiveness, application of ICTs in multicultural awareness and culturally situated hands-on teaching experiences] in the foundational stage of early childhood education teacher education programmes, the student teachers would be better equipped for the handling of cross-cultural relationships of children due to providing intercultural early learning experiences in the form of cultural competence, using culturally congruent teaching methods, and multicultural materials and thus enabling them to understand and relate to the diversity within their classroom. Establishing IIM-type national institutes of early childhood education, in every state is needed to serve imparting contextualized teacher training and conducting regional need-based action research. Identified potential schools of education and teacher training of universities may also serve this purpose by upgrading them into centres of excellence at the foundational stage of school education.

NOTES

1. This is the revised and updated version of my earlier paper titled "Culturally Responsive ECCE Teacher Education System: Five Essential Elements" appeared in University News., a weekly journal of higher education,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. D. D. Pandey

Former Regional Director, National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD). His research interest includes comparative early childhood education, pedagogical concerns, financing, administrative structure, context, teacher preparation, policy planning perspectives and monitoring and evaluation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). He has published in indexed journals and edited volumes of repute and has offered professional and policy-designing support to national, sub-national, regional, and international bodies on various aspects of ECCE. The views expressed in the article are personal. You can reach him at ddpandey1161@gmail.com