

What is Worth Teaching?: Analytically Looking at Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the dominance of textbooks within classroom teaching in India. In the history of Indian education in the post-independence period, since as early as 1952, various education commissions and policy frameworks have expressed concern over textbook dominance within Indian classrooms. But the education system still relies heavily on textbooks for 'educating' its students. National Curriculum Framework 2005 establishes the need to make learning meaningful for children by actively engaging them within the classroom. But with consistent domination of textbook reading as the only method of classroom teaching, actively engaging children remains a challenge. The paper discusses how choosing textbooks that create opportunities for actively engaging students can be a step towards developing a link between textbooks and active participation of children within classroom processes. It further suggests certain parameters for looking at texts in an analytical manner and also provides an example by analyzing a text on the parameters that are suggested.

Keywords: Textbook-centered teaching, national curriculum framework (2005), child-centered education, active learning/participation, reflection based learning

As early as 1952, in the history of Indian education in post-independence period, the Secondary Education Commission criticized the school curriculum stating that "it makes inadequate provision for practical and other kinds of activities which should reasonably find room in it, if it is to educate the whole of the personality" (p.59). It further noted that the curriculum is 'bookish and theoretical'. Almost five decades later National Focus Group on Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks 2006 (NFG 2006) also noted the same problem; that of the role of textbooks as sacrosanct teaching material within classroom.

It stated that the textbook "is sought to collect all the knowledge that a child is supposed to acquire at a given stage or class and is planned so that the child never needs to look beyond it" (p.37). Even after a decade, despite the focus on child-centered education and on active learning, the situation remains the same. National Curriculum Framework 2005 establishes the need to make learning meaningful for children by making it child-

centered. 'Child-centred' pedagogy means giving primacy to children's experiences, their voices, and their active participation (p.12).

Also, active learning/participation does not merely mean providing hands on experience to students. It means to engage the child in actively constructing her own knowledge. Active learning is the action of the mind wherein, the child is involved intellectually within the classroom. With consistent domination of textbook reading as the only method of classroom teaching, actively engaging children remains a challenge.

In such a scenario, it becomes imperative to look at the textbooks that are used within classrooms and find ways to develop a link between textbooks and active participation of children in classroom processes. One of the ways in which this could be done is by choosing textbooks which create opportunities to actively engage students within the classroom. Also, the dominance of textbooks can be countered by incorporating various other texts into classroom teaching. NFG 2006 states that within the

classrooms “what is needed is not a single book but a package of teaching learning material that could be used to engage the child in active learning” (p.ix).

Both, choosing textbooks that help in actively engaging students in teaching-learning process and incorporating various texts, other than textbooks, within classroom teaching require us to analytically look at texts and choose them accordingly. This solution throws up further challenges as to how to analytically look at texts, what does one look for in a particular text and so on. The first section of this paper suggests certain parameters for looking at texts in an analytical manner. The second section provides an example by analyzing a text on the parameters stated in the first section.

I

It is important to analyse the contents of a text/textbook to ensure whether the textbook/text really actively engages students or the ‘activity-based approach’ label is misleading. For instance, it was found that a textbook being used in many schools in North India, in the name of being activity-centered, suggests students to lock a kitten in the box to find out if air is necessary for breathing (for details refer Indian Express, February 8, 2017 issue). Any textbook/text may be looked at for four aspects: provision, perspective, activities and content. The category *provision*, is concerned with the availability of the textbook/text and its physical aspects. Perspective as a category, looks at the issues of the ‘view of knowledge’ that is reflected in the textbook/text.

In other words, it looks at whether the text serves the ideological interests of any particular section of the society or whether the text is written to engage children and so on. The category *activities*, looks at the kind of activities the textbook/text engages the children into. *Content* as a category, is concerned with the concepts and the language used in the textbook/text. Keeping these four aspects in mind, the following parameters could be used to analytically look at textbooks/texts:

With respect to Provision

- ♦ Whether the textbook is easily available
- ♦ Whether the cost is such that it enables wider reach to the target group

- ♦ Whether the material, which is to be used in order to follow the instructions/ activities given in the textbook, is easily available
- ♦ Whether the material to be used is user-friendly or not
- ♦ Whether it can be easily distributed and manipulated or not

With respect to Perspective

- ♦ What is the view of knowledge, which is reflected in the textbook/text
- ♦ Whether the text provides space to teachers and students to bring their knowledge to class
- ♦ Whether the objectives of the book/ text are stated in the book/ text
- ♦ Whether there is a social, cultural or political bias in the text/book
- ♦ Whether the book/ text is activity centered or concept centered
- ♦ Whether the text provides the learner with the opportunity to reflect on learning process
- ♦ Whether the text aims at engaging children in critical thinking with respect to social and political issues and practices

With respect to Activities

- ♦ Whether the activities in the book/text are related to the objectives stated, if any
- ♦ Whether the activities promote interaction between teacher and students
- ♦ Whether the activities provide students the opportunity to think or are they memory based
- ♦ Whether the activities promote peer work or are they individual based

With respect to Content

- ♦ Whether the concepts are well explained with examples
- ♦ Whether the language of the text/book is age appropriate
- ♦ Whether the text taps children’s prior knowledge or pre-requisite knowledge
- ♦ Whether the alternative frameworks are dealt with while explaining concepts

- ◆ Whether there is consistency in concepts dealt within the text/book

This section suggested various parameters for critically looking at textbooks. The following section provides an example of the use of these parameters to analytically look at the contents of a textbook.

II

This section uses as an example the History textbook for standard VI, *Our Pasts-I*. It is published by National Council of Educational Research and Training. The author and illustrator are as follows:

- ◆ Author(s): Textbook Development Committee
- ◆ Illustrator(s): Artt Creations, New Delhi

Provision

The book is an NCERT publication thus has a wider reach and is priced at ₹ 50, a nominal rate compared to other publishing house productions. Since the book is a government publication its production is not for profit motive but under 'welfare' policy of the state, the price seems considerably low. Also the book is available free of cost in government schools. Certain sections of the book are also available on the internet. The book taps human resources for various activities which involve interaction with others; this resource is readily available in form of peers, family and school community.

Physical aspects

The cover page of the textbook consists of different sources, which enable interpretation of the past such as a seal, manuscript and engraving and the title 'Our Pasts'. The size of the book is appropriate for an 11-12 year old. There are various features of the book, it has separate boxes for each feature such as definitions, source, additional information, elsewhere, keywords, some important dates, imagine, let's recall, let's discuss and let's do. The title of the chapter and introduction are highlighted and thereby catch attention as soon as one opens the page.

Perspectives and Rationale

Texts serve to be tangible and influential tool of school curriculum. According to Krishna Kumar (1989) texts contribute to wealth of symbolic forms that people use to bind themselves together.

Therefore, the perspective with which the text is written becomes important.

The book is titled 'Our Pasts' keeping in mind the fact that there is no such monolith category as 'past' and that the experiences of different beings in same period and even of the same event can be different. National Focus Group on teaching of social sciences also states that Indian history be taught emphasizing the concepts of plurality and change. The book opens with a foreword where the perspective behind the textbook is explicated. The perspective is in consonance with National Curriculum Framework (2005) and is as follows:

- ◆ The book attempts to implement basic idea that children's life at school must be linked to their life outside school. This principle marks a departure from the emphasis on bookish learning in schools which causes gap between life at school and life at home of the child.
- ◆ There is an attempt to discourage rote learning and maintenance of sharp boundaries between different subjects.
- ◆ Children's life at school needs to be a happy experience and not source of stress.
- ◆ Children need to be encouraged to reflect on their own learning and pursue imaginative activities and questions. High priority needs to be given to opportunities for contemplation, discussion in small groups and activities requiring hands-on experience.
- ◆ Children generate new knowledge by engaging with information passed on to them by adults. For this purpose they need to be given time, space and freedom.
- ◆ Textbook is not considered as the only source of knowledge as it is recognized that other sources and sites of learning are also important sources.
- ◆ Creativity and initiative on the part of children is possible only when they are participants in learning and not receivers of a fixed body of knowledge.
- ◆ School routines, methods used for teaching and evaluation need to be flexible for effective use of the text.

Rationale for studying History is given in the book as it is for the first time that the children will read history. Here the subject is related to not only past

periods but the present (what we are today is due to the history we have had) indicating a belief in change and continuity which is again emphasised at the end of the book where under 'Next Year' children are briefed about what will they study in part II of the book. Here they are instructed to look out for what changed and what remained the same. Connections are made between History and other subjects such as geography, economy, social and political life transcending the boundaries of rigid disciplines.

Content

The content is organized under various sections, which are well connected. Each illustration has a story to tell and serves as visual source. The pictures are collected from resource persons from photo Archives of American Institute of Indian Studies and Archeological Survey of India. It is a known fact that more graphics and colours help in better learning because they stimulate more areas of the brain. Apart from that, it also makes the book more attractive, life like photographs catch children's attention (a child in the school I was teaching was so excited to see the pictures that she came up to me and exclaimed that the pictures were so real and clear). The book also contains maps and an effort is made to engage children in locating the places mentioned in the lessons. Such activities also develop mapping and spatial skills in children.

Each chapter is introduced by a girl or a boy, which indeed provides a context for reading and something to look forward to while reading. This feature is not merely a prop and is generally followed up later for instance, children are asked to write a paragraph to a girl in the introduction, answering her query. Many chapters contain boxes with interesting 'additional information' for instance, box on Ostriches in India. All chapters end with a section, 'Elsewhere' which tells about something that was happening in another part of the world for instance writings on animal bones in china.

This feature is in consonance with NCF 2005, which states that history will take into account developments in different parts of India, with sections on events or developments in other parts of the world. Keywords and dates are listed at the

end of each chapter so as to remind children of important ideas and dates introduced.

One finds *questions and activities* at two points, one during reading and other post reading (at the end of the chapter). During reading activities and questions require the children to think in terms of the period depicted and relate it to present day. These enable children to assimilate and accommodate better by organizing and correlating various sections that they read. During the process of working on activities and questions, children also reflect on their learning and relate it to their previous knowledge. The post-reading activities are of three types: let's recall, let's discuss and let's do. The activities are not just memory based but involve discussions, imagination and interaction with people who are not from one's school (parents and others).

Extra information such as paintings of that time and what they depict or manuscripts and other sources help in creating interest in the subject. The *language and the style of writing* of the book is such that the children can read the book on their own which is how a text might be, for the child to explore and also be interactive so as to make sense of without interpreter (during my teaching days children did read and come to class on their own at times as they found reading it interesting). This when compared to other books is an advantage as it is generally considered that it is teachers' responsibility to utilize the book optimally and make children understand it as books cannot speak. But this textbook interacts with children and no special note or feature for teachers is found. The style of writing is in conversational mode where mostly sentences, activities, instructions are directed to the children for instance, 'you may have heard of the Jatakas...', 'in this book you will find....' and so on.

The book is about kings, queens who lived in ancient India, about their conquests and policies and also about hunters, peasants; about how wheat and rice began to be cultivated; about the lives and activities of ordinary women, men and children, incorporating the view of various pasts. The chapters range from earliest people, people who grew food and earliest cities to kingdoms, villages and towns. There are chapters on books, buildings, paintings and ideas to discuss cultural transformations as well.

It also helps one to understand how historians come to know about the past. The book demonstrates how somewhat like detectives, historians follow clues and traces left by people who lived in the past. The book gives exposure to many sources and tells children how historians study these sources (stone tools, coins, traces of plants, written material, picture, ornaments, books, burials and so on). This might enable children to recognize that the social sciences lend themselves to scientific inquiry just as much as the natural and physical sciences do.

The book aims at developing important skills and qualities such as that of imagination, analysis, reasoning, and perspective taking through various activities which lead children to imagine or recreate the past. The text provides various enriching learning experiences. For instance, the children are asked to imagine that they live in *inamgaon* and write about how the burial of the chief would be prepared. In another instance they have to describe a conversation where they are preparing for a visit of the king's army.

According to NCF 2005 the content in Social Sciences should aim at raising students' critical awareness through critical exploring and questioning of familiar social reality. The book also creates political and social awareness in children through focusing on issues like gender, voting rights, *varna* system and so on. For instance the text talks about taxes and the rights of all groups in society to vote while relating it to the past system where certain groups in the *ganas* had no right to participate in administration; 'find out whether groups who earlier had no right to vote can vote now'. The book also talks about women thinkers such as Gargi who was famous for her learning. Also while talking about *bhikkhus* the term *bhikkunis* is also used. Such instances suggest a commitment to gender parity and propagate the viewpoint that there is nothing natural about gender roles in society wherein, gender roles are binary and females cannot perform the roles males perform.

There is an interesting box that discusses how men and women both wore jewelry so a skeleton found with jewelry is not necessarily that of a female. The better way to know the sex of the skeleton is to look at the bone structure. Another social construct whose naturalness is contested is Varna system, it is stated that the Varna system was created by priests and was not found in places where

priests did not have much influence. Therefore, pointing out that the system is the result of certain circumstances, which enabled priests to assert power over other people. Here the emphasis is to develop concepts and the ability to analyse socio-political realities rather than on mere retention of information without comprehension. It is a step towards promoting children to critically reflect on social issues.

According to NCF 2005 it is through non-coercive and participatory mode that the process of teaching and learning can be made interesting as well as enjoyable. In order to make the process of teaching-learning more participative, there is a need to shift from mere imparting of information to debate and discussion in which teachers and children participate in generating knowledge without any latent and manifest forces of coercion.

The text encourages children to participate in teaching learning process through activities requiring discussion, reasoning, and reflection and does not give just information. Rather than being merely instructive the text is suggestive and offers scope for the learner to go beyond the textbook and creates opportunities for children to interact with other sources (parents, teachers, peers, books) to enrich the understanding of a given social phenomenon. Therefore, knowledge is not taken to be 'given information' in the textbook (text is not the only source of knowledge) but one that is constructed through interaction with peers, teachers, parents and so on. The text provides space to teachers and students to bring their knowledge to class by initiating discussions, reasoning and interaction to collect data from others. The focus is to enable a stimulating environment for teaching learning process rather than lining up facts to be memorised for examinations.

The introductions to every chapter cater to things many children might wonder about such as 'how did people travel when there were no buses or trains', 'how do we get to know what happened hundreds of years back', 'how did the people in earlier time lived, what did they do' and so on. Also during discussions initiated for various questions and activities a platform is created for the children's alternative conceptions to surface and a mutual understanding to be reached through interacting with others. According to National Focus Group on

teaching of social sciences 2005, an index to terms should be provided in the end of the book but such is not the case with history textbook though a table of important dates has been given.

Analysing the text through ideas of Dewey (experience in environment), Piaget (construction of knowledge), Bruner (reflecting on one's learning) and Vygotsky (interaction with others) about learning, one finds that the text combines the ideas of all by enabling the learner to interact with others to make sense of the text and construct knowledge; and to reflect and organize one's own learning.

The history book no longer looks dated and utilises greater resources of visual material including photographs, charts and maps, and replicas (on paper) of archaeological material. The activities and questions are not memory based but require children to understand the ideas and organize them to draw relationships between past and present and promote creativity, problem solving and critical perspectives. The text deals with ancient India and does give information about other parts of the world. The progression from early people to cities and towns is gradual and well connected. Keeping in mind the plurality of experience the text talks about kings, queens, ordinary people, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. It tries to do away with bias towards any particular people or gender and tries to bring to front the unnaturalness of social structures, in doing so it sets example for others publishers to follow. The NCERT textbook is a leap towards pragmatism in the history of large scale textbook production.

It is by looking for these parameters in a book/text that we can choose material that actively engages students within classroom processes by enabling them to critically look at existing structures and think of alternatives to the same. Here, the teacher

has a larger role to play than merely choosing supplementary texts for classroom teaching. It is imperative to state that the NCERT book aims to provide environment that is conducive to learning but cannot do this by its own and the teacher has to share the perspective of the textbook writers and that of NCF 2005 in order to achieve the aim. Teacher also needs to understand her role and be reflective about teaching learning process and focus on making it participative for all as well as unthreatening. It is well established that mostly teachers do not have the opportunity to choose the textbooks that are prescribed for students. But teachers can certainly incorporate supplementary texts within the classroom processes to encourage children to actively engage with the teaching and learning process. This is not an impracticable task as Apple (2000) points out 'critical teachers employ conservative material into site for reflective activities that clarify with students the realities they experience and construct'.

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