

Student Centered Teaching Methodology

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Education has a rich history and many of the theories in which educators are trained are not all that well understood by the public or by the educators that rely on them.

The other part of the problem is that some of the language used by educators is misleading. For example, the term “best practice” is widely used by educators and most laymen take it to mean teaching practice that is well known to be effective in producing student achievement. In fact, the term is used to mean teaching practice that is consistent with certain favoured educational theories.

Academic excellence, determined by the levels of individual and institutional performance in public schools, and equity, measured by each student’s achievement of rigorous learning standards, are the starting points and the fundamental indicators of the quality of public education planning.

Parents realize that the possession of knowledge and skills is critically important to a child’s future. If nothing else, they can see its importance from their own experiences.

Even individuals who themselves have had little education can see how that deficiency disadvantaged them. This common understanding among adults is probably the core reason that compulsory schooling is so widely supported. Responsible adults understand that schooling is valuable precisely because it equips children with knowledge and skills that they cannot yet recognize as important.

What do adults want kids to learn ? Plainly the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic are the indispensables because they are the tools that permit acquisition of everything else. So called higher order thinking skills are important too; but contrary to the theorising of some pedagogical experts, thinking skills cannot be optimised without knowledge and without the tool skills needed to gain more knowledge.

Bottom line:

Practically everyone agrees that schools should at least ensure that kids learn the basics. Beyond the basics there is the general rule that the more a person knows, the easier it is for them to acquire additional knowledge and understanding. Thus the general aim of most schools is to establish a broad based curriculum that affords students enough background to gain additional knowledge should they choose to do so. Parents and the employers favour practical and career objectives too but not to the exclusion of the general background knowledge.

Speaking at a more theoretical level, there is an enormous social, cultural, and economic advantage to a broad educational foundation—which is the reason that virtually all literate societies support it. The advantage is that the

members of succeeding generations are able to begin with a base of knowledge that previous generations had to struggle to discover for themselves. Instead of each succeeding generation figuratively having to reinvent the wheel, each can build on the hard won discoveries of their ancestors. The beneficial aspect of cumulating knowledge across generations is abundantly clear in areas such as science.

Determination of what should be included in a common curriculum is a messy process, but scholarly societies, state boards of education, school boards, and other interested parties muddle through and come up with a kind of “best of” what is known; and these are the facts and skills that come to be what students are expected to know. Of course, it is these goals and expectations that are translated into course and grade level objectives, tests of achievement, report cards, and other materials that communicate to parents, teachers, and students what students are expected to learn.

You may be wondering why I am spending so much time reciting what may seem obvious, but I have a purpose. I want to be clear about the primary aim of education insofar as parents, the consuming public, and most policymaking representatives are concerned. It is that schools should ensure to the extent possible that each member of the coming generation is equipped with the knowledge and skills that are believed essential to adulthood.

I should add that this aim in no way implies that schooling outcomes should be limited to mindless memorisation of facts and information or should be unconcerned about all other outcomes. Rather I am simply making the point that the public considers the acquisition of the knowledge and skills prescribed by the curriculum to be the primary outcome of schooling and their view is supported by good and sufficient reasons.

First I will briefly describe learner - centered instruction and then I will show how it disagrees with India’s educational aims and priorities. The term “learner - centered” implies teaching fitted to the learner’s unique characteristics, e.g. the student’s developmental stage or learning style or gender. In concept, it assumes that if teachers are able to “connect with learners, rather than simply covering the curriculum,” students will learn more or less spontaneously, i.e., without the structure and teacher direction ordinarily considered necessary.

It is an appealing concept but unfortunately one that is largely unsubstantiated by experimental evidence. For example, there are many studies of student learning styles but almost none have demonstrated that student achievement can be improved by fitting teaching to particular learning styles. In medical terms, there is plenty

of diagnosis but little in the way of proven treatment.

The same problem exists with most other attempts to fit teaching to student diversity. Yes, there are all kinds of differences among students and it might be supposed that if the school did a better job of accommodating to these differences, students would learn more. But the problem is that proven treatments are lacking. So instead of teachers being trained in an armamentarium of approaches proven effective with different learners, they are trained in theory and given to believe that if they correctly fit their teaching to each learner's uniquenesses, learning will more or less spontaneously emerge. By the way, when learner - centered teaching fails, professors presume that the teachers are at fault. In other words, if a teacher uses learner - centered methods and fails to bring about expected outcomes, it is presumed that they applied the theory incorrectly. Often it is assumed that they lacked proper training. In the alternative, it might be assumed that they lacked a proper sensitivity to student differences or lacked the creativity to make an adaptive response. Teacher-educators consider insensitivity and lack of creativity to be negative predictors of a successful career in teaching; so not surprisingly, most teachers prefer to accept the idea that they need more training.

The teacher is a leader of a learner - centered community [i.e., classroom], in which an atmosphere of trust and openness produces a stimulating exchange of ideas and mutual respect. The teacher is a critical thinker and problem solver who plays a variety of roles when teaching. As a coach, the teacher observes, evaluates, and changes directions and strategies whenever necessary. As a facilitator, the teacher helps students link ideas in the content area to familiar ideas, to prior experiences, and relevant problems. As a manager, the teacher effectively acquires, allocates, and conserves resources. By encouraging self-directed learning and by modelling respectful behaviour, the teacher effectively manages the learning environment so that optimal learning occurs.

Notice that the ideal avoids any suggestion that the teacher should direct or require or expect any particular educational result. Also notice that it in no way suggests that the teacher direct or require students behave themselves, pay attention, and make an effort when they don't feel like it. Rather it assumes that the ideal teacher is one that is somehow able to fit classroom conditions to learners in such a way that they will be transformed from the kind of young people we see in everyday life to ones who undergo a spontaneous burst of self-directed and collaboratively undertaken educational growth.

It is clear that the public wants teachers to employ methods of instruction that will bring about the outcomes prescribed by the curriculum. It is also clear, however, that they want teachers to teach in ways that students will find stimulating, engaging, and enjoyable. Teachers who have been trained to use learner - centered teaching methods agree with both of these objectives but there is a critical difference in their priorities. The public and especially parents are concerned, first and foremost, about whether the students are learning that which they are supposed to learn. To them, the child's longer-term educational well-being is more important than any immediate satisfactions in the learning experience. They agree with the notion that school

should be a stimulating, rewarding, and joyful experience, but not at the expense of the longer-term educational outcomes.

Teachers who employ learner - centered teaching methods act on the basis of the opposite priorities. The learner - centered viewpoint taught in schools of education presumes that the student's engagement in the learning process is more important than any specific result sought by the teacher because they believe that enjoyment will somehow eventually lead to learning. Teachers are taught to believe that if a child is interested and engaged in an educational activity, they are learning something valuable even if that outcome is not the immediate objective.

For example, rather than systematically teach children how to sound out words, children taught to read by the learner - centered, whole language approach are encouraged to guess at words about which they are uncertain. Whole language instructors believe that guessing permits children to become engaged in reading more quickly and naturally than they would if they began by learning to correctly decode the letters printed on the page.

The problem, however, is that in the case of reading, putting enjoyment and engagement ahead of decoding skills invites the development of habits that can seriously undermine long-term proficiency. It is the same kind of handicap that is created when people learn to keyboard by the hunt and peck method.

A Regulatory Alternative :

Happily for policymakers, I believe there is an alternative that will permit policymakers to see in a more direct and clear-cut way whether teachers are being trained in teaching methods that respect the public's aim of improved student achievement. It avoids the blending of objectives that has resulted from collaborative regulation. Some school have adopted a value-added indicator of teacher effectiveness. Value-added assessment is a statistical methodology that quantifies annual student achievement gains in a way that takes into account student differences. It is the most accurate and objective way of determining teacher effectiveness currently available. Instead of relying on indirect indicators like ExCET scores, it measures teacher effectiveness by looking at the measured achievement of the students who were taught.

Value-added assessment can be used to measure teacher preparedness for licensure, advanced certification and, of course, the scores earned by newly graduated teachers can be used as an indicator of how well they were trained. Of critical importance, it measures teacher effectiveness in a way that respects the public's aims.

There was an unshakable faith that these theories were in the best interests of children and therefore that those who denied them were not merely in error but intent on doing children harm. There was consequently an absolute denial of the harm these theories were themselves doing to children. Where there was clear and demonstrable evidence of such harm, it was either ignored or denied or blamed on every surrounding social factor that could be thought of—parents, television, poverty, unemployment—on anything but the way children were being taught.