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PhD Topic/Title: Textbook Development and Classroom Transaction: Understanding Social and Political Life

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Findings of the study:

The study examines the subject-area of Social and Political Life (SPL), conceived under the recommendations of the National Curriculum Framework, 2005, and introduced by the NCERT in 2006–08 in place of erstwhile 'Civics' in classes VI, VII and VIII. Guided by the transformative and reconstructionist agenda of NCF'05, the SPL textbooks tried to engage with social, political and economic issues in a diverse country, and were appreciated by educationists, planners, teacher-educators and students when first published (Batra, 2010; Bhog, 2012; Pathak, 2013). Despite being in use for more than fifteen years in CBSE schools, no published studies have examined, through thick descriptions, the debates and dilemmas of the textbook development committees, or the usefulness of SPL in government school classrooms. This study addresses that gap by covering the entire trajectory of the textbook — from its making at the NCERT to its use in classrooms — and hopes to be an original contribution to the field of political science/ social science education in India.

The study is organised around two questions: (a) What went into the process of creation of textbooks titled Social and Political Life? and (b) What purpose do these textbooks serve for teachers and students in the classroom? It was conducted in two phases: open-ended, semi-structured interviews with ten members of the Textbook Development Committee (TDC), and classroom ethnography in a Sarvodaya Government Secondary school in East Delhi, involving observation of SPL classes in VI, VII and VIII, interviews with six social science teachers including the HoD and a B.Ed trainee, and informal group discussions with students. Drawing on Goffman, Mead, Schutz, Geertz, Garfinkel, Bernstein, Young, Thapan, Sarangapani, George and Farooqi, the study employs classroom ethnography, symbolic interactionism and "thick description", structured through Wolcott's (1994) sequential approach and Becker's (1986) data-driven writing, with reflexive attention to the researcher's positionality.

The Process: An Epistemological and Pedagogical Shift

The SPL textbooks represent an epistemological shift from 'Civics' to an interdisciplinary 'Social and Political Life' — not a mere change in nomenclature, but a fundamental rethinking of how social sciences are taught. Central to this was the administrator's role, executed by Krishna Kumar, then Director of NCERT, who brought together a diverse group with a shared goal of creating a new kind of national textbook that would foster critical thinking and empathy. He provided both the freedom and the control necessary for the TDC to choose the forms and content of new knowledge for critical citizenship, aligning with Apple's (1993) advocacy for democratic education and Freire's (1970) view of education as a practice of freedom. An atmosphere of intellectual freedom (Giroux, 1981) was crucial: the government in power let members work independently, and even when the final product carried elements not aligned with its perspective, this was allowed without fear. The prospect of participating in a critical epistemic shift was itself intellectually stimulating. Constructing the reality of social and political life for children in a country as diverse as India required significant freedom within the TDC; content and themes were finalised through dialogue and consensus rather than majority rule. Time was a constant constraint, and key content choices

— for instance, choosing Sudha Goel’s case over Shankar Guha Niyogi’s to illustrate the justice system’s ability to deliver resolutions — were made through extensive discussions on the picture of India to be presented while keeping realities intact.

The Product: A New Kind of Textbook

The efforts culminated in SPL textbooks that draw upon Political Science, Sociology, Economics and, at times, History, making the subject-area interdisciplinary. Guided by ‘Equality’ and ‘Social Justice’, the textbooks integrate issues of gender, caste, class and religion through critical pedagogy, moving away from a development-finance approach and challenging patriarchal notions. The diverse composition of the TDC brought a multiplicity of perspectives, bridging urban–rural and dominant–subaltern positions, even as an urban middle-class perspective remained visible in the choice and representation of content. Design and appearance — photographs of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, illustrations, storyboards, font choices — required painstaking negotiations echoing McNeil’s (2000) account of educational material production. Contentious issues, including the marginalisation of Adivasis, Muslims and Dalits, were included, situating politics at the heart of the endeavour. Yet, iterations and stakeholder demands mean that textbook ownership is shared; some contributors dissociated from later content or refused honorariums, reflecting the complexities of collaborative projects (Sleeter & Grant, 1991).

The Disconnect with Teachers

The development of SPL textbooks was not followed up with a strategic plan to engage teachers. Teachers were often perceived as a homogeneous group, and when they did not show enthusiasm, no further strategies were developed to involve them meaningfully. Curriculum development remained an academic exercise, filled with jargon, and although some teachers were included in the design process, they did not exhibit the mental engagement required in the actual writing (Bhog). Many viewed the innovative pedagogy as extra work rather than professional growth (Yadav), mirroring Anyon’s (1980) findings on systemic constraints and reflecting the absence of a view of teachers as ‘organic intellectuals’ (Gramsci, 1926).

Situating Classroom Dynamics in Educational Theory

Bernstein’s (1971, 1975, 2000) concept of framing frames the analysis of classroom transmission. The shift from ‘Civics’ to SPL aimed to break down rigid boundaries and make students active participants; however, observed teaching fell under strong framing, with teachers controlling selection, organisation and pacing, not necessarily to ensure meaningful learning. Some displayed little interest and authoritarian methods, occasionally reflecting judgmental attitudes towards students’ caste and class; others made efforts to include students while still controlling the direction of discussion, especially on topics like the Indian Constitution. Bernstein’s framing captures the ‘what’ but not the ‘why’; thick description of side conversations, teasing, discipline and casual remarks reveals that teachers were unwilling to engage with the epistemic shift, rarely engaged in session planning, and organised knowledge based on their own understanding rather than on whether students were grasping the concepts as intended by the curriculum.

Differing Social Realities and Curriculum Gaps

While the textbooks offered opportunities to compare, contrast, interpret and analyse, some sections met resistance from students — on household work, roles attributed to women, censorship, influence of TV — bringing back the notion of ‘valid knowledge’. Textbooks are repositories of “official knowledge”, but that knowledge is negotiated between students and teachers in their classroom contexts. The thesis critiques SPL both at the level of “Process” (how they were developed) and “Product” (how they have been received), and shows how the gaps between them reflect the larger distance between social reality and ideal expectations. Students’ response to the chapter on gender revealed that children whose parents were themselves house-helpers could not associate with the textbook’s insistence on foregrounding household work — reminding the researcher of what the middle-class TDC assumed to be of paramount importance, and reinforcing the need for inclusive teams that differ not only on caste, class, language and gender, but also on perspectives about knowledge and classroom practice.

Teacher Motivation and the Limits of NCERT Textbooks

For the ideals of SPL to work in classrooms, teacher involvement and motivation in curriculum design are essential. Motivation is hampered by weak training and by teachers' under-representation in textbook development; teachers with little control invest less in personalising the curriculum (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), while those who contribute feel empowered (Shulman, 1987). The SPL process fell short on precisely this factor. Practical limits of the system compound the problem: schools are not required to use NCERT textbooks and often adopt derivative books by private publishers that, as V. Geetha observed of CBSE schools in Chennai, are "bad rip offs" missing the earnestness with which SPL was written. A second limitation is that of contextualisation and representation: it is easier for SCERTs than for the NCERT to closely link concepts with contexts while abiding by the terms of inclusion.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Recognising that schools are "linked through their everyday practices to other powerful institutions in ways that are often hidden and complex" (Apple, 1990, p. 63), the study makes the following recommendations. First, democratise textbook development: move to a cyclical, two-to-three-year process of drafting, field trials (as with Eklavya's social science programme), feedback and revision, followed by continuous NCERT workshops with teachers before introducing new textbooks and a five-year review cycle. Second, redesign content through greater teacher involvement — "teacher dialogue groups" or peer groups working on text and content, and "moving out of curricular study to broader community engagement" through pamphlets, street plays, Bal-Melas and newspaper columns on gender, media and related issues — so as to strengthen teachers' agency and avoid pedantic, didactic voices. Third, tie curriculum design to teacher training and assessment. Curriculum design alone changes little; textbook development, teacher training and assessment must move in parallel. External pressures of standardised testing and accountability further erode autonomy (Ingersoll, 2003), and diluting rigid disciplinary and pedagogic boundaries can enable more dialogic classroom conversations.

Fourth, create conceptual, contextual and child-friendly content. Chapter titles such as 'Marginalisation' or 'Diversity and Discrimination' betray an adult voice burdened with underlining constitutional values. Introducing friendship, care, fraternity, peace and love into the heart of writing — rather than talking down to children — would internalise learning, keep it 'interesting' in the Deweyan sense, and reduce the need for separate happiness or moral science curricula. Fraternity is itself a constitutional value and highly relatable for middle-school adolescents. Finally, SPL content should respond to the present socio-political and economic climate. A practical reduction of curriculum load — through information reduction and an interdisciplinary social science textbook combining History, Geography and SPL — is desirable. While equality, democracy, diversity, constitution and rights remain relevant frameworks, their scope needs expansion to address communal politics, minority and LGBTQ rights, the Right to Education Act, power relations across gender, caste, class and religion, media and digital literacy, fact-checking in the age of "fake news", sexuality, Section 370, urban migration and the pandemic's effects on lives and livelihoods. Democracy must be understood as "equitable, active, widespread and fully informed participation", not as "unregulated business manoeuvres in a free market economy" (Apple & Beane, 2006/2013: 139), and pedagogy must resist the banking model (Freire, 1996), enabling the freedom to learn from one's own experience and action (Kumar, 1989: 2475). Drawing guidance from the Constitution of India, Social and Political Life should build independence of thought and action by becoming sensitive to children's feelings and realities, so that they grow into "active, responsible and reflective citizens" (NCF, 2005: 4). SPL is marked by "dynamic theoretical debates and empirical investigations" (Marks, 2008), and must continue to embrace newer political thought and ideas that are contextually more relevant to children.