

## Student-centred learning: A curriculum trend across Asia

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### Background

In internationally funded education projects in Asia, two common curriculum trends are *student-centred learning* and *multi-grade teaching*. This paper will talk about the former. A number of projects have been assisted by various governments and organisations, including UN agencies and the Asian Development Bank. Three international projects focusing on student-centred learning (SCL), all under their national Ministry of Education, are introduced in this paper.

It is worth noting here, that the countries where this writer has worked specifically on SCL cover areas in South East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia. This is significant in so far as the trend to put students at the centre of classroom learning is widespread. Across the Asian region, student-centred learning seems to be the fastest growing and most heavily emphasised aspect of curriculum development and teaching methodology.

### Why student-centred teaching and learning?

SCL, as the term implies, puts the student at the centre of the learning process. Rather than a teacher asking: How am I going to teach this topic/concept? the question is: How are my students go-

ing to learn this topic? The answer to this determines the method chosen by the teacher.

For any of us involved in teaching and curriculum development, we would say that it is not a new idea to have students at the centre of their own learning. So why is SCL emphasised to such a degree that it receives ongoing technical advice and financial assistance from big funding agencies?

It is common for teachers to talk a lot in the classroom — up to 80 per cent of the lesson according to Flanders's (1970) analysis of interaction between teachers and students. Not only is teacher-centred teaching the most common pattern in many countries of the world, including the Asia-Pacific region, but students interacting with other students is actually quite rare.

Further research needs to evaluate whether this type of teaching suits some personalities, but what is clear is that children learn from each other in their daily interactions. Teacher-centred teaching, however, tends to promote rote-memorisation of material, and generally halts creative learning in the classroom.

In many Asian countries, where there is a shortage of trained teachers, large

class sizes, and a shortage of books and teaching-learning materials, teacher-centred teaching became the norm. With as many as one hundred students in a class, and with children in makeshift classrooms or seated in the open-air and public buildings, discipline is often the focus of attention, as the teacher tries to keep children busy or at least under control. No other way is known. Teachers teach the way they were taught in school. To bring about change, special projects to promote SCL have been initiated across the Asian region, not necessarily systematically, but constantly. It is to help address the many problems in educational systems that SCL is incorporated into educational development packages. In the remainder of this paper, the student-centred approaches from three programs are introduced. Each is different according to specific circumstance but all have the basic elements of SCL in common.

### **Bangladesh**

The Comprehensive Primary Education Project (CPEP) in Bangladesh operates in three northern districts, among the poorest in the country. In some cases, there is no permanent school because annual floods damage buildings. Rural schools have two or three teachers. Many run morning and afternoon shifts.

Under CPEP, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MPME) distributed a kit of teaching materials to over 4000 schools. The simple teaching-learning aids (TLAs) are practical items, sometimes found in the market. They can be

used for teaching across the curriculum, but are particularly useful for science and mathematics.

TLAs alone were not the answer, though. It became evident that teachers had no experience with these materials in daily life, let alone using them for student-centred learning. They had to be encouraged and assisted to do more than demonstrate the TLAs. They had to get students to use the materials. To help achieve this, CPEP produced a bright, illustrated book for teachers, which gave simple steps for multiple SCL activities. It shows how the teacher is involved, how students can be grouped in large classes, and how they can use the TLAs practically, both in discovery and in more structured SCL.

Exemplary local teachers were selected as Resource Pool members. They were trained periodically in SCL with TLAs for 18 months. After this, they 'trained' groups of teachers in schools. Newsletters with practical SCL tips were also distributed to teachers. Throughout the project, the focus has been on SCL and it has been so successful that, four years later, the training is still going on, with regular monitoring built into the program.

### **Nepal**

The UNDP Community Owned Primary Education (COPE) program operates in six districts in remote areas of Nepal. These schools are in highly inaccessible regions, where population numbers did not warrant the government establishing

schools. Children had previously been required to walk many hours to ‘neighbouring’ schools, which in extreme Himalayan conditions meant that most children did not go to school at all, particularly girls.

Under COPE, local communities make buildings available as the ‘school’, and manage them through local School Management Boards. These schools provide the first three years of schooling and have one woman ‘teacher’, selected by the community from the community. If schools have a roll of over 80 students, an assistant can be appointed. multi-grade teaching is also the norm in this situation.

The young women selected as COPE teachers are given short initial training in mathematics and language, with a strong focus on learning activities with children at the centre. Initially, a team of master trainers were trained in SCL, with a focus on fun and useful educational activities which could be used in the early grades. These trainers then conducted the same SCL activities with the new recruits in the ten-day induction program. Follow-up training is conducted every six months, each time concentrating on SCL.

## **Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, the ADB funds a national education project with a strong focus on SCL. The project covers the entire country. Until 1991, Uzbekistan was part of the USSR. Uzbek is now the official language, although Russian is

widely spoken. Textbooks are translated into the many regional languages — a huge expense for the government, and methods have been largely didactic, and geared to top performers. Though teacher training curricula mention the topic, “lecturers seldom demonstrate new methodologies such as student-centred teaching” (ADB, 2000).

As well as a radical reform of textbooks up to Grade 9 level under the new project, the other major initiative in curriculum in Uzbekistan is teacher in-service training for SCL. Traditional methods were geared to an educational elite but the mass of children were left behind with rigid methodology and few resources. In this reform, elitism will be a thing of the past, as textbooks are being redesigned and rewritten with a focus on SCL.

Two comprehensive research projects are also under way — one determining the teaching methods actually used in schools, and the other examining the form of in-service training which already exists in in-service training centres across the country. With this as a basis, a new program of in-service, focusing on SCL is planned for the next four or five years. The greatest challenge here is to get the trainers beyond the talk about SCL and to get them to work practically with teachers and, in turn, teachers with students.

The teaching ‘culture’ in Uzbekistan is in the process of change. The results of student-centred methods will be held up for inspection. As Hanlon (2001)

notes, “woven through these debates [‘traditional’ versus student-centred] are value judgements about particular teaching styles”. For the Pacific, too, the tension between teacher-centred and student-centred learning is ever-present. The issue of how, when and why to use student-centred learning needs to be constantly debated, reviewed and reworked at the school level.

## References

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