

Teacher Educators' Beliefs regarding Elementary School Curriculum in Pakistan

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Abstract

The study aimed at exploring teacher educators' beliefs about elementary school curriculum in Pakistan as teacher educators' beliefs towards curriculum may influence teachers' beliefs towards curriculum. The study was done qualitatively. Sixteen teacher educators were interviewed through semi-structured interview (fourteen from twelve public sector institutions and two from private institutions) conveniently. All the participants were those who had either taught a course on curriculum or member of curriculum review committee(s) or had some other role related to curriculum development. Moreover, the feedback given by the respondents to the student teachers, after observing their lessons during teaching practice, was also analysed to cross-validate the findings from interviews. The data highlight that the elementary school curriculum is generally perceived as a set of written documents by the teacher educators. School subjects are considered disintegrated and specialized in nature which may be taught by subject specialists only. Teacher's role is largely viewed as to impart subject knowledge and maintain classroom discipline. These findings indicate that teacher educators' beliefs on elementary school curriculum are clearly inclined towards the 'Scholarly Academic' and the 'Social Efficiency' Ideologies of curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum beliefs, curriculum ideologies, curriculum orientations, curriculum philosophies

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Introduction

Curriculum is a central element of education at any level. Because of this centrality, it has been debated extensively producing a relatively huge literature on it. Schubert (1986) noticed a tremendous increase in curriculum related publications in the past century. The number has increased many folds by now. Though curriculum theorists have always been concerned about the curriculum work, they have not been able to reach on a common definition of curriculum. Literature shows a large variation in curriculum definitions and its purpose (Ellis, 2004; Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Ratcliff, 1997; Schubert, 1986; Stark & Lattuca, 1997; Thomas, Kern, Hughes, & Chen, 2015; Marsh, 2004; Walker, 2002). Portelli (1987) cited in Marsh (2004), noticed that more than hundred definitions of the term 'curriculum' appear in the literature. Sometimes, curriculum is defined as intended planned learning and sometimes as a set of learning outcomes and experiences. Some educators use the term syllabus and curriculum interchangeably. To some educationists, curriculum is an 'object' while to others it is an 'act'. On the same note, many educationists suggest preparation of curricula by experts while others favours teachers input in curriculum planning. Considering a large variation in understanding curriculum, theorists have categorized curriculum under different categories representing distinct ideologies.

Study of educational beliefs has received considerable attention in past few decades (Barnes, Fives, & Dacey, 2015; Buehl, & Beck, 2015; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991; Tondeur, Braak, Ertmer, & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2017; Zhang, & Liu, 2017). Similarly, various aspects of teacher education e.g. the importance of practicum, research-based programme, teacher education policy have also been extensively researched (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009; Munthe & Rogne, 2015; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2015). However, there is a lack of research on curricular orientations or beliefs of teachers and teacher educators. Though some researchers have tried to investigate curricular orientations of teachers (Cheung & Wong, 2002), there is scarcity of research on teacher educators' curricular orientations. Tatto and Coupland (2003, p. 128) noticed lack of research on teacher educators' beliefs on curriculum. Curriculum beliefs have a profound effect on curriculum practices and roles of stakeholders, parents, educators and students (Joseph, 2011).

Though the role of curriculum has been acknowledged worldwide in making educational reform successful, no study on teachers and teacher educators' beliefs about curriculum has been done in Pakistan in past 70 years. In fact a very few studies have been done in the field of "Curriculum" as searched from Higher Education Commission (HEC) research repository. Most of the researches have tried to explore models of curriculum and their relevance in elementary and secondary schools in Pakistan. National

research repositories do not contain any research particularly based on examining teachers' beliefs on education or curriculum. Moreover, no such study has been done on teacher educators too. Realizing the research gap, the present study was planned. This study extends research on curriculum beliefs or orientations of academia by exploring teacher educators' beliefs regarding elementary school curriculum. It is important to explore teacher educators' beliefs to school curriculum as their beliefs can influence pre-service teachers' beliefs. In Pakistani context, the study is even more important as teacher educators have been key players in different education reforms which have occurred in Pakistan.

Research Question

What are teacher educators' beliefs regarding elementary school curriculum in Pakistan?

Context of the Study

Elementary school curriculum gained comparatively more attention in Pakistan since the start of 21st century. It is evidenced from the fact that curriculum policy documents and National Curricula 2006 have been developed in the previous decade. National Education Policy 2009 document has the word 'curriculum' 49 times in it. In order to check whether textbooks are in agreement with National Curricula, in 2007 National Textbook and Learning Materials Policy and Plan of Action was developed. This document also contends that examination will be based on curriculum (p.8). National Curricula have also emphasized on teacher education programmes to include national curricula in their courses. Similarly Punjab Education Examination Commission, a statutory body claims that it holds examination in accordance with the national curricula. Moreover, in order to make sure that textbooks are in accordance with national curricula, recently Punjab Curriculum Authority (PCA) has been established in Punjab Province.

Currently in Pakistan textbooks are being written taking the National curricula as reference documents. In these curricula learning outcomes are mentioned from behavioural aspect. Private schools curricula have also been developed around objectives. This method of curriculum development has its basis in Tyler's (1949) reasoning of curriculum development.

Theoretical Framework

Different classification schemes, particularly Schiro's (2012) ideologies, have provided theoretical framework of the study. Before discussing theoretical roots of the study, the concepts of beliefs and curriculum have been discussed here.

Beliefs

The construct of beliefs has been defined in a number of ways. Pajares (1992) has labelled them as ‘messy constructs’ which are difficult to delineate or define. Kagan (1992) defines beliefs as provocative form of personal knowledge that guides one’s actions. Denessen (2000 cited in Hermans, Braak, & Keer, 2008) views teachers’ educational beliefs as understandings, conceptions, premises or propositions about education. Haney et al. (2003) consider beliefs as people’s convictions or personal philosophies. Loucks-Horsley *et al.* (1998) cited in Mansour (2009) argue that beliefs are deeper than opinions. They are close to ideal truth. In this study, beliefs have been taken as understandings and premises thought to be true (Philipp, 2007, p. 259) and curriculum ideology is considered as a combined set of beliefs about different aspects of curriculum like objectives, goals, content, learning activities, and assessment (Cheung & Wong, 2002, p.226).

Curriculum

Curriculum debates have resulted into different descriptions of curriculum. Prideaux (2003 cited in Parsons and Beauchamp, 2012, p. 206) argue that curriculum exists at three levels i.e. planning, teachers’ implementation and students’ experiences. A curriculum should be flexible to accommodate emerging trends. Goodlad and associates (1979) state that curriculum is made at different places and each place has its own context. Doyle (1992) has explained curriculum at three levels: The institutional curriculum; the programmatic curriculum; and the classroom curriculum. The institutional curriculum is based on societal expectations and needs. The programmatic curriculum translates institutional curriculum into programmes, courses, timetable, examination or assessment schedules. The classroom curriculum is the micro level of curriculum. It refers to what is taught and learned in schools and classrooms. Each of these levels contributes a distinctive layer of meaning to curriculum content.

Curriculum can be conceived at narrow or broad levels (Oliva, 1997). It means that the notion of curriculum cannot be reduced to teaching subjects, schemes of work or a lesson plans rather it may be understood in terms of micro and macro perspectives. *Micro perspective* involves questions of local context. For example, contents of different subjects, activities and assessment practices (Autio, 2009). In contrast to micro perspective the *macro perspectives on curriculum* focus on larger political, sociological or psychological frameworks of education and the curriculum (Autio, 2009). Molnar (1992, p.198) notices that generally teachers and other professional in school believe that curriculum means what is taught in schools.

Classification of Curricular Beliefs

Curriculum beliefs have been labelled and categorized by curriculum theorists. For example, Kemmis, Cole, & Suggett (1983) classified curriculum beliefs into three categories: classical orientation; progressive orientation; and socially critical orientation. Longstreet and Shane (1993) pointed out four conceptions of curriculum: society-oriented curriculum which defines the purpose of schooling as to serve society; student-centred curriculum in which individual students and their interests are crucial; knowledge-centred curriculum where knowledge is the heart of curriculum; and eclectic curriculum in which various compromises are possible. Grundy (1998) has classified curriculum beliefs as two views i.e. syllabus and pedagogical. *Syllabus View* of the curriculum considers it from the aspects of objectives, content of subject, relevant teaching/learning acts and examination as designed by experts. Moreover, knowledge is viewed as something out there in this view. Syllabus is designed to teach specific knowledge to the students. In contrast to syllabus view, pedagogical view considers curriculum from external entity point of view instead construction by student/teacher on daily basis. Pedagogical curriculum is also named as ‘descriptive curriculum’ because here curriculum is not in the form of written document rather it is defined in real situation (Ellis, 2004). Prideaux (2003) believes that teaching/learning are part of the curriculum.

Schiro (2012) found that different classification schemes of curriculum were similar to Scholar Academic, Social Efficiency, Learner Centered, and Social Reconstruction ideologies.

The Scholar Academic Ideology

It has its’ basis in a belief that aim of the education is to equip students with in-depth knowledge of different subjects so that they gain the essence of academic disciplines. This ideology of curriculum defines teacher’s role as of a mini-scholar who has deep understanding of an academic discipline and can impart knowledge to the students. The Scholar Academic Orientation of curriculum considers the purpose of assessment as to compare students’ performance thus advocates grading achievement.

The Social Efficiency Ideology

The Social Efficiency Ideology of Curriculum is concerned with social productivity. The underlying belief is that the essence of learners lies in their capabilities to performing activities. The curriculum must be a set of behavioural outcomes developed by the experts and teachers are the implementers of that curriculum to ensure that students develop the desired competencies particularly skill competencies. The Social Efficiency Ideology of curriculum describes the purpose of assessment as a mechanism to judge if students have attained the required competencies by them in “Pass” or “Fail” categories.

The Learner Centred Ideology

The learner-Centred Ideology of Curriculum puts individuals' interests and needs first. Learner centred or child-centred curriculum beliefs put child first and every other thing revolves around the child interests. Though child centred ideology values the child's empowerment, it does not encompass social change or society's empowerment. The proponents of this ideology of curriculum favour integration instead of compartmentalization of subjects. Timetables are not organized in terms of subjects/courses but in terms of integrated units. Grady (1994) favours inter disciplinary curricula as it provides opportunities for complex learning. Grady (1994) further insists that classroom environment, content standards, themes, topics, problems collectively make interdisciplinary curriculum. Though this orientation of curriculum has received a lot of attention in late 20th century, Beck (2002) criticizes individual focus of self-actualization in the learner centred curricula.

The Social Reconstruction Ideology

This ideology considers that the aim of curriculum is to contribute in developing just society. The social reconstruction ideology views the elementary school curriculum as a tool for facilitating change. This ideology defines teacher's role as of a learner. Freire (1972) maintained that teaching is in fact learning. Teacher has to be part of the learning process.

Methodology

This qualitative study included the semi-structured interviews of sixteen teacher educators (fourteen respondents were from twelve public sector institutions and two from private institutions). The sample was selected conveniently. The participants were those who had either taught a course on curriculum or member of curriculum review committee(s) or had some other role related to curriculum development. To cross-validate the findings from interviews, respondents' feedback to student teachers on their teaching practice was also analysed. Respondents gave feedback to the student teachers after observing their lessons during teaching practice.

Participants were interviewed individually on the days when they observed the lessons of student teachers during teaching practice. The average time of interview was 30 minutes. The following questions have been asked during interview: How do you define elementary school curriculum? What is the role of teachers in elementary school curriculum? What is the role of assessment in elementary school curriculum? The researcher tried to listen to the respondents in detail without any interruption. The researcher rephrased questions or translated them in Urdu, if needed. The respondents were requested to share the written feedback which they had given to student teachers.

The researchers read feedbacks and interview transcriptions independently and coded them to develop themes. The researchers shared their coding with each other to reach consensus. The themes emerged through coding were later analyzed in terms of Schiro's ideologies of curriculum.

Findings of the Study

Themes emerged from the interview transcriptions and feedback analysis are given below. To keep respondents anonymous, codes have been used.

1. Curriculum as a set of written documents
2. Curriculum as subject knowledge
3. Curriculum as overall knowledge
4. Curriculum as observable behavioural outcomes
5. Curriculum as construction - Child-centeredness
6. Curriculum as Social Reconstruction



Figure 1. Beliefs on Elementary school curriculum

1. Curriculum as a set of written documents

Majority of the respondents defined curriculum as a written document. Some respondents defined curriculum as a set of targets.

Curriculum is a document prepared by education ministry. Teachers need to follow this document to plan their lessons. The document clearly includes Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. These SLOs provide a direction for teaching. (Respondent 2 [R2])

Another participant added:

It is a detailed plan which a school needs to follow. It includes the subjects being offered by the school, the content (books), supportive teaching materials and assessments. Scope and goals are different for different grades. [R4]

Although few participants highlight that lesson plans are part of curriculum, but around half participants gave importance to lesson plans as is evidenced below:

You prepared an excellent lesson plan! Lesson objectives were very clearly written followed by appropriate, relevant, and sequenced activities.

(Feedback given by Respondent 5 [F5 & 11])

2. Curriculum as subject knowledge

Half of the respondents viewed curriculum as subject knowledge and supported to teach subjects by their experts at primary school level. These respondents have the point of view that every subject in the school is unique in its nature and specialist of that subject can teach it properly, as is evidenced from below response.

Each subject has its own nature and unique knowledge therefore it must be taught by a subject specialist as s/he has a master's degree in a school subject. I believe that a subject specialist teaches concepts better than others. [R16]

Nearly all teacher educators mentioned knowledge of the teaching concepts in their feedbacks. They appreciated the student teacher if s/he was able to teach the concept or explained the topic. If the teacher did not teach the topic well then the teacher educators highlighted:

Before starting exercise on subtracting algebraic fractions you might have revised operation rules (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) with the students. It would have helped in revising students' concepts. [F1]

It was a very well-taught lesson. You told students that percentage sign (%) means out of 100 and then you wrote many examples on the board to help pupils understand the concept of percentages. [F11]

A focus on teaching subject content indicates that teacher educators believe that the role of teacher is of “mini-scholars” who have to impart knowledge to the students.

3. Curriculum as Overall Knowledge

Very few teacher educators viewed curriculum as knowledge (knowledge of subject, skills, and discipline) which children get in school.

Curriculum is not only syllabus. It comprises all academic, co- as well as extra-curricular activities. Learning is not confined to classroom only but outside the class also. [R14 & 3]

It is noticeable that the teacher educators did not highlight teaching of discipline explicitly in their interview responses. However, many teacher educators mentioned teaching of “good behaviour” in their feedbacks. They used different jargons e.g. management, control and discipline for the same notion i.e. students’ behaviour. Half of the respondents commented on ‘pupils’ behaviour’ in post lesson observation feedbacks. They used a variety of expressions, for example:

Classroom discipline needs your attention. Some students were continuously talking throughout the lesson. [F1]

Your classroom management was good. Students remained on their seats and raised their hands before answering a question. [R10]

4. Curriculum as observable behavioural outcomes

Another theme emerged from the interview responses as well as the feedback analysis is behaviouristic beliefs on curriculum. Few teacher educators described curriculum in terms of behavioural targets in their interview responses.

A teacher should not only follow the textbook rather he should base his lessons on the SLOs identified in National Curriculum. Similarly, his assessment should also be SLO- based instead of textbook based. [R10]

You did not write objectives in the form of behavioural outcomes. [F10]

5. Curriculum as construction - Child-Centeredness

Some of the respondents highlighted child-centeredness in their interview responses.

Though experts prepare curricula but to me the actual curriculum is what occurs in classroom with the students. Teacher makes decisions regarding teaching methods, activity choices, assessment strategies, and feedback mechanisms. A teacher needs to know the ZPD of all children and scaffold them. To me curriculum revolves around the teacher to make an impact. [R14]

Some of the respondents highlighted the importance of knowing children's psychology instead of subject knowledge only during their interviews.

To teach in primary school, a teacher must have qualification and specialization in teaching at primary school. Teachers should keep updating their knowledge. They should know children's psychology to cater for the needs of children. I also believe that primary school syllabus should not be segmented into subjects instead there may be integrated projects. The focus needs to be learning the problem solving. [R3]

Child centred curriculum beliefs can be traced in some teacher educators' feedback also:

Brainstorming in the start of the lesson was good as students freely expressed their thoughts. You did not wind up the brainstorming session before moving to actual creative writing activity as a result students looked confused. Your approach seemed teacher-centred mostly; and you tried to follow your lesson plan as such. You could have changed your plan as per needs of the classroom situation. Your role is not to cover the syllabus but to make pupils learn. [F14 & 3]

Above statements show that some teacher educators have learner-centred ideology of curriculum.

6. Curriculum as Social Reconstruction

A very few respondents spoke about social reconstruction emphasis of the curriculum.

Teacher's work is not limited to subject teaching and finishing syllabus rather much more than that. We know that our society is suffering from a lot of ills like corruption, dishonesty, illiteracy, and insecurity. I strongly believe that teachers should address these aspects also in their lessons. Teacher has to develop students as confident, critical thinkers. For this teacher needs to be creative and non-conformist. S/he needs to learn many things and I believe that a teacher is the most important learner in the class as s/he has to learn about students' interests, their learning styles, their prior knowledge, needs of the society, needs of the class and much more. [R3]

Discussion

The findings of the study have been discussed in terms of syllabus and pedagogical orientations, Schiro's (2012) curricular ideologies and the context of the study. As there is relatively little literature related to curricular beliefs of teachers or teacher educators, the findings have been compared only with one available research. Before discussing the findings, the researchers want to ascertain that this qualitative study is highly contextual and the findings may only be generalized with caution. However, the study offers valuable conclusions regarding curricular orientations of teacher educators.

The themes indicate that mostly teacher educators in Pakistan have *syllabus orientation* of the elementary school curriculum. Though a few teacher educators defined curriculum in terms of activities, *pedagogical orientation* of elementary school curriculum is not very visible among teacher educators. There could be multiple reasons for this orientation among teacher educators and social context may be one of the major reasons for it. In Pakistan, the term curriculum is used by the professionals as well as non-professionals. Curriculum Studies is a core course in postgraduate programmes on Education (MA, MEd) and all teacher educators have studied this course and read about different curriculum beliefs and ideologies, their curriculum beliefs are not very different from common people in the society. It strengthens Vygotsky's idea that *knowledge is social*. Common people talk about the curriculum of different schools in terms of "Oxford Curriculum" or "Textbook Board's Curriculum". To common people, curriculum is an "object" and teachers teach that object. It is worth noting that professional teacher educators also view curriculum as an object. Describing curriculum in terms of SLOs, Work Schemes, Plan of Lessons, Standards, etc. presents syllabus orientation of the teacher educators. Examination boards have a mandate to manage examination at different terminal stages. People assume that whatever is examined formally is curriculum and this is only the subjects' content which is examined, thus, teacher educators similar to other people view curriculum as subject knowledge.

Teacher educators of Pakistan lack in curriculum's pedagogical orientation and this might be because of their exposure and experience. In Pakistan, Curriculum Wing, as a separate body has been working for a number of years and has produced and revised curricula of different subjects over the years. Similarly, separate government entities named as textbook boards are producing textbooks for schools. Presence of such organizations provide evidence for the understanding that curriculum needs to be developed by curriculum experts, books to be prepared by textbook writers and teachers are only the implementers of the curriculum. Almost all teacher educators have developed one or more teaching courses during their career and they describe them as course curriculum. This might be another reason for believing that curriculum is a document and not an 'act'.

Classroom discipline has emerged as an equally significant theme especially from the analysis of post observation feedback. The reason could be “apprenticeship observation” done by teacher educators. Apprenticeship observation is a term applied on student teachers’ for developing their beliefs. It has been used here for the teacher educators’ with an underlying assumption that teacher educators had also been schooled. Though teacher educators have studied different learning theories and they talk about child-centeredness in often, only some of the teacher educators mentioned children’s interests and needs in their interview responses. Moreover, the lesson feedbacks also do not emphasize on child-centeredness. Teacher educators’ main emphasis is on classroom discipline and the presentation of concepts. In their feedbacks, the teacher educators generally did not criticize teacher-centeredness or appreciate child-centred activities.

The study indicates that the elementary school curriculum is generally perceived as a set of written documents by the teacher educators. School subjects are considered disintegrated and specialized in nature which may be taught by subject specialists only. Teacher’s role is viewed as to impart subject knowledge and maintain classroom discipline. It shows that our education related beliefs are strongly influenced by our culture. Most of the parents get their children educated to make them able to have job later on. Moreover, parents have main concern with their children’s marks/grades because grades are key to get admission in higher degrees along with getting job.

Generally, programmes of teacher education claim to produce such graduates who are reflective teachers, meaning that these practitioners are able to reflect on and in their practice/action and can improve themselves. The curricula of these programmes develop self-actualizing and pragmatic people. During the operational use of such curricula in teaching/learning setting, the progressivism remains to impart the knowledge merely. Child-centredness and Social reconstruction are though highlighted and advocated at different forums, they could not be traced as major curriculum orientations in this study. The findings of current study are significantly different from those of Cheung and Wong (2002). They noticed that teachers had no preferred curricular orientation rather had mixed orientations. The reason for this variation must be differences in culture and professional training.

Conclusion of the Study

The study indicates that although teacher educators are actively involved in planning and teaching courses on curriculum development and curriculum studies, their own curricular beliefs are traditional. This indicates that knowledge of child-centred and socially critical curriculum does not necessarily inform teacher educators' own curricular beliefs. Generally, education is believed by common people as a tool for good living. Teacher educators are also part of larger society and they also view curriculum with the same lens. The findings raise concerns regarding the implementation of child-centred integrated curriculum at elementary level, and activities for social change. The study findings indicate a need for research on factors responsible for curricular beliefs of teacher educators. There is also a need of research regarding correlation between teacher educators' and preservice teachers' curricular beliefs regarding elementary school curriculum.

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