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Bridging Borders: Global Perspectives in Education

Meenakshi Lath

Bombay Teachers' Training College

meenakshilath@hotmail.com

Abstract

The individualization of curriculum is a challenge for the teacher education system in India. Curricula are prescribed by Universities for all the affiliated colleges, and these undergo revision only every few years. The curriculum innovation described in this report is a response to this challenge. The study explores a unique case of the development of a certificate add-on course relating to global perspectives in education for a group of pre-service teachers.

The inquiry was based on a constructivist paradigm and revolved around two fundamental questions which emerged as the focus of the study. How did the teacher educator with almost no prior experience of curriculum development describe her experiences of developing a course on global perspectives in education? How did the participants in the course describe their learning experiences? The method of inquiry adopted was qualitative, and the research strategy used was the case study approach. The tools for data collection included interviews, observations and content analysis of documents. The data was analyzed using a narrative approach.

The setting was a college of education affiliated to the University of Mumbai. The college is situated in the central business district of the metropolis of Mumbai, the commercial capital of India. The institution has about 200 students and 15 faculty members and runs courses for almost all levels of teacher education. The “actors” in this study were a group of 11 Bachelor of Education students who undertook the course in “Global Perspectives in Education” as an add-on course to enrich and supplement their studies. The “events” were the learning experiences of the researcher who developed the course to orient the students to the practice of education in different parts of the world, as well as the learning experiences of the students who had chosen to participate in the course. The processes studied were the evolution of the course and participants involvement in the learning process.

The curriculum innovation incorporated perspectives on education from different parts of the world and covered a wide range of issues. A variety of source materials were used, among them the most popular was an American film “Freedom Writers” released in 2007 based on the book “The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World around Them” by Erin Grunwell. Another book used for readings was a bestseller, “Teacher Man” a memoir published in 2005, authored by Frank McCourt. A selection from the INNODATA Monograph Series published by the IBE UNESCO which provide information on successful innovations of interest and relevance to educational practitioners were used as case studies. Issues related to trade in education services and teaching overseas were also included.

The course was transacted through a diversity of teaching methods such as case studies, discussions, viewing of film clips, reviews of books, readings, and other innovative methods. A secondary objective of the course was to enable the pre-service teachers to gain generic skills of critical thinking, reflection and analysis.

The major findings of the study revealed that the course was process-based rather than product-based. The participants willingly engaged in the process of acquiring perspectives from across borders as they felt these skills were required to improve their prospects in the future. From the perspective of the teacher educator, though the process of curriculum development is not an easy one, it is a rewarding experience. Curriculum development is not static; rather it is ongoing and dictated to a large extent by contexts of the learning situation.

Bridging Borders: Global Perspectives in Education

Globalization has been one of the major evolutionary forces in the world during the last decade. Across the ages, many events and phenomena have been credited as being “evolutionary forces, such as natural disasters or environmental stress; social processes such as industrialization or modernization; human issues and realities such as gender conflict or ageing. However, it is an undisputed fact that the blurring of barriers between nations has been the forerunner of change in terms of the sheer numbers of human beings it has swept in its tide. The teaching profession is not immune to this tide of change, and in the years to come, we can expect a radical shift in the ways in which we educators operate. In such a scenario, it is imperative that pre-service teachers have a deeper awareness of educational contexts across the world.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case report of the implementation and development of a certificate add-on course relating to “global perspectives in education” for a group of pre-service teachers in a college of education located in the central business district of the metropolis of Mumbai, the commercial and intellectual capital of India. The module was designed to develop the awareness of student teachers to issues related to education and the practice of education all over the world.

Context for the study

The college of education, which provides the setting for this study, is one of the affiliated institutions of the University of Mumbai. In the Indian context, affiliation to a University implies that the University prescribes the curriculum, conducts final examinations and awards the degree. The college is accredited “A” grade by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) an organization which concerns itself with quality assurance. The college is recognized by the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE), a statutory body which decides policy issues related to teacher education in India. It is aided by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and is accountable to it. It is under the management of the Hyderabad (Sind) National Collegiate Board. Curriculum transaction and internal assessment fall under the purview of the college. The institution has about 200 students and 15 faculty members and runs courses for almost all levels of teacher education, from the pre-primary to the doctoral level.

In the year 2006, the college of education had organized a National Conference on “Challenges and Choices: Education in a Globalizing World”. The proceedings of the conference, along with the associated discussions and debates which took place in the course of organizing the conference left some of the faculty in the college acutely aware of the sweeping changes that globalization had brought across the world. The researcher had presented a paper on “Emerging Teacher Profiles and Professional Mobility in a Globalizing World” and the reflections involved in the preparation for the paper contributed to the sense that the impact of globalization was not limited to trade and to the economy, but was also seen in the educational sphere.

A year later, before the start of the academic year 2007-08, the Principal of the college suggested that the faculty members could develop curriculum innovations in the form of add-on courses to enrich and individualize the Bachelor of Education curriculum. The B.Ed. curriculum at that stage had been reviewed four years ago and was due for review within a year. Many changes had taken place in the interim, and there was a strong sense that the curriculum fell short in many areas.

The outcome of this was the development of three add-on courses, each of 20 hours duration spread over 4 months. The first was a “Pathways to Personal Enrichment” course which catered to students who were interested in personality development and communication skills, some of them from a regional background who were new to the city. The second was a “Yoga and Aerobics” course

which catered to the psychomotor development of student teachers, an area which is sometimes neglected in the B.Ed. courses in parts of the country. The third was the “Global Perspectives in Education” course which was developed by the researcher, inspired both by the conference held in the previous year, and the felt need to enrich the B.Ed. curriculum. It attempted to fulfill the needs of a certain section of students who were looking for a window opening out to the world. Perhaps they aspired to teach in one of the International schools or to cross over borders and teach or study overseas. Signing up for these courses was optional.

The teacher-researcher, therefore, wore two hats. She undertook the task of development and implementation on the one hand, and had the compulsion to seek answers to questions through inquiry on the other.

Research Questions

Two fundamental questions emerged as the focus of the study. How did the teacher educator with almost no prior experience of curriculum development describe her experiences of developing a course on global perspectives in education? How did the participants in the course describe their learning experiences?

Method of the study

The study was conducted through a qualitative research approach, using a constructivist or naturalistic inquiry paradigm. Patton (2002) maintains that qualitative designs are naturalistic as the phenomenon of interest does not have any predetermined course established by the researcher in contrast to experimental designs where study conditions are controlled.

The research design was a case study which was bounded by time and activity. Yin (1994) considered to be one of the leading exponents of case study research suggests that the case study method can be applied to investigate and describe an intervention in its real-life context; and to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes. Among the various forms of qualitative research, the case study design is of specific use when studying educational innovations (Merriam, 1998).

Participants in the Course

The group of student teachers who signed up for the course ranged in age from 20 to 35 years. They came from varied academic backgrounds, such as the Sciences, Humanities and Commerce. In terms of teaching experience, again it was a range from almost no experience up to 18 years of teaching at the school level. The participants were academically among the top 30% of the cohort of 100 students, and brought their own insights and understandings to the course. The participants came to the course with high expectations and it was a challenge to the researcher to meet these expectations. Some had studied overseas; some had taught in international schools, others came with a lot of awareness of the world around them and its dynamics.

Tools of Research

In this study, the main strategy employed for data collection was interviews of the student teachers. The interviews will be open-ended and unstructured. Document analysis was used for collecting data. Participant observation and the researcher’s field notes provided an important link in data collection.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Validity of the findings will be established through the use of triangulation of data sources, member-checking, and peer debriefing.

Limitations

Since the study was primarily a case study, it is a unique case and perhaps the outcomes and results may or may not be generalizable to other contexts. Factors like motivation, fatigue and interest of the participants may have had an impact on the effectiveness of the tools used for data collection. The study involved only the student teachers and teacher educators and the research did not look into the topic from the perspectives of the colleges of education or the affiliating University.

Global Perspectives in Education – Aims of the Programme

This programme aimed to prepare pre-service teachers to face the challenges of a globalizing world. It aimed to enable pre-service teachers to reconstruct knowledge and experience which would in turn help them to face the challenges they would encounter in their practice and prepare them for new roles. It aimed to increase motivational levels, build a climate of inquiry and encourage teachers to become reflective practitioners. The thrust of the programme was to create an awareness of educational issues all around the world and develop qualities in teachers as would enable them to become receptive, perceptive, reflective, innovative and dynamic practitioners.

The stated objectives of the course were:

- To prepare teachers to face the challenges of a world without borders.
- To create awareness about the International Baccalaureate Programme.
- To explore the different educational trends across borders.
- To analyze the innovative educational programs in the field of education.
- To create an awareness of skills required for teaching on the international circuit.

The Course Outline

At the time of introducing the course, the review of the literature did not reveal much about a global perspective in teacher education. The review did not give the researcher any basis to decide what should go into the course contents. Discussions with the academic community in teacher education did not lead anywhere, as the idea of global perspectives in education was a relatively novel one then. However, after the implementation of the course the review of the literature revealed that some well-structured course modules had been developed and offered in universities overseas since then.

According to a leading global educator, Robert Hanvey (1976) a global perspective is not a quantum but a blend of many things. The course was developed in terms of global perspectives for teachers attempting a fine blend of a number of elements as follows:

- An Attainable Global Perspective – a concept paper by Robert Hanvey
- The International Baccalaureate Curriculum Model
- Trade perspectives and India's import and export interests in the education sector
- Case studies of innovations in education across the world
- Book review – “Teacher Man”
- Movie review – “Freedom Writers”
- Models of Teaching
- Teaching Portfolio and Professional Development

- The system of teacher registration and licensing in different countries
- Integrating global perspectives in practice lessons

The above elements can also be viewed as odd pieces in a jigsaw puzzle which, when put together, portray a picture of the whole. The analogy of the jigsaw is significant, because there are many pieces in this puzzle which were definitely missing, which could have provided a clearer view of the bigger picture.

An Attainable Global Perspective

“An Attainable Global Perspective” was a concept paper by global educator Robert Hanvey, first published in 1976 as an exploration of what a global perspective might be. The paper makes interesting reading and the tone of the paper is still relevant today. The researcher felt that in the absence of any framework or model to introduce pre-service teacher to a global perspective in teacher education, this concept paper was a good way to lay the ground for the course. Hanvey claims that the essay is a beginning effort in understanding what global perspectives are and how they may be introduced in the school curriculum and how this is “attainable” by the youth.

Hanvey suggests five key interdisciplinary dimensions that need to be developed in the youth:

- Dimension 1: Perspective Consciousness
- Dimension 2: “State of the Planet” Awareness
- Dimension 3: Cross-cultural Awareness
- Dimension 4: Knowledge of Global Dynamics
- Dimension 5: Awareness of Human Choices

Each of the above dimensions finds direct applicability in the classroom. Each dimension is discussed in the paper with the help of illustrations which correlate directly with real life events.

The discussion which followed the paper reading was directly correlated by the participants to their teaching practice, as many of these dimensions could be connected with the lessons they gave in the course of the B.Ed. year. Most of the participants attempted to integrate these global perspectives in their lessons, sometimes in token ways, sometimes subtly and sometimes in a glaringly or oddly out of context manner.

It helped the cohort to realize that there were issues in the world which were beyond borders, which affected humanity at large, for example, water or nuclear war are issues which concerns all of humanity. It left all of the participants with a sense that “all of us are in this together”.

The IB curriculum

The International Baccalaureate curriculum was included in the module as many of the participants who had signed up for the course expressed their desire to work for one of the growing number of IB schools across India. The IB schools in India attract the most talented of teachers as they offer higher pay scales and more challenging work conditions than most other types of schools in India. Another reason for inclusion of the topic was that the IB curriculum is the only truly international curriculum which is not associated with any country, even though the International Baccalaureate Organization has its headquarters in Geneva. According to the IBO website it offers a “continuum of high-quality education that encourages international-mindedness accessible to students in 135 countries”. The British system of education was also considered for inclusion in the course as it is very popular in India. The idea was rejected as it is essentially a national system of education.

The presentation centered on the framework of the primary years, middle years and diploma programme of the curriculum. However the discussion which followed included more practical

aspects which were of greater interest to the cohort in the short term, such as comparisons between the different state and central boards of school education, the commercialization of school education, the elite nature of IB schools in India, work conditions and pay scales in the schools and personal experiences of one of the participants who had taught in an IB school. The participants showed little interest in the curriculum model and their focus was on how to get into the IB system, rather than to understand it. The researcher made several attempts to arrange a few days or at least a visit in one of the IB schools in the city, but that did not materialize.

After the Bachelor of Education course, three of the participants in the programme are working in IB schools, and all of them claim that the sessions helped them in making their choices.

Trade Perspectives in Education

Trade perspectives in education were introduced with a discussion on the World Trade Organization (WTO), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the potential of its impact on education in India, especially higher education. At the time of implementing the course, the issue of commercialization of education was raised regularly in the media, and therefore its inclusion in the course. The topic also aimed to create awareness about the trend of viewing education as a service rather than a public good. It brought to the fore issues such as profitability and viability of education services, quality implications and the change in mindset required to switch to a service mode. It also raised issues about self-financed educational courses as opposed to government-funded educational courses.

The four modes of supply as related to education services (Chanda, 2004) are:

Mode 1: cross border delivery: delivery of education services via internet

Mode 2: consumption abroad: movement of students from one country to another

Mode 3: commercial presence: establishment of local branch campuses or subsidiaries by foreign universities in other countries, course offerings by domestic private colleges leading to degrees at foreign universities, twinning arrangements, franchising

Mode 4: movement of natural persons: temporary movement of teachers, lecturers, and education personnel to provide education services overseas

Trade issues related to education and its implications for those in the teaching profession were a subject of debate and the participants expressed the need to be more updated on skills than ever before. India's import and export interests were discussed with relation to all the four modes of supply, and the general consensus among the participants was that huge opportunities would open up in the education sector in India. Some of them saw themselves as beneficiaries in this trend, or visualized investment opportunities in the education sector.

Case studies of educational innovations

The rationale for inclusion for the case studies in educational innovations was to show the students with a cross-section of educational efforts addressing specific issues in an attempt to acquaint the pre-service teachers with education as a problem-solving exercise. The also served to inculcate generic skills such as reviewing, analysis, reporting and presentation.

The case studies of educational innovations around the world used reports published by the International Bureau of Education (IBE). The stated mission on the IBE's website is to act as UNESCO's centre, specializing in contents, methods and structure of education. Among its many publications is the INNODATA Monograph Series. These monographs are case reports on selected innovations which have been successful and are of interest educational practitioners and policy-makers. The case studies are written by individuals who have close experience of the innovations described, in some instances having been directly involved in their creation and development.

The students were given a case study each (listed in Appendix A) and were asked to study and present the reports in front of the class. This was followed by discussion about the cases. The case studies ranged chronologically from 1999 to 2004. In some cases the participants found that the so-called innovations no longer qualified as innovative.

Freedom Writers – an inspirational story

Among the other source materials were used, and the most popular was an American film “Freedom Writers” released in 2007 based on the book “The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World around Them” by Erin Grunwell. The film stars Hilary Swank who plays the role of Erin Grunwell, a new, excited schoolteacher who arrives to teach at a school in Long Beach, California where a new integration program puts students of all backgrounds and races in classes together. The reasons for including this film review were many. It is an inspiring story based on real events. It addressed several issues and had the potential for discussion from many angles such as multiculturalism, empathy, motivation, the education system in the US, school violence and the use of teaching strategies.

Many different aspects of the film were discussed.

- The multicultural classroom which was the setting of the movie, and how the teacher handled the diversity in her classroom. The situation was also compared to the Indian context.
- The use of games for teaching (as in, the line game shown in the movie) to develop empathy among the students.
- The use of journaling as a cathartic exercise, and in the teaching of Language and writing.
- The use and correlation of book readings for learning History.
- The stress faced by a teacher in the exercise of her practice.
- The issue of affirmative action.
- The attitude of teachers and their inability to be responsive to situations.
- Violence in the life of youth.
- The use correlation of events in the past as a technique to achieve empathy.

Teacher Man – A review

“Teacher Man” is a 2005 memoir written by Frank McCourt which describes and reflects on his teaching experiences in New York High Schools and colleges. This book was chosen among a number of other options because it offered scope to discuss about the use of different strategies for teaching English for speakers of other languages, humour as an aid, and aspects of teacher education and their relevance to the realities of the classroom.

The book makes for light and easy reading and several aspects were discussed about the book. It was particularly appreciated by all the participants who had an interest in learning or were taking English as one of their teaching methods.

- The teaching of English through innovative methods (such as excuse notes)
- Classroom discipline and handling situations in the classroom.
- Storytelling as a technique.
- The teacher vs. the academic
- Humour in the classroom as an instructional aid
- The gap between what is taught by Professors in colleges of Education and what is experienced on the ground in schools.

Teaching Portfolio – An avenue for professional development

The use of the teaching portfolio is not very common in India. It has been introduced to teachers in schools through workshops and practical sessions in refresher courses conducted by some progressive schools across our country. However, it has not been used formally as a tool for showcasing teachers efforts and professional development.

The participants were introduced to the concept of a teaching portfolio. The potential for reflecting on, and initiating personal and professional development (Seldin, 2003) while attempting to enrich the portfolio was the focus of the session. Participants also explored electronic teaching portfolios on the World Wide Web. Due to paucity of time, preparation of a teaching portfolio did not form a part of the course, even though the researcher felt that this was a huge missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle.

Teacher licensing and registration

Many of the students who signed up for the course were interested in teaching overseas. The session was intended to create awareness of systems of teacher registration and licensing so that they were better prepared to initiate the process of making the move to teach overseas. Systems of teacher licensing and registration were explored, especially for countries in which individual participants were interested. The countries which they expressed interest in were as diverse as the group itself, ranging from Dubai in the Middle East to France in Europe, from Down Under to the far western corners of the US.

Expanding one's repertoire

No course related to global perspectives of education would be complete without an overview of innovative teaching methods. The rationale for including the topic on “Models of Teaching” in the course outline had been to introduce students to innovative models of teaching used across the world. One of the main challenges a teacher faces on a daily basis is keeping students engaged and involved in learning. There is no limit to finding new ways and means to teach or to get something across, However, time did not permit the completion of this aspect of the course due to the pressure of year-end project submissions. To make up for that, one of the takeaways of the course was a copy of the much acclaimed book “Models of Teaching” by Joyce and Weil.

Besides the elements mentioned above, many other issues crept into the discussions, especially issues related to the real-life context which the participants felt they would have to face after completing the Bachelor of Education. The Multiple Intelligences theory of Howard Gardner was one such topic which came up during discussions. The researcher feels that, given a longer time frame, a research project could have completed the global perspectives picture very well. However time is always at a premium in a B.Ed. course in India.

Findings

Many of the participants used course and after-course time to seek answers to their questions about teaching or studying overseas, procedural issues related to teaching overseas or future educational and career choices. Information gathering and equipping for the future was their major concern, and justifiably they were less interested in theoretical or foundational considerations.

The researcher consciously followed adult learning principles and the natural tendency was to create a democratic kind of set-up. This was greatly appreciated by the participants and as one of them mentioned:

... It was a great learning experience with a delightful feeling of freedom, adulthood and democracy.

The movie “Freedom Writers” had a huge impact on the participants. They all got together on one Sunday and watched the whole movie again. They were quick to relate it to the Indian context, and the challenges teachers face in India, if they teach classes with students from diverse cultural groups.

It isn't easy, is it, teaching there? ...trying to build a bridge between dwellers of the same country but with different colour...

Our students here are different... less violence, more discipline...

Great ways to initiate activities like creative writing, public speaking...

The Line Game was terrific!

In fact, when the researcher had first watched the movie alone, it came across merely as a story about a teacher at an inner city school in the US. It made interesting viewing and was just something which could be shared with others in the profession. Watching the film with the participants was an entirely different and unexpected experience altogether, which made the researcher develop a deeper understanding of the subtleties in the film.

The course was transacted through a diversity of teaching methods such as case studies, discussions, viewing of film clips, reviews of books, readings, and other innovative methods. A secondary objective of the course was to enable the pre-service teachers to gain generic skills of critical thinking, reflection and analysis.

The classes were also filled with recounting a variety of work experiences of various teachers like the challenges faced by teachers in America in a “high-aggression low-tolerance” classroom or the problems which Indian teachers face when they go abroad, that is, the cultural issues, the academic gaps and the day to day social isolation.

Challenges ruled sometimes.

The presentation of the case studies was taken up with enthusiasm by only six of the participants, the others had not found the time to read through them thoroughly enough. One of the case studies had particularly caught the interest of the class

... the teaching strategies used in one of the countries where the women are still struggling for their existence and individuality. The country tries to use innovative strategies for the upliftment of women.

The researcher observed in her reflective journal that most of the group of 11 who participated in the course were:

...reluctant to take charge of their own learning and constantly came to the class expecting to be entertained, but without any inclination to participate actively.

There was a marked unwillingness to be involved beyond a point especially if that meant actually doing something beyond discussion.

Attendance among the participants varied, primarily because of other commitments related to the course such as lesson planning, project submissions and computer classes took priority at certain times. Attendance was also affected since the course was conducted after college hours, in the evening and personal compulsions sometimes ruled.

Both of them need to get their presentations done by tomorrow...

Leave us early, just for today. This week has been crazy...

She's at home; her mother-in-law is in hospital...

The researcher felt a great sense of isolation whenever decisions were to be taken about the course contents or transactions, or trying to get the participants to take initiatives towards self-

learning. In the middle of an academic year, faculty or peers have no time to reflect, discuss or debate over an issue in any depth.

There is another side to academic freedom, a huge responsibility...

However, the researcher's self-doubt regarding the course contents was put to rest to a great extent when one of the participants quoted:

Gestalt the famous psychologist emphasized on the idea of "organized whole" and if seen closely, our "global perspectives in education" too revolved around the same idea.

A cycle that never ends

The "Global Perspectives in Education" course was initially meant to be an ongoing feature of the course offerings at the college of education. However, at the subsequent curriculum review of the Bachelor of Education course at the University in 2008, a new elective paper in "International Education" was proposed and introduced as a special field. The term "global education" was rejected, because the commonly understood meaning implied a distinctively "developmental" perspective which was lacking in all but one unit of the paper.

Global education has become a worldwide movement now, and many countries, among them Australia and the US, have well-formulated global education programmes for school education. Therefore an issue which still remains unresolved is the use of the word "global" in the nomenclature of the programme which the researcher felt did not adequately describe the course.

Since many of the ideas introduced in the International Education paper overlapped with ideas in the add-on course, it was not offered to the Bachelor of Education students in the subsequent year. However, experiences gained during the course and the feedback obtained from the participants has informed the development of another programme. Therefore, though the study did not start out with an action research framework, it has evolved over the period of the last two years. The first phase has informed the development of a second cycle which is still a work in progress.

The basic objectives of the course and its contents remain somewhat the same, yet with significant differences from the original. The first point of difference is that the target group for the course is meant to be in-service or beginning teachers instead of pre-service teachers. The rationale for this is that in India, a one-year Bachelor of Education course poses a challenge for endeavours of this nature. Perhaps in-service teachers can work in a bit of professional development into their schedules. The second major difference is that instead of a face-to-face course, the proposed course is being developed entirely online. The course uses the Moodle Learning Management System which is open-source software available for course management. The Moodle platform provides a user-friendly interface suitable for teachers with varying levels of ease with online technology. The online medium has been deliberately chosen as it could facilitate bringing together geographically separated groups of teachers to interact online, thus "crossing borders" in one sense of the term.

Conclusion

The study indicates that there is a felt need among pre-service teachers for increasing their awareness of the world around them and educational efforts across the world. Inclusion of elements of global perspectives in the curriculum can release both students and teachers from being geographically imprisoned and work towards the "attainable global perspective" which Hanvey talked about. Such a perspective could help pre-service teachers to help their students attain the same. It also helps pre-service teachers in dealing with the challenges of a globalizing world, and changing equations in the classroom.

Four key words: Pre-service, globalization, research, curriculum

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Appendix A

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