

Education in the Asia-Pacific Region:
Issues, Concerns and Prospects 16

Arathi Sriprakash

Pedagogies for Development

The Politics and Practice
of Child-Centred Education in India



ASIA-PACIFIC EDUCATIONAL
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Springer

Pedagogies for Development

EDUCATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND PROSPECTS

Volume 16

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The Politics and Practice of Child-Centred
Education in India

 Springer

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ISBN 978-94-007-2668-0 e-ISBN 978-94-007-2669-7

DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-2669-7

Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011945442

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Introduction by the Series Editors

Worldwide, the education community has sought to find more effective ways to improve the quality, equity and relevance of school education. This is of particular importance with regard to education in developing countries, where there are millions of children and adults who have been excluded from formal education. In the case of those who have had an opportunity to attend school, many drop out before they complete a full cycle of primary education for a number of reasons including the irrelevance of the curriculum taught and the systemic disempowerment of teachers and students. It is largely because of such concerns that international, national and local communities have invested in programmes to achieve high-quality Lifelong Learning, Education for All and Education for Sustainable Development. Progressive pedagogies have been utilised in these efforts, and have been linked to the modernisation of schooling in developing countries, aiming to improve the quality of education for the poor, and to social democratisation.

Given this background, Arathi Sriprakash has written an important book that deals with a globally significant subject. She critically examines the politics and practices of progressive, child-centred education to consider how schooling in developing countries can deal more sensitively and effectively with persisting issues of social inequality and exclusion. Although the author focuses on India, the research reported on here provides provocative insights into reform processes which are relevant to other developing countries and beyond.

The volume is a definitive work, drawing as it does on the theoretical contributions of Basil Bernstein's sociology of pedagogy. The sophisticated and nuanced application of Bernstein's theories reveals the social and political complexities of pedagogic reform in the developing world. Bernstein's ideas, developed over many decades in the UK, and which focused on the analysis of social class inequalities in British education, are shown by Sriprakash to have a wider application to other national and social contexts.

This book contributes striking insights concerning the theoretical and practical aspects of reform in contemporary India. The focus is on the delivery of child-centred education in Indian government primary schools which gained momentum in the 1990s through government interventions, internationally sponsored programmes

and NGO initiatives for pedagogic reform. It maps the relations between micro and macro practices of education reform, and in doing this it considers how pedagogy is socially and politically constituted at national and school levels.

Sriprakash's research focuses on two specific reform programmes that have been implemented in the South Indian state of Karnataka. The first is the *Nali Kali* ('joyful learning') reform, which has been described as 'one of Karnataka's most successful, innovative and even revolutionary reform programs'. The objectives of this reform were to change the teacher-centred, nonparticipatory traditional pedagogy to one that was activity-based and child-centred. By 1997 there was a Government of Karnataka programme adopting this approach and it was implemented in over 4,000 rural primary schools. The second programme was the Learner-Centred (LC) initiative, implemented in 2005 in government schools in Karnataka. This approach was a reaction to the existing system of primary education which stressed teacher-centred instruction and the memorisation of facts. The LC initiative sought to focus on the relevance of rural schooling, and through a discussion-based pedagogy, it emphasised the importance of how children learn, not only what they learn.

After many months of detailed interviews with teachers, and the undertaking of extensive observations in classrooms, Sriprakash shows how the education reform process is not as rational, neat or coherent as policy pronouncements expound. Instead, they are socially and materially contingent and often reform ideals are recontextualised through competing social and cultural frameworks in schools. The book's in-depth discussion demonstrates the crucial importance for policy and reform actors to address the deep social inequalities operating in Indian schools through which pedagogic practices are shaped. Sriprakash concludes that encouraging teachers to critically reflect on the social role of education, and their social distance from the rural child, is a much needed strategy for future reform.

The book makes a significant contribution in its ethnographic insights and theoretically informed sociological analyses to the study of pedagogic reform and to the field of comparative and international education more broadly. The nuanced methodological approach it offers is especially valuable to education development research which has tended to be oriented towards quantitative analyses of reform. An important addition to critical scholarship, the volume will resonate with educational theorists and reformers interested in social change, not only in India, but also globally.

The Hong Kong Institute of Education
National Institute for Educational
Policy Research of Japan (NIER)
26 July, 2011

Rupert Maclean
Ryo Watanabe

Acknowledgements

Writing this book would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of friends, family and colleagues. Madeleine Arnot inspired me to embark on the research for this book and her unflagging academic mentorship sustained me through it. I am deeply indebted to Padma Sarangapani for her generous guidance throughout this project and greatly admire her work which has opened a space for critical social inquiry in Indian educational research. I thank the teachers of Mallige and Kamala schools whose knowledge, experience and perseverance inspired this study. Finding my feet in Mysore was only possible with the help of Elspeth, Rajaram, Vidya, Professor Govinda, Annapurna, Ravi, Hema, Shishira, Shiv, Gowri, Manjunath, Arasu, Kumaraswamy, Sarojini, Roopa, Mandya mammus and mannis and the friendship and tireless assistance of Suma and Vijay.

I am immensely grateful to Rupert Maclean for the opportunity to work on this book, and to Elena Knox and Sarah Fraser for their invaluable comments on chapters. Rich discussions with my colleague Peter Bansel helped me clarify my arguments. I also thank Simon Williams for whipping my Endnote library into shape. The research was made possible with funding from the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust and Girton College, Cambridge. The manuscript was prepared while I was at the University of Western Sydney, working with supportive colleagues at the School of Education, the Centre for Educational Research, and the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies. Some data discussed in this book have been presented in the following articles I have written: The Contributions of Bernstein's Sociology to Education Development Research, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 32(4):521–539, 2011; Being a Teacher in Contexts of Change: Education Reform and the Repositioning of Teachers' Work in India, *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 8(1):5–31, 2011; Child-Centred Education and the Promise of Democratic Learning: Pedagogic Messages in Rural Indian Primary Schools, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30(3):297–304, 2010; 'Joyful Learning' in Rural Indian Primary Schools: An Analysis of Social Control in the Context of Child-Centred Discourses, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 39(5): 629–641, 2009.

I simply could not have done this without all my wonderful friends in Cambridge, Bangalore, Sydney and Melbourne. I am especially grateful to Rahul Mukhopadhyay and Rosie Peppin-Vaughan for their academic companionship. My family has offered constant encouragement as I moved between Australia, England and India for this project. To Paddu Aunty and Patis, Sharyn and Bob, and my fabulous parents – thank you, with love. This book is for Scott, for everything.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

DIET	District Institute of Education and Training
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
EFA	Education For All
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GoI	Government of India
GoK	Government of Karnataka
HPS	Higher Primary School
KSQAO	Karnataka State Quality Assessment Organisation
LC	Learner Centred reform
LPS	Lower Primary School
MHRD	Ministry for Human Resource Development
MLL	Minimum Levels of Learning
NCERT	National Council for Educational Research and Training
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NK	Nali Kali
NPE	National Policy on Education
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDMC	School Development Management Committee
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribe
Std/Stdts	Standard/Standards
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund

Chapter 1

Introduction: Pedagogy and Development

1.1 Introduction

What is the relationship between child-centred education and development for the poor? Despite significant debate over the implications of progressive education in western schooling systems, child-centred pedagogies have been associated somewhat uncritically with ‘quality’ education and development in the global south. In the last three decades, numerous ‘quality’ improvement programs in schools and teacher-training institutions have utilised pedagogic principles clustered around progressive ideals, especially in many regions of Asia and Africa. However, there has been little engagement by reformers and researchers with the social, economic, and political assumptions underlying such models of education. Pedagogy is not value-free, nor does it merely represent a set of technical procedures in classrooms. The significant mobilisation of progressive child-centred discourses by states, aid agencies, and private partners in education compels us as educators and theorists to enquire critically into the implications and the social and political intentions of such pedagogies.

Child-centred education has no manifesto by which to codify its aims. It is represented by a number of overlapping approaches that privilege different philosophical sources and draw on various pedagogic labels, such as child-centred, learner-centred, progressive, humanistic, constructivist, or competence-based education. For instance, the child-centred movement in the United Kingdom during the 1960s and 1970s was broadly understood to be ‘critical of authoritarianism, committed to the development of the “whole person”, and attentive to a psychology of learning’ (Jones 1983:2). In development contexts too, child-centred initiatives take different forms. They often emphasise democratic learning environments, loosened authority relations over the child, more flexible boundaries around what constitutes school knowledge, and constructivist theories of learning.

The broadly democratic rhetoric of such pedagogies lends itself to the dominant neo-liberal development paradigm which has tied social and political democratisation

to economic advancement. It is in this context that some have critiqued the widespread sponsorship of child-centred pedagogies by international development agencies as ‘a process of Westernisation disguised as quality and effective teaching’ (Tabulawa 2003:7). Pedagogy has been brought into urgent question by looming global targets for the universalisation of elementary education, pressures from external aid mandates, and the search for ‘quality’ in schooling. However, pedagogic renewal in development contexts occurs in a contested policy terrain. Managerial discourses have gained traction in education, perhaps nowhere more apparently than in the increasing use of standardised benchmarks and performance measures to account for ‘quality’ and ‘progress’. This benchmarking does not sit easily with the ideals of a relational, learner-specific education implied by many child-centred pedagogic discourses. Nevertheless, different strands of ‘democratic’ education are carried by the ideas of both standardisation and child centrism and have been taken up simultaneously in development agendas.

It is in this context of reform that this book maps the politics and practices of child-centred education in India. It draws on ethnographic research of two reform programs implemented in rural Indian primary schools to provide a sociological analysis of pedagogy and pedagogic change. The book examines how child-centred education has been constructed as a strategy for development and social reform in India and traces the ways child-centred ideas have been re-shaped by teachers in rural government primary school contexts.

There is an emerging body of work that analyses pedagogic reform in the global south. Studies have reported on the difficulties of training teachers in new pedagogies (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002), on the inadequacies of resources and the piecemeal implementation of reforms (Capper et al. 2002; Courtney 2008), on the effect of conflicting pedagogic frameworks (Nyambe and Wilmot 2008), and on competing cultural constructions of learning (Clarke 2003). Reflecting recently on reforms to teacher education in the United Republic of Tanzania, Vavrus (2009) examined the cultural politics of constructivist learning theories that are often promoted by learner-centred and child-centred pedagogies. Her work underscores the need to attend to the structural and systemic contexts in which pedagogic ideals are expected to be realised. Vavrus calls on policy-makers to ‘recognize that the examination system, the material infrastructure of schools, and the length and the quality of teacher education programs limit the likelihood of a fundamental shift from formalism to constructivism’ (Vavrus 2009:309). Similarly, Carney’s (2008) study of learner-centred reforms in Tibet shows how international and national policy goals are re-shaped by local cultural and educational contexts, with often incompatible interests at play.

These studies raise questions about the global transfer and translations of pedagogic models: what assumptions are made about social and economic development by pedagogic reforms, and what are the conditions and processes of their implementation? The multiple actors in educational policy and practice bring different meanings and interests to development programs. In schools, teachers and administrators interpret and re-contextualise policy with relation to local knowledge, interests, and resources. The intended frameworks of education programs are not always reproduced

or sustained in local contexts; there is a need to pay attention to the conditions and possibilities articulated by those working at local levels. With this need in mind, this book not only investigates the construction of child-centred education in Indian policy arenas but also offers a detailed analysis of Indian teachers' discourses and practices as they work with new pedagogic models in their rural primary school contexts.

The ethnographic accounts presented here seek to develop a more complex, culturally contextualised view of pedagogy. Child-centred education has emerged in development policy discourses as an indicator of 'quality'. It has been positioned as a technical method rather than a set of pervasive social relationships between the teacher, the child, and school knowledge. Reflecting on the sponsorship of child-centred education in the Indian context, Alexander (2008) has warned: 'to propose "child-centred teaching methods" as an indicator at national level is to smother with a blanket of unexamined ideology a vital professional debate about the conditions for learning and the complexities of teaching' (Alexander 2008:16). Indeed, researchers such as Barrett (2007) have sought to illuminate the complexity of pedagogic practice in development contexts, especially beyond the common polarisation of teacher-centred/child-centred instruction. Her analysis shows some of the ways pedagogic practices in Tanzanian classrooms have been influenced by pre-colonial community education practices as well as by more recent international discourses on progressive pedagogies. This book takes a similar interest in the pedagogic mixes that occur due to the introduction of child-centred ideas in the Indian context, and emphasises through its analysis the social implications and complexities of such pedagogic change.

The historical, social, and political specificities of pedagogic reforms in developing countries must not be under-played. However, debates about progressive education in western schooling systems have been useful to consider: they can alert us to the potential assumptions and intentions of child-centred pedagogies. For example, progressive pedagogies in the post-war decades in Britain were linked to modernising state education in response to new social and industrial demands, not unlike more recent development agendas in the global south. Jones (1983) has argued that progressive ideas seemed useful at this time in Britain to promote self-motivation and to link education to productive work: '[i]n this context, "self-government" and co-operation were attractive concepts. They stood less for an ideal of students' rights than for the voluntary submission of the student to the behavioural requirements of social unity' (Jones 1983:29).

Such readings of child-centred education in Britain illuminate how progressive philosophies were taken up, reshaped, and institutionalised by the state for its political and social projects. In Britain, this was said to occur through a process of 'de-radicalisation' whereby progressive education came to signify

a parcel of loosely connected ideas and practices which combined criticism of the status quo with support of techniques that could be used to regenerate, but not to fundamentally transform, mass education; thus its equivocal role: at once the challenger of many features of the school, and a means by which the school adapted itself, the better to survive. (Jones 1983:32)

The ambivalent aims of progressive education identified here by Jones are relevant to appraisals of pedagogic reforms that are now emerging in the global south.

Our attention is turned to the ways transformative discourses can be mobilised by pro-poor development agendas and reshaped, perhaps ‘de-radicalised’, through processes of institutionalisation. We might ask: in the Indian primary education context, how are new meanings ascribed to child-centred education as it is taken up by the state and fed into development reform strategies?

Analyses of western progressive education can also help us examine the social implications of child-centred pedagogies in the global south for children and their classroom learning. Concerns have been raised against discourses of learner centredness that have legitimised more insidious forms of regulating the child. The individualisation of success, the emphasis on the entrepreneurial self and independent learning, and normative discourses on children’s ‘natural development’ produce new expectations of students (cf. Walkerdine 1992; Bernstein 2000; Popkewitz 2008). Sharp and Green’s (1975) well-known ethnography of an English infant and junior school explored how child-centred education was inflected by the moral rhetoric of ‘romantic radical conservatism’ through which students’ successes and failures were regulated by middle-class social expectations. This new form of regulation was seen to neglect ‘the realities of a given situation of a stratified society where facilities, prestige and rewards are unequally distributed’ (Sharp and Green 1975:226).

The caution such arguments raise against the individualisation of school success/failure and the masking of social stratification is especially relevant to progressive education projects in development contexts. In India, stratification of social class, caste, and gender is deep and explicit. This social ordering requires us to examine critically how the social agendas driving child-centred reform in primary schooling, especially the promises of democratic education, play out in classrooms. Are child-centred practices in rural Indian government schools oriented towards social justice for the rural poor? What social and educational expectations are relayed to children through child-centred programs? The rapid economic growth in India over the last decade and the country’s increasingly significant position in global technology industries provide a backdrop to a highly competitive and largely performance-based education system. Private fee-charging providers, especially of English-medium education, are seen as producing a more globally marketable pupil, but what kind of learner is sought to be produced by child-centred pedagogies that are implemented especially in rural, low-income, government school settings?

Examining the deeply competitive and socially stratified context of Indian education, this book investigates the social role of the rural government primary school vis à vis the democratic thrust of two specific child-centred reforms. Child-centred pedagogy represents a significant shift for Indian primary education that has been characterised by textbook-based, rote-oriented, exam-centred, authoritarian, and didactic instruction. Child-centred reform programs have been targeted at the fee-free government school sector which is the largest primary education provider in India, accessed mostly by the country’s majority poor and socially marginalised.¹

¹ According to 2008 survey data, 71.8% of children aged between 6 and 14 years are enrolled in government schools across India (ASER 2008).