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STUDY**

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**Volume No.3 Issue No.3 September 2014**

**[www.iresearcher.org](http://www.iresearcher.org)**

**ISSN 227-7471**

THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL "INTERNATIONAL RESEARCHERS"

[www.iresearcher.org](http://www.iresearcher.org)

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# EMPOWERING STUDENTS' VOICE THROUGH INNOVATIVE PEDAGOGY: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

This study intent to critically examine that how does innovative pedagogy allows learners to become active participants in their learning process. Also what other enabling aspects enlighten them during this process. The said theme was very pertinent for novice trained teachers to implement the learnt notions with their previous typical mind set of traditional teaching approach, where they found difficulty to cope with challenges related to low performance, less participation, lack of interest towards curriculum.

As practitioner and teacher educator, I wanted to help teachers to overcome this issue; thus I opted for participatory action research (PAR) which is a form of experimental research where researcher's direct actions of practice within a participatory community aiming to improve the performance in an area of concern through desired interventions.

In this research, it was imperative to work as a teacher and researcher both to make teacher aware how does innovative pedagogy lead students towards improvement and enable them to see their own gradual improvement. I was mentor and mentee at the same time, with extensive deliberation and reflection with my mentor, I was reviewing and improving my actions. This action research project was undertaken with grade 5 students in one of the private schools of Karachi.

The action research project was based on 3 cycles where each cycle was closely monitored by action research team. The findings revealed that the transformation from teacher centered approach to learner centered approach enable students to actively participate in learning, students found autonomy to express their views; later on, with the reflective practices approach they become responsible for their own learning and got empowered. This action research project strongly suggests formative assessment policy to be in placed in order to inspire learners in the learning process from beginning.

**Keywords:** Innovative pedagogy, empowerment, students' voice, participatory action research, learner' centered approach, students' autonomy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being a teacher educator, I came across problems related to the integration of content and pedagogy during various training programs. During those sessions, I had conversation with many novice teachers who shared their concerns and worries about lack of students' interest towards teaching and learning. To them, integration of content with strategies seemed difficult areas to handle; this further resulted in low performances by learners and their lack of interest towards learning and active participation in school and other environments.

This was although a great concern raised by a group of new teachers but after having concentrated negotiations with them, I came to know the root cause of all these issues which was actually a typical mind set with traditional teaching approach that was hampering them and also made the whole process more grave and complicated. This therefore encouraged me to review the literature and found few suitable strategies that could provide gradual but long term solution to the problem. I therefore planned to conduct an action research with the students of grade 5 in one of the private school of Karachi and worked with one teacher and introduced to her learner-centered approach using innovative pedagogy. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998:45) discussed, "*Action research concerns actual, not abstract, practices. It involves learning about the real, material, concrete, particular practices of particular people in particular places.*"

Prior to action research, I took classroom observations with proper permission from concerned class teacher, coordinator and head of the school, to get familiarity with the context and also practiced reflective approach throughout to understand how to deal with the existing situation. Thus each cycle enabled me to respond the situation in order by getting opportunity to seek out solutions to overcome the prevailing situation. During the action research study, critical reflective approaches enabled me to solve the day-to-day issues. Robert fisher (1990: 22) mentioned, "*Thinking involves critical and creative aspects of mind, both the use of reason and the generation of ideas, Thinking is involved in a mental activity that helps to formulate or solve a problem to make a decision or seek understanding.*"

### 1.1 Situating the Context

The school in which I conducted my action research was a private school offers teaching to all levels i.e. from early years to matriculation with diverse teaching approaches. ECD classes were conducted by trained teachers using high scope approach. Although in all levels i.e. ECD, primary and secondary, classes were run by qualified teachers but as teachers' turnover ratio was high therefore new teachers were encouraged to join the school. Those new teachers found it difficult to integrate pedagogy with content in order to make teaching and learning process effective. Thus during informal negotiations with those teachers, I chose to work with a teacher of grade five where there were 35 students who were the direct beneficiaries as well as respondents of this study.

## 2. KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

This research study aimed to cater the main question:

- How does innovative pedagogy enable learners' to become active participants in the classrooms during teaching and learning process?

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Freestone (2012) considers traditional teaching is based on single learning approach, focuses on content by the teacher. Potvin *et al* (2010) cited that teacher centered approach is considered as expert knowledge base approach where teacher is solely responsible for course planning and execution, along with evaluation and assessment. Also teaching centered learning often presented as "pedagogy of answers" (Astolfi, Darot, Ginsburger-Vogel & Toussaint 1997).

Innovation pedagogy refers to a learning approach that helps learners to acquire information through different creative ways which helps in making learning meaningful during the process of internalization and express through creativity. The significance of innovative pedagogical approach has been always remaining at great level in creating a joyful learning milieu. Such interventions provide learners an opportunity to voice - up by high level of engagement. Teachers support through a thorough reflection about "the needs and wants of the learner" (Roger1994), thus innovative pedagogy enable learners to *Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate* and *Evaluate*. This

curriculum and instruction model is also known as 'five Es' (Bybee *et al.*1989). An innovative pedagogical approach is contrasted to 'surface approach to learning' as Nicholls (2002: 31–32) explains, "*which is exemplified as an intention to complete the task, memorize information and facts, no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge, and to treat the task as externally imposed. However, rote learning is a typical strategy adopted by surface learners*". Hence the paramount importance of the theme encourages learners to experience various modes of learning by participating in the learning process themselves.

Nicholls (2002: 36) states: "Deep approach to learning is exemplified as an intention to understand and seek meaning, leading students to attempt to relate concepts to existing experiences distinguishing between new ideas and existing knowledge and critically evaluating and determining key themes and concepts". Thus it provides a direction on how knowledge is acquired and then a level of adaptation in order to understand the processes. I, P.S. & Fox, R. (2004: 4) presented few important characteristics of innovative pedagogical practices which include:

- ❖ Promote active and independent learning
- ❖ Collaborative, project based learning involving complex, extended, real world like problems
- ❖ Individualised, customised instruction
- ❖ 'Break down the walls' of the classroom (e.g. time, space and participants in the teaching process)
- ❖ Improve social cohesiveness and understanding

In the light of above mentioned characteristic, these elements should represent independent learning which could further be linked with real life of learners. It is therefore imperative that our classrooms must promote such atmosphere where curriculum is not only implemented through force rather created and developed together with the close interaction of teachers and students both. Such classrooms setting then become real for learning thus teachers are the key players who make curriculum live and develop a sense of direction in learners to create meaningful learning environment and also critically examined their own participation in the provided context.

Bahou (2011:12) argued "what is education for" and responded that it "cultivates collaborative relationships among students and between students and teachers that are conducive to capacity building and agency". Many research studies (MacBeath *et al* 2003; Mitra, 2001; Flutter and Rudduck 2004; Morgan, 2006; Pedder and McIntyre 2006; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Thompson, 2009) revealed that the significant practical contribution of students have huge impact on school improvement therefore, students' voice has become a significant and pertinent theme in current days and educational outcomes are considered from students' perspective.

Recently in the education world, the notion of students voice has re-emerged by broadening this field for research study. Cook-Sather (2006) illustrates as 'legitimate perspective, presence and active role' however, Wolk (1998) argues by pointing out that that everyone has a voice and, therefore, this is not something that can be "given". According to Bahou (2011), United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) legally accepts Children' right to be voiced and expressed internationally; hence being a part of global world, it is significant to pay due respect and attention to achieve national targets in order to be aligned with global community.

According to Fielding (2007), students' empowerment works at manifolds; School improvement, offers teachers important insights into learning and work potentially, challenges the passive role of students within schools and also redefine student-teacher relationships as a joint endeavour in learning.

Because of its great advantages, innovative pedagogy thus becoming popular strategy which enables teachers to inspire learners towards learning and get artefacts of learning benefits at multilevel. Though out the participatory action research, I have used this as major theme. While planning and introducing activities, I critically observed other enabling factors that brought improvement among learners towards learning.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This action research falls under the qualitative paradigm which is particular meant to improve the existing situation. According to Gay (1992), the primary concern of action research is to solve local problems in a local setting.

In the words of Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998: 24), "Action research concerns actual, not abstract practices. It involves learning about the real, material, concrete, particular practices of particular people in particular places."

In order to conduct my action research, I followed similar procedure as suggested by Burns (1997) and Henry and Kemmis (1985). A detail of the procedure followed is given below:

### **Stage 1: Reconnaissance**

In the words of Simon Hole and Grace Hall cited in May (1999:23) "The ordinary experiences of our teaching days are the essence of our practices, using a guide to reflect on these experiences. Either individually or with colleagues is an entry to improving our teaching."

Apart from informal discussions with recently trained teacher inducted in the school; I also found information from following processes:

#### ➤ **Classroom observation prior to begin action research:**

As researcher, it was very important for me to be familiar with the existing educational context where teaching and learning was taking place. Also to build good rapport with the stakeholders and especially with the class teacher, thus I met with the management and shared the purpose and objectives of my action research and with their consent I observed two lessons of grade 5 in that particular school.

During the process, I observed various things and also shared my initial but brief feedback with class teacher separately. My initial findings about the teaching and learning process in that class were teacher centered approach, students were passive during the process, and teacher had a particular style which did not allow many activities and curriculum. I felt these observations would certainly allow me to situate myself as an inquirer and alert my observer too. During the feedback session, I discussed and inquired about her preparation plans and few specific challenges that she had been encountering during her teaching; along with what more could be done to her students.

Focusing on the areas that emerged during my initial observations, I made special considerations to incorporate those as I wanted to respond to them during my focused teaching.

In order to create enabling environment for the class teacher, I did not discuss in details the number of strategies that I would be incorporating in teaching, as I wanted her to observe my teaching and then spell out what she felt good or bad in my teaching to her students.

#### ➤ **Consensus building and taking over**

As mentioned above that after getting two classroom observations, I shared my succinct feedback with the class teacher and also requested her to allow me to teach in her class. Since beginning of the process, we had made each other clear about the purpose of those 15 hours teaching (3 classes per week).

I informed her that it would basically enhance my own learning as how students to be facilitated in teaching learning through using some new strategies. Furthermore, she was also informed about her role as observer throughout the process; and her critical reflection would facilitate in bringing novelty into teaching and learning process.

### **Stage 2: Developing plans for desired action research cycles**

The first cycle was planned through the findings of reconnaissance and the subsequent cycles were developed from the results of the preceding cycle.

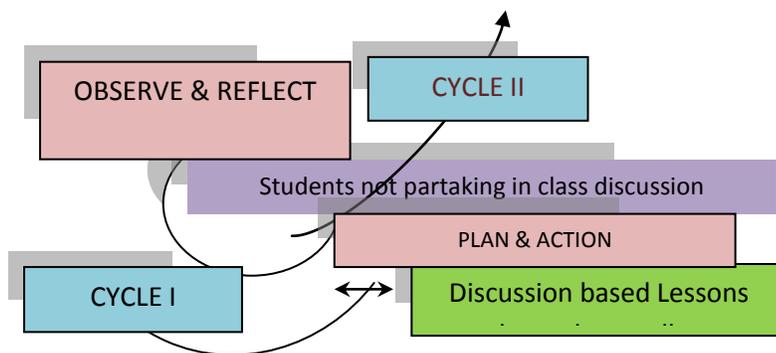
**4.1 Ethical consideration**

A careful consideration of the emerging ethical issues was an integral part of the study. The School management, Head teacher and teachers were informed about the purpose and procedure of the research. Parents' consent was taken before initiating the project. Participants' right of anonymity was maintained, confidentiality was assured to the participants with the promise that the shared information will not disclose to anyone who is not directly involved in the study.

**5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

For all the intervention, I followed the action research methodology (i.e. Plan, action, observation, reflection). A sample of first cycle is presented below:

**Action Cycle I: Discussion based lesson plans**



**Planning**

Before initiated my teaching (action research) into the class V, I took two classroom observations where I came to know that those students' involvement and participation is less than required thus this to be increased.

Based on the mentioned observations, I planned to invite all students to involve in the discussion, and my initial three lesson plans were aiming to engage them in activities.

### Action (Process)

The pedagogy applied in my lesson plan of day first three days i.e.1, 2, 3 and 4 was based on the constructivist theory where students would partake in their own learning to create meaning. Initially in the first class, students were hesitant while introducing themselves to me and faced difficulties in sharing their views therefore in my initial lesson plans, I placed some of the activities that could help them to open up their own ideas such as class discussion, group presentations, thinking i.e. to voice themselves and later on their involvement became the part & parcel of my teaching.

In the second class, I gave task to students to present for 3 minutes for which they could prepare from home, only 2 students participated in the presentation activity. Upon inquiring the reasons, it was learnt that as they were not exposed to such activities thus they felt shy, however for the rest of upcoming classes, they started following me and involved in all the mentioned strategies. Throughout the process, my teaching approach was based on constructivism where teaching strategies such as individual presentation, think-pair-share, group presentation, role-play, creative writing were commonly used.

### Observation

I was successful in letting students bring about their voices in front of all. They started involving in all classes from initiation till the end of the day, and it seemed difficult to stop them within 50 minutes as we couldn't get involved in lengthy discussion as a whole class strategy; thus in further classes I divided them into groups where they discussed their opinions within small group and after filtering their ideas, they presented the key messages with other groups. Initially it was very limited, chaotic but gradually it went quite well.

I also noticed that my students weren't working well in groups especially sharing of ideas with each other and help each other, therefore I had to structure the task with greater details for which I thought of planning another intervention.

### Reflection

At the culmination of action cycle I, I noticed that students began to participating in the given tasks. Martin (2000: 35) has highlighted "*Motivation can be conceptualized as student's energy and derive to learn and work efficiently to achieve their potential at school and the behavior that follow from this energy certainly drives*". As a researcher, I applied negotiation strategy with observer teachers to find out what went right or wrong during the first cycle.

It was revealed that although they initiated to participate by themselves however they are still not feeling comfortable to work with their classmates in a group setting. Thus this invite for second intervention where I had to introduce cooperative learning with them.

### Action Cycle II: Incorporating elements of 'Cooperative learning' in lessons

#### Planning

From the beginning, my focus was to bring students into discussion where they could engage themselves into learning and creating process which would enable them to make connections between concepts of life skills curriculum and their practical lives.

To foster the linkages between what is read, and how to use it in life, I highlighted innovative strategies including cooperative learning in my lesson plans where small group discussion cum activities, jigsaw reading and

deliberation, use of ICT (videos and presentations) were incorporated. This action remained continued till the end of the cycles, and activities such as think-pair-share and jigsaw were used to blend with content. One student shared his reflections during the informal talk: *"We shared what we understood and what we didn't was explained to us by our group mates"*.

#### **Action:**

Through elements of cooperative learning strategy, we were able to overcome the issue, now students started appreciating others ideas and began responding to it.

A student shared her thought during the interview: *"Our mind cannot get with so many ideas at a time but by group work we got so many ideas"* Another said, *"We built friendship bond"*. The co-teacher of the class shared her views related to the same, *"Each child was participated and every one shared their ideas through this group activity. They also learn how to cooperate with each other"*

In addition to this observation, data also indicates that students' centered approach is supportive in developing positive qualities among students such as confidence, ability to express, leadership qualities, and sharing ideas. My critical partner's reflection mentioned in her reflections informs that: *"All the students participated actively. A student named Rashid (pseudo name) who possesses a great knowledge but didn't use to speak previously now participates actively in class"*

#### **Observation**

During the process of my first action, when I introduced the jigsaw reading plan, they really liked and enjoyed but it consumed a lot of time i.e. 3 hours; I also noticed that students began to participating in the given tasks. My critical partner (CP) referred the similar observation in following comments: *"All took great interest in this. I noticed that even those who don't respond frequently in class, also took great interest, one of the students who had problem on phrasing her sentences, has taking help from her classmates"*. The class teacher shared her views related to the same: *"Each child was participated and every one shared their ideas through this group activity. They also learn how to cooperate with each other"*.

#### **Reflect**

It was apparent that students are profoundly sharing their thinking, they began relating incidence happening in schools, at home, during recess time etc. and many of them relating their day-to-day activities with all the concept dealt during classroom teaching. All the team members including me and my two observers had noticed this change in them and were convinced that it foster their personal inquiry and critical thinking. Critical partner cited in her remarks: *"It seemed very interesting that all the children were very much eager to discuss about the movie and wanted to give their own ideas and findings"*.

The involvement of the students in the discussion was very fascinating as they not only took part but also prolonged the discussion points by sharing their own understanding. Rogers (1994) endorses similar qualities among learners i.e. experiential learning, personal involvement, self-initiated, evaluated by learners and all-encompassing effects on learners for learning". During the discussion time, it was also important for them to make connection through reading text but it was revealed that some of them were found difficulties to comprehend the text through self-reading. This led me into another intervention which was group -reading activity that I tried in next cycle.

### Action Cycle III: Interactive group reading was focused

#### Planning

Responding to the immediate issue of reading the content in the text book, the most suitable option which they agreed was to allocate them into various groups where they could sit with those who are well versed in reading and can discuss with them. Meanwhile, I had to make sure that in the groups they all read the text, interact with the text and were able to discuss the given questions at the same time. Although it was somehow difficult to meet the requirement of all the students, for the purpose I sought support from my partner teacher to facilitate with those two children who needed more support, where as I focused on the entire groups.

#### Action

During my teaching, although I provided them with plenty of opportunities to work in pair and groups as students learn more freely and with no hesitation. I believe that they shared their understanding with peers through questioning, discussing, listening, elaborating and also eliciting their thoughts. Thus, PMI, KWL, debate, penal discussion and small group discussion methods were used.

#### Observation

Indeed, with a great effort, the group work strategy went very well and it encouraged all to participate. My critical partner (CP) illustrates her views: *"The thing I realized was that best teaching technique is to keep students busy during the whole class and get them involved with you and this can be done by indulging them in various activities"*.

#### Reflect

With this experience, I found out that not all groups were able to complete their scheduled reading pages within a short span of time. It was also realized that lengthy readings could not uphold their interest. Thus reading as post-discussion activity was practiced throughout which enable them to connect with the content easily. This strategy was very much liked by the class. My critical partner (CP) mentioned her thought regarding using this strategy in other classes: *"I also learnt different activities, as I was familiar with these activities but I never thought of using them but I learned how to integrate these activities in life skills curriculum"*

#### 5.1 Handing over to the class teacher

After successful implementation of three cycles which facilitated students' confidence and social skills, I handed over the class to the respective teacher. Though, she was active partner throughout the action research process, she wanted more coordination with me to bring innovation in her teaching even after my exit from the school. I promised to work with her as her mentor for another 6 months on her free period, which was further step of enabling her to lead in her teaching career and I supported her from behind.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

Innovative pedagogy enables learners to become active participants during learning. I reflected the whole process and asked myself whether I was able to motivate students to engage in classroom activities positively? Whether innovative pedagogical approach provided a positive impact on student learning? Have I empowered them to interact with their colleagues during and after classroom discussions? And the answer was 'yes', the reflection

diary of teacher, notes and observations of critical friend, sketches and plans of my mentor informed that there was a positive change and improvement among students'.

Students became self-dependent and showed their eagerness to learn; their confidence level rose and their participation in all the activities especially role play, the panel discussion, classroom discussions were extraordinary. Besides that, their involvement in the assignments was remarkable. My finding revealed that students were able to interact with each other and as they became very reflective and used questioning to share their thinking.

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**Statement:**

We hereby confirm that this research paper is our own original work and we have cited all sources that were used.