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Rozina Jumani and Yasmeen Jumani

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Constructing Authentic Curriculum Context for Relevance and Sustainability: Transforming Roles of Educational Leaders as Authentic Pedagogues

Rozina Jumani¹ and Yasmeen Jumani²

¹Associate Professor and Director Academics Affairs, Higher Education Institutes and NDIE, Karachi, Pakistan

²Head of Teacher Education Department, ITREB Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan

(PAKISTAN)

¹rozinajumani@gmail.com, ²yrijumani@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Though teaching and learning is a very sophisticated process, it can only take place when authentic pedagogy is employed; however there are other factors such as authentic context, authentic activities, reflection, collaboration, authentic assessment etc equally important to be considered for setting authentic learning environment and seeking authentic learning outcomes. It is significant to question the relevance of curriculum (with all varied types) in current times. Do we as teachers or teacher educators contextualize our curriculum to make it relevant for learners, do we have authentic context while teaching different mixed ability students in our schools? What is the role of educational leaders in each school to make curriculum relevant according to the need of learners, learning and environment. In order to investigate the current practices of teaching curriculum in various schools of Karachi, approximately twenty mid-career professionals of masters/ post-graduates and graduate certificate program embarked on a learning journey of curriculum planning and teaching for about six months in their respective schools. The paper highlights mid-career professionals i.e. educators' learning journey of bringing sustainable authentic changes as curriculum reforms in their school context. It also reports their little yet meaningful attainments and countless obstructions during the process, as all participants do not seek similar insights to change and improvements. Hence this paper provides a contemplative approach regarding the current scenario in schools.

Keywords authentic learning, school leaders, narrative analysis, transformed roles, curriculum planning

1. INTRODUCTION

Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that allows learners to explore, investigate, discuss and construct their meaning related to real life issue (Donovan *et al*, as cited in Mims 2003). According to Rule (2006), the term authentic learning is relatively recent, the idea of learning in contexts that promote real-life applications of knowledge. Authentic learning is defined as learning that is flawlessly integrated or entrenched into meaningful, real-life situations (Jonassen *et al*, 2008)

The term 'authentic learning' is comparatively a new idea of learning, it has its philosophical roots in constructivism that promotes real life application of knowledge by involving learners in higher order thinking task. Lombardi (2007) explains that constructivists advocates authentic learning when learners construct their own meaning focusing real world - complex problems and seeking their solutions using role-play exercises, problem based activities, case studies and participation in virtual communities of practice. Schell (2000) believes that if classroom practitioners i.e. teachers and instructional pedagogues place high value on learning in authentic context then their instructional programs will be different and unique then usual.

Situating the context

In June 2010, Notre Dame Institute of Education inaugurated a new program in Educational Leadership. This program was offered to Master (M Ed Leadership), Postgraduate (Pg Ed leadership Certificate) and/or Graduate (GC Ed Leadership Certificate) mid-career professionals, who have minimum 5 to 8 years of teaching experience and essential credentials required for the enrolment of two years master degree, or one year certificate program either PG or GC.

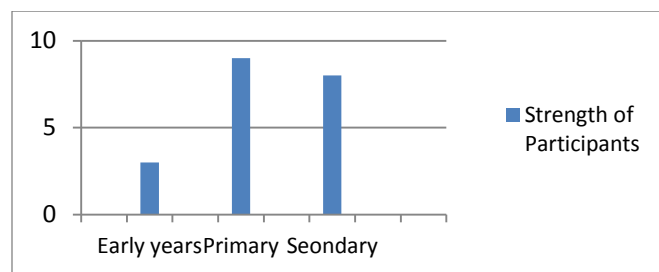
These modules were taught simultaneously at Karachi and Lahore centres, however, in this paper the reflections of pedagogues belonging to Karachi centre i.e. participants from Karachi, Hyderabad & remote Sindh, and Quetta will be presented.

All modules employed various learning and teaching strategies including class discussion, presentation, literature reviews & reading tasks, reflective talks and debates, journal writing etc. Moreover, each module was linked with field based tasks that could enable participants to be more critical and reflective about the current practices and they could identify the loophole along with strategies to improve the situation in their own context.

This paper therefore highlights the learning journey of participants who studied 'Leading Authentic Learning' and 'Authentic Learning and influence of Leadership' modules at M.Ed, PG or GC levels. It also discusses how this module enabled them to transform their roles as 'authentic pedagogues' who could lead authentic learning in their schools context.

2. METHODOLOGY

For this study, narrative analysis within the qualitative paradigm was used especially to capture participants' understanding of transforming while going through the learning process. Narrative inquiry is suitable to seek participants' creation of meaning and how they relate with their work context to improve the situation.



All 20 participants from various levels were engaged in an in-depth semi structure interviews where they opened up their minds and analyzed their transformed role. Further in this paper, participants' conversation is shared to inform the process of transformation which is totally intrinsic and based on internalization of the philosophy of 'leading authentic learning' what they believed in and practiced also.

What characterizes the authentic learning environment?

It is important to present a comparative picture of an authentic and unauthentic instructional program which any teacher engage into. It is certainly a new phenomenon of teaching and learning where learners are engaged into real-life issues, they are encouraged to lead their own inquiry through collaborative approach and solve the problems of life. Each learner is provided scaffolding during the process until s/he seeks comfort to lead his or her work independently.

Framework of authentic learning environments – brief review of literature

Herrington & Oliver (2000: 26) describe 9 elements of authentic learning that are essential framework for establishing authentic learning environments.

1. Provide authentic contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life (e.g. Brown et al., 1989; Collins, 1988; Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Martens, 2005)
2. Provide authentic activities (e.g. Brown et al., 1989; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990; Jonassen, 1991; Young, 1993)
3. Provide access to expert performances and the modelling of processes (e.g. Collins et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991)

4. Provide multiple roles and perspectives (e.g. Bransford, Sherwood, Hasselbring, Kinzer, & Williams, 1990; Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson, & Coulson, 1991)
5. Support collaborative construction of knowledge (e.g. Bransford et al., 1990; Brown et al., 1989)
6. Promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed (e.g. Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Norman, 1993)
7. Promote articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pea, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978)
8. Provide coaching by the teacher at critical times, and scaffolding and fading of teacher support (e.g. Collins, 1988; Collins et al., 1989; Greenfield, 1984; Harley, 1993)
9. Provide for authentic, integrated assessment of learning within the tasks (e.g. Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004; Herrington & Herrington, 1998; McLellan, 1993; Reeves & Okey, 1996; Young, 1993, 1995).

This approach works well where curriculum areas are integrated as learners are engaged into project work or problem based learning etc which blends language, mathematics i.e. problem solving, social studies including environmental studies and science i.e. exploration altogether; thus project work needs integration among all curriculum areas. It is also known as *interdisciplinary approach* towards learning.

Setting up for field exposure - An emergence of authentic pedagogues

In the modules 'Leading Authentic Learning' and 'Authentic Learning and influence of Leadership' apart from other instructional pedagogies, research component was introduced where each participant regardless of their role as class teacher, or school administrator, or section coordinator, spent six months in the classrooms to seek the relevancy of the taught course within the school.

Most participants were from administration i.e. principals/ head-teachers/ section-coordinators etc and very few were either teacher educators or teachers having direct link with teaching in the classrooms; thus all participants paired with a teacher of their specialized subjects in a particular section of their own school. Because the participants belonged to diverse contexts i.e. urban and rural context thus, a flexible instructional plan was devised that could enable them to co-teach initial topics of the unit then gradually bring about the elements of authentic learning in their instructional plans. The initial hiccups and doldrums in the classrooms made them realize their deficiency in meeting the demands of the curriculum and instruction, but gradually they were able to inspire their students in the classrooms.

As one of the participant quoted,

'The meaning and purpose of learning has perhaps become more clearer since the application of contextual learning is emphasised upon'. (Jumani 2011, p. 33)

They were able to make meaning while implementing the plan, as another participant from PG commented,

'The course on 'leading authentic learning' open and made clear many areas in the field of education, it helped me to understand what authentic learning is and what is not.

By preparing the lessons I was able to discover myself as a leader and a teacher. I was able to know my strong and weak points, I was able to understand what and where I require the improvement and also I learnt how to improve that area. This course helped me to improve my thinking'. (Jumani 2011, p. 52)

Transforming roles of pedagogues - Insights from the field

This section of paper presents participants' learning journey of what they encountered i.e. achievements and/ or challenges in the field and how they managed to bring initial changes in transforming unauthentic context into authentic context in their respective fields.

It would be ambitious to claim that all have transformed at once. As one of the participant reported:

'I was challenged by the preparation which was involved in planning a lesson. I was making sure that the lesson should be good, interesting and above all should have activities which lead the students into authentic learning'.

'The first step was to select the unit and then topic. This was done carefully because this was a model lesson which will provide us with all the activities involve the authentic learning. The teacher who partner with me had very little ideas about the authentic learning. She was uncomfortable with me as she had to give the lesson with the Principal'.

'The students' reaction was interesting, as they found for the first time, the Principal in their class for teaching. They enjoyed and had fun as they got into the activities of authentic learning'. (Jumani 2011, p. 99)

Participants were also careful about the notion of change as it is a gradual process especially if convincing all stakeholders together is very difficult. As participant shared that,

'When I planned and taught a lesson based on the idea of authentic learning, I decided not to be very idealistic in planning as the system where I am working does not have qualified trained teachers.

I felt that thought the lesson was not totally authentic, but it had touched almost all the elements. I created a scenario of second hand scale where students used their knowledge and got to know the actual application of it. I conducted VIII class of boys' section without any disciplinary issues and all the students were engaged and enthusiastic about the processes.

Afterwards, I started to teach one of the Matric Maths class on regular based for the students who needed remedial help and by relating the content with real life application...

An achievement which I consider major one is a dramatic change in the students' motivation as their keenness to participate was visible during the session'. (Jumani 2011, p. 109)

Moving gradually from unauthentic context to authentic context of learning: The process of developing authentic pedagogues

This section represents participants' reflective narration of how the process enables them to experience change, their journey from unauthentic context to authentic context of learning.

'Before joining the M.Ed Lead, I was already working as instructional leader. Though I learnt a lot from the earlier first two modules in previous semester but did not get that much excited to bring change and to reflect the practices need to be change in my local context till I started with 'Leading Authentic Learning' course in my current semester. During this course, I did not only learn about the idea and elements of authentic learning but also practices and experimented the achievements and challenges in reality'. (Jumani 2011, p. 73)

Participant reported retrospectively:

'Some of the major achievements during the module were the understanding and application of authentic learning. Before attending the module I often wondered why the students are unable to fully grasp many concepts especially in mathematics, and the answer to it was touch of authentic learning.

I have become more conscious in preparing and delivering my lessons and try my level best to make my lesson really authentic. I don't claim of becoming a perfectionist, but I do feel a development in my teaching. I have learnt and started to use different and new strategies of students' assessment. Though a general pattern is followed, yet in class, I probe questions that enable student to think of the content and apply it in real life in various contexts.

Another significant achievement is creating links in all the subjects. Whenever possible I try to help students understand the importance of learning / studying other (all) the subjects. This is done in an informal manner. I myself have started to make connections, which I rarely did before.

Through the module I have become more reflective, I try to evaluate and analyze microscopically the success and weaknesses in my plans. If there are short comings or hindrances, then I try to take a different approach that is within my means. I have also learnt to be critical to myself'. (Jumani 2011, p. 62)

Another fellow commented while critically reviewing one's role in school:

Application of theoretical concept:

'Reading up on what authentic teaching and learning are complemented the practical experiences that I had had. Everything and more jell into perspectives and I was able to apply these theoretical concepts to practical work and reflect on their usefulness as well as limits'.

Empathize with teachers/classroom issues:

'The practical teaching experience made me understand the work of a teacher and her predicament vis-à-vis, no. of children, classroom facilities and most importantly limitations of her own personality and knowledge that created barriers for her to deliver well'.

'Classification of the confusion that surrounded the concept of "authenticity" and the realization that authentic world mean original and what would be more original than what is home grown! So I learnt that in order for the children to understand the importance of history for instance, they must be provided with an opportunity to explore around their own community, city, and country and then look elsewhere. A perspective on who they are and where do they exist in time would be the key to know what the world is doing'.

Learning about the nine elements of authenticity:

'What helped me in prove upon the lesson plan were the pointedly asked questions within the discipline of each element. I only had to apply those questions to my lesson plan are know what was right or wrong'. (Jumani 2011, p. 48)

The above narratives would allow the readers to realize and appreciate the gradual transformation occurred among participants. One participant commented:

"Being a leader of a school, I had always realized the importance of team efforts therefore I initiated an interest group in my school of like minded people who wanted to explore the concept of 'authentic learning' and see how it could make teaching learning practices more meaningful, interesting and challenging at the school' (Jumani 2011, p. 54)

Continuing with re-conceptualized role as 'authentic pedagogues' in their work context

This section informs participants' commitment to continue their learning journey to bring about required improvement in their work context. There is a realization that new emerging role is very complicated and also requires careful initiatives which could mean collaborating with all stakeholders in the school context to transform gradually for bringing the authentic learning environment which is the need of the time. As one fellow said,

'Authentic learning is the "truth"! and therefore there are no two ways about leading and campaigning for authenticity that we all do'(Jumani 2011, p. 21)

Commenting on how this journey will be continued, another participant commented.

'I would like to continue with the work initiated in this module by developing a master plan for the kind of transformation with my school management team, also taking input from teachers.

This plan will help me as a leader to be focused and outcome oriented. It could also serve as a long term planning document for my school specially focusing teaching and learning. This will include planning for professional development of teachers, aligned to the needs for implementing authentic learning plans.

Alongside one will be refining, reviewing curriculum to find out where and why authentic learning can be incorporated. Similarly assessment modalities will also have to align in relation along with resources. The reason why I would like to do it is that it would enable me to actualize the vision that is developing a critical thinker. A mind that is able to connect to the global perspective needs and in able to develop skills, attitude required to make adjustments in coping up with the challenges of tomorrow'.

Also I feel that learning needs to be applied in real life and only then the acquired learning allows you to know it. It is worthwhile or not. Hence this module is helpful in establishing this important feature'(Jumani 2011, p. 51)

Continuing with the similar thoughts, a participant commented that:

'Authentic learning course went smoothly and I really enjoyed it as a learner, it has really opened new vistas for my future planning and work. I would suggest that it will become more authentic and meaningful for the learners, if instead of one or two lessons, a whole unit is to be planned focusing on authentic learning approach especially all the elements of authentic learning'.

'Planning of the module was done carefully and was executed very well. All the activities were planned considering the requirements of the module and making sure the concept of authentic learning becomes clear to all participants. Not only conceptual knowledge was given consideration, even the implementation of authentic learning in the classroom was given due importance. It was also made sure that the participants continue practicing authentic learning even after the completion of the module'.

'Module was well planned, flexible with innovative ideas that incorporated authentic learning. Throughout the unit, all participants were encouraged to participate and various issues and challenges at schools were not only discussed, rather we were encouraged to do all that was possible, within our means, the advice and suggestions given by the mentor were of great assistance in this regard. I was not only thought about authentic learning, but I actually experienced it happening throughout the module. I must appreciate the enthusiasm of the facilitator'.

'The planning and execution really opened the doors of many challenges in my ideology of learning. The instruction given in the given tasks make very easy for me to complete the task without any hesitation and misunderstanding'. (Jumani 2011, p. 84)

3. IMPLICATION

It is important to bring sustainable change on gradual level along with introducing the notion of authentic learning, it is equally important to bring essential changes at assessment level; otherwise the process could be wasted. As reported by a fellow:

'Assessment at the primary level need to focus more on the softer skills e.g. team work, confidence curiosity and less marks oriented to promote integrated learning, classroom presentations and elocutions as authentic assessment rather than paper pencil tests'. (Jumani 2011, p. 68)

At the completion of module, all participants and a faculty sat together for post-mortem of their field-based experience which concluded on following recommendations:

- It was suggested to invite all the participants for refresher programme i.e. two days in each quarter, where they could bring classrooms issues that could further be investigated.
- In order to bring authentic learning context, it was recommended to choose one school as model school where the structural as well as pedagogical interventions to be planned. This school then become corporate school for the institute where most practicum could take place.
- Faculty visit to various schools to facilitate the process was also suggested, until the pedagogues would establish confidence in the context thoroughly.

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