

What Can a Caged Bird Sing? A Case for a Place-Based Component of Curriculum

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Abstract

Society in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is culturally and linguistically diverse. Schools follow only the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum. The curriculum is sterile, divorced from the students' context and experiences. The article discusses the challenges that students face in the centralized curriculum and argues for a place-based education to develop stronger connections between people and place. The article discusses two examples of place-based curriculum, one from Ladakh and the other from the Andamans. It concludes that a place-based curriculum is not a rejection of formal education. It is the creation of a space within the curriculum for local issues.

Keywords: Place-Based education, local language, Ladakh, Andaman Islands, critical literacy

*The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own
But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird" from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983)
...or if a politician wants to show they are down to earth, then they can

change their style of language to a local dialect, if they have the correct roots.

Tom Bartlett, *Analysing Power in Language: A Practical Guide* (2014).

A centralized curriculum seldom has space for local issues. Gruenewald (2003) refers to such a curriculum as “placeless” (p.8) because the experiences of teachers and learners have little to no place in the curriculum (Sunny, 2008). A sterile world is presented to learners through static textbooks in a standardized language. It does not provoke the inquiry and curiosity of children (Sarveswar, 2021), and students become caged birds. The classroom transactions convey the impression that the language and content of the textbooks is the sole acceptable version of the world (Sarangapani, 2003).

A curriculum based in the local context—a place-based education—reduces the alienation of the curriculum for the learners. It connects learners to their places and ecosystems (Gruenewald, 2003). The learners’ identities, cultures, language, experiences, and activities gain importance through which they gather knowledge.

This article grapples with the question of creating space for a place-based curriculum in formal education. First, it brings out a few challenges of a centralized curriculum like the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for children in the Andaman Islands. Then it highlights two instances of place-based curriculum to show how these make space for a place-based component in the school curriculum.

Challenges of a Centralized Curriculum

The South Andaman village of Wandoor is used to bring out the challenges of CBSE and make a case for a place-based component in it. In the Andamans, those whose mother tongue is Bengali form the largest linguistic group, but this is not homogeneous. They originate from either present-day Bangladesh or West Bengal (Lorea, 2017; Zehmisch, 2017), with the diaspora maintaining the distinctions. The divergences in language, culture or identities do not find a place in the school curriculum.

Challenges of the Language of Instruction

The medium of instruction in some CBSE schools around Wandoor is Bengali, a standardized and “Sanskritized” (Mukherjee, 2003, p. 89)

Bengali. This Bengali is inaccessible to learners as it differs from the colloquial Bengali used outside the schools (World Bank, 2021). Formal language teaching focuses on grammar and accuracy (World Bank, 2021), and the competencies related to comprehension and expression are often sidelined (NCERT, 2006a). The language of instruction does not equip students to navigate the world outside school, and the language of the home—lacking technical vocabulary finds no purchase in the school (Mohanty, 2017; NCERT, 2006a)

Challenges in Textbooks

The schools follow the NCERT textbooks. The geography textbooks give a scant reference to the islands and that too only in Classes 6 (NCERT, 2006b), 7 (NCERT, 2007), and 8 (NCERT, 2008). In Class 6, the island's location is described along with its tropical rainforests and mangrove forest. The Classes 6, 7 and 8 textbooks also refer to the 2004 earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean.

In the English textbook, the speaking and writing exercises encourage students to imagine themselves as rescue volunteers:

who went to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for relief work after the tsunami, or imagine themselves as a British school girl who was visiting the islands and was able to save the lives of tourists because of something she had learned in school (NCERT, 2008, pp. 32-33).

Locals from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have very different experiences about the tsunami that are not recognized in textbooks. It does not develop personal links between the landscapes of the place—outer landscapes—and the students' identities or inner landscapes (Lundahl, 2011).

Challenges in Striving Towards the Aims of Education

In principle, the curriculum should start from where the child *is* (Winch & Gingell, 2004) and schools need to adopt this principle to facilitate learning (NCERT, 2006c). By this principle, the curriculum is built through and in mediation with the context of children's experiences. Language and place are at the core of these experiences. The experiences provide the opportunity for discussing curricular concepts through "local contexts, taking into account learners' experiences and cultural identities while remaining connected with global impacts and consequences" (Stibbe &

Luna 2009, cited in MGIEP, 2017, p. 71).

Since the curriculum is centralized, students struggle to comprehend the content and develop a “minimal level of proficiency in the language” (Nambissan, 1994, p. 2747). There is a lack of interest, confidence and motivation (Mohanty, 2017) to learn. As the curriculum is governed by policy, it falters on the delivery of aims because the experts who design and delineate the curriculum and pedagogy remain outside and, nearly always, above the school system (Sarangapani, 2003). Policy documents are framed in a certain context but emerge into diverse social and institutional realities and are taken up differently (Ball, 1993).

Place-Based Education to Address Curricular Sterilization

One way to counter the sterilization of the child’s schooling experience is to encourage using a place-based component, defined by and for locals as a part of the curriculum. For example, the “collection of oral histories of older residents of the region” (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p.46). It uses spoken language to share experiences and ideas (Singh et al., 2019). Two significant initiatives on place-based curriculum are showcased to show how place-based curriculum can find a space in the centralized curriculum.

In Ladakh, there was widespread concern about the high percentage of failures in Class 10 examinations. The Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement in Ladakh (SECMOL), founded by Sonam Wangchuk, started a school for Ladakhi youth, unable to pass their examinations. The initiative used a curriculum relevant to the bio-geographic and cultural realities of Ladakh, and the content emphasized the Ladakhi language and way of life (Balasubramanian, 2015). Students lived on campus and learned about Ladakhi people, tradition, practical knowledge of cooking, constructing new traditional buildings using mud bricks, cattle care, agriculture, etc. Teaching consisted of using examples drawn from students’ experiences and linking it to the lessons in the textbooks (Stahl, 2014). The pass percentage increased to 70 to 80 per cent (DownToEarth.org.in, 2003; Stahl, 2014).

The second initiative was on environmental education for teachers in the Andaman Islands in 1996. Sunita Rao of Kalpavriksh and Andaman Nicobar Environment Team (ANET) developed a place-based curriculum for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands called *Anmol Dweep* in Hindi and

Treasured Islands in English (ANET, 2003; DownToEarth.org.in, 1996). The teachers reported that they found “it difficult to use or implement *Treasured Islands* because there is no clear linkage to the school curricula” (ANET, 2003, p. 78). The Supreme Court, in 2003, mandated the teaching of environmental education in the school curriculum (Tandon, 2018). To enable this, Dakshin Foundation, in collaboration with ANET, Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bengaluru and local teachers and administrators from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands made connections between place-based concepts and the school curriculum in Hindi and English (Modi, 2021).

The “*Treasured Islands*” presents students with evidence that reinforces, extends and even challenges notions expressed in their school textbooks. The Class 6, CBSE syllabus for science explains why roots of plants grow under the ground, and the *Treasured Islands* curriculum draws attention to roots in mangrove forests, which grow above the ground. In Class 7, students learning about ecosystems through the CBSE syllabus for geography relate the general concepts to specific species of local plants and animals. Class 8 syllabus for geography seeks to explain concepts like “sustainability”. In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, occupations like fishing and fisheries are economically significant and extremely sensitive to unsustainable practices. *Treasured Islands* provides opportunities to contextualize conversations about fisheries (Modi, 2021) locally.

The two examples reaffirm Smith and Sobel’s (2010) idea that place-based education can be as simple as giving elementary school students an hour to write poetry in the school garden each week.

Conclusion

School-based knowledge, today, is alienated from the everyday realities and cultural milieus of children (Kumar, 2005). Active engagement with one’s experience (NCERT, 2006d) unearths the multiplicity of ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ that has, so far, been absent from the national curriculum. A place-based component to formal education could deliver the missing piece in the child’s relationship to the school, offering space to discuss what is personal and important to the children and their families. Such a curricular component can promote enthusiastic engagement. It need not displace education in the languages of prestige (Mohanty, 2017; Nambissan, 1994, 2010). It is a creation of space for itself within the curriculum. It could be delivered out of school hours.

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