

Results of an experiment in holistic education in the primary grades in an education zone in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka during 2013-2014

A brief prepared by
Sujata Gamage, Principal Investigator
sujata@lirneasia.net; www.lirneasia.net/HCR; +94 77 774 8470

Introduction

Views on the purpose of education have changed over time. Such views have ranged from more utilitarian one of preparing citizenry for the workplace, to more idealistic views of learner defined learning for the holistic growth of an individual. The idealistic versions are becoming more main-stream as it is increasingly realized that the knowledge needs of tomorrow cannot be pre-determined and it is best to prepare individuals to take responsibility for their learning throughout their lives (Heckman and Kautz, 2012).

Interestingly, as far back as 1992, well before these new ideas on education became prominent, the National Education Commission (NEC) of Sri Lanka produced a report which advocated a set of learning outcomes which are just as valid today (NEC, 1992). The report identified nine national objectives of education and five competency categories that translated those objectives into learning outcomes. Later these five competency categories were expanded into seven competencies related to (1) communication (2) personality (3) biological, physical and social environment (4) religion and ethics (5) leisure and sports, (6) learning to learn and (7) readiness for the world of work (NIE, 2008).

Sadly, these general objectives of education never took root in Sri Lanka. Although every teacher guide book starts with the national objectives of education and the seven set of competencies and emphasizes the importance of an activity-centred and competency-based teaching-learning process, the syllabi and the assessments that follow very quickly degenerate into rote-learning mode. At primary levels, use of the pass-rate of students at the Grade-five scholarship examination as a performance measure has essentially buried any chance of teachers paying attention to the seven basic competencies.

During 2013-2014, an action research was carried out to refocus on NEC/NIE basic competencies and to develop a system for evaluating the performance of schools in regard to their efforts in inculcating these basic competencies in children. The target population was 100+ primary schools in an education zone in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. The proposed paper summarizes the results of the research as (1) a reformulation of NEC basic competencies into personal and citizenship categories that are more applicable (2) tools for reinvigorating an activity-centred and competency-based education and (3) a method for evaluating schools for their efforts in inculcating these competencies in students.

Methodology

The action research team comprised of all the officials responsible for primary education in the zone and a researcher and an advisory group comprised of civil society leaders and academics. All the activities were carried out by the officials with the researcher and the advisory team serving as resource persons.

Fifty out of the 100 schools in the district were selected for treatment beginning in January 2013, based on the advice of the officials. An ex-post facto analysis showed these schools to be sufficiently representative in of the population of 100+schools in the zone. No control was used.

NEC/NIE categories were reformulated as Subject, Personal and Citizen competencies using several classifications in the literature (Delors, 1996; LMTF, 2013;Tough, 2012). Two new tools were introduced – i.e. a student journal and an assessment sheet for personal and citizen competencies. Existing tools such the teacher notes on each child (Prathyeka Vaartha), teacher-parent book and the student portfolio concepts were revitalized. Performance of schools in regard to their role in inculcating personal and citizen competencies was measured as a sum of scores for a random sample of student portfolios.

To collect a random sample of portfolios, each primary teacher was asked to sort their students' names according to their admission numbers and have the in-service advisors to collect the portfolio of student number 5 from each class and forward them to the zonal office. The number 5 was picked at random. It was assumed that the teacher paid the same attention to all the portfolios since she expected any one of them to be called for evaluation. By inference, then the sample of portfolios captured the effort by teachers in school zone to inculcate personal and citizen competencies in children. A total of 365 portfolios were collected from Grades 1-5 in 49 out of the 50 participating schools in the district during April 4-5, 2013. The action research team comprising of 15 officials, the researcher and two external consultants evaluated the portfolios and awarded mark from 0-2 to each portfolio in regard to effort shown by the teacher in developing subject, personal and citizenship competencies of each student. Since only one portfolio from each class for Grades 1-5 in each school was selected, one could only generalize only about the zone as a whole, but, not the school or the teacher.

Results and Discussion

The reformulation of 50+ competencies as subject, personal and citizen competencies was well accepted by the principals and the teachers but there was reluctance on the part of provincial department of education to pronounce those as state policy, even though the project was carried out at the personal initiative of the Minister for Education in the province. Understandably, the education officials were waiting for a directive from the national ministry of education. The national ministry officials including the secretary was briefed about the project but they were awaiting the results of the action research project, causing a chicken-egg problem in acceptance of the new methods.

The tools were enthusiastically applied during first 6 months of the project but the enthusiasm waned as the pressures of examinations, the Grade five scholarship examination in particular, intensified during the second term.

However, we were able to carry out a comprehensive performance evaluation of the 50 selected schools as to the effort by the teachers in that set of schools to inculcate subject, personal and citizen competencies in their students. A mark of 1 was given if the teacher has identified at least two attributes relevant to the competency category and a mark of 2 was given if the student, teacher, or parent journal showed that the teacher had played a role in developing that competency in the child. A zero was given otherwise. The Math and

language competencies were deduced from the respective student assessment sheets that were included in the portfolio.

Grade	% Portfolios which demonstrated efforts by the teachers in terms of:			
	Inculcating citizenship	Inculcating Personality Development	Subject competency	
			Sinahla	Math
1	6% - 25%	13% - 20%	100%	100%
2	12% - 20%	7% - 7%	95%	50%
3	7% - 30%	8% - 25%	60%	40%
4	0% - 20%	0% - 15%	70%	20%
5	7% - 28%	7% -22%	70%	30%
1-5	7% -28%	7%-17%	80%	50%

Note: The first percentage in the range denotes percent of portfolios AND the teacher has actively contributed to develop the competency in the child. The second percentage in the range is denotes the percent of portfolios where the in which the teacher had identified at least two instances where the student demonstrated the desired competency only.

Conclusions

Over all, the portfolios showed that 28% percent teachers identified personal or citizen competencies of the children in the class and 7% actively contributed to the development of the competency of the students. In the present case, these performance measures were considered adequate given that the teachers received guidance on developing portfolios only in January 2015. Eighty percent of the students showed the language competency expected for their grade level but only 50% did so in Math

Although measuring citizenship or the personal development of a student, primary students in particular, is difficult or even unnecessary, measuring the effort by teachers is a policy relevant activity. Present study demonstrated that it is indeed possible to measure performance of a school in terms of its efforts to provide a holistic education. The tool has to be developed further by including a validation step by the in-service advisors where they talk to the student to make sure the documentation indeed reflects the competencies of the child. An added advantage is that competency in language and math could be Measure the math and language competency using a random sample of studnets

References

- Delors, Jacques et al. 1996. Learning: The Treasure Within. Paris: UNESCO. http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/15_62.pdf
- Heckman, James J. & Kautz, Tim, 2012. "Hard evidence on soft skills," Labour Economics, Elsevier, vol. 19(4), pages 451-464
- LMTF (Learning Metrics Task Force). 2013. Toward Universal Learning: A Global Framework for Measuring Learning. Report No. 2 of the Learning Metrics Task Force. Montreal and Washington: UNESCO Institute for Statistics and Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution.
- National Education Commission of Sri Lanka(1992)

- NIE (2008). Syllabus and teacher guide, Grade five. Primary education Unit, National Institute of Education, Maharagama
- Tough, Paul (2012). How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character. Random House Books
- Almlund, Mathilde; Duckworth, Angela Lee; Heckman, James J.; Kautz, Tim (2011) : Personality psychology and economics, Discussion paper series //Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit, No. 5500, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201104113733>