

Quality Issues in Secondary School Education in Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

The National Education Commission (NEC), Sri Lanka in 1997 included compulsory education regulations for the 5–14 age group and proposals for the establishment of a well-equipped quality school in each of the 324 local administrative divisions to ensure an equitable distribution of educational opportunities. The Commission's Proposals in 2003 also had as its priority, equity in the provision of quality education. Even though new types of schools have been established under different names and efforts made to improve teacher development, school infrastructure and develop a relevant curriculum, the goal of 'excellence' appears to be still elusive.

Among the quality issues highlighted consistently are shortcomings in curriculum and teaching-learning, which lead to examination domination, rote learning, and children being ill-equipped to face demands of life and the world of work or the opportunity to develop creativity.

The National Institute of Education in 2007 introduced a competency-based curriculum at junior secondary education level to improve the quality of education especially to cater to societal demands for a well-rounded education. The paper will present the findings of an evaluation to identify strengths of the reformed curriculum and perceived deficiencies in identification of levels of competencies, and thereby, deficiencies persisting in curriculum development.

THE COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM IN 2007

The National Education Commission (1992) identified a number of National Goals for a National System of Education and competencies on which the curriculum should focus. The NEC Report (2003) further expanded the National Goals of Education and also identified two additional competencies essential for the achievement of those goals. The present curriculum focuses on the following competencies

1. Competencies in Communication based on four sub-sets, Literacy, Numeracy, Graphics and IT proficiency.
2. Competencies relating to the Environment
 - a. Relating to the Social Environment,

- b. Relating to the Biological Environment
 - c. Relating to the Physical Environment
- 3. Competencies relating to Religion and Ethics

It is essential for individuals to assimilate values, so that they may function in a manner consistent with the ethical, moral and religious modes of conduct, rituals, practices in everyday living, selecting that which is most appropriate.
- 4. Competencies in Play and Use of Leisure

Competencies that link up with pleasure, joy, emotions and such human motivations. These find expression in play, sports, athletics and leisure pursuits of many types. These also link up with such values as cooperation, team work, healthy competition in life and work. Here are included such activities as are involved in aesthetics, arts, drama, literature, exploratory research and other creative modes in human living
- 5. Competencies relating to 'Learning to learn'.

These competencies flow directly from the nature of a rapidly changing, complex and interdependent world.
- 6. Competencies relating to Personality Development
 - a. Generic skills such as creativity, divergent thinking, initiative, decision making, problem-solving, critical and analytical thinking, team work, inter-personal relations, discovering and exploring
 - b. Values such as integrity, tolerance and respect for human dignity
 - c. Emotional intelligence
- 7. Competencies relating to Preparation for the world of work

Employment related skills to maximize their potential and to enhance their capacity

 - a. to contribute to economic development
 - b. to discover their vocational interests and aptitudes
 - c. to choose a job that suits their abilities and
 - d. to engage in a rewarding and sustainable livelihood

Since 2006, the National Institute of Education (NIE) has carried out a reform of the school curriculum accommodating some of the recommendations of the NEC, from Grade 6 – 11 with the following objectives:

- (i) to encourage activity based learning
- (ii) to facilitate students in 'Constructing Knowledge'
- (iii) to foster the development of higher order academic abilities and skills and
- (iv) to provide for non-cognitive aspects of student development.

The NIE in developing the new syllabuses and the Teacher Instructional Manuals have identified the Competencies and the Competency levels that a pupil should attain in different grades. The paper presents a part of the findings of a recent larger study related to the formulation of levels of competencies that the curriculum is attempting to develop in students and the extent to which vertical integration of the curriculum has been effected in the Subjects in the curriculum of Grades 6-11.

REVIEW OF PERTINENT LITERATURE

Competency is defined as an individual's actual performance in a particular situation. Actual performance is the gold standard for demonstration of competency. In the Competency Assessment Process, performance tests which consist of evaluation entries embedded within a checklist are used. A performance checklist is used to determine presence of performance. A Competency statement describes (1) a general category of behaviour or performance, (2) describes behaviour that is observable or measurable (McKee,).

Competencies reinforce one another from basic to advanced as learning progresses. Continued refinement of defined competencies is necessary so that enhanced performance in a variety of contexts can be assessed". It emphasizes "All objectives and competencies, regardless of the level for which they are intended, should be specific, measurable, and written in behavioural terms. Each should specify an observable learning outcome, and all objectives have two parts – an action verb and a content area" (Council for Public Health, 2006).

The levels of competency thus become extremely relevant in integrating skills and processes. Especially in a competency-based curriculum, competencies need to be evaluated and they cannot be evaluated without relying on one's judgment. In Canada, based on the Québec Education Program, levels of competency provide common points of reference that enable teachers to determine the competency levels attained by students at the end of a cycle. In secondary education, the scales describe different competency levels that students may have attained by the time the teacher prepares a competency report. These scales facilitate the recognition of students' competencies, and the competency report that parents receive must explicitly refer to the scales of competency levels.

Moon (2002) has explained that in relation to vertical integration, particular consideration needs to be given to *level*. Level can indicate both a stage in learning or level of performance. Discussing the stages or levels in relation to Learning Outcomes, Hughes and Boyle (2005) explain that Bloom's (1965) and Biggs (2003) SOLO Taxonomy are used as level descriptors when discussing levelness.

In Sri Lanka, Gunawardena and Lekamge's (2004) study on the implementation of the junior secondary curriculum in two selected districts pinpointed the non-identification of levels of mastery in the achievement of competencies which these subjects focus on to be a major deficiency. This observation applied to all subjects, and mostly to the new subjects. Gunawardena et al's study (2004) on the effectiveness of the implementation of educational reforms at the senior secondary level also found that the formulation of curricular aims and objectives had not been carried out systematically in some subjects. The principle of vertical integration had been ensured for the most part in all subjects.

McCaul's study (2007) on the implementation of Mathematics and Science Curriculum in Grade 6 and 10 found that in Grade 6 and 10 Mathematics, measurable learning outcomes are specified only for content strands and process learning outcomes include purely the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy – knowledge, comprehension and application while in Grades 6 and 10 Science, Measurable learning outcomes are not specified for either content or process strands. Perera's study (2008) on the evaluation of the curriculum introduced to Grades 6 and 10 in 2007 concluded that the vertical integration in the curriculum has been sustained.

This paper attempts to answer the following two research questions:

- (1) Are themes in a subject in a particular grade continued in the subsequent grades?
- (2) Have the levels of competencies been formulated properly?

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Formulation of the Levels of Competency

In examining the levels of competencies we have attempted to find out whether “All ... competencies, regardless of the level for which they are intended, are specific, measurable, and written in behavioural terms and whether each specifies an observable learning outcome, and whether the levels of competency have two parts – an action verb and content area” (CEPH, 2006).

The study was able to compile a detailed list of the levels of competency which do not appear as specific, or as describing observable or measurable behaviour within a short period of time, and which do not possess both an action verb and a content area through the scrutiny of the competency levels given in the Teachers’ Instructional Manuals. A selected list of levels of competency from this list is presented below in Figure 6.

Figure 4.7: Selected List of levels of Competency

Subject	Level of Competency
Buddhism	Builds one’s own life and character on foundation of the Dhamma;
	Devotes to realization of Nirvana
	Bases one’s spiritual life on the five precepts
	Identifies the Sri Lanka Buddhist heritage and preserves it
	Understands the Buddha’s analysis of suffering and faces suffering with sense
Mathematics	Plans daily activities by being conscious of time
	Prepares for international relations using standard time and date
	Manages time to do daily duties efficiently
Entrepreneurship	Applies entrepreneurial skills for success of diverse social roles
	Takes action to eliminate challenges to entrepreneurship development
Geography	Studies the inter-related nature of one’s home & its immediate surroundings
	Contributes to upkeep one’s home & its surroundings
	Reviews national identity of Sri Lanka
	Studies the environment in which one lives
	Contributes to the balanced existence of the Earth
Hinduism	Accepts and follows the truth that only God is truth and He is the reason for all activities in our life
	Through <i>nayanmar</i> ’s history, realizes their religious beliefs and devotion to God, and follows their religious way
	Through the stories of <i>upanidatham</i> understands and follows God is truth.
	Follows religious traditions and disciplines in different stages of life.
Life Competencies & Citizenship Education	Studies the need and importance of information about one’s self
	Protects environment, national and cultural heritage
	Utilizes forces that are favourable for a successful life relevantly
	Performs duties and responsibilities as citizens towards suppliers of public services
	Internalizes the ideals of democracy
Practical & Technical Skills	Engages in all basic activities relevant to all fields of Technology
	Uses appropriate agricultural methods
	Makes alternate implements for agriculture
	Maintains a home garden using available resources efficiently

	Implements plans and develops characteristics of entrepreneurship through such implementations
Roman Catholicism	Experiences that the world is beautiful
	Contributes to the growth of creation by protecting the environment
	Nourished by God's spirit experiences Him in all that befalls
	Experiences God's glory in the creation
	Experiences the revelation of God's power through the inventions
History	Makes an attempt to preserve the national identity
	Realizes that the power struggles that emerge among the various nations could lead to world wars
	Activates oneself taking cues from the way the Indians behaved to maintain their independence and the integrity.
	Studies the way Japan rose up as a powerful entity in the world and take cues to adjust one's life accordingly.
Sinhala Language	Imbues social ethics through reading
	Reads appreciating culture and value systems
	Develops the habit of listening to electronic media programmes
	Develops the habit of listening to non-electronic media lectures and discussions
	Acts with understanding of traditions of different ethnic groups

The scrutiny of the competency levels given in the Teachers' Instructional Manuals, however, showed that there were levels of competency which do not appear as specific, or as describing observable or measurable behaviour within a short period of time, and which do not possess both an action verb and a content area. Sufficient care has not been given to the formulation of levels of competencies especially in subjects which focus more on attitudinal development.

Thematic Vertical Integration in Core Subjects

The analysis revealed that thematic vertical integration existed in the subjects of

1. English Language (Sports, Environment and Entertainment)
2. Tamil Language (Morals and ethics, Folklore and culture, Science and Technology and Nature and Environment)
3. Buddhism in eight of the ten themes,
4. Islam, Mathematics, Hinduism, Science, Life Competencies and Citizenship Education, in most of the themes
5. Roman Catholicism in six of the themes noted above,
7. Geography in selected themes which occur in some grades, and
8. Health and Physical Education in all the themes.

In other subjects even though to a large extent, thematic vertical integration appeared to have been maintained, concerns were expressed regarding the following:

1. In Tamil Language, there was little evidence in the texts that the themes were well planned and a purposeful attempt to vertically integrate them has been made by the text writers.
2. In Roman Catholicism several instances where vertical integration does not appear as satisfactorily developed such as inclusion of almost the same content in Grade 6 and 7, several sub-themes included in Grades 10 and 11 being too simple and suitable for Grade 6 or 7, and the possibility of organizing certain sub-themes in Grade 7 and Grade 8 were noted.

3. In Geography under Map work, the Grade 6 textbook introduces the concepts of scale, direction and colours used in maps to denote selected features but Grade 7 lesson 6 re-introduced 'direction' without a reference to the previous grade. The discussion on climate in Grade 8, has not been linked to the discussion on weather in Grades 6 & 7.

5. In History, several issues have been pinpointed:

- (i) Content in the Grade 7 book being too detailed, than the content of the same themes in the Grade 10 book,
- (ii) The Industrial Revolution being discussed more exhaustively in the Grade 8 than in Grade 10,
- (iii) The Grade 9 syllabus giving great details of the legislative changes in the 19th century without dealing with economic, social, cultural changes, life styles in this century and same details of legislative changes being given in the Grade 11 syllabus which is the appropriate grade for such information and
- (iv) That all the themes dealt with, in Grades 6-8 are loaded on the Grade 10 curriculum, resulting in overload in information and superficiality in content in Grade 10 and that all the themes covered in Grade 9 are taken up in Grade 11.

6. In Life Competencies and Citizenship Education, it has been pointed out, that vertical integration is found among grades, but the topics/units are not well organized to make the vertical relationship of content visible. 'Family', 'Society' are topics that are dealt with in almost all grades but not in a planned manner; and looks more haphazard. The concepts of obligations, duties, responsibilities, conflict, culture have been repeated many a times; sometimes resulting in over emphasizing.

On the whole, the aspect of vertical integration appeared to have been sufficiently ensured.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations to rectify the identified deficiencies are given below.

1. When the curriculum is being developed, vertical integration should be consciously planned.
2. In a competency-based curriculum, extra care has to be exercised in formulating Competencies and levels of competencies. Curriculum development teams should discuss and decide whether they want the competency-based curriculum to be enforced in all subjects or only in selected subjects. Especially where subjects such as religion focusing more on affective development are concerned, even if competencies are formulated (examples are available in other countries), whether assessment of such competencies can be undertaken by the teacher at the end of each school period, should be carefully studied. Overall, it is recommended that all curriculum developers be given a thorough training on formulation of competencies if the competency-based curriculum is to be continued.
3. If successful implementation of a curriculum is envisaged, it is imperative that all teachers who are responsible for its implementation are sufficiently made aware of the need to ensure vertical integration. Especially when curriculum reform is being launched at the national level, in all state schools, and when the curriculum has been designed and developed on a novel concept such as a Competency-based model of which the average teacher may not be aware, awareness-raising regarding these concepts are essential for effective implementation. The cascade model of teacher training on curriculum reforms may not be adequate in relation to the above concepts.

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