

Primary curriculum or competence-based curriculum?

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An article on competence-based curriculum was published in this newspaper recently. It raised the question whether our primary curriculum can be called competence-based curriculum or not. The writer in his article says "our primary curriculum was actually not made competency-based, the term was used erroneously." He argues that competency-based curriculum is applicable to those curricula designed to develop "skills or competencies" (notice the writer assumes skills and competencies both bear the same meaning) necessary in technical, vocational or professional education. But the curriculum designed for primary level does have 13 broader objectives and 29 narrower objectives dealing with cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains, and as such, according to his opinion, the objectives of primary curriculum "can, in no way, be taken as competencies."

The writer's perception about the competence-based curriculum is partially acceptable as part of that curriculum is the capability of transferring one's knowledge to a newer situation, i.e. skill. But this is not the only periphery (skills) which the competence-based curriculum deals with. Competence extends beyond the possession of skills. It includes the following elements: (i) cognitive competence involving the use of theory and concepts, as well as informal tacit knowledge gained experientially; (ii) functional competence (skills or know-how) -- things that a person should be able to do when working in a given area; (iii) personal competence involving knowing how to conduct oneself in a specific situation; and (iv) ethical competence involving the possession of certain personal and professional values

So, competence-based curriculum can be expected to relate to knowledge (K) -- development of cognition/conceptual acquisition; skill (S) -- thinking, doing, etc.; attitudes (A) -- developing aptitudes such as perseverance,

initiative etc.; and values (V) -- personal and social, making decisions, interacting with others etc. Thus it goes beyond content and aims to open the three Hs (heads-on, hearts-on and hands-on) of learners. So, the focus of the competency-based curriculum is on developing the learners' moral and ethical values along with knowledge and skills. The above general competencies may relate to (a) preparedness for further education, (b) supporting developments towards choosing, seeking, obtaining a career and (c) also supporting a student to play a role as a responsible citizen in the future. In this sense, competence-based curriculum goes beyond direct learning and seeks to promote transfer of learning to new or unknown situations.

The primary curriculum has 13 objectives divided into 29 terminal objectives. If we go through these objectives we will see that they are apparently general objectives (called general competencies) addressing cognitive, affective or psychomotor domain (believing in Allah or Creator, and developing moral and humanitarian attitude of the learners of the primary education to be respectful to all religions and believers of other religions). But the finest level of the terminal objectives, e.g. learning outcomes, are an integral part of a curriculum and they can, of course, be put forward for K, S, A and V, and hence they are part of a competence-based curriculum. For example, learning outcomes (called specific competences) for different subjects in the primary curriculum are: (i) to know about the society and environment, (ii) to carry out a set of commands and instructions, (iii) to love and serve the country, (iv) to love the juniors, behave well with juniors and seniors and express patriotic feeling through his/her behaviour, and (v) to understand the needs of the children with special needs and to help them, etc.

These are some specific competences (aiming to achieve the general competences termed as terminal objectives) which will pave the way for a learner to enter the later stage of his/her life with

full potentiality. When we assess how far a student has achieved those objectives, we will need to assess the capability of transferring information, knowledge, skills, attitude and values of a student to his/her day-to-day life. When the national achievement assessment is conducted in the primary level (dominated by cognitive domain), all strive to move away from learning depending on memorisation to creative thinking in new contexts and develop a range of abilities -- subject specific and also cross-curricula.

Skills-based does not by definition include attitude and values and hence is not really an aspect for describing general education. If we take the curricula of different subjects introduced in Technical Education Board as our example we will see that skills (mostly work-related) can be referred to as the ability to apply the knowledge gained from textbooks, and there is no room for developing attitude and values of a learner.

Our primary curriculum has the compilation of lots of learning outcomes (specific competences) aiming to develop ability (e.g. rendering text book information) and capability (going beyond text book information), and has given emphasis on 4 general competencies: (i) cognitive competence involving the use of theory and concepts (knowledge-ability to develop conceptual acquisition of text book information, (ii) functional competence (skills- capability of solving problems following the scientific procedures; participating in the practice of science, applying the use of ICT in daily life etc., (iii) personal competence involving knowing how to conduct oneself in a specific situation (attitude -- collaboratively working with others, or recognising the contribution of co-workers); and (iv) ethical competence involving the possession of certain personal and professional values (values -- demonstrating an increased awareness of environmental pollution). So, it is rational to call this curriculum competence-based curriculum.

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