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TRACING THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS OF GUJARAT

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Introduction

On the auspicious day of shukla paksha ekadashi of the holy month of shravana in the 2076th year of the Vikram Samvat calendar, which was also July 29th of the year 2020 in the Gregorian calendar, Bharat witnessed the release of a new National Education Policy approved by the Union Cabinet Minister Dr. Ramesh Pokhariyal Nishank. In this policy, many reforms related to the entire discourse of educational journey starting right from kindergarten to open learning, were introduced. One such reform, which is of our interest here, is the introduction of Experiential Learning. While the full-fledged impact of NEP 2020 may only be seen in larger timeline after planned execution up-till 2030, in this paper the researcher attempts to inquire into the existence of experiential pedagogy and other such experiential initiatives which may be knowingly or unknowingly taken up, if at all, by the teachers for their students in the contemporary school education discourse in different schools of the Gujarat region of Bharat, as that is where the researcher resides. Here it is important to define what is considered as experiential learning throughout this paper. Technically, David Kolb in his experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015) defines experiential learning as a learning cycle where first step is a concrete experience, after that is the reflective observation about the experience, this is followed by abstract conceptualization and then culminates in active experimentation, and the cycle repeats itself with new experiences and subjects. Throughout this paper, the researcher has kept in mind to consider the act facilitated by teachers where Experience, Reflection,

Conceptualization, and Application are undergone/ attempted by students to be experiential learning practices.

Literature review

Theoretical reviews

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) emphasizes learning as a continuous process grounded in experience. It identifies four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Learners engage in a cycle where they experience, reflect, conceptualize, and experiment, making learning more dynamic and personalized. In educational settings, this theory allows teachers to facilitate learning by incorporating real-world activities and reflection, fostering deeper understanding.

The proposition made by M. K. Gandhi which is also well known as *Nai Talim* talks about learning through experience and integrating education with practical work. It promotes a similar idea as experiential learning that true education involves the development of the mind, body, and soul through hands-on activities and self-reliance, making learning more meaningful. This approach closely aligns with experiential learning, as students engage with real-world tasks, reflect on their experiences, and develop skills through active participation in their environment (Geethika, 2021).

John Dewey believed that education is deeply rooted in experience, emphasizing that learning occurs through active participation and interaction with the environment. He advocated for a student-centered approach, where education adapts to the needs and interests of the learner rather than imposing rigid structures. Dewey argued that teachers should facilitate learning by encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection, enabling students to connect experiences with real-world applications (Dewey, 2024).

Research Reviews

Purushothaman V (1997) examined the effects of an experiential psychological program on the personalities of student youth participating in the National Service Scheme (NSS) in July 1997. He evaluated aspects such as self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, communication, leadership, and social concern. By analyzing t-values from pre- and post-assessments between experimental and control groups, he found that both groups were initially similar in personality traits before the program. However, post-assessment results revealed significant differences,

with the experimental group showing greater personality development compared to the control group, despite both being involved in the NSS, which aims at personality growth.

Chopra (2022) explored the impact of experiential learning strategies on learning outcomes and interpersonal skills of senior secondary students, focusing on different learning approaches. The study was experimental, involving a randomly chosen sample of 210 senior secondary students from PSEB-affiliated schools in Amritsar city. The findings showed a significant improvement in the experimental group's learning outcomes and interpersonal skills compared to the control group, attributed to the use of experiential learning strategies. Additionally, students using a deep learning approach outperformed those with a surface learning approach in both groups across both dependent variables.

Hemnatchatra G. (2020) studied the enhancement of language learning abilities in children with learning disabilities (LD) through a modified experiential learning theory (ELT). The study emphasized the importance of using ELT in regular classrooms for LD children, enabling teachers to address learning deficits early. This method helps teachers tailor their teaching strategies based on individual needs, promoting effective learning. The intervention allows LD children to integrate into mainstream classrooms, reducing psychological and emotional issues while improving academic progress. Teachers' awareness of LD and timely intervention are crucial for its success.

Rationale

The researcher has taken a position of inquiry as to find out the practices, if any, that may or may not exist in the current scenario of school education in Gujarat region. This is because the policy document of NEP 2020 directly refers to experiential learning or practices more than 10 times and to the experience of learners more than 20 times which only shows the interest of the central leadership into the concept and towards its implementation in school education. Here are some direct quotes out of the policy document itself;

"Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centered, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable."(National Education Policy, 2020, p. 3)

"Experiential learning within each subject, and explorations of relations among different subjects, will be encouraged and emphasized despite the introduction of more specialized subjects and subject teachers." (National Education Policy, 2020, p.11)

"CPD opportunities will, in particular, systematically cover the latest pedagogies regarding foundational literacy and numeracy, formative and adaptive assessment of learning outcomes, competency-based learning, and related pedagogies, such as experiential learning, arts-integrated, sports-integrated, and storytelling-based approaches, etc." (National Education Policy, 2020, p.22)

"Further, unless online education is blended with experiential and activity-based learning, it will tend to become a screen-based education with limited focus on the social, affective and psychomotor dimensions of learning." (National Education Policy, 2020, p.59)

Now given this interest, it is only a reasonable inference that the government, before making of the policy document, must have had some exposure to the ground level situation in school education and experimented with probable solutions at some point. This in turn points to the basis of the current central government's idea of development and reform and its typical modus operandi, and what better place exists than Gujarat to understand the 'model' of solution and reform that is followed under the leadership of our current Honorable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi who is also former Chief minister of Gujarat and a proponent of 'Gujarat Model' of reform and development. Which is why the researcher becomes interested in knowing the current scenario on experiential learning practices in Gujarat as this region may have been the laboratory for implementing innovative pedagogies on ground level before introducing them nationwide. It is with this underlying assumption, the initial frame work of this paper started. After the coming in effect of the NEP 2020 in the academic year 2023-24, there must also have been dissemination of the conceptual and applied alternatives to traditional pedagogies including the dissemination of experiential learning pedagogy to the school teachers. Thus it becomes subject to the teacher level implementation of such practices. Although the researcher is well aware of the fact that implementation of new pedagogies on ground level in India is not a cake-walk and certainly not a five year job and that it will take at least 10 years for initial changes to appear, the researcher is also hopeful to find such enthusiastic teachers who may have taken it upon themselves to implement innovative pedagogies and solutions best to their capacity. This brings us to the next section of this paper.

Objective

To investigate the presence of experiential learning practices in state government schools across different regions of Gujarat.

Research Questions

1. Experiential learning is practiced by teachers in which Subjects?
2. What kind of experiential learning activites are practiced by teachers?
3. How do the teachers incorporate experiential learning practices in pedagogy of their subjects?
4. What kind of effects on students have been observed by the teachers due to experiential learning practices?
5. What kind of challenges have the teachers faced for execution of experiential learning?

Research Methodology

Here the researcher has opted for a descriptive survey method and chosen the tool of interview for collecting data from teachers through telephonic mode. The interview contains 6 questions and it took about 30 minutes on an average to conduct these interviews.

Population

Population of this research are the teachers working in Gujarat state government schools who are known for their innovative approach to school education practices. Here, the researcher's first challenge was to identify such teachers who actually do carry out innovative practices in school, so as to proceed with interviews. This challenge was eased by a document that was published by IITE about the innovative educational practices by different teachers in India (Chand, 2024). So the researcher contacted several (more than 40) teachers that were working in Gujarat but only 13 of them agreed for an interview.

Sampling

Here, purposive sampling was used. Such teachers were selected who were known for their innovative approach to educational practices in state government schools.

Tool

For the current research, telephonic Interview is used as tool for collecting data.

Data Collection

More than 40 teachers were approached for interview and 13 teachers agreed for participating and during the interview voice recording was done after taking consent from the teachers. Following table shows relevant information about the sample for data collection.

Table 1

Interview Number	Taluka	District	School Name

1.	Una	Gir somnath	Ranavshi Primary School
2.	Himmatnagar	Sabarkantha	Mehtapura Primary school
3.	Mahuva	Bhavnagar	Sathra Primary School
4.	Wankaner	Morbi	Hasanpur Primary school
5.	Havtad	Amreli	Havtad Primary School
6.	Ghogha	Bhavnagar	Shree Trambak Primary School
7.	Bhuj	Kutch	Shree Hiten Dholakiya Vidyalaya
8.	Jungadh	Junagadh	Kathrota Secondary School Shala
9.	Udhna	Surat	Smt. Savitribai Phule School (no. 47)
10.	Vadali	Sabarkantha	Veda Primary School
11.	Godhra	Panchmahal	Nava-nadisar Primary school
12.	Lathi	Amreli	Aasodar Primary School
13.	Bavla	Ahmedabad	Bavla Public School

Interview number with Taluka and District name

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected through interviews were interpreted qualitatively by the researcher and the essential interpretation about each research question is described here in this section.

Subjects Incorporating Experiential Learning

Answers for this question presented an order of subjects in which the teachers say experiential learning is executed. Most frequently given answer to least are written in order here Science, Math, Social Science, Language (Gujarati, English, Hindi, Sanskrit), and Environmental Science.

Experiential learning Activities practiced by Teachers

To this, teachers describe activities such as Experiments, Demonstration, and Measurement using tactile objects, Use of TLMs, and flash cards mostly. There are a few who have listed field visits, visit to professionals, reflective writing, project works, and group discussions. Standing out from these is the use of social science teachers and language teachers using practices like reflective writing about field visits, and visits to skilled workers and even inviting skilled workers like mason, vegetable sellers, electrician etc. to school.

Inclusion of Experiential Learning in Pedagogy of subjects taught by respective teachers

As a total interpretation, teachers have listed the pedagogy which is induction based and inquiry based while one of the two of the teachers have described the pedagogy that is more activity based and instruction reliant rather than experiential which shows that there are teachers who are using "experiential" and "activity based" methodology as interchangeable. However, two teachers in social science subjects stand out in their use of role play, drama, visits to historical places, awareness drives, group discussions and debates as tools for creating concrete experience and opportunities for reflection while there's no description by them of any follow up about experimentation by students or application in real life. Moreover, One of the teachers who teach Gujarati language, uses assembly time for highlighting words that are later used in classroom for language learning, the same teacher describes the pedagogy where he asks students to bring concrete objects are connected to a theme and puts those in front of the class and then asks the students to make sentences in those objects and then a list of sentences and then put those sentences in an order to form a sequence of events and thus write an outline for essays and then asks to elaborate on the outline to make an essay on the given theme hence successfully starting from a concrete experience going towards reflection as a group then conceptualizing of how and outline of events is and then experimentation with adding their own details to make an essay while the teacher also shows a flexibility in accepting varying answers from students. Also, one teacher who teaches mathematics describes the use of ICT and applications such as Geogebra and more for creating an environment of interest and experiment among the students regarding various sub-themes in mathematics On the other hand one of the Science teacher describes the use of cartoon in teaching concepts in science to make the classroom more interesting, these descriptions may not be fully coherent with the learning cycle as described by David Kolb, they are, in themselves, concrete experiences that do result in reflection at student level as described by teachers.

Question/Pointer used by teachers for guiding experiential learning

Here, the descriptions by the teachers show a pattern of "giving instructions" being misunderstood as 'guiding' or 'facilitation' or 'scaffolding' given to the students for ensuring a meaningful direction to their experience. Only one of the teachers, among the interviewed, describes the pointers/questions being asked before, during, and after the experiential learning activities that can be put into the category of being simulation for reflection among the students. This teacher describes this process as 'not to give answers in form of questions but to challenge the students to work their brain in order to find a solution' which is consistent with the essence

of thought process presented by John Dewey in his book titled and *Experience and learning* which is a bedrock of the philosophy of experiential learning (Dewey, 2024).

Effects of experiential learning on students as observed by teachers

The pattern that comes out here is that the teachers have observed students to have been more interested in participating into learning activites and more responsive to learning from experience. Some of the teachers who have partially followed the learning cycle (knowingly or unknowingly) have observed that students are quick to complete any kind of home work that was related to these activities and event take initiative to further apply experimentatively any kind of suggestions that were given by the teacher during the process of learning. Two of the teachers expressed that the students have shown a tendency towards originality as opposed to copying which is more a consequence of traditional calk-and-board methods.

Challenges faced by teachers for execution of experiential learning

If the researcher is to be honest, here a diplomatic approach has been observed because all the interviewees have maintained that as such there is no difficulty, however, they have opened up about one or two things such as crowded classrooms being a challenge to conducting the required experiences in an orderly fashion without random side-tracking due to overexcitedness of students upon seeing an opportunity to be given a free hand. Another challenge that has come to notice is the availability of material resources for ensuring individual hands-on activites for each student which presents a forced choice of grouped activities or peer-learning type of setting. While the teachers accept that group learning or peer learning settings aren't undesirable, but it does dilute the individual experience and show more dominance of group experience both of which are different in their overall effect and that is a well know fact. Furthermore, two of the teachers, among the interviewed, are senior teachers who are at the position of head teacher and cluster resource person, have described in their interviews, their observations about the attitudinal problems of other teachers (formerly including themselves) in execution of such pedagogy as the teachers struggle to let go of the "only teacher can teach" idea and accept the fact that "world is the classroom".

Findings

Here the researcher has found the following common occurring as coming up from the interviews -

- Subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Social Science and Gujarati, in this order, are usually the subjects which are used for incorporating experiential learning pedagogy.
- The approach that the interviewed teachers have taken for including experiential learning in their subjects inductive rather than deductive.
- It is also found that some of the teachers have taken 'Activity based learning' as interchangeable with 'experiential learning'
- Teachers have expressed crowded classroom and lack of material resources as a challenge for implementing experiential learning.

Conclusion

In this exercise it was observed that currently in schools, experiential learning takes place mostly in Math, Social Science, Science and Languages, in languages it was observed that mainly Gujarati language sees more experiential learning opportunities. It was also apparent that the pedagogy which is followed by teachers who indulge into experiential learning activities is also less tending towards direct instruction based approach and more induction based approach though a few of them seems to be using 'activity based' learning as interchangeable with 'experiential' learning which are not the same. It has been a clear pattern that teachers tend to use Assembly, group lunch, games, field visits, role play, drama, etc. for providing experiences and so connect the classroom learning with these out-of-classroom experiences, thus making learning more about real life applications and less bookish mug up learning. The teachers interviewed here present a common observation of seeing an improvement in interest towards learning through experiences and advanced initiatives from the students with improved social skills, critical thinking and academic achievement. It is also an inference from the interviews that difficulty on ground level may be related to crowded classrooms, un-availability of enough material resources, attitude of teachers, and professional training regarding newer pedagogical frameworks though teachers maintain that the difficulties are only in initial phase and solutions start presenting themselves as time goes by if the teacher keeps at it and doesn't let difficulty deter him/her. Although, the researcher acknowledges the fact that no generalized statement can be made about ground reality on basis of as small a sample as thirteen interviews, it does give an idea about how teachers that have been on ground for several years have practiced, initiated and innovated from time to time to incorporate a newer pedagogy in current scenario. A more detailed inquiry in this matter will reveal more facets about the ground reality of execution of experiential learning pedagogy.

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