



Refining primary social studies textbooks for behavior change in Bangladesh

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Independent

Abstract

It is not surprising that little is known about the criteria of effective textbooks because they are only one among a complex range of factors that affect teaching and learning. On the other hand, more is known about the potential of structured pedagogy in improving learner experiences and learning outcomes, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In many LMICs, textbooks for subjects such as social studies are often presented as a sequence of comprehension exercises, and fail to model good pedagogy, develop good learning processes and model good student behaviors. This paper is an account of how government primary school social studies textbooks in Bangladesh were revised in order to reflect curricular aims in a clearer, more engaging, and more practical way for classroom conditions in poorly-resourced contexts. The revised textbooks include a structured pedagogy rather than a content-heavy, comprehension-based approach, and thereby aim to better achieve behavior change.

Keywords: textbooks, social studies, structured pedagogy, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), Bangladesh

Despite the central importance of textbooks in many low and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Westbrook et al, 2014; Banerji, 2015), textbooks in LMICs frequently lack a noticeable pedagogy – that is, a considered approach to teaching a particular subject at a particular level of education. This may be

most noticeable in textbooks for primary mathematics or literacy, where pedagogy is often under the spotlight, but it is also common in other subjects. In government textbook publishing contexts, this lack of appropriate pedagogical support may be due to the minimal role played by teachers, or writers with teaching experience, in the development of the textbooks. In some LMICs, the curriculum developers themselves may write the textbooks, even though they may lack relevant classroom experience.

A consequence of this weak connection to classroom pedagogy among some textbook writers in LMICs is a common tendency for textbooks – in particular for literacy, science, and the social sciences – to become a series of comprehension exercises, often including demanding passages of text that students may struggle to understand. The textbooks are effectively designed for ‘self-study’ and are little different from books for home-based revision practice, where the student works through the book on her or his own.¹ The combination of dense texts and lack of pedagogy reinforces the prevalent tendency to teach through rote-learning.

This paper describes the process of developing new textbooks for social studies in Bangladesh, where the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) – which reports to the Ministry of Education – has the sole right to publish textbooks for basic education in all government schools. It shows how a simple and appropriate pedagogical approach – as well as simplified language and conceptual presentation – was introduced into the textbooks to reflect the general syllabus aims and to provide for more effective teaching and learning.

In Bangladesh, writers of government school textbooks are often drawn from among the curriculum developers. The author of this paper worked with the NCTB specialists as part of donor-funded assistance to a renewal process that was described as textbook ‘refinement’. The term *refinement* had been agreed between the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and the development partners (eg DFID, AusAid). Since the textbooks had already been revised in 2012 to support the revised curriculum, they could not officially be revised again, *only refined*. At the same time as the specialists were working on a DFID-funded contract to support Bangla, English and social studies, another team of specialists were working with Japanese support to refine the mathematics and science textbooks. This was the first time

¹ In the UK, for example, the CGP series of books: <https://www.cgpbooks.co.uk/primary-books/ks2/geography/g2r21-ks2-discover-learn-geography-study-bo>

in Bangladesh's history that international textbook and publishing consultants had been invited to work within NCTB.

Social studies as a vehicle for behavior change

In LMICs, the social studies curriculum and textbooks generally focus almost exclusively on developing students' sense of identification with the 'national narrative'. The syllabus and the textbook represent a social agenda. The result is often an overloaded textbook with a large number of definitions, using fairly complex terminology. This raises issues of how the textbook writers envisage the process of behavior change.

The discipline of social studies emerged from the USA after the Second World War and became the focus of education reformers including Jerome Bruner's *Man: a course of study* in the 1960s. Such reformers attempted to introduce new ways of teaching and learning the subject. Pring (1984, p.121), for example, proposed that 'an integral part of the understanding of humanistic studies in their contribution to personal development is the classroom atmosphere, the active mode of learning, the non-authoritarian relationships between teacher and pupil, and the strategies for involving pupils in deliberative and reflective learning.'

Social studies seeks, by its nature, to develop social understandings, attitudes, and behaviors. In contrast with, for example, mathematics or literacy, social studies aims to modify social behavior as well as promote cognitive understanding.²

Social behaviors can also be modelled in the classroom itself, by means of the teacher's relationship with the students and through pedagogy. In higher-income countries, the pedagogy of civics teaching has been found by some commentators to be a critical factor (Campbell, 2006):

Rather than focus on curriculum – what is taught – the best available evidence indicates that civic educators should worry more about *how* the content is taught. Woven throughout the research literature on civic curriculum is one consistent conclusion: the most effective civics instruction involves the free and open discussion of current political

² For an example of social studies textbook evaluation criteria for the state of Kentucky, see: <https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/books/Documents/Social%20Studies%20Eval%20Form%202016%20-%20DRAFT.pdf>

events within the classroom, or what is often called an open classroom climate. (italics added)

The nature of social studies or civics teaching is also affected by its status, and whether it is an examinable or non-examinable subject (Morris & Cogan, 2001):

the subject can become academicized as it emulates the characteristics of the high status subjects. Teachers may focus on propositional knowledge and rely on didactic instruction, with pupil learning measured solely by examination results. Conversely, where the curriculum framework relies on permeation and school-based or teacher-centered initiatives, the potential benefits relate to relevance and flexibility of provision. Specifically, several features can be stressed: relevance to pupils' and the community's needs, a sense of ownership by teachers and pupils of what is taught; and a pedagogy distinctive from, rather than imitative of, that prevailing in the more formal academic curriculum.

Very little research has been carried out on appropriate pedagogies and resources for social studies in LMICs. In the 1980s–90s, an initiative was undertaken in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India, where the Eklavya organization new social studies textbooks with the agreement of the state government. Batra (2010, p.44 and 292) describes the approach:

The concern for a holistic treatment of themes, engaging children in 'thought activities' and 'classroom dialogue', ensuring children's engagement with information and its use, rather than the learning of text by rote, relating themes to children's physical and social environment and personal experience formed the major principles on which textual materials were developed.

... it is not the retention of 'knowledge' of the discipline which is more important but the understanding and application of that knowledge, possible via skills of logic that was sought to be enabled through the texts. For example, the language and method of comparison, description, articulating causation, summarizing an argument, inferring and extrapolating was considered necessary if learners were to grasp the subtle differences in perspective on the subject-matter.

The Eklavya initiative came to an end in 2002, with a change in the state government and controversy over certain historical statements in the textbooks.

Social studies in Bangladesh primary schools

In common with other countries in the Indian subcontinent, primary school in Bangladesh consists of five years. Children in grades 1–2 study environmental studies, which includes a science strand as well as basic social studies, but do not receive a textbook.³ In grade 3, a social studies textbook – *Bangladesh and Global Studies* – is introduced, which includes strands of history, geography and civics.

In 2012, the Bangladesh social studies syllabus was revised as part of an entire primary curriculum review.⁴ The revision was intended to strengthen the primary curriculum's competence-based approach. The new 2012 primary social studies syllabus described the intended methodological approach as follows:

The teaching–learning methods, planned activities, guidelines for writers and artists have been given in such a way so that the children easily understand different topics and can perceive with interest without memorizing them. In order to implement the teaching–learning methods, planned activities and instruction, these are made attractive, realistic/practical, participatory using elements from the immediate environment.

After a general introduction, including the above statement, the curriculum is presented in terms of terminal competencies (that is, the outcomes expected to be achieved by the end of the primary cycle) and attainable competencies (the outcomes expected to be achieved by the end of the grade). The following sample is taken from the grade 4 matrix of competencies, topics and planned activities.

³ Teachers of environmental studies in grades 1–2 are provided with a teacher's guide.

⁴ The new curriculum was supported by new textbooks, presented in this paper as the pre-refinement versions. However, MoPME (the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, which manages primary education but has no authority over NCTB), along with the multiple donors of the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDPIII), decided that the textbooks did not fulfil the aims of the new curriculum. Hence, the decision to invite international consultants to refine the new curriculum textbooks.

| Subject wise Terminal Competencies | Attainable Competencies | Learning Outcomes | Subject matter/ Topic | Planned Activities | Instructions for Writers and Artists |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| 7. To show tolerance to others' views and practice democratic rules and norms. | 7.1 Will express own opinions about different works and matters at home and school. 7.2 Will listen to others' opinions with patience and respect them. 7.3 Will acquire democratic values. | 7.1.1 Will be able to tell what is tolerance to others' views 7.1.2 Will be able to tell the necessity of tolerance to others' views 7.1.3 Will be able to tell that everybody has right to express views freely. 7.1.4 Will express own views in different works at home and school. 7.2.1 Will provide opportunity to everybody to express views. 7.2.2 Will respect the views of the friends, play mates and classmates and others. 7.2.3 Will be able to tell that in some matters the opinion of the majority is to be accepted ignoring one's own opinion. 7.3.1 Will accept the opinions of majority. | Tolerance to others' views 1. Necessity of tolerance to others' views 2. Everybody's right to express views freely 3. Importance of expressing own views 4. Show respect to others' views 5. Will show tolerance to others' views in different matters home and school. | Will practice tolerance to others' views through role playing and exercise. Will show tolerance to others' views in practice in different works in the class. | As in 1-9 above 10. As the topic is based on abstract concept, so the ideas about the topic should be given through examples, simulation, practice, group works etc. Contents to be presented in such a way that the students can show tolerance to others' views. |

Figure 1: Sample from Bangladesh National Primary Curriculum: Bangladesh & Global Studies, class 4

This curriculum format is not unlike that of many LMICs and provides a convenient framework for textbook writers.⁵ The curriculum does not define the meaning of competency, but the above extract indicates that competencies are intended to target specific behaviors such as 'show tolerance', 'practice democratic rules and norms', and 'express own opinions ...'

Background to the intervention

In 2013–15 a small team of textbook specialists worked with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The specialists were tasked with refining the textbooks and teachers' guides for three subjects: Bangla language, English and social studies.⁶ The author of this paper was the team leader, supported by a specialist in language-teaching textbooks (in this case, Bangla language and English) and another specialist in social studies textbook publishing. The three consultants

⁵ Generally, to save time, the sections of the textbook are assigned to different writers, which can make for difficulties in 'horizontal' coordination (eg. of cross-cutting behavioural issues) between subjects.

⁶ NCTB produces English-language editions of its textbooks, which cater to the large numbers of families returning to Bangladesh after spending time abroad and whose children have limited reading ability in Bangla language. The examples used in this paper are taken from the English-language editions of the textbooks.

made a series of frequent short visits over a two-year period, in which the textbooks were refined for all primary grades. The consultants worked with NCTB's own specialists who are responsible for curriculum development as well as co-authoring textbooks in collaboration with invited academic specialists. NCTB's management describes the organization as the 'largest state-owned publisher in the world'.⁷

Due to reforms in textbook production and distribution in recent years, most children in Bangladesh primary schools now receive a complete set of new textbooks, free of charge, at the start of the school year in January. The textbook is the only resource used by teachers and students. As in many LMICs, government primary schools in Bangladesh have large class sizes of 40–50 pupils. Reading levels are not high.

The intervention

The first two activities of the consultant team were to

- contract an organization to carry out a needs assessment in sample schools across the country.
- identify a Dhaka-based organization that could provide the day-to-day publishing services and liaise with NCTB when the international consultants were not in-country⁸;

The needs assessment, which was carried out jointly by an international consultancy organization jointly with the research department of Dhaka University, demonstrated that teachers were not able to cover the syllabus of the subjects in the time available and that students had difficulties with the concepts and language of the textbooks.

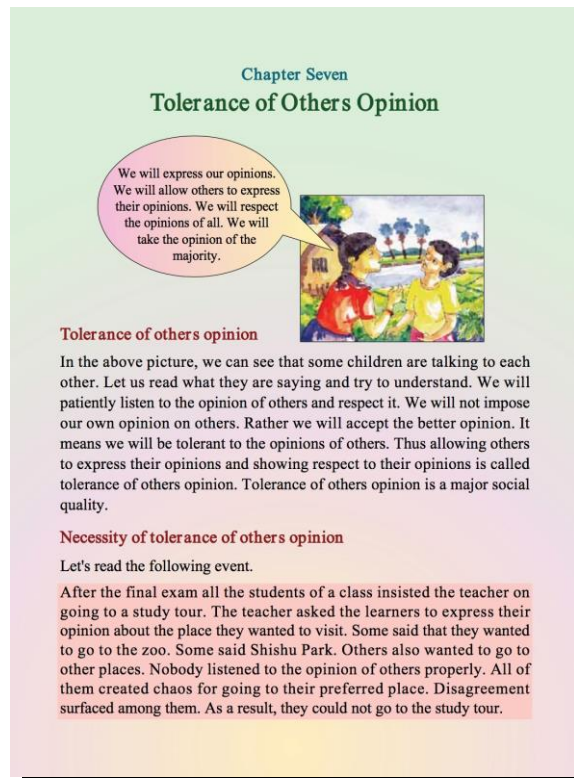
The social studies textbooks that were being used in schools before the refinement consisted of large amounts of text followed by comprehension questions (similar to textbooks in other LMICs that the author has worked in). This 'text-plus-comprehension' approach is the consequence of the textbooks being written by specialists with little or no direct experience of classroom teaching. The focus for such writers is frequently on providing factual information, which is expected to be learned by heart. The exercises that follow the text are usually of a gap-filling type, encouraging word-for-word memorization of the text.

⁷ http://old.moedu.gov.bd/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=329&Itemid=229

⁸ The organisation selected was the Institute of Education Development (IED), part of a large NGO called BRAC.

In general terms, the approach can be described as one of 'self-study', which effectively depends on no interaction between the student and the teacher or between students.

In the old edition of the grade 4 social studies textbook, the chapter entitled 'Tolerance of others' opinion' was allocated five pages (see Figure 2):



Now let's think about the following questions -

1. Why did the learners fail to go to the study tour?
2. Did they listen to the opinion of others and respect it?
3. How should have they expressed their opinion?
4. What sort of problems can occur if there is no tolerance of others opinion?

Tolerance of others opinion is a good quality. It brings peace and harmony to the members of the society. It helps people to live with intimacy. This quality gives a person an opportunity to express his opinion about any issue. Everyday we do a variety of activities at home, in school and at work place. While working, we need to take various types of decision. We can think about something in one angle while others can think differently on the same issue. Everybody's opinion is important. In the chapter, 'Our Rights,' we have learnt that everybody has his right to express his opinion independently. A better opinion can come out if everybody's opinion is taken into consideration. We all have to be tolerant to the opinion of others.

If we do not show enough importance to the opinion of others, there might be plenty of problems. Their might be disagreement or quarrel with our classmates, friends, siblings and others. It may also cause difficulty in taking the right decision. As a result, we may find it difficult to work properly. It may also create problem to have a healthy relation with others. These are the obstacles to form a healthy society.

Allowing others to express their opinion

Sometimes when others talk or express their opinion, instead of listening to them we also talk or make noise. We should not do things like this because this may hurt them. So we need to allow others to express their opinion. We have to listen to their opinion with patience and respect it. Sometimes we may not like somebody's opinion or his opinion may not be right yet we should not say anything that might hurt him. In this case we should explain it properly to him. Besides we have to thank him for his opinion. We have to express our opinion or explain things with modesty.

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Expression of our opinion at home and in school

At home we need to do a variety of activities. Sometimes we need to take decisions on some issues. Such as - what should be done in someone's birthday or in a program, how to study, what to cook, which clothes to be bought and so on.

In these cases we will express our opinion as much as possible.

At the same time we will also listen to the opinion of others in the family. Respecting all the opinions, we will accept the opinion that is good for all. Similarly in various activities of school (arrangement of various programs, development activities of school etc), we have to listen to the opinion of others and express our own opinion as well. Even on playgrounds and with the friends in the neighbourhood, we have to show the same degree of tolerance to their opinion. We will show importance to the opinion of all.

Let us take the opinion of the majority

When we express our opinion on a particular matter, a number of opinions are formed. But all the opinions cannot be taken together. Among all these opinions, we have to take the opinion which is given by the majority and good for all. Sometimes our own opinion may not be



A child is saying something in the class and others are listening to her attentively



A child is writing the ways to be tolerant of others opinion

taken but for that we should not be sad. In fact respecting the opinion of the majority, we have to work with an open mind.

We have learnt about the tolerance of others opinion. We will implement this quality at home, in school, on playground and wherever it is necessary. In this way we can build a healthy and a peaceful society. Let's do the following activity.

I will write in my diary about how I can be tolerant to the opinion of others.

Let's read again

1. Allowing others to express their opinions and showing respect to their opinions is called tolerance of others opinion.
2. We will express our own opinion. We will also allow others to express their opinions. We will respect everybody's opinion.
3. It is a social quality which brings peace and harmony in the society.

Planned activities

1. The learners will practice tolerance of others opinion on various issues in the classroom.
2. Writing the ways of showing tolerance to the opinion of others on a poster paper, the learners will present it in the classroom.

Exercise

1. Put a tick mark (✓) beside the correct answer.

- 1.1 What is the main theme of tolerance of others opinion?
 - a. tolerance to everybody's opinion
 - b. expressing only my opinion
 - c. do according to my own opinion
 - d. imposing my opinion on others
- 1.2 What should we do when others express their opinion?
 - a. to speak
 - b. to make a noise
 - c. to listen to the speaker patiently
 - d. to do according to my own opinion

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1.3 Whose opinion should we accept?

- a. opinion of my own
- b. opinion of the person whom I like
- c. opinion of one or two people
- d. opinion of the majority

1.4 Which of the following is the result of tolerance of others opinion?

- a. spoils peace
- b. creates disagreement
- c. quarrel
- d. helps to live with intimacy

2. Fill in the gaps with appropriate word.

- a. Showing _____ to others opinions is called tolerance of others opinion.
- b. Everybody should be given the opportunity to express his _____ independently.
- c. Tolerance of other opinion is a _____ virtue.
- d. The opinion given by the majority should be _____.
- e. We have to listen to and _____ of the opinion of others.

3. Match the words on the right with those on the left.

| | |
|---|--|
| a. Listen to patiently | lack of tolerance of others opinion |
| b. Social value is | others opinion |
| c. Which is good for all | disagreement |
| d. The obstacle of forming a healthy society is | we will accept the opinion tolerance of others opinion |

4. Answer the following questions briefly.

- a. What is tolerance of others opinion ?
- b. What are the benefits of being tolerant to the opinion of others ?
- c. What problems may arise if there is no tolerance among us ?
- d. What should we to be tolerant to the opinion of others ?
- e. How can we express our own opinions at home and in school ?

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Figure 2: Sample pages from Bangladesh & Global Studies, grade 4 (old edition)

The first observation to make is that this is a large amount of dense content, which has to be covered in a very short time: in grade 4, social studies has a total of 60 periods during the year, with each period 35–40 minutes long, which means at most 30 minutes of teaching time per period. The grade 4 textbook contained 110 pages of teaching content. The teacher would therefore need to teach the above five pages in two lessons; that is, in about 60 minutes. It was therefore impossible for the teacher to do more than work through the passage of text, mostly by means of choral drilling. There was no time for anything else. The ‘Planned activities’ on page 46 of the textbook would themselves have needed at least one lesson per activity.

Curriculum overload is a widespread challenge in LMICs.⁹ According to Pritchett and Beatty (2012), ‘Paradoxically, learning could go faster if curricula and teachers were to slow down.’ For teachers, the density of the content means teaching ‘to the top’ (Glewwe and Muralidharan, 2016):

Since teachers continue to follow the textbook as the default mode of instruction, and define their goals in terms of completing the curriculum over the course of year, it is not surprising that they are effectively ‘teaching to the top’ of the distribution and that a large number of children are in the class but not learning because the lessons are too advanced for them.

Although the refinement of the textbooks was not tasked to modify the curriculum, some action was necessary in order to make the teachers’ work more feasible. One perspective that was brought to bear was that of E.D. Hirsch (2016, p.66):

To label a topic ‘developmentally inappropriate’ implies that it is being taught prematurely, like feeding small children oysters Rockefeller when they should be eating oatmeal. But as the eminent research psychologist Jerome Bruner once memorably observed, the idea that there are ages for which particular topics are appropriate has no scientific support.

⁹ The more so, given the scale of teacher absenteeism.

Refining the passages of text

Although the textbook refinement had no mandate to interfere with the actual content, the lengthy text could be made much more readable. Given the typical low reading levels of students in grades 3–5, as confirmed by the needs assessment, it was important to reduce the barrier to learning that was posed by lengthy texts consisting of long sentences, often with complex syntax and a large amount of dense, specialist vocabulary.

Specialists in reading estimate that over 90 percent of a text should be familiar to a reader in order for the reader to understand what they are reading. The amount of new language that the reader is expected to understand in social studies is considerable. Therefore, the reader needs as much support as possible.

Refining the pedagogy

Although teachers in Bangladesh are provided with a teacher's edition of the textbook, which includes a reproduction of the textbook page accompanied by methodological notes for the teacher, many teachers – as in most LMICs – do not actually receive a copy of the teacher's edition. (Cost factors mean limited print-runs and reprints for teacher's guides.) In this case, the pedagogy of the approach must therefore be clear from the textbook itself; in other words, the pedagogy should be made transparent.

As part of their preparatory work, the consultants provided examples of social studies textbooks from other countries, with an explanation of how and why the textbooks differed from those of NCTB. It was agreed to adopt a double-page spread format and to allocate more space for activities relative to the passages of text. The passages of text would be considerably reduced, without reducing their conceptual content. The activities would follow a clear, structured pedagogy, based on what was believed to be an appropriate application of good pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986, pp.4–14). The following pages (Figure 3) show the same lesson as above (Figure 2), but now laid out in the refined grade 4 textbook.

It can be seen that the right-hand page of the spread consists of four parts, developing from a semi-structured, whole-class, oral activity, to a guided writing activity, leading finally to an activity intended to allow students to apply their learning:

- In the 'Speak' phase the teacher develops the children's use of the new language and ideas, monitoring their understanding ('responsive teaching').
- The 'Write' phase provides a bridge from the guided learning of the 'Speak' phase, via peer-supported learning, to students' independent application of the learning (in the following 'Extend' phase).
- In the 'Check' section, the teacher provides immediate feedback and guidance in dealing with exam-type questions. The 'check' section was a requirement of NCTB. The format of the questions follows that of the Primary Leaving Certificate.¹⁰

Comparing the two versions, we see that the original edition intended that students would engage in a classroom activity to bring to life the concept of democratic decision-making. However, given the amount of teaching and learning content, the teacher had little time to carry out such a demanding task. Neither the teacher nor the students were provided with enough support to plan and carry out a major classroom activity. In the refined version, the teacher and students are given scaffolded support. On pages 28–29 of the new edition, the process of 'express–listen–decide' is explained and practiced, and key concepts are presented through concrete steps. The format of each topic means that students learn to gradually 'take control' of the process throughout the topic.

¹⁰ Assessment questions are either multiple choice, 'short form' or 'long form' answers.

Chapter 6

Tolerance of Others' Opinions

1 The majority view

Here are Mitu and Ratul.



Tolerance is an important value. Everyone has opinions. So we should listen to every opinion with **tolerance**. And then we can follow the opinions of the majority. This is what we call **democracy**: following the opinion of the majority. There are three stages to this process: express, listen and decide.

At home

One situation that might require you to express, listen and decide is agreeing who will do each chore in the house.

At school

Some of the situations that might require you to express, listen and decide are:

- What games to play in the playground
- Where to sit in class
- Which topics to study

A Speak

With your teacher, choose one of the topics listed under 'school'.

Act out with the whole class the three stages of:

- Expressing views
- Listening to and respecting these views
- Reaching a majority decision

B Write

In pairs, take the example listed under 'home'. Write a plan for how you would come to a decision, under these three headings:

| | |
|---------|--|
| Express | |
| Listen | |
| Decide | |

C Extend

Act out a role-play in small groups. Think of a situation where you all have different opinions. Take it in turns to express your views. Then reach a decision, based on what the majority want to do.

D Check

What should we do when others express their opinion?

- a. speak
- b. make a noise
- c. listen to the speaker patiently
- d. do what we feel like

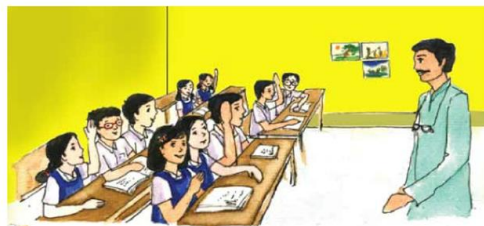
Chapter 6 Topic 2 An example

Let's read the following event.

After the final exam all the students of a class insisted the teacher take them on a study tour. The teacher asked the learners to say where they wanted to visit. Some said the zoo. Some said Shishu Park. Others wanted to go to other places. Nobody listened to the opinion of others. They all disagreed. As a result, they could not go on the study tour.

Now let's think about the following questions:

1. Why did the learners fail to go on the study tour?
2. Did they listen to the opinion of others and respect it?
3. How should they have expressed their opinions?
4. What sort of problems can occur if there is no tolerance of others' opinions?



A Speak

Discuss with your teacher the answers to the four questions opposite.

B Write

In pairs, write how the class opposite should have worked through the three stages of making democratic decisions:

| | |
|---------|--|
| Express | |
| Listen | |
| Decide | |

C Extend

Hold a **debate** in class on a subject that interests you all. One speaker should express the view on each side of the argument. The rest of the class are then invited to state their views. Finally you all vote on the majority decision.

D Check

What does tolerance of others' opinions mean?

- a. taking in everybody's opinion
- b. expressing only my opinion
- c. acting according to my own opinion
- d. listening to no one

Figure 3: Sample pages from Bangladesh & Global Studies, grade 4 (new edition)

Other refinements

In addition to the texts and pedagogy, the illustrations were also refined. The criteria for refining the illustrations were:

- Follow the new format (the double-page spread layout);
- Support the refined texts;
- Make the design and illustrations more child-friendly.

An editor also followed up all photographic illustrations to ensure that everything possible was done to trace copyright holders.¹¹

Discussion

The refined textbooks did not modify the curriculum. In fact, they aimed to implement the stated methodology of the social studies syllabus, which was that the approach should be 'attractive, realistic/practical, participatory using elements from the immediate environment'.

The main inputs aimed to transform the approach from one that was largely 'text plus comprehension questions' to one in which the text was made more readable while conveying the same essential information, and in which the teacher would have enough time in the classroom to use a pedagogy that engaged the students in cognitive reflection by means of a well-scaffolded process. For a subject such as 'tolerance', the process can also lead to shared student and teacher reflection on values or 'social and emotional learning'.

Given the constraints of the syllabus, the writers tried to bear in mind that the content of the textbooks had to be meaningful to the students: it had to have relevance to their lives and have intellectual coherence. Likewise, the pedagogy had to be appropriate to the subject and the age of the students.¹²

Conclusion

The refinement of the social studies textbooks for grades 3–5 was an example of improving the interrelation of content, pedagogy and textbook design to support more effective teaching and learning.

¹¹ This was the first time for Bangladesh government textbooks to include acknowledgements to copyright holders.

¹² Since working with NCTB, the author has become a co-convenor of NISSEM.org, which seeks to design resources to target Sustainable Development Goal target 4.7, by using an approach based on social and emotional learning (SEL). This would have given even more foundation to the approach followed with the NCTB textbooks.

This was the first time for NCTB's textbook writers to collaborate with international specialists, who brought knowledge of commercial textbook publishing, new pedagogical approaches and ways of adapting good practice to local conditions.

It is a consequence of project-style educational inputs that longer-term outcomes may never be communicated to those who contributed to designing the inputs. While the intervention, which was designed jointly by MoPME and the donors, included a needs assessment at the start of the process, no impact assessment was planned for.

A further limitation was that if such an initiative were to be repeated, and if time allowed, it would be valuable to include more collaboration with practicing teachers throughout the textbook refinement process. Without such collaboration, any intervention risks being ineffective. As the noted American education thinker – and former social studies teacher – Larry Cuban observed of his own experiences working in the US education arena:

From the mid-19th century through the early decades of the 21st century, no instructional reform imposed upon teachers has been adopted by most teachers and used in lessons as intended by designers. The history of top-down classroom reform is a history of failed efforts to alter what teachers regularly do daily ... Reforms aimed at altering dramatically classroom instruction require working closely with teachers from the very beginning of a planned change and includes using their existing expertise and expanding their knowledge and skills.¹³

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank colleagues at the National Curriculum and Textbook Board in Dhaka as well as at the Institute of Educational Development at BRAC, and also Brenda Stones, who made an important contribution to refining the primary social studies textbooks in Bangladesh.

¹³ <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/2017/08/03/eighth-anniversary-of-blog/>

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