

*The Use of a Problem Based Learning Approach to Teach Islamic Ethics:
An Action Research in the Indian Context*

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Abstract

Fostering ethical values and its internalization in students' lives is a daunting process. Mere regurgitation of moral values in classroom does not translate into application. In recent years, the global trend suggests that excessive materialism and individualism have led to ideas of instant gratification and the erosion of the ethos of ethical values. India is no exception. This brings forth many questions: Can ethics be taught? How can we create opportunities for students to imbibe ethical underpinnings and articulate their concerns, question or doubts about these values? This article will share findings from the research which was conducted as a part of the researcher's Master's Degree report. In which the focal point was on using Problem-based learning (PBL) to teach Islamic ethics in India.

The study found that PBL provided opportunities to examine and internalize the global challenges through contextual problem based scenarios relevant to students' lives. Such as water leakages and cleanliness of society which were prevalent in their respective vicinity. Through this process, they developed problem-solving skills, team-work, confidence and empathy. The study indicated that PBL is not applicable for teaching all the ethical values within the EPHD curriculum. Furthermore, lack of awareness among students and parents, expertise and willingness of the teachers, limitations of resources and traditional methods of teaching in the secular schools are some of the challenges encountered in implementing this pedagogy. These challenges place greater emphasis on the role of the teacher and necessitate students-teacher collaboration to make it a more meaningful learning process.

Keywords: Islamic Ethics, Problem-based learning, Global Challenges, India, Contextual-problems, Relevance, Team-work, Empathy, Student-Teacher collaboration.

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Introduction

This research was undertaken to understand the efficacy of Problem Based Learning (hereafter PBL) in implementing 'Ethical Pathways to Human Development' (hereafter EPHD) a curriculum developed by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS, London) in the Indian context.

As a RE teacher and researcher, I have always grappled with issues such as can ethics be taught? Does teaching of moral values and notions of development lead to its internalization and application? How can one practice ethics? How can the understanding of issues of social development, their complexities, and sensitivities be realized by students? What can a teacher do to create enough opportunities for students to imbibe ethical underpinnings of the curriculum and articulate their concerns, questions and doubts about these values?

These questions become even more pertinent because statements from the teacher's guide such as "*make it relevant to their own local and cultural contexts*", "*appropriate to the abilities of students*" (IIS, 2010, Pg. 20), "*to sustain the interests of pupils and make learning meaningful*" (IIS, 2010, pg.13) encourage teachers to keep certain aspects in mind while implementing it in the class. Thus, this research aims to examine the utility and effectiveness of PBL approach in explaining Islamic tenets about development and enhancing spiritual and ethical progress.

Research Context

This research took place in Indian Ismaili community. Ismailis are a minority belonging to Shi'i sect of Islam (Daftary, 1998). In 2009, STEP (Secondary Religious Education Programme) was implemented in India to professionalise the secondary religious education system of the Ismaili community. STEP in Mumbai (India) has been piloted in 8 clusters. This small scale research was conducted over a period of 7 weeks (26 hours) in one of the suburban religious education clusters in Mumbai, India. This Religious Education Center (REC) had facilities such as LCD projector, laptop, stationery, textbooks, resource room and voluntary staff to support the teachers. It is significant to note that this REC is situated within an enclosed society of the community with the facility of garden, library and prayer hall. It has a population of approximately 1000 residents. This safe environment allowed for conducting of many practical activities.

Students coming to this cluster belonged to diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It was a classroom of fourteen twelve and thirteen year old students (8 girls and 6 boys). Most of the students attend English medium school of which two students attended an International school. The language of communication was mostly English: two students who had recently migrated from Gujarat had some issues communicating effectively in English. The classes were conducted once a week on Sunday morning for three hours.

Literature Review

What is Problem Based Learning?

It is difficult to come up with a single definition of PBL due to its varied usage in diverse disciplines. Thus, it brings forth the challenge to state one universal definition (Chen *et al.*, 1994). However, the following working definition of PBL has been accepted for the purpose of this research:

According to Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) “*this method...involves learning in ways that use problem scenarios to encourage students to engage themselves in the learning process*”. Boud (1985) explains that it is a starting point of learning where the learner is puzzled and strives to find solutions. Students either work individually or collectively to develop new knowledge to apply in diverse situations.

Characteristics of Problem Based learning:

Various researchers (e.g. Hallinger & Bridge (2007), Creedy & Hand (1995), Barrows and Kelson (1995)), have given different characteristics of PBL depending on the nature and discipline that they are examining. However, there are common denominators in all these discussions of characteristics of a PBL classroom:

- Real life situation as the starting point for learning
- Self-directed learning
- Work in groups

The above characteristics have also been echoed by Charlin *et al.* (1998). He states that it is a unique learner centered approach that allows students to confront real life situations which do not have any right or wrong answers. In addition, it provides an opportunity for the communion of theory and practice and makes learners aware of the lacuna in their knowledge as they consult with their peers to discuss probable solutions. Furthermore, the interactions among students inadvertently allow for both self as well as peer assessment to take place within the classroom. It develops accountability due to peer pressure. The problems create curiosity which triggers prior knowledge and necessitates the integration of different subject-matter knowledge for resolving the challenge at hand. This entire process unconsciously develops skills that can be applied simultaneously such as self-directed learning and interpersonal skills.

However, most of the studies on PBL have been conducted in western universities providing higher education and do not provide sufficient information about its implementation at the secondary level. Moreover, there are fewer examples of problem scenarios mentioned in the literature except from the medical field. Hussain *et al.* (2007) conducted a study on PBL within the Asian context and found that students in Asia are different from western context due to their cultural heritage in which their lack of critical thinking and other skills makes it difficult for them to engage in a PBL environment. Eng (2000) believes that Asian students’ deference for teachers does not allow them to question the teachers which can lead to poor learning experiences. Further, Asian students are over-cared for by parents and have less freedom which impacts their decision-making and problem-solving ability. However, Kennedy (2002) argues that it is unfair to generalize this to entirety of Asia due to its rich diversity.

Methods and Participants

It was an action research. However, in order to maintain objectivity and to triangulate the findings. Data for the research was obtained via the following three methods:

1. Semi- Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven STEP teachers from three different cohorts who had taught the EPHD curriculum.

2. Focus Group Interview

Focus group interview was conducted at the end of this small scale research in which 9 out of the 14 students participated. The remaining 5 did not participate due to the pressure of secular school exams.

3. Reflective Journal

Researcher's observations and experiences were captured as evidences which helped to obtain insights of subtleties of the process and contextual understanding of the study

Result and Analysis

This section aims to present findings and analysis of the three major themes that have emerged from the research:

❖ Implicit scope to use PBL to teach EPHD curriculum

Teacher Sana: *"... I think module provides opportunity (to use PBL) and I also think that it also depends on a teacher. How she picks up the reader and puts it across to the students..."*

However, there were other teachers who disagreed and stated that all the units do not provide opportunities for PBL

Teacher Mansi: *"... I don't think that all the 6 units provide that opportunity for integrating PBL. Each unit has its own different demand and set objectives. We cannot go with the same pedagogy in every class. Pedagogy will be different for every unit and every class..."*

Teachers thought that although not all the units encourage PBL explicitly, the module nevertheless gives scope and room for teachers to be creative and employ PBL when teaching. For instance, Teacher Simran felt strongly that the curriculum does not explicitly promote PBL and that *"concepts are very new....but a teacher needs to make it relatable. The ideas in the book are alien to students. They don't relate to them much..."* Teacher Sophia was of a similar view thinking that the curriculum does not directly discuss about PBL, but *"...we as a teacher needs to think and create problem based questions around the text...."* Teacher Saira on the other hand thought that for a teacher to contextualize the module was very important *"....There is lot of contextualization which a teacher will have to do for global – local or local to global keeping in mind students and context. So in a way, it allows a scope..."*

The role of teacher in connecting the curriculum with students' daily lives and interests was reiterated by one of students during the focus group interview:

Student H: “...you were new to us and you asked us about our personal likes/dislikes and it attracted me very much...”

In summary, the above cited excerpts suggest that while the EPHD curriculum does not provide explicit opportunities for PBL, it can serve as a spring board for creating it. It can be assumed that every teacher has a different understanding of PBL which may impact the usage of the curriculum. However, the aforementioned responses underscore the role of a teacher in making PBL through contextualization and making it relevant according to students’ interests, needs, culture, local environment and background. Thus, the subsequent theme focuses on understanding different advantages of problem based learning due to flexibility provided by the curriculum, its contextualization and proactive role of a teacher.

❖ Advantages of PBL

Students’ voice is very important in making PBL successful. This was also echoed by a teacher during one of the interviews.

Teacher Simran: “...I realized that my Lesson plans failed miserably and so what I did was started reflecting on what went wrong..... I rather than making lesson plans for them...I started making with them....”

Therefore, students were asked to conduct a survey of the society to identify challenges faced by the residents. Issues such as caring for old people, leakage of water tanks, garbage in the garden and educational methods were identified as major problems their communities face. After analyzing a number of challenges encountered by the society members, students were asked to narrow it down to one issue which they strongly felt about and would like to draw immediate attention. This process of discussion and negotiation among the students took a lot of time as they had different rationales and thoughts about selecting a particular problem. Finally, students came to a consensus about ‘educational methods’, by which they meant extra pressure, put on them by parents for taking tuition classes other than school work. They argued that they do not have time for other activities and they wanted their parents to understand their point of view and not to compare the present system with their way of learning in the past. Researcher’s note in the reflective journal reads:

“My struggle to engage students in understanding the various global or local problems did not work out. However, when students were asked to collectively decide about a problem from their lives (here students selected extra tuition pressure from parents and teachers) and play character of different stakeholders. They developed wider perspective, empathized with others and their attitude to problem changed”.

Though this problem was not directly relevant to RE, the researcher agreed to consider this problem to assess the development of problem-solving skills and to make the global issues mentioned in the curriculum relevant to their lives; Moreover, he anticipated that PBL would be able to bring radical changes in their daily lives. However, his host teacher highlighted that this was a very sensitive issue and can become controversial. Thus, researcher dropped the idea of exploring the topic and decided to conduct it in the classroom only through role play. Students enacted the roles of different stake-holders and debated on the issue from the character’s point of

view. While exploring this topic students came up with some understanding of PBL. Their reflections can be broadly categorized as Empathy, Problem-solving skills, Independent thinking and Application oriented learning:

Empathy

Some students expressed that they developed empathy and understood the significance of analyzing a problem from multiple perspectives. Getting into the shoes of their teachers and parents assisted them to realize the challenges adults face when dealing with their children or students:

Student B: *“...I felt that it is difficult to manage others’ character and in the process also felt it is difficult to manage a child...”*

Problem-solving skills:

After gaining confidence about students’ responses to researcher’s approach to PBL, researcher decided to push it further and try different teaching strategies to enhance students’ problem-solving skills. As it reflects in his journal:

“I had an apprehension that instead of PBL; my class is moving towards developing problem-solving skills. However, it was minimized when students utilized those skills to analyze and examine the problem collectively decided by them. I got an insight that problem - solving skills are a key ingredient for PBL to work and more a teacher should focus on the process rather than achieving the required result. I used different activities such as short video clips, worksheets, and collage making to enhance their problem solving skills”

There were students who articulated that the procedure enhanced their problem-solving skills and that they should not take things for granted but look beneath the surface, *“look for evidence”* and avoid being judgmental:

Student B: *“...what we learnt is that it is not important to catch the problem directly. We should always look for more evidences..... In school, we are only taught things that are in the text books but in STEP class we were taught how to resolve the problems, how to interview others, how to talk to them politely without telling this is wrong and this is right...”*

Independent Thinking

Some of the students stated that undertaking PBL activities have increased their confidence and independent thinking by providing opportunities to be *‘on my own’*. Further, it prepared them for future activities:

Student G: *“...we will not be dependent on anybody, if a problem occurs, then we will think about it. We will not call our parents that this happened or that happened and now what should I do? As we grow up, we have to learn to handle the problem independently...”*

Application oriented learning

PBL also helped students to practically experience and implement their learning in their lives. Moreover, PBL makes RE more interesting, different and meaningful from their previous learning experiences at secular school or in primary classes of RE.

Student B: “... when you told us to go out and see how our local society and make the points about how the society is and then we made the collage that was very nice in the STEP class. Before this we never went out of REC for practical learning...”

Others appreciated learning about different styles of learning and how knowledge can be acquired. At the same time they became aware of problems and more importantly how to solve these issues.

Student H: “The surveys which we did, earlier we were not able to do surveys in our normal RECs”

As such, there are many skills such as problem solving, communication and research skills which are essential for PBL to take place in the classroom. However, it is a slow process. In due course students develop qualities such as empathy, independent thinking and contributing to society which is in direct congruence with the ‘aims of the curriculum’ cited on pg.9 of teacher’s guide. Nevertheless, implementing PBL in Indian and particularly RE context has its own challenges. Some of the prominent challenges are mentioned in the next section.

❖ Challenges of implementing PBL

In spite of earlier mentioned advantages, there were many challenges encountered during the implementation of PBL. One of the fundamental concerns was disparity and ambiguity in understanding of PBL:

Teacher Saira: “...I personally feel it does, when we talk about ethics there is lot of scope for ethical dilemmas and the way I understand PBL is that you have a concept of ideas that you want to present what you do is that you problematize it...”

On the contrary to teacher Saira’s definition of PBL, there were teachers who considered case studies and other field based projects as a strategy for PBL

“It appeared to me that every teacher has a different understanding and strategies for PBL. What should I do now? Which one should I follow?” (Researcher’s Journal)

Notwithstanding, this dilemma of selecting and considering a particular strategy as a PBL, all the teachers agreed that no matter what strategy is adopted, small group work is pivotal for developing required skills and achieving its objectives.

Teacher Mansi: “...when I talk about human dynamics ... put them in the group and see how they react ...you will be able to observe whether kids have understood or not ...they become sensitive for other person...”

It seems that group work is one of the best ways for implementing PBL and students collaborated enthusiastically with their peers. However, formation of a group and working with others from different backgrounds was a daunting task for students as

well as for teachers. Moreover, students had their preferences for team-work due to their preconceived notions about each other.

Student B: *“...as the teams were made for the first time, there were some problems. It taught us how to agree with others for our team and how to make them understand the self is not important and team is important. Moreover, who is in the team that is not important than the work...”*

The aforementioned statements of the students indicate the transition time that is required for PBL and the shift in the students' attitude after their initial struggle in accepting the difference while working in the group. One of the reasons for this kind of challenge is lack of exposure and skill necessary for the PBL. Lack of exposure to English language and to various teaching strategies emerged as major obstacles, which was highlighted by some of the teachers and students:

Student D: *“...there were so many words which I did not know or which were difficult...”*

Teacher Delnaz: *“...One thing that I can understand is the English Language challenge. Especially in the suburbs...another reason is that students are not exposed to these kinds of pedagogy. So first to explain to them. How to understand, how to go about doing it? All that explanations from teachers' side become repetition 4-5 times which means when implementing these kinds of pedagogy, it becomes very tiring and time consuming for the teacher...”*

There were teachers who stated that in Indian context; only imparting framework and information about those skills will not suffice. Teachers will have to take extra pain to foster confidence in students that they have the required knowledge, attitude and capability to make decisions for problem resolution.

Teacher Fiza: *“...Kids are not well-exposed here, they are so uninformed. Kids in UK are independent and are respected for their views. They are considered by their parents as little adults whereas here kids' decisions are not taken seriously. That lowers the confidence that we can do something...”*

Due to lack of these basic skills required for PBL which are very common in western countries, a teacher compromises with the PBL activities and curriculum in order to develop problem solving skills:

“...It is a time consuming process, it allows for depth but length of the curriculum is compromised...once a week interaction with students makes it difficult”
(Researcher's Journal)

There were teachers who brought to the notice another limitation of implementing PBL especially in relation to the predicaments of developing countries illustrated in the EPHD curriculum

Teacher Simran: *“...You have to realize that Indian kids live alongside poverty. So they are not sensitised, when you experience something continuously, you become indifferent..... How do you sensitize these kids to such issues...that you are in this*

world to do something? You have some social responsibility toward other human beings and very clichéd thing...”

In addition, teachers expressed their concerns about the local sensitivities these were considered as potential challenge that can aggravate and can have an adverse impact on the psyche of the students.

Teacher Sana: “...*there are those cultural issues...socio-economic background. These students are from diverse socio-economic background. So when I am dealing with poverty, hard life... I hope that I am mindful of their emotions and don't hurt them...*”

Challenges of implementing PBL in a RE context include contesting definitions of PBL among teachers, a teacher's struggle to form a balanced group, and an absence of the necessary skills, attitude and knowledge required for PBL. Moreover, if a problem is not directly relevant and does not involve students' voice, students may not be able to internalize the process, which is pivotal for religious formation. However, the last section of the challenges suggests a caveat for over-reliance on relevance to students' lives; especially when we keep cultural sensitivity in mind. This can also go against the actual objective of developing harmony and empathy among students.

Discussion

Teacher's role is significant for the successful implementation of PBL

The first theme of the finding and analysis section provided mixed responses about the scope for PBL in the EPHD curriculum. However, the responses of teachers such as “...*there is lot of contextualization...*” and “...*a teacher needs to make it relatable...*” state the importance of the teacher in optimizing this implicit opportunity and for successful implementation of PBL. Peretz (1990) supports this idea and states that “Teachers are informed and creative interpreters who modify the curriculum according to classroom needs”. This indicates that text or a particular strategy will not speak for itself and that teachers are the link between students and the curriculum. Moreover, teachers can analyze major aims and objectives of the curriculum and identify effective ways to communicate them after taking into account students' voices, prior knowledge, interests and needs.

Dahlgren *et al.* (1998) describe the teacher's role in PBL as “interaction-oriented” and not “transmitted-oriented”. A teacher has to be a partner in the process of learning with students. Though PBL literature encourages minimal intervention of a teacher (Donaldson and Caplows, 1996), the teacher's role was shown to be critical when implementing PBL in Indian Ismaili RE. The teacher has to be a partner as well as a knowledge provider due to several factors:

First, PBL necessitates that real life scenarios are presented to the students (Boud, 1985). However, the EPHD curriculum is centrally developed by the Institute of Ismaili Studies. This curriculum includes global issues which are unfamiliar to Indian students. Therefore, a teacher functions as a catalyst to contextualise and present issues to students in a way that is relevant to their lives (Bransford *et al.*, 2000).

Second, Hmelo-Silver (2004) states that it is important for students to know about the objectives and processes of PBL before embarking on it, this became even more

important for the purpose of this research because students coming to RE are adolescents and are in the formative stage of religious formation. These views are relevant for this research as students were educated “*to go out*”, “*make the points about*”, “*how to talk to them politely without telling this is wrong and this is right...*” Thus, the teacher’s guidance and thought provoking questions reinforce social and ethical complexities to be kept in mind while dealing with a problem. Koschmann *et al.* (1994) have affirmed similar thoughts on the role of a teacher in PBL.

Third, Polanco *et al.* (2001) talk about the necessity of the appropriate mind-set for PBL, Students coming to RE were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, had different school schedules, and had a variety of interests, skills and prior knowledge. Therefore, teacher-researcher had to bear in mind the cultural sensitivities and appropriateness of the problem.

Fourth, the classes are held once a week on Sunday for three hours. In such situations, PBL appears to be a burden on students. In addition, REC is managed on a voluntary basis and does not have stringent rules to control the absentees or resources like secular schools. If teachers are not actively involved, PBL activities will not be able to achieve its objectives due to time constraints and there is a high probability of losing the direction (Sefton, 1997 and Nieuwenhuijzen, 1997).

Fifth, as it emerged from the findings that unlike western countries, students in India are not efficient in thinking as well as in language skills, attitude and knowledge required to undertake PBL activity, which corroborate research findings of Hussain *et al.* (2007).

Sixth, group work is one the important characteristics of PBL; the success of any PBL activity will depend on the correct formation of groups keeping in mind their strengths and diversity. It “promotes shared construction of knowledge” and will develop higher order thinking in students (Vye *et al.*, 1997). A teacher can play a decisive role in structuring groups due to their regular interaction with students and awareness about strengths and weaknesses of each student.

Last, unlike PBL used in other fields where solutions of the problems are fixed, the findings of this research demonstrate that in RE one does not necessarily come with any right or wrong answer. Indian Ismaili RECs also currently do not implement summative assessments. Finding from researcher’s journal that a “*teacher should make students aware about the significance of respecting sentiments and dialogue in analysing a problem. This becomes even more vital in Indian context which is full of religious and ethnic diversity....*” reiterates Yeo’s (2005) emphasize on teachers’ monitoring, feedback and guidance for learning.

Group Work helps in developing various skills required for PBL

Barrows (2000) considers group work as one of key components of PBL process. According to Schmidt and Moust (2000) group work in PBL impacts the learning outcomes and works as intrinsic motivation. However, in this research, initially students struggled to work in a team “*...as the teams were made for the first time...*” When the task given was to identify problems faced by the society, students wanted to work with their friends or whom they knew from other activities. They had their preconceived notions about each other. The Researcher had to orient students about

the rationale and benefit of working in a team. After some resistance, they began to work in a group and realised its effectiveness. When they were asked to select one problem out of list collected by them, they experienced the power of team work. In the process they developed multiple perspectives, problem solving and interpersonal skills. They began to think critically and had to re-examine their thought when questioned by their peers. They understood the significance of interdependence. Furthermore, they learnt to share their ideas without any judgements. They began to use their collective wisdom to resolve problems. Some of the students expressed that group work nurtured adaptability and open-mindedness which will help them in future.

Barrows and Kelson (1995) validate these advantages of group work. However, they describe it as a process needing time and skills for its culmination. Researcher agrees that it is a process because the challenge of human dynamics (Dixon, 2000) which came in the class was minimise due to proper orientation, timely intervention and facilitation. Thus, it increases the responsibility of a teacher to ensure that there is a balance in the groups.

This study accepts that there are many challenges in using group work; however, he believes that while implementing PBL in teenagers' class, group work becomes a useful tool for enhancing the teaching-learning process. However, if the teacher is not well planned, skillful and tactful, group work may become unmanageable. Therefore, researcher reiterates that only effective teachers can apply it in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Though the setting was a religious context, some aspects of this study seem to be in agreement with the literature review. It appears that EPHD curriculum provides opportunity for PBL. However, the onus of utilising it and connecting with students' lives lies with teachers. The findings indicate that PBL provides opportunities for developing skills such as problem solving, empathy, independent thinking in students.

However, there were two major challenges which emerged from this study. One was how to make students sensitive towards the problem given in the curriculum. Some of the teachers expressed that India being a developing country and students constantly view these issues (poverty, illiteracy etc.) in their surroundings. Thus, the predicament is how to make the content relevant to students' lives.

Second, students lack the exposure, experience and skills required for PBL. The research found out that PBL is an interesting strategy to implement but due to students' inability in language and other skills, it becomes difficult to conduct it. Moreover, it is a time consuming process.

Notwithstanding above challenges, the study concludes that PBL is an effective strategy for teaching EPHD curriculum provided teachers take a proactive role in planning and developing skills in students.

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