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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FINLAND AND INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is a theory developed by educationist David Kolbe which emphasizes the value, mechanism and strategies of learning from experiences that have been described in a wonderful manner. As learning is considered as an active and engaging process, experiential learning highlights how real-life exposure and observations are one of the most durable and interesting techniques of learning. The experiential learning approach follows a cyclical process which involves Concrete Experience-Reflective Observations-Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation as stages of learning. Finland, whose primary education system is considered as best in the world has successfully implemented experiential learning approach inits educational system. This experiential learning approach aims at fostering critical & constructive thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, which are considered as most desirable skills for any learner. Meanwhile, country like India which has traditionally put focus on orthodox exam-oriented system and rigid curricula is bracing itself for new educational reforms under the ambitious National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates massive thrust on learning by doing. The present paper explores the concept of experiential learning, its status in both India and Finland. Significant differences in its application, and inputs regarding various lessons India can adopt from Finland to develop a competent primary education system.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning by doing was initially propagated and popularized by legendary pragmatic educationist John Dewey, who established an experiential school in University of Chicago in 1896 to implement his unique model of practical education. places experience and pupil at the central position in the educational spectrum. In an experiential learning approach, the student does not merely cram information. Instead, he is actively encouraged to obtain life experiences through vicarious learning. This theory of John Dewey aligns with David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which has revolutionized education in the world over the past few decades. Since many decades, Finland's primary education system has integrated experiential learning through project-based social learning, field studies and play-based pedagogy. This strategy has resulted in developing a generation of curious, inquisitive and active learners who are extremely receptive and reflective in their approach. In contrast, India has historically given weightage to close ended examinations and textbook-based instruction. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, proposed a paradigm shift towards experiential and skill-based learning approaches for India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore how experiential learning approach is being used in Finnish primary schools to make learning fun and meaningful.
2. To explore how experiential learning approach is being used in Indian primary schools in context of NEP 2020
3. To compare the use of experiential learning in Finnish and Indian primary education system.
4. To provide certain suggestions concerning use of best practices of Finnish primary education system in Indian primary education system

Review of Related Literature

Mandavkar (2023), Sari et al. (2022), Hakala and Kujala (2021), and Sahlberg and Walker (2021) analyzed Finland's experiential learning-based education system, and found that teachers' huge autonomy, liberal scheme of education, Individualized instruction and pupil-centric policies have contributed to developing Finland as a unique model of quality in primary education. Whereas Mahanta and Garg (2022), Paltasingh and Bhue (2021), and Kalyani (2020) found

that Indian primary education had been adversely affected by a rigid curriculum, outdated methodologies and outdated assessment system. It was observed that NEP 2020 is bound to bring some much-needed improvements in primary education system of India, which is also facing issues like centralized implementation, financial constraints due to massive population size, and teacher training gaps.

Procedure of the Study: In the present study, primary observation was done by the researcher by visiting Finnish and Indian primary schools. Semi-structured interviews with Finnish and Indian primary school teachers helped the researcher to obtain very meaningful and relevant information regarding the theme of study. Apart from this, content analysis was used to systematically evaluate various secondary sources including policy documents, government reports, school manuals and curriculum designs. By integrating all observations and reflections obtained from primary and secondary resources, credible information was received and incorporated in the study.

Experiential Learning in finland's primary Education: In Finnish primary education system, the experiential learning model method effectively bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, making the learning process much more engaging, interesting, pragmatic and enjoyable. In addition to this, play-based learning is a basic ingredient of early childhood and primary education in Finnish schools. Unlike traditional systems where children are expected to sit for long periods in classrooms, Finnish classrooms motivate and facilitates natural movement, play, and social interaction, which enhance cognitive development and social-emotional well-being of all learners. The concept of art integration in learning through music, storytelling and role-playing has the capacity to convert dull learning into a rich multi-sensory experience, catering to different sorts of learning styles (Visual, auditory, kinesthetic etc.) and abilities. In addition to this, Phenomenon-Based Learning (PhBL) is a major novelty in Finland's primary education system. PhBl is an emerging pedagogical approach that replaces traditional subject-based teaching with interdisciplinary, inquiry-driven exploration of actual-world themes. Instead of studying subjects in isolation and compartmentalized manner, students investigate broad themes or phenomena, integrating knowledge from science, mathematics, social sciences and language studies into a single project. For example, a project on environment conservation might include:

- Understanding the concept of global warming.
- Analyzing temperature trends and greenhouse gases levels using statistical tools.
- Studying the adverse impact of climate change on different ecosystems.
- Writing thought provoking and reflective essays or delivering interactive presentations on global issues.

Further, in Finnish primary schools, children spend significant time in activities such as:

- Collaborative problem-solving tasks, such as mapping a hiking route or setting up a community garden.
- Mathematics lessons might involve measuring tree growth rates or calculating the perimeter of a playground.
- Literacy activities could include storytelling sessions around a campfire or nature- inspired poetry writing.
- This exposure to natural environments improves concentration, reduces stress levels, and fosters creativity, reinforcing the importance of experiential, hands-on learning beyond the classroom walls.

Instead of relying on standardized testing (as in the case of many countries), Finland uses formative as well as criterion referenced based assessment methods to evaluate student progress. It is interesting and astonishing to note that there are no high-stakes exams in primary education, and students are instead assessed through rubric, continuous observation, self-reflection, and portfolio-based (process and product) evaluation. Instead of norm referenced criterion assessment, which is considered fundamentally flawed by many progressive educationists, assessment in Finnish primary schools focus on student's individual growth, his/her own learning trajectory, innovative outlook and problem-solving abilities rather than mere awarding grades or ranking of students (like in the case of norm referenced assessment) on the basis of pre-decided academic criteria. Some leading assessment methods in Finnish primary schools include:

- Self-Reflection Journals: Students document their own learning experiences, thoughts, and discoveries in journals, helping them develop meta-cognitive skills and mindfulness.
- Students present their research findings and demonstrate their understanding of concepts through practical application and inter-personal communication.
- Educators provide individualized feedback on students' strengths and areas for improvement rather than assigning numerical grades.

This approach is hassle free, pupil-centric and rewarding for every learner. This sublime approach has transformed Finland's model of primary education as a wonderful blueprint for future educational reforms worldwide.

Experiential learning in India's Primary Education: NEP 2020 has advocated paradigm shift through experiential learning and life related education in Indian primary education system. Primary education system is a vital phase as it determines learners' cognitive, social, and emotional development in a big way. As per the directions and guidance of NEP 2020, many schools are encouraging students to actively participate in their education through real-world applications of knowledge. Students are now encouraged to:

- Conduct experiments to understand scientific phenomena, such as growing plants under different conditions to study photosynthesis.
- Participate in field-based learning, where students visit nature places, small scale industries, or historical sites to develop a contextual understanding of their subject.
- Take part in role-playing activities, such as re-enactment of dramas, historical events or participation in mock debates and elocutions to bring social studies and history lessons to life.
- Use the art of storytelling to express and communicate concepts, making learning more participative and interesting.

All these learning approached perfectly align with David Kolb's famous Experiential Learning Theory, where learners move through a cycle of direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application, ensuring insightful understanding and retention of concepts.

Challenges in Implementing Experiential Learning in India: Despite progressive changes in some schools, experiential learning remains underutilized in plenty of government and rural schools, where traditional teaching methods continue to dominate. Several structural and systemic challenges hinder the widespread adoption of experiential learning which includes overcrowded Classrooms Exam oriented educational system, insufficient teacher training in experiential pedagogy, resources & infrastructural constrains etc. One of the biggest obstacles to experiential learning in India is large class sizes, often exceeding 50-60 students per classroom. This makes individualized instruction and learning by doing experiences very difficult to implement. In contrast, Finland, which excels in experiential learning, maintains small class sizes (generally 12 students per class), allowing teachers to interact with students more effectively and facilitate group-based exploration. As stated above, India's education system has been historically driven by high-stakes board exams and competitive entrance tests, leading to a focus on mere memorization rather than conceptual understanding. Many schools continue to prioritize exam preparation over experiential,

student- centered learning. Most of the teachers in India lack exposure to experiential teaching strategies. Teacher training programs often focus on textbook instruction rather than interactive, hands-on learning. Many teachers are overburdened with administrative tasks, limiting their ability to implement innovative learning approaches. Most of the schools, especially in rural areas, lack access to basic infrastructure required for experiential learning, such as well-equipped science labs for hands-on experiments, digital tools and internet access for technology-based learning experiences, outdoor learning spaces for environmental and nature-based education and Project- based learning kits and maker spaces for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education. Despite these daunting challenges, several promising initiatives such as Atal Tinkering Labs (the Government of India has set up innovation labs in schools, where students can work on hands-on STEM projects using 3D printers, robotics kits, and AI tools. are leading the way in promoting experiential learning across India), Eklavya Model Residential Schools (These schools have been established for tribal students where emphasis is on activity- based learning, skill development, and contextualized education that aligns with students' cultural backgrounds), Storytelling-Based Pedagogy (through many non-profit organizations, such as Pratham and Teach for India) are making certain positive changes in primary education domain in India. To really infuse and integrate experiential learning into India's primary education system, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must need to introduce experiential learning modules in teacher training programs, provide continuous professional development workshops, helping teachers integrate activity-based learning into daily lessons, and encourage peer learning networks, where teachers can share best practices and learn from successful experiential education models. We also need to shift away from rote-based exams to competency-based assessments that evaluate problem-solving, creativity, and application of knowledge. Encouragement to project-based evaluations, Investment in STEM labs, ensuring equitable distribution of digital tools and learning resources, and encouragement to public- private partnerships are certain essential steps. We may say that India is at a decisive juncture in its educational transformation, with NEP 2020 paving the way for experiential learning in primary education. India needs to invest in better teacher training, infrastructure development, competency-based assessments, and hands-on learning environments, if we have to make our schools really effective and futuristic.

Comparing Experiential learning in Finland and India: The contrast between Finland's well-established experiential learning model and India's evolving education system under NEP 2020 highlights some vital differences in curriculum flexibility, assessment approaches, and learning environments. Since so many decades, Finland has been a global leader in student-centered education, emphasizing inquiry-based, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning. In contrast, India, with its historically exam-driven, rote-learning-based system, is now trying to apply and achieve gradual transformation towards competency-based education under NEP 2020. One of the most distinctive advantages of Finland's education system is small and manageable class sizes, which easily allow for personalized learning experiences, hands-on activities, and better teacher-student interaction. As stated earlier, Finland's remarkable student-teacher ratio (approximately 1:12 in primary education) ensures that each child receives individualized attention, making experiential learning more effective. In contrast, India's overcrowded classrooms (often 1:40 or more) make it very tough to execute student-centered, activity-based learning on a large scale. Many Indian schools struggle with scarcity of resources, and many logistical difficulties in facilitating hands-on learning for all students. Another major issue is quality and efficiency of teacher training programs in India. NEP 2020 has recognized this issue and suggested a huge focus on capacity building programmes for primary teachers to enhance their effectiveness. NEP has also highly recommended competency- based assessment, so that competencies like rational thinking, reflective observations and problem solving could be given a push. NEP 2020 has suggested to do away with one-size-fits- all approach as major policy reform. NEP 2020 has also recommended major investments in digital education and infrastructure, but full implementation is yet to be realized nationwide.

Lessons India Can Learn from Finland: Shifting from memorization-based evaluation to application-driven assessment is essential for fostering deep learning and skill acquisition. India needs to reduce dependence on high-stakes exams and introduce portfolio-based assessments, project evaluations, and self-reflection journals. The students need to be encouraged to demonstrate their insights through experiments, presentations, case studies, and real-world problem-solving tasks. There must be focus on collaborative learning and critical thinking rather than ranking students based on marks. We also need to put more focus on interactive and flexible learning environments, development of phenomenon-based learning curricula, interdisciplinary projects, and student-driven inquiry projects to boost learning in real sense. India also needs to expand funding for interactive learning tools, STEM labs, and digital education initiatives to ensure equitable access to experiential learning. Bridging the urban-rural education divide by providing rural schools with technology-enabled classrooms, encouragement to public-private partnerships, organizing community-driven projects, real-world apprenticeships, providing students with exposure to real- world problem-solving through field visits, internships, and mentorship programs are some of the measures India need to adopt for making true experiential learning a reality and thundering success. Experiential learning has the power to truly revolutionize education in India, transforming classrooms into dynamic place of countless explorations. By adopting Finland's best practices— such as competency-based assessments, interdisciplinary projects, and flexible teaching methodologies—India can reduce and bridge the gap between traditional and modern education.

CONCLUSION

The application of experiential learning model has the potential to change the quality of teaching learning process in a big manner. David Kolbe's model has been successfully applied in Finnish education system with astonishing results. Aspects like drawing reflection from concrete experiences with active engagement, connecting education with real life situations and adopting inter-disciplinary approach for learning contains immense potential. Finnish model provides immense autonomy to its teachers to adopt an inquisitive, activity based and experimental frame of mind for classroom transactions. That's the reason that primary education ambience in Finland is stress free, joyful and full of learning experiences. In context of NEP 2020, India is also trying to apply experiential learning model in its classrooms. If applied in effective manner, this approach can help Indian system to get rid of many of its glaring weaknesses. For this to happen, the primary teachers of India need to be given relevant autonomy, infrastructural support and digital resources. The curriculum design needs to be more flexible, activity oriented and futuristic. Inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary teaching need to be encouraged. By doing so, the aspiration to have real quality education could be achieved.

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