

# BACKGROUND NOTES

## APPLIED LEARNING CURRICULUM

A curriculum is more than a set of textbooks or lesson plans. A curriculum is mediated by teachers and explored by students as a lived experience (Campbell 2008; McConnell et al. 2020). A living curriculum provides students with a wide range of organized learning experiences that are geared towards achieving educational aims and objectives.

It is useful to think of curriculum as a dynamic interaction of content, pedagogy, and experiences of the school community (students, parents, leaders, teachers) within a particular cultural and sociopolitical environment. These interactions can be seen at three levels (Male, Waters & Dunford, 2012):

- National or State Framework: the curriculum as set out by the nation or state
- Institutional Mediation: the curriculum as mediated by the school or teachers for students in the school or class
- Learner Experience: the curriculum as experienced by the students

The school's curriculum is shaped by the crucial process of mediating and interpreting external expectations for local relevance.

### A dynamic curriculum includes the following key elements (NCF 2023)

- Goals and objectives
- Syllabi
- Content to be taught and learnt
- Pedagogical practices
- Assessment
- Teaching-learning materials
- School and classroom practices
- Learning environment
- Culture of the institution

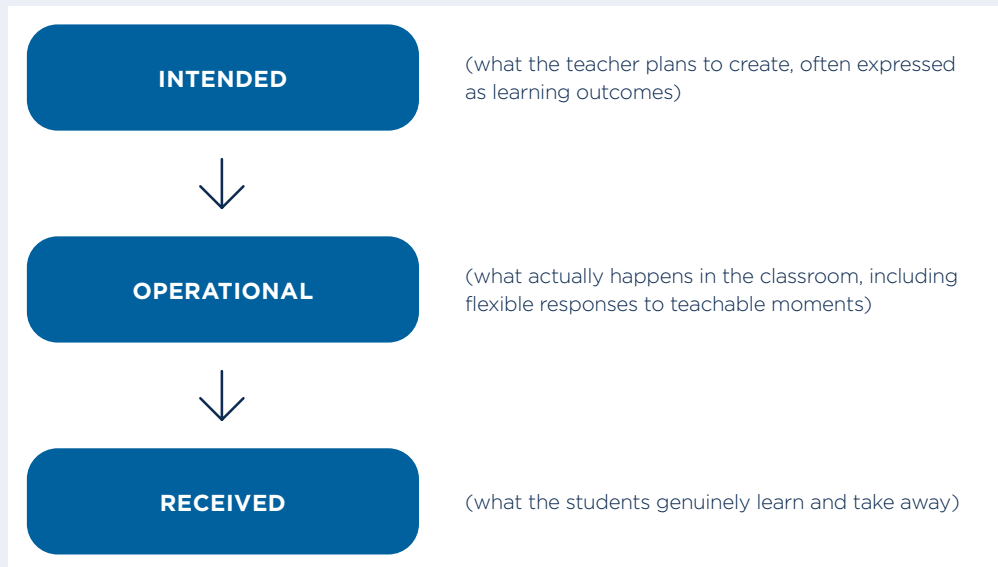
An applied learning curriculum should be:

- experiential (Kolb 1984), providing purpose, direction, and application of knowledge
- contextual, ensuring relevance to real life, especially working and community life
- personal, meeting the learners' individual needs (Ovenden-Hope and Blandford 2017).

India's National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 recommends exposure to real-life work in secondary and higher secondary levels. It makes a strong case for interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum design, with a focus on addressing local needs of the community and industry. This establishes the need to adapt curriculum and align it with applied learning goals. Central and state school boards have a crucial role to play in adapting relevant curriculum to advance applied learning.

The Relevant, Engaging, Active Learning (REAL) framework (Ovenden-Hope and Blandford 2017) is useful both for designing a new curriculum and adapting an existing curriculum to incorporate applied learning experiences that are experiential, contextual, and personal. This can include teaching and learning strategies such as problem-based learning and real-world creative challenges (Male 2012). The design must provide learners with choice in their activities and opportunities to actively co-construct their learning experiences.

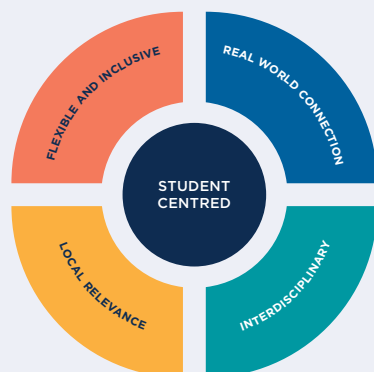
When designing or adapting a curriculum for applied learning, it is important to recognise that teaching involves three types of curriculum: intended, operational and received. Comparing the intended and operational curricula provides vital feedback for improving teaching practice and ensuring that the received curriculum increases genuine learning for students (McConnell et al., 2020).



## APPLIED LEARNING CURRICULUM ADAPTATION

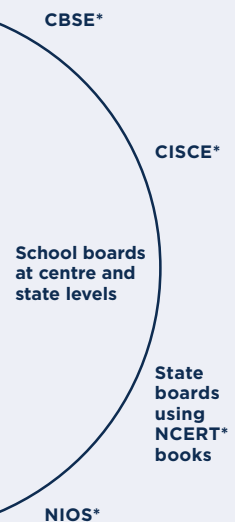
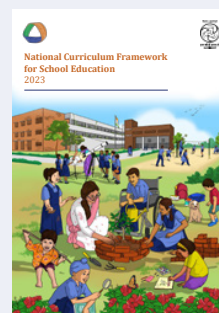
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This diagram highlights the core principles of curriculum adaptation for applied learning in alignment with existing Indian curriculum frameworks.



### ALIGNMENT WITH NCF SE 2023

- Localised and aspirational curriculum
- Exposure to different forms of work in real life situations
- Equity and inclusion
- Value working with hands
- Learning outcome based curriculum as outlined in National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)
- Provide hands on experiences
- Interdisciplinary approach in curriculum design



\*Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)

\*Council For The Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)

\*National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)

\*National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)

## HOW DOES TEACHER COLLABORATION STRENGTHEN APPLIED LEARNING?

As a teacher, you play a central role in shaping meaningful applied learning experiences. Strong collaboration among teachers forms the foundation for this work. It begins with a shift from isolated subject teaching mainly focused on covering subject matter for tests and examinations, to finding ways of designing or adapting a curriculum so that classroom concepts are integrated with real-world applications.

Start by reflecting on your existing curriculum (Grundy 1987). Ask yourself how classroom content can help students prepare for situations beyond school, in their communities, future studies, or the world of work. For example, traditionally you may have taught a social sciences subject by providing facts, categories, statistics, issues, events, and so on. With applied learning, you can adapt your lessons to create scenarios centred on local issues, still based on the same core elements. You can then have students design solutions, explore civic responsibility, develop a public awareness campaign. Such activities allow students to see how they can apply their learning to create real impact.

When you plan together as teachers, you can identify common goals, share expertise and create authentic projects that reflect how problems are solved outside school. This collaborative approach also supports curriculum mapping, helps to reduce content overlap and schedule clashes and keeps students engaged through practical, relevant learning. See resource 2.1.

Even within a fixed curriculum, teachers can co-design small-scale applied scenarios that connect lessons with real-world contexts.

Assessments, too, benefit from collaboration. When you and your colleagues co-design rubrics, expectations become consistent across subjects. Students understand what success looks like and receive constructive, formative feedback that improves performance (see Assessment element).

When planning collaboratively with your colleagues, you could explore together whether digital and AI-enabled tools make certain processes more efficient. Teachers are increasingly using AI-enabled tools to brainstorm, generate draft rubrics and assessment tasks, or check alignment between learning outcomes and activities. AI tools can also be used to make curriculum maps and validate whether project tasks address intended skills and knowledge. You need to test such tools with care and critically evaluate the outputs, drawing on your combined professional and pedagogical knowledge and experience to determine their quality and usefulness.

## DO TEACHERS REALLY HAVE TO STEP OUTSIDE THEIR SUBJECT AREA?

Real world problems rarely fit within one subject. A defining feature of applied learning is its interdisciplinary approach. Ideally an applied learning curriculum will connect disciplines such as Mathematics and Science, Humanities, Arts, Technology, and Commerce. Cross-disciplinary projects can create richer and more authentic learning experiences (Edelbroek, Mijnders and Post, 2018.)

When you design learning around shared themes or projects, students view concepts through multiple lenses. This makes learning multi-dimensional and helps them see how theory applies to real, complex issues. Working across disciplines also builds essential life and work-related, transversal skills such as teamwork, collaboration, communication, problem-solving and critical thinking (San-Epifanio and Filibi 2023).

If you are adapting an existing curriculum for applied learning and find it difficult to design such cross-disciplinary projects, you can still explore with your colleagues how to make students aware of the different disciplinary dimensions of a particular real-world issue. You and your colleagues can discuss these aspects with students in the subjects you teach.

See resource 2.1 for tips on how you can build interdisciplinary connections for real impact.

## HOW CAN WE MAKE CURRICULUM RELEVANT TO LOCAL NEEDS AND ENHANCE STUDENT PARTICIPATION?

For applied learning to be meaningful and effective, it needs to connect with students' interests and their local context (Ovendon and Hope 2018). Designing activities around community needs, real data, and cultural relevance helps students see how applying knowledge can make a genuine difference.

When abstract concepts are translated into practical action for community improvement, learning becomes purposeful. This approach builds a strong connection between school and society. It helps students become informed, active citizens who can adapt global understanding to address local challenges. Local examples make lessons relatable and give students a sense of ownership in developing solutions that matter (Stanley 2018).

Engaging with community voices, such as professionals, entrepreneurs, or cultural practitioners, can also enrich learning. These partnerships bring authenticity to lessons and help teachers design activities and assessments grounded in real-life situations. See resource 2.2.

## HOW CAN WE ADAPT CURRICULUM TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Student agency lies at the heart of applied learning. It transforms students from passive recipients of information into active participants who shape their own learning journeys (Lee et al. 2026).

Curriculum design should create opportunities for students to have a voice in what they learn, how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning. When students make choices about topics or products, they take greater ownership of the learning process and of the work they create.

Agency and accountability go together. One approach is to have students use rubrics to assess their own and peers' work. Empowered learners are more motivated, creative, and reflective, producing higher-quality work and developing lifelong learning skills (Kirk et al. 2017). See resources 2.2, 3.1-3.2, 3.7-3.8.

## HOW CAN FLEXIBLE DESIGN MAKE LEARNING MORE INCLUSIVE?

An applied learning curriculum is an ideal framework for inclusiveness because it values what students can do, not just what they know. An inclusive curriculum ensures that every learner, regardless of background, ability, or preferences, can participate and demonstrate mastery.

When students are given multiple ways to engage, express and reflect, learning becomes equitable and empowering. By building in flexibility, teachers create opportunities for **every** learner to experience success and contribute meaningfully to collaborative tasks. It creates a supportive space for students with different psychosocial learning needs to gain experience from applied learning (Koh, ed., 2020). See resource 2.3.