

# Challenges and Constraints to get Real Benefits from Quality Circle Activities among Students

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**Abstract.** During the Students' Quality Circle (SQC) activities in academics, students identify, analyze and solve their problems at school and at home by applying various QC tools in a QC team using QC story of systematic problem solving approach. This paper highlights the content analysis of the secondary information compiled from the proceedings of the recent national and international conventions on students' quality circles using KJ method. The result depicts that students have developed several characters deemed necessary to build leadership quality. Students participating in Students' Quality Circle activities have developed eleven types of leadership traits, skills and habits like self confidence, self discipline, interpersonal relations, broader vision, creativity, social responsibility, communication skills, scientific and analytical skills, time management skills, empathy, and working habits in a team. The experiment of integrating Students' Quality Circles in the class room as co-curricular activities together with regular curriculum seems very successful. However, some constraints and challenges still exist in implementation of Students' Quality Circle in a sustainable manner. The paper also tries to highlight cautionary notes which are derived from the lessons learnt while introducing quality circles among young students at educational institutes in Nepal.

## A Research Finding on Potentials of Students Quality Circles

Educationists from around the globe are trying to use quality practices and projects at various levels in academics to introduce the concept of quality in the mind of young children. However, the first Students' Quality Circle is recorded as a case presented by young school children of City Montessori School of Lucknow, India at the International Conference on Quality Circles in Hong Kong in 1994. Thus, it is more than a decade that Students' Quality Circles are in practice in academics.

A content analysis was carried out with a simple but widely used tool for verbal information called K.J. Method to identify the potentials and benefits of the Student' Quality Circle. Secondary information on the intangible benefits while practicing SQC were collected from the report of the national and international conventions on Students' Quality Control Circles held at different places. The analysis has helped to cluster the personality or traits of students that were developed after conducting Students' Quality Circle exercises as expressed by these Circle members.

The traits derived from the content analysis include many of the required character qualities to become a total quality person. The interesting traits found are as follows:

**Self-Confidence and Desire to Excel:** Students develop confidence in their knowledge, action and capability to deliver positive results even in difficult situations. This happens when a group of students in SQC solves their problem by themselves without depending on others. Their confidence in analyzing the environment and service delivery starts to develop in their mindset. They become forward looking, have desire to excel, and develop capability to take risks when they feel self-confident.

**Self-Discipline and Better Manners:** Students instill self-discipline. When students in SQC start to identify and solve their own problems rather than always cuing on other's problems, they become self aware and develop a mindset of honesty and commitment. The self-disciplined character attributes of commitment and honesty are also developed when SQC members assemble every week at the same time for discussions and analysis.

**Interpersonal and Public Relations:** Students develop a confidence in interpersonal and public relations. In the process of problem observation and implementation of the action plan to solve the problem, the students have to meet and interact with a number of other people besides their own team members. They meet other students of their own grade, their seniors and juniors, their teachers, their guardians and sometimes people in the society who directly and indirectly influence the problems. Students involved in SQC develop confidence in public relations which is a very important character attributes of leadership.

**Positive Attitude and Empathy:** Students develop an attitude of empathy towards other human being and colleagues. During discussions and brainstorming, Circle members always listen to others and give due importance to the views and opinions of others. While implementing countermeasures to solve problems, they show understanding for other people with whom they have to work. Students with empathetic behaviour also develop spiritually. They develop peaceful and humorous character, and perform their work in an honorable manner.

**Social Responsibility:** Students develop a feeling of social responsibility. At the time of identifying problems, the SQC members personally start exploring the problem keeping in sight the community's sensitivities and well being. They develop high regard for the community they deal with. The students' community members include all students, teachers, administrators, guardians and the society where they live. This way, the students develop social responsibility character attributes such as adaptability, tolerance and doing something good for the society.

**Time Management Skills:** Students develop the skills of managing time. SQC members have limited time to work. Each week, some ideas, analyses or conclusion have to be drawn within an hour. In addition, at least one problem has to be solved within a semester or a year. Students involved in SQC know the importance of time. They develop skills in prioritizing activities, preparing action plans for analysis and implementing countermeasures within scheduled time. Students learn to deliver services on time, a character attribute which is very important to be a leader.

**Scientific Problem Solving Skills:** Students develop scientific, logical and analytic skills. SQC activities involve a lot of data collection on the features of the problems and phenomena, observation, analyzing the causes and root causes. They utilize various problem solving tools and techniques. Students develop the habit of analyzing with facts and figures and learn several qualitative and analytical tools during the process.

**Communication and Presentation Skills:** Students develop excellent communication skills and are confident in expressing their views and listening to others. Students who initially have difficulties in expressing their opinions in front of others develop confidence in communicating and sharing their views and opinions during brainstorming sessions. Besides, they also develop skills in presentations of their cases in front of a mass during the annual day function or seminars and conferences. Communication skill is one of the most important character attributes of leadership which students develop after being involved in SQC activities.

**Creativity and Lateral Thinking Habits:** Students develop the skill in lateral thinking and generating creative ideas. Students involved in SQC activities participate actively in several brainstorming sessions. The brainstorming exercises kindle the lateral thinking process among the students and help develop their habit of thinking creatively and always coming up with innovative ideas. The lateral thinking mindset is an important character attribute of a leader.

**Working Habits in a Team:** SQC is essentially a team-building program. Students realize the importance of group dynamics and the concept of creating synergic effect of a team working together. Individuals understand how to work in a team effectively. As a team, they participate in identifying, analyzing and solving common problems. Thus, students develop the personality attributes of working collaboratively to achieve a common objective.

**Broader Vision and Academic Knowledge:** Students involved in SQC acquire broad and in-depth knowledge of life and the surrounding environment. They are quick to acquire knowledge and skills prescribed in the curriculum from their teachers in the class. They enjoy getting knowledge beyond their books. They learn a lot in the process of sharing and interacting with their SQC team members and also during the observation of the features of the problem. The information collection and analysis of the problem provides the scope for broadening their insights and visions. Such extra knowledge and skills help to create good leadership for the future.

### **Lessons Learnt from SQC Experience in Nepal**

Some issues are quite interesting to rethink on application of Students' Quality Circles in academia. During the process of its implementation in Nepal, various constraints and challenges occurred. I take this opportunity to share these with you. Some issues are discussed below which may be useful to all of you:

**Quality Improvement in Educational Institution Vis-à-Vis Preparing Total Quality Person:** Several quality initiatives are found in educational systems to assure society about the quality of education delivered at the institution. Quality curriculum, quality reading materials, quality teachers, quality teaching-learning logistics, quality evaluation and quality management systems are all concerns of the government, parents, students and the society in large. The quality status of each factor determines the quality level of the students who graduate from that institute. Designing specific quality parameters, teaching students as per the designed curriculum and

evaluating students at various stages are some of the common approaches of quality control system available among traditional educational institutes. Presently, ISO certification is becoming popular to assure quality to the society by introducing quality management system in the institute. Implementation of total quality management with teaching and non-teaching staff's participation, policy deployment and quality circles also provide assurance on the quality. All these control and management systems are established to assure society on the quality of the educational institute.

Preparing total quality person in educational institute is not related to the quality assurance system of the educational institute. And, establishing quality circles among students in educational institute is not to provide assurance to the society on the quality of the institute, but to implant quality ingredients in the mind of the students who are products of the educational institute. ***The implementation of Students' Quality Circles is to enhance quality of the product (student) at the institute and not the Quality assurance system of the institute itself.***

**Basic of Quality Circle is Same whether Applied among Employees or Students:** The basics of introducing quality circles in any organization are to enhance the unlimited latent capability of people involved in QC exercise. If quality circle is practiced by the employees of the institute, they will be able to harness their hidden talents. Similarly, students at any level who practice Students' Quality Circles can also enhance their latent capabilities. Another reason behind practicing quality circles is to empower its members and to develop harmonious working relationship. ***As employees of any organization, if quality circles are practiced by students it helps develop their confidence and form a cohesive environment among friends.***

**Permanent Character of Employees QCC vis-à-vis Temporary Nature of Students' QC:** Employees who practice quality circles in industries are more or less permanent in nature, where as students involved in quality circles are upgrading their qualification every year and leave the institution in very short period. Students are thus a temporary in nature in relation with the institution they are involved in. Employees' quality circle members find their workplace in a more or less permanent home for work, where as students' quality circle members find their class room in a more or less temporary place to learn. ***Naturally, addressing of the problems in Industrial QCC and SQC will be completely different in scope.***

**Personality Development and not Merely Solving Problems:** Quality Circles in industry or educational institute as an industry are used as employees' participation for problem solving with the motive of continuous improvement in process and products. The Employees' Quality Circles solve workplace problems in a team for continuous improvement. The Students' Quality Circles solve their own problems in a team for their personality development. ***Here, one should take care that Students' Quality Circles are not meant to solve the educational institute's problems but to develop the personality of students who are involved in the QC problem solving process.***

**Students' Quality Circles not Students' Quality Control Circle:** Students are not controlling quality of any thing, nor are the quality parameters of students are controlled by anybody during Students' Quality Circles. Hence, the terminology – Students' Quality Control Circles is inappropriate and we have to rename it as Students' Quality Circles. The proposed terminology is short, catchy as well as self explanatory. The Students' Quality Circle means students' team in a circle which neither has head nor tails while practicing brainstorming, who uses QC systematic problem solving tools and techniques for developing quality mindset among team members. ***The three words Students' Quality Circles convey a specific and appropriate meaning.***

**Nature of Problem for Employees' versus Students' QCs:** In quality circle exercises, a homogenous group of people solve their problems. However, the problems analyzed by the employees in the organization and the problems identified by the students are completely different. The nature of the problem to be solved will be different. Employees try to prioritize the problems on the process, working environment and products, where as students look for problems they are facing due to their own faults. The QC team of the employees can some time recommend the management to solve their problem justifying that the solution will be beneficial to the management to generate more market or profit. However, in case of students, they should not recommend management for solving their problems; rather they should identify the method of solving their problems by themselves. As the purposes of QC exercise among the employees and students are different, the nature and scope of the problem also varies. The purpose of implanting Students' Quality Circles is to develop personality and not just solving the problem. ***The nature of problems taken up by students will be very simple within the domain of their own and not going on the domain of teachers or other management staffs.***

**Compulsory Not Voluntary Participation of Students in QCs:** In Employees QC exercise the participation is voluntary, where as in Students' QC, it should be compulsory and mandatory. The purpose and scope of QC among students is different than Employers' QC in industries. The main responsibility of the educational institute is to develop character of all its students. Thus the institute should not encourage only voluntary membership from smart students to participate in Students' Quality Circle exercise, if QC exercise really

develops their personality. Employees' QC is primarily conducted to improve the process where as Students' QC is implemented to improve students' personality. *The environment in educational institute should motivate all students to participate.*

**Time Schedule for Students' QC Meeting:** In educational institutes setting time schedule for QC meeting for different groups is an arduous job. Students generally do not get free time during their study periods. Educational institutes should set aside QC schedule permanently, to ask all students for exercising QC activities. *Some institutes observing fixed schedule for QC are making good progress in this regard.*

### Conclusion

Adapting Quality Circles approach for students may need some fine tuning in the original form of Quality Control Circles approach developed 4 decades back in Japan for employees' empowerment and problem solving. Some issues are identified here for discussion and considerations. The Students' Quality Circle is a strong tool, for personality development of students, to help them become good citizens, confident, competent and humane, in today's 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **References**

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