

Social Constructivism and Teaching of Social Science

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***Abstract** The paper presents an overview of prevailing pedagogic practices of social science at school level in India. It has been sketched with the help of social science teachers' interviews. The analysis of teachers' interview revealed that the teaching of social science is a reflection of teacher's own biases and beliefs; dominated by deficit model of thinking and learning. Against this backdrop the paper tries to address the question do we have any alternative of 'deficit model' of teaching learning? If yes, what is it? How it can be designed and executed? In the present descriptive study the researcher adopts the theoretical underpinnings of Socio-cultural approach to learning and tries to design and execute constructivist pedagogic setting for teaching social science. It emerges from the analysis of these constructivists pedagogic settings that it helps to develop and sustain a culture of inquiry in the classroom where the strong interface between students' everyday knowledge and school knowledge take place. The paper establishes the argument that for moving deficit model of teaching-learning, knowledge should be viewed as co-constructed, negotiated and situated entity, knower should have agency and the voice in process of knowing and the process learning should be dialogic.*

Key words: Funds of Knowledge, Social Constructivism, Social Sciences

Introduction

Social science as a school subject enables learners to deal with the multifaceted social reality; reality that is not given but produced and reproduced under the influence of authoritative discourse of power and hegemony. By the virtue of being 'social', best place to teach student to question prevailing social norms, processes and practices is in the social science classroom (Winberg and Martin, 2004). Social science should engage and make learners aware of present scenario and expose them to the 'reality' of society not only the 'ideal' of society (Ogle Klemp and McBride, 2007). Dewey (1916) suggested that school should provide multiple opportunities for learner to learn what a democratic way of life means and how it might be led.

In India, National Curriculum Framework, (NCF) 2005 also adhere same views and recommends that Social Science teaching will enable students to think critically and take

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informed position regarding different social issues. It gives primacy to learner's experience and emphasised to connect the knowledge to the life outside school. The classroom processes should not be like a 'closed-box' processes rather it should reflect interface between school learning and what a learner learns through his/her everyday experience (NCF, 2005). After National Curriculum Framework, 2005 'Civics' has been removed from the school curriculum as it reflects the colonial legacy and ideal of a colonial citizen. Instead of it 'Social and Political Life' has been introduced at the upper primary classes which covers the issues related to diverse Indian society in their prevailing form. These new textbooks present different social issues related to class, class, gender, human rights and tries to engage the learner with the same.

Prevailing pedagogic practices of social science:

At the beginning of the present work I did a scouting task. I informally interviewed social science teachers of a government school who were teaching new social science textbooks namely Social and Political Life. Their responses showed a different picture of prevailing pedagogic practices of social science. It emerged during the interaction with these teachers that they are still viewing the text book 'Social and Political life' as textbook of 'Civics'. They appreciated the new textbooks for their design and activities but they are critical about the content of the textbooks. They argued that new textbooks do not provide appropriate knowledge base for the success in the future. For them, 'success in the future' means to prepare and qualify various competitive exams.

The agenda of introducing these new textbook was to move beyond the encyclopaedic image of knowledge related to 'government', judiciary' 'functioning of local bodies' etc. and to present the dynamics of social processes. However such kind of views shows that social science teachers are still believe in information loaded curriculum that can be used for examination purposes. They do not understand the shifts brought to curriculum through the NCF, 2005. Further such kind of believe system influence their pedagogic strategies and impedes the implementation of new curriculum with its above mentioned essence. They also reported that these books have overestimated learner's capacity and learners are unable to understand concepts such as diversity and discrimination. They believe that every learner can learn but they shared a prejudiced view regarding learner in their school: 'learners (coming from lower socio-economic class) are lacking in knowledge base', 'they are not motivated to learn', and 'they are not getting any support at home'. These responses are reflection of deeply rooted 'teacher's beliefs' which follows the 'deficit model' of learner and learning. The possible explanation of such

responses lies in Moll *et. al.*'s (1992) argument, “*when the classrooms practices are disconnected from learner’s everyday experience classroom instruction tend to be unidirectional, authoritative and monologic.(pp. 62)*” Further, it contributes in forming and reinforcing teacher’s believe that learners coming from ‘poor’ and ‘lower’ class background do not bring significant cultural capital with them.

Beyond deficit model: using learners’ social funds of knowledge for teaching-learning social science:

At the next phase of my research work I initiated to design and create a pedagogic setting with the aim to challenge these assumptions of teachers and developing a learning environment by acknowledging learner’s agency and voices in classroom learning processes. I got theoretical support and insights from the previous researches. Studies done by Moll *et. al.* (1992) showed that children through their active participation in various social activities accumulate funds of knowledge. Their funds of knowledge are abundant and diverse as they actively participate in a vast and diverse arena of activities in their contexts (Moll *et. al.*, 1992, Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Rogoff (1998) identified that students daily experiences is not a passive and inactive storage of information rather they use it to influence each others’ actions or engage in shared thinking. It is also suggested that learner’s social experiences can be used to engage the class and construct the knowledge based on learner’s resources rather than on their deficits (Gonzalez & Amanti, 1992; Gonzalez & Moll 2002).

Learner’s everyday experience in the community is a legitimate source of knowledge, a kind of cultural capital that can be tapped by teachers to improve the pedagogic practices. These studies led me towards the theoretical underpinnings of Social Constructivism. Social Constructivism explains learning and knowing as a social process, situated in physical as well as socio-cultural context and distributed across person and tools (Vygotsky, 1987; Rogoff 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Bruner,1996; Brophy, 2002;). Learning also involves negotiating understanding through dialogue or discourse shared by two or more members of the community who are pursuing shared goals (Brophy, 2002). The basic tenets of socio-cultural approach are: (a) learners construct their own knowledge, participating in authentic activities and internalizing the tools of practices, (b) learners are reflective beings, they can think and reflect on their lived experiences, (c) Social interaction/ dialogue plays a crucial role in learning). This perspective focuses on learning as sense making rather than on the acquisition of rote knowledge that exists somewhere outside the learner. It expands the horizons of teaching learning process and stretches it

beyond content and curriculum transaction to establish a community of learner's who are engaged in process of knowledge construction.

Against the above backdrop the present study aims to design and implement Social Science lessons adopting the social constructivist approach to learning. The approach provides scope for using learner's funds of knowledge as resource in classroom discourses.

Methodology

Adopting an interpretative approach, the present study was designed as a descriptive research. The study was conducted in the class sixth of a Government Senior Secondary school situated in Sarojani Nagar, New Delhi. There were 35 students, including 26 boys and 9 girls in the class. Most of them belong to migrant families, migrated from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal states of India. Their parents are working as labourer working as daily basis, rickshaw puller, fourth class employ in MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) and other government institutes. They live in nearby areas. Most of them live in one room flats or *Jhuggi*.

The source of the data was participant observation. As a teacher-researcher, the researcher himself taught the class for a period of three months. The class was taught in the first semester of the session 2013-2013. All the classes were audio recorded. Later on data was transcribed and content analyzed. As a participant observer the researcher also kept field notes and reflective journal. For conducting this study, activities for teaching social and political life to class sixth students were designed and executed by the researcher. It was kept in mind while designing these activities that the knowledge and understanding about society that learners bring to the classroom must be acknowledged. This aspect of activity makes it authentic; similar to real world problems. The role of learner is envisioned as an active and reflective person acting within a certain context. The teacher, acting as guide and facilitator establishes situations that promote communications between students and student and teacher-student. These activities provide scope for interaction, participation and negotiation that helps in creating learning opportunities for exploiting the learner's funds of knowledge. All the audio recorded data transcribed and content analyzed. The field notes and reflective journal was used for the triangulation of the data. Following section presents the analysis of the activities that were carried out in social science classes with the above mentioned perspective.

Findings

Activity 1:

This activity aimed at discussing the concept of ‘Diversity’ and ‘Discrimination’. The overview of activity is as follows:

- A handout was distributed to the class. In the space provided in the handout, students were asked to mention their name, state, religion, language, food, festivals, dress and some specific cultural practices of their family. Some blank space was also provided so that they could fill any other relevant information about themselves. Once they finished working on their own handout, they were asked to share and discuss the details filled with their neighbours. This helped them to highlight and appreciate the similarities and differences in the content which they had mentioned.
- They were then divided into groups of five and asked to talk for three to five minutes on major forms of diversity.
- The forms of diversity that came up after discussion were written on the blackboard.
- Further discussion was generated around the issues that emerged.

The following forms of diversity came out during classroom discussion -Physical appearance (color, height etc), Region, Religion, Caste, Intelligence, Social Class, Gender and Language. Keeping in mind these forms of differences, it was discussed whether these forms of differences would enrich our feeling of living together or would create hindrance to it. They had classified these forms in two major categories. In first category, they mentioned region, language, food and dress, which they said contribute to enriching their routine experiences. They said that name, attire, food habits and language help to identify other peoples region, religion and caste. It enriches their experiences by introducing them to the diverse ways of dressing, eating habits and language. Although they said that this is their culture and it does not work as constrain in their interaction with others, yet, during discussion, many stereotype and prejudices of learners came up-

“Biharies eat rice only”

“He eats beaf”.

These kinds of stereotypes and prejudices are challenges for social cohesion. These points were taken into account and included in the classroom discussion. It is noteworthy, that issues/ stereotype would not have come to the fore if learners personal social experiences were not discussed in the class.

L: Sir, he is a Bihari

T: Okay. So your friend is from Bihar

L: (Laughs) yes sir. He speaks 'Bihari' and eats rice

T: But he is your friend. Are you not accepting him as a friend because he is Bihari?

L: No Sir, he is my friend

T: If that doesn't influence your relation with him then from where he comes and what he eats should not make a difference.

In the second category they had put religion, class, caste, intelligence and told that these forms of differences separate each other. During the discussion students affirmed that a person from one religion and caste does not want to interact with a person of other religion and caste; a person who belongs to high class and caste hates people of lower class. After discussion, students come to the point that this is not 'Diversity' but something else. Significant finding that emerged during discussion that caste and class were significant dimensions of differentiation. This was evident in the fact that most of the learners mentioned their caste and class in the untitled boxes. All the girls of the class mentioned their gender in the same box along with caste and class while none of the boys mentioned his gender.

During the class activity it was observed that a significant category of discrimination i.e., differently abled was missing. Therefore they were given a case that if a person who is 'visually challenged' is admitted to their class, how would he/she feel? How would they behave with them? As soon as this case was put before them their quick response was 'what would he do in our school?' This response showed that such kind of mindset is a challenge for inclusion. Taking this statement as a vantage point, a further discussion was encouraged. At the end of the discussion, learners themselves started empathized with their imaginary classmate. This activity not only brought out their understanding about social diversity and discrimination but also reflected their stereotypes and prejudice. In the present activity they, themselves came forth to discuss critical issues which impedes the social cohesion. The activity made them revisit their stereotype and reflect on their prejudice.

Activity 2:

Activity: Rural Economy

In order to understand whether the everyday classroom transactions and pedagogy provide any scope to integrate the essentials of learning to live together with the concepts taught in the classroom. The following set of hypothetical problems was given to the class and their responses on the same were sought.

The students were divided in groups of four. They were given a reflective exercise where they were supposed to plan economic activities for farmers who had already sown their crops for the season and had finished all tasks related to farming. The students were told that until harvesting, the villagers were facing the problem of seasonal unemployment. While planning the activities, they were guided to keep the following points in mind-

1. The task should generate monetary benefits for the farmers
2. All the villagers who are capable and willing to work should be included/employed in these activities in some way or the other
3. Through these activities some social cause or purpose should also be served. Along with this, the task should provide scope for people to nurture and develop-care, brotherhood and co-operation among each of them

The students were asked to present their individual ideas about the possible solutions and plan to the problem and suggested plan for farmers. Within the group, learners got the opportunity to not only present their ideas but also to debate whether the plans suggested were feasible and would generate optimum monetary returns. They tried to find the possible solutions to alleviate the problems of seasonal unemployment of farmers.

Students seemed keen and excited to work on the task as this activity provided them with scope to work in small groups. Further, they felt that the planning they were doing would be instrumental in providing employment to the unemployed villagers. They seemed to be driven by a sense of positive 'purpose' and saw themselves as thinking-contributing members of the society. They were also expected to present this to the entire class.

The solutions they shared clearly showed the clarity and insightfulness they had in understanding the problem. It is evident that the variety of suggestions and proposed economic activities thought out by the children were not restricted to the examples stated in their textbooks. This shows that while working in groups they go beyond the given information and put their ideas in a constructive way. During the observations, it was found that every group took time to arrive at a consensus. It is significant to note that none of the student showed a tendency to dominate the others while working in groups. Every

one gave space to other members of the group to express their idea. When one child shared his idea, everyone else in the group listened to the idea and commented on it and finally all the group member arrived at consensus regarding the most appropriate activity that they are going to present in the class. It is important to note that the children kept in mind the gender, the educational background and social status of people while allocating them work. It can be inferred from this tendency that for them these factors decide the occupational trajectory of individual. While conducting the discussions it was further probed as to why only women should make toys? Or why only the rich people should finance? Or why only the educated villagers should manage finances and accounts? What are the implications of these for long term planning?

This gave them a chance to come out of their comfort zones and think of a possible world that is free of biases and based on the principles of equality, fraternity and brotherhood.

Activity 3:

OUTLINE OF ACTIVITY:

- At the beginning of the class, a case vignette (from the book) was given to the class and the learners were asked to read it.
- When they had read it, the following questions were posed to them to generate discussion-
 1. What are the major issues discussed in the *Panchayat* (Local Municipal Government in Rural India) meeting?
 2. What could be the other issues that can be discussed in the *Panchayat*?
 3. How does *Panchayat* arrive at any decision?

These were only guiding question for the discussion.

It emerged during the discussion that learners knew that the *Panchayat* implements government plans such as preparing and repairing roads etc. Along with it, *Panchayat* also deals with people's personal matters such as land and property disputes, division of property and so forth. The focus of vignette and course content was to provide them with an idea that *Panchayat* works as local government. During the process the learners raised these significant aspects of *Panchayat*, themselves, showing that they observe and are aware of what goes around them. They may not be direct participants in the process but they are aware of these. Taking into account these points, they were asked to give some examples from their own lives where they had heard or seen any matter being addressed by the *Panchayat*. One student narrated his own experience to the class, which is as follows-

“Last year I went to my village. My uncle fought with my father and separated my family. My father went to the *sarpanch* and requested him to intervene and divide the property in a fair manner. Then they brought some of their other people along with them and fairly divide the property.”

When a learner was narrating the whole experience, he was not just describing a ‘case’ but also a personal life experience. This made the other learners in the class aware about the functioning and role of the Panchayat. Along with this they were also able to understand the turmoil a family goes through when people fight and separate. The entire class also learnt as to how his family no more includes his cousins; they have become ‘other’ for him and his family. This process of separation made his uncle’s family ‘other’ from his family.

It also emerged during the discussion that *Panchayat* takes decisions in consensus with all the members of the *Panchayat* and after listening to the arguments of both the sides. To elaborate it further and make the process of decision making more explicit, they were asked to highlight/hypothesize how the process of decision making would take place in a group? The learners came up with the following responses-

“Every person will express his view. While he/she is expressing his views everyone else would listen to her. They may agree or disagree. In case of a disagreement, they will argue it out within the group. Gradually, this process will move further and the group will eventually arrive at a final decision, possibly which suits all or most. In this process everyone’s voice(s) will be heard. Each idea is important. This whole decision making process looks at the welfare of the community as a whole and. It is kept in mind that the decision should not harm anyone. Through this process of reflection they came up with very relevant ideas. In the case vignette it was shown that all the villagers are present in *Panchayat* meeting but during the classroom discussion many students argued as followed-

“But everyone does not go in the Panchayat meeting, only ‘big shots’ are called and only they discuss during the meetings”

When probed as to whom do they consider ‘influential’? One of the learners said:

L1: Those who have lots of money, land and belong to upper caste)

T: But according to constitution everyone can participate in Panchayat meeting.

L2: No Sir, only influential people attend Panchayat, I have seen it.

T: Ok tell me, who puts forth the views of the people who do not attend the Panchayat. ;

(This was followed by a silence in the class)

T: (Don’t you think that if we have been given a right, then we should go and put forward our point)

The discussion was carried forward by probing further. During the discussion an effort was made that students reflect on these issues, critically. In this activity, it emerged that learners are aware of what is going on in the society. They knew the gaps between

what is 'actually' happening and what 'ought to' be happening. They were also open to revisit and challenge their existing notions and construct fresh notions that seemed more appropriate and progressive. It was hoped that in the light of their lived experiences and reality they would be enabled to think in a positive and critical manner. What also emerged through the classroom interaction was that the teacher's role was not cut short but he/she was allotted a key role in facilitating the teaching learning process. Teachers role is not only restricted to presenting the concepts but developing understanding and skills of critically reflecting on those concepts and connecting them with real issues; providing space for meaningful engagement and dialogue on social issues. While discussing those concepts she should help students understand the realities of societies by discussing the difference and diversity, there is a possibility to make them responsive human beings who accept multiple perspectives and people who are seen as others.

Discussion and Conclusion

It can be seen that in above mentioned narratives, the whole pedagogic practice begins with learners' understanding of society, moves further with critical reflection by problem posing and providing space for reconstruction of prior assumptions beliefs and ideas. Learner's engagement and ownership in classroom pedagogic processes, teachers modelling the culture of inquiry in classroom and importance of communication within the group can be easily seen as the crux of these activities. Rather than relying on teacher's unquestionable authority, students in these pedagogic settings propose and defend their own views. They also respond thoughtfully to views of others. This process leads them to be a member of the '*community of inquiry*' (Goss 2004). The whole class benefits from '*sum of cognition*' as when the class is divided into groups , a new social context was created, in which students get the opportunity to share individual cognition with their peers and arrive at conclusions based on the sum of those cognitions (Slavin, 1995). A new participant structure emerges in classroom where power and authority shift from teacher to the students. It has potential to change the relationship between teacher and learner, between learner and learner and learner and subject matter studied (Wertsch, 1998).

Students had developed ways of communicating, reasoning, and providing arguments to defend their ideas as they participate in and contribute to the norms and practices of their learning communities. It was found that learners were able to see themselves as question 'posers', decision makers and participants of democratic discussion where their views and ideas were heard.

Findings of the present study challenged the prevailing beliefs of social science teacher and showed that students are cognizant about the social issues such as class, caste, discrimination, poverty etc. The students studying in class six can also articulate their views on the various social issues. The new role of the learner as ‘negotiator between the self, the learning process and the object of learning showed that the learner is as much a contributor as a gainer in the learning process and thereby he/she learn in an independent way. However the study raises some questions concerning pedagogic practices of school social science i.e. who decides what is worth teaching? How teachers own biases and beliefs which is the product of his/her socio-cultural experiences influence the learning processes? How the enacted curriculum is different from envisioned curriculum? How to explicate the hidden fabric of learner’s socialization which impedes the very essential value of social cohesion? These questions must be taken into account while designing pedagogic setting for teaching Social Science at school level. Issues related to class, caste, gender poverty and power need to bring to forefront of the classroom.

A social science teacher who utilizes learners ‘funds of knowledge’ will be able to transform the classroom in such a way where multiple facets of social reality is contested and this contestation will further contribute in propagating learners critical literacy. Using learner’s ‘fund of knowledge’ for teaching social science will contribute in developing critical literacy and further will equip learner to appreciate pluralism, consider diversity as an asset, and take a informed position regarding critical social issues.

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