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Children's Experiences in School

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Abstract:

Backed by secondary researches, the paper aims to look into the children's inner experiences at school. There seems to be a dearth of researches where children's voices are being heard and where their perceptions are taken into consideration. This is an attempt to bring together some of the available works to explore children's experiences in school. However, when it comes to children, the terms 'education' and 'schooling' comes quite readily. It seems important to also study these two notions so as to discern significant differences between the two. The two terms apparently have wide connotations and are defined differently by Indian and Western philosophers and thinkers. Gradually moving towards the children's experiences in school, emotions surfaced out as an important factor.

Keywords: children, school, education, children's experiences, school experiences

1. Introduction

George Eliot (1868) brought out the concept of childhood beautifully by saying, "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had no childhood in it" (p. 42). Childhood is cherished everywhere. Children have a special place in all cultures and traditions of the world. Legal definitions of childhood have also emerged over time. Article 1 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines child as 'any person under the age of eighteen' (CHETNA, 2008). The well-being of children found formal expression in the constitution of India when it became operational in 1950. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has also provided a subsequent focus on listening to the views of the child and has devised rights keeping into consideration the "best interests of the child".

For a child to develop healthy and happy, the immediate environment plays a considerable role (Maggu & Kapoor, 2015). Pianta & Walsh's (1996) Contextual Systems Model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory also talked about the importance of contexts in positive child's development. O'Connor & McCartney (2007) said that "the Contextual Systems Model (CSM) was designed to explain the experiences of children in school, is a good example of an ecological-contextual model of development" (p. 341). As also according to Postman (1994), Childhood is analogous to language learning. It has a biological basis but can be realized by the triggers of social environment. The contexts, therefore, has an important role to play. Considering how important the role of immediate environment is in the emotional development of the child, the role of schools and adults therefore cannot be ignored. A large part of childhood is spent in school. Therefore, there seems to be an urgent need to explore children's experiences in school.

Education is considered to be of utmost importance to children. For education, school seems to be the only resort. The paper below also talks about these two notions and how the two concepts evolved over time. However, when it comes to school, teachers seem to be a significant adult in the child's life. Much of the children's experiences in school revolve around teachers and friends. With humans, relationships do play an important role, thus the consideration of emotions. Today parents worry over finding an appropriate school for their child, one which will aid quality education. Are emotions also considered during the search for schools?

2. The Concept of Education

Dhiman (1987) presented two views of education: according to one view, 'education' has been derived from the Latin word 'educare' which means 'to bring up' or 'to raise'. According to this view, education is a process of imparting to an individual certain information and knowledge which society deems necessary. Thus, education is a process of external imposition rather than growth from within. This derivation gives us the concept of teacher-centered rather than child-centered education. The second view, however, talks about education being inherent in the child, which needs to be drawn out. According to this view, the term 'education' is derived from the Latin word 'educere' which means to 'lead out' or to 'draw out'. Thus, the term education is meant such wherein the external imposition is not made but the internal and inherent capacities are drawn out and finished. It is the process of 'drawing out from within' rather than 'imposing from without'. This had also been the view presented by Mahatma Gandhi to the world. Education, from this point of view, is considered as a process of the development of what is innate in the child. This explanation presumes that all

knowledge is inherent in children. Later, it was discussed that the two view points of education discussed cannot be isolated from each other.

“The words ‘Shiksha’ and ‘Vidya’ are the Indian synonyms of education. Shiksha is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘Shas’ which means ‘to discipline’, ‘to control’, ‘to instruct’ or ‘to teach’. Similarly, the word Vidya is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root ‘Vid’ which means ‘to know’. Thus, it refers to acquisition of knowledge” (Dhiman, 1987, p. 5). Hence, disciplining the mind and acquisition of knowledge has always been the dominant theme in Indian approach to understanding education.

Education, according to Reimer (1971) should be such that invokes freedom and justice making individuals independent. According to Mackenzie (1970), “Education, which should be a nourishing thing providing growth, is anything but that. It is a narrow thing, restricting growth. It is restricted in being largely confined to the severely intellectual, shutting out the sensuous side of things, denying the child’s right to experience. And even within its own sphere, the intellectual, it denies freedom of thinking” (p. 62). The term education, thus, has wide connotations and has been defined differently by Indian and Western philosophers and thinkers. However, the term is now frequently associated with schooling. In this context, Johnston (1998) said, “If education is considered as schooling it means that the child is educated only for five or six hours a day and not for the remaining time. Again, this means that he is educated only for six days a week and not on Sundays and other holidays. Perhaps he is educated more when he sees movies, listens to radio, and chats with friends and members of his family” (p. 12).

3. The Notion of Schooling

Schools have been considered as an indispensable institution in any society. School is viewed as an educational institution- an institution wherein instruction is provided; or as an activity or a process of learning under instruction. The concept of schooling has evolved over the years. The main purpose of school has been ‘to educate’ which was made available majorly to the elite groups in the society who could afford to pay for the services rendered by the institution called schools. Later in India, with the efforts of several freedom fighters and revolutionists, various efforts were taken to mandate education so as to make it available to the common masses. However, many people may accord different meanings to the term ‘school’. It may be different for those who proposed the ideology into the society. The meaning may be different for those who have had first hand experiences in the school and the meaning of the school would have been, yet, different for those who dropped out or were pushed out from this institution. “What conceptions the school holds in society also play an important role in determining its indispensable role for the present and for future generations as well. How a society cares for its children and designs its schools, becomes an essential consideration” (Young & Kaplan, 1990, p. 4). The meaning or purpose of the word school is often confused between education and instruction. The two terms are often used as synonyms when explained in the context of school. However, there exists a vast discrepancy between the meanings of these two words. Postman (1994) represented schools as public institutions that lay important differences between childhood and adulthood and that adults have things of value to teach. But the authority of schools is declining and educators are confused about what they are expected to do with children.

Johnston (1998) presented the difference between the term schooling and learning: “schooling involves formally training a person on how to conduct him/her in the place called school. Learning on the other hand, is a highly personal process by which the learner develops the ability to function in the world using his/her unique personalized abilities for doing so” (p. 8). However in concerns with education and instruction, the term education should also not be confused with the day-to-day teaching of lessons in school. This process of imparting knowledge and skills in the classroom or laboratory is called instruction, and not education. Since, instruction implies external imposition and education implies growth from within, instruction was said to be one of the many components of education and not education itself (Dhiman, 1987).

In present days, for the purpose of making education available to common masses, there exist schools of different kinds and at different levels. The schools may vary in the context of environment, facilities, and teachers. The main purpose of all schools is to make children learn, which is achieved through different means and by practicing different manners and styles of teaching. No doubt, the environments of the schools may differ from each other in various respects.

4. Emotions in Children

The term ‘Emotion’ is derived from the Latin word ‘emovere’, e- (variant of ex-) ‘out’ + movere ‘move’ i.e. to move out, to remove, to take out and from the French word ‘émouvoir’, meaning “to stir up”. According to Misra (2011), emotions have positive or negative quality, invite cognitive appraisal, involve bodily responses-may be internal (changes in heart rate, blood pressure, or respiration) or external responses (facial expressions) which can vary in intensity. Indeed, emotion is multifaceted and not a unitary phenomenon. Since the feelings are verbalized, the words mediate the regulation of emotions.

Sutton (2004) brought out the importance of the three fundamental classes of mental operations: cognition, motivation and emotions. However, out of the three, emotions seem to have been highly ignored as there is very limited literature available. Johnston (1998) stated that “the brain also employs its affective, emotive sensors to the learning process” (p. 22). Eynde, Corte, & Verschaffel (2006) also pointed out the close interactions between cognitive, conative and affective factors in students’ learning and problem solving.

Schutz & Pekrun (2007) mentioned that academic emotions are part of everyday school life. Sutton (2004) also mentioned that emotions form as an essential part of a productive adult life and important in understanding the goals one attain. Holt (1964) described six main achievement related emotions; hope and joy are referred to as positive academic emotions and anxiety, anger, boredom and hopelessness are among the negative academic emotions. Out of the six emotions mentioned, only two are defined as positive emotions lest are stated negative. Schutz & Pekrun (2007) further explained that specific features of classroom and social environments contribute to the development of academic emotions and that emotions influence students’ learning and achievement as

well as teachers' instructional behaviour and professional development. Emotions have surfaced as an important contributing factor to the success of both students and teachers in academic settings. Considering the importance of education, it is crucial to not only understand the causes or antecedents of emotional events and how these affect classroom transactions, but also to better understand how these events influence students' and teachers' success in the classroom. They further brought out the definition of achievement emotions as:

"...one tied directly to achievement activities or achievement outcomes. Achievement can be defined simply as the qualities of activities or their outcomes as evaluated by some standard of excellence, most emotions pertaining to students' academic learning and achievement are seen as achievement emotions, not all of the emotions in educational settings are achievement emotions. Specifically, social emotions are frequently experienced in these same settings, as for example, a student's caring for a friend in the classroom. Achievement and Social emotions can overlap, as in emotions directed towards the achievement of others (e.g. contempt, envy, empathy) or admiration instigated by the success or failure of others. Examples of outcome related achievement emotions are the joy and pride experienced by students when academic goals are met, and the frustration and shame when efforts fail. The excitement arising from learning, boredom experienced in classroom instruction, or anger about task demands are but a few examples of activity-related emotions" (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007, p. 15).

Meyer & Turner (2002) through their research concluded that emotion is an essential part of studying motivation in classroom interactions and illustrated the importance of students' and teachers' emotions during instructional interactions. Emotions are intertwined in teachers' instructional responses and students' beliefs and actions, constituting an integral part of the interpersonal processes that create classroom contexts. Valiente, Swanson & Eisenberg (2012) also postulated that emotions matter to academics. However, to substantially advance our understanding of school readiness and academic achievement, it is imperative to integrate the two aspects, as mentioned above, Cognition and Emotion. Various researches have shown how emotionally positive and stress free environments results in higher levels of academic achievement and socio-emotional well being. Sylwester (1994) pointed out how emotions are important in education as it drives attention, which in turn drives learning and memory.

Biesta (2014) called education a beautiful risk and explained that "...the risk is not that teachers might fail because they are sufficiently qualified. The risk is not that education might fail because it is not significantly based on scientific evidence. The risk is not that students might fail because they are not working hard or are lacking motivation. The risk is there because education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility" (p. 1). With humans, emotions play an imperative role.

As far as the conceptualization of development in children is concerned, different domains and the various faculties of the brain are involved. Emotional development as an important domain involves awareness of one's emotional states; identification of emotions experienced and expressed by others; empathic sensitivity to other's emotional experiences, coping adaptively with negative emotions. The ability to control one's emotions is a key dimension of development which may involve certain cognitive strategies. This may develop over age. Parents and caregivers, however, play an important role in supporting children's emotional development. However, when it is about the discourse of emotional well being, teachers and friends have an imperative role to play.

5. Experiences in School

Holt (1964) gave the definition of school from the child's perspective: "school feels like this to children: it is a place where they make you go and where they tell you to do things and where they try to make your life unpleasant if you don't do them or don't do them right. For children, the central business of school is not learning, whatever this vague word means; it is getting these daily tasks done, or at least out of the way, with a minimum of effort and unpleasantness. Each task is an end in itself" (p.38). Whereas, what one should actually aim for is the child's emotional well being. As Hastings (2006) pointed out, "...having a healthy, happy classroom is in everyone's interest" (p. 1). As also mentioned in the document earlier, contexts have an important role to play. And since children spend the majority of their time in school, experiences at school are powerful enough to either strengthen or weaken their learning.

Biesta (2014) advocated John Dewey's theory of dialogical communication and considered it as playing an important role in education, and cited him in this regard, "Of all affairs, Communication is the most wonderful" (p. 25). The quality of relationships in school can be maintained through constant communication. The child communicates interpersonally with the teachers about the subject being taught and about other general things in the class. There does exist yet another type of communication which we call intrapersonal wherein the child communicates within (Maggu & Kapoor, 2015). In the old days, a quiet school was considered to be a good school. Creative work and scope were of less importance than giving the authorities the comfortable feeling that everything was under control. There were neat rows of desks, each box-like classroom quiet. The principle quality looked for in teachers was that they should be 'good disciplinarians'. This was the main function of schools – keeping pupils quiet and in order (Mackenzie, 1970). Thus, in the pursuit of maintaining discipline, the child is often rendered silent and immobile. This notion of discipline allowed teachers to practice violence on children. Even with the governmental rule that says corporal punishment is banned, it is still a sad fact of school life. Mackenzie (1970) talked about the law which he tried to enforce, that a teacher should be in loco parentis suggesting that a teacher should treat his pupils as he would treat his own son which didn't work and the corporal punishment was brought back into practice in their school (p.125).

Ballal (2010) pointed out in a newspaper article, "Isn't it time our teachers got a little more creative to control the class instead of resorting to the cane?" She reported Dr. Helen Williams saying, "When we beat children as a form of discipline, we may well be teaching them that it is okay to hit someone. That people can dominate you. That one has to do what one is told and not think for

oneself and that it is okay to act in anger. Isn't beating a child an example of a teacher who has literally given up on all other means of educating a child? Children at this age like going to school not because they love maths or geography but because their teachers teaches well and they like her". It is however important for a child to feel safe and secure at school. As Russell (2010) said,

"Physical Punishment I believe to be never right. In mild forms it does little harm, though no good, in severe forms. I am convinced that it generates cruelty and brutality. It's time that it often produces no resentments against the person who inflicts it; where it is customary boys adapt themselves to it, and expect it as a part of the course of nature. But it accustoms them to the idea that it may be right and proper to inflict physical pain for the purpose of maintaining authority – a peculiarly dangerous lesson to teach to those who are likely to require position of power. And it destroys the relation of open confidence which ought to exist between parents and children, as well as, between teachers and pupils" (p. 110).

Friere (1972) argued that education is suffering from narration sickness which accords students simply as listening objects and through which reality or knowledge about real things is hampered which may make the children feel bore, dull and thus inattentive in the classroom and therefore can contribute to be one of the major reasons for children not liking their schools. Holt (1964) said that, "they went on daydreaming, no matter how often they got caught and embarrassed doing it, because the class, despite our efforts to make it interesting and safe, was a boring, confusing, and dangerous place, from which they could and daydreaming was the only way to escape" (p.33). He also argued success and failure as adult ideas imposed on children. The two ideas that go together are the opposite sides of the same coin. He mentioned how a love of succeeding cannot be generated without giving them an equal dread of failing. He also raised an interesting question to his children in school, "what goes through your mind, when the teacher asks you a question and you don't know the answer?..They all began to clamor, and all said the same thing, that when the teacher asked them a question and they didn't know the answer they were scared half to death. They said they were afraid of failing, afraid of being kept back, afraid of being called stupid, afraid of feeling themselves stupid" (pp. 69-71). How tragic does this seem to be! Next, schools often accord high importance to the tests and examinations. Scoring good marks is very important than anything else in school. During unit tests, it has been observed that children are asked to make a physical demarcation (more often, with a book) to ensure that there is no scope of communication possible.

A newspaper article "NCERT studies mood of school kids in city" discussed a research study by Sibia (2009) about students' perception of their emotions in learning. Sibia found that there were more positive emotional expressions than negative ones. However, she said negative emotion was more in higher classes like IX and XI. It was also seen that boys gave more negative emotion than girls. Students also wrote about how punishment of a classmate had a ripple effect on them. These responses show that a lot of time was spent dealing with shame rather than participating in the learning process (Times of India, 5th December, 2009, p. 3).

6. Conclusion

Johnston (1998) presented the two agendas: the teacher's agenda to school the child and develops a student, and the child's agenda to thrive in the school environment and learn about the world around her. The child can easily become confused by the expectations of the first and the desires of the second. This scenario is played out over and over again, classroom after classroom (p.11). Thus, an emotionally safe classroom environment is necessary for the child's cognitive learning, growth, and creative expression. Happy classrooms, therefore, should be the most desirable and realized goal of a teacher. An environment which is restrictive and does not permit child's exploration of place and freedom of speech will make schooling an emotional turmoil for the children (Maggu & Kapoor, 2015). It seems imperative for the children to have positive perceptions about school as only then will they be able to experience the joy of being at school. For children to perceive positively, school experiences should be such that children feel good and are happy at school.

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