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Changing Perceptions about Children: Challenges for Primary Teachers

Dr. Bharti Dogra*

Abstract

Development of the child is not only a precondition but also a product of education. Recently, human development has taken a turn towards a more “first-person” point of view, i.e. how the world appears to children themselves, a view that allows us to accept that children are not ‘blank slates’ or ‘empty vessels’ and they too have an understanding of their physical, biological as well as social worlds. Older terminologies related to children like “skills”, “abilities”, “potentials” cannot define the actual beliefs, intentions, understandings and misunderstandings of the children. The pedagogy of child learning today is based on the latter. This new approach about children’s knowledge requires not only a new pedagogy but a new perception about the classrooms as well. Classrooms are not places where information is transmitted by an authoritative teacher to children but rather they are places where children collaborate and form communities of learners. Teachers’ role becomes highly challenging in such circumstances. This paper discusses various adjustments required on the part of the primary teachers in the light of changing perceptions about children’s knowledge, learning theories, pedagogy, designing activities and catering to individual differences.

Introduction

Primary education needs a complete revamping in the light of the human development studies. All educational practices are rooted in a set of beliefs about the minds of children. Earlier educational practices were also based on certain assumptions. Educational

practices are constantly reviewed and reconsidered for the welfare of the children. Any type of teaching-learning approach is based on certain beliefs about the learner like collaboration is based on a belief 'learner as a collaborative thinker'. Teachers too have certain personal theories related to

* Reader, School of Education (SOE), IGNOU, New Delhi.

learners. For understanding and enhancing educational practices at primary stage, models of the child's mind must be considered in tandem with a model of the teacher's theory of children, and their minds and learning skills, and how this affects their choice of pedagogic method. This paper discusses various adjustments required on the part of the primary teachers in the light of changing perceptions about children's knowledge, learning theories, pedagogy, designing activities and catering to individual differences. This paper will help primary teachers as well as educators in better understanding of primary children as well as educational interventions required at this age.

Seeing Children as Thinkers

The notions about nature of children's mind have changed. Children are not seen as 'doers' or 'knowers' but as 'thinkers'. Children, like adults, are now seen as constructing a model of the world to help them in making sense of their experiences. Children just like adults have their own point of view and they must be encouraged to recognize their own point of view. Children must also be helped to recognize that others too have their own point of view which may or may not match with their point of view. These different views are based on recognizable different reasons which may have their origin in different beliefs. Sometimes I may be wrong, sometimes others may be wrong, and at times both

of us may be right. Reasoning plays a very important role in proving a view right or wrong. Children can also reason out, can make sense on their own or through discourse with others. Children too can think about their own thinking and can make corrections in their ideas or notions through reflection. Piaget took the first step in seeing children as epistemologists; a slight transition now is that children can see themselves as epistemologists.

So, children hold theories about the world, about the mind and also how it works. The harmony between the theories held by children and those held by parents and teachers is possible not through imitation, and not through didactic instruction but by discourse, collaboration and negotiation. Knowledge is, what is shared within discourse (Feldman, 1991), within a 'textual' community (Stock, 1983), or within a paradigm (Kuhn, 1962).

What is Knowledge?

The earlier theories in the history of epistemology emphasized on absolute or permanent nature of knowledge (absolutism) whereas the recent theories put the emphasis on its relativity or situation dependence (relativism) which in other words its continuous development or evolution and its active interference with the world and its subjects and objects. According to Heylighen (1993), the whole trend moves from a static, passive view of knowledge towards a more and more adaptive and active one.

Constructivism is an epistemology in which knowledge is seen as Relativistic (nothing is absolute, but varies according to time and space) and Fallibilist (nothing can be taken for granted). Constructivism rejects the traditional philosophic position of realism and adopts a relativist position.

Another important issue is where do you get this knowledge from? When children enter a school, they assume that the teacher has knowledge which she will pass on to the class. Then when they interact with others, they realize that others too possess knowledge, and this knowledge can be shared. So, knowledge exists in the group but inertly. What about group discussion as a way of creating knowledge rather than merely finding who has what knowledge? (Brown and Campione, 1990)

Personal Beliefs and Theories of Primary Teachers

Teaching is based on the beliefs, values and personal theories of teachers. During their school days, the teachers may have experienced educational settings which reinforce the notion that learning means knowing the right answer. Their classroom experiences could be characterised by the use of worksheets, and other product oriented forms of assessment, an emphasis on external forms of motivation such as grades, and other strategies to control their behaviour. They may not have experienced classrooms where they were encouraged to solve their own

problems, develop their own questions and search for answers, or use critical analysis and reflection to develop their own ideas about issues. Research suggests that teacher beliefs and reflections are important drivers of classroom practices and thus must be considered to understand any changes in practice (Peterson, Fennema, Carpenter, and Loef, 1989). Beliefs act as the theories that guide actions, and reflections allow on examination of those actions in terms of one's beliefs, thereby promoting necessary modifications in either actions or beliefs.

If children are seen as 'thinkers' then teachers too need to see children as 'thinkers'. Teachers need to understand what children think, and how they arrive at what they believe in. The teachers' pedagogy should be such that it helps children to understand their learning as well as thinking. A careful, supporting and sensitive classroom environment can help children to understand their interests, inclinations and orientations. Claxton and Carr (2004) suggest that adults should at the very least create environments that are 'affording', i.e. provide opportunities for children's active engagement. Better still is an 'inviting' environment which highlights clearly what is valued and gives some guidance to the child. Best of all is what they call a 'potentiating' context, which stretches and develops young children. They argue that potentiating environments involve frequent participation in shared activity.

Classroom Pedagogy

Classroom pedagogy is based on treating children as human equals, providing them a sense of inner satisfaction and success so that they move beyond extrinsic rewards. The classroom pedagogy for early childhood education must provide children:

- *Opportunities to interact and collaborate:* Learning happens when children share ideas, listen to others' views, fearlessly criticize others, observe others, test ideas, watch others and collaborate. The interaction with caring teachers creates a sense of security in children and they feel confident to take challenges in their learning. When children interact with their peers then they challenge each other and thereby expand their thinking. Collaboration is the vehicle for enriched learning. Let them have a discussion on junk food vs healthy food. Let them share their experiences.
- *Recognising children's powers of thinking:* Children can think and can make meaning. They are curious by nature and want to find out about the world. They can learn on their own. They require a responsive and challenging environment for their learning. Teachers are active researchers. What is the role of the teacher? The teacher has more experience than the children. Therefore, teacher can extend their thinking by co-creating

experiences through observation, listening and opportunities to ask questions. The teachers' own questions and investigations of learning are valued. The learning of the children is based on their previous knowledge; therefore the learning of the children must be recorded by teachers by clicking photographs, recording videos, note taking and maintaining entries in the reflective diaries. In reflective diaries teachers can record interactions of children with the environment as well as adults like teachers. Such kind of methodology helps in studying the process of learning, reflecting upon it and if required then new ideas can be used for adding variety or complexity to renew the whole experience.

- *Providing direct experiences:* Young children are always engaged in activities like moving, listening, manipulating objects etc. These self-initiated activities help them in learning concepts and they create their own symbols or abstractions. For helping children in making sense of the world around them, they should be provided direct experiences to interact with people, objects, ideas and events. Why is it required? It is required to initiate and promote their thinking which helps in their development. Children observe natural objects (wool, cotton, soil, water, plants, rock pieces etc.) as well as manmade materials (nylon, plastic etc.),

household objects, toys, equipment, and tools in their surroundings. Children manipulate these objects by using their sense organs as well as body which helps in active learning. Acting on objects initiates thinking. Such concrete experiences with real objects provide basis for the formation of abstract concepts. "Children perform real actions on materials which form the learning base, actions as concrete and direct as the materials can be made to allow." (Flavel, 1963, p. 367).

Role of the Primary Teachers

Teachers create a safe and conducive environment for the children. Teacher is a researcher and works in collaboration with children. Both children and teachers co-construct knowledge. Children work in collaboration with adults as well as peers. The role of the teacher is to be with them, support them and to be sensitive to their needs. Teacher acts as a participant observer. Designing learning experiences, keeping in mind the interests and needs of learners, triggers the learning process of children. This process of learning is a continuous process. Researchers Mark Lepper and Melinda Hodell identified four essential requirements if children are to have intrinsic motivation. These requirements are challenge, curiosity, control and fantasy. Teachers can motivate children by:

- *Designing challenging activities:* The task for the teacher is to design

a range of activities that are far enough within the comfort zone to make the child feel competent, yet far enough outside the comfort zone to challenge her to achieve more. The level of challenge has to be high enough that she is motivated to achieve the task, but the task must not be too difficult, or it will fail to engage her and may diminish her self-motivation.

- *Arousing curiosity:* In order to evoke strong curiosity, children need to undertake activities that challenge their current level of understanding. If an activity challenges the child's sense of equilibrium he will be prompted to fully engage in learning to resolve the discrepancy. Again, the level of challenge must be appropriate, as a large discrepancy between what the child understands already and what is presented through the activity will be likely to discourage him from engaging fully in the task.
- *Control:* Children need to have shared ownership of the curriculum and be free to make choices in their learning in order to become fully engaged in learning.
- *Fantasy:* Through fantasy and play, children have the opportunity to explore issues and emotions, which in turn can lead to increased intrinsic motivation.

Summing Up

There is a shift in models of child's mind from passive listeners or blank slates

to competent thinkers. Children can reason out, can make sense on their own or through discourse. Children can see themselves as 'epistemologists'. There is a shift from static or passive view of knowledge towards a more and more adaptive and active view of knowledge. Knowledge can be gained from group members by collaboration. Primary teachers should be aware of

the present model of child's mind as well as shift in theories of knowledge. Primary teachers must examine their personal theories related to learner as well as learning tasks and reflect on them. The pedagogic choices must be based on model of child's mind, learning skills and theories of knowledge for effective and safe educational practices at primary stage.

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