

LEARNERS' PERCEPTION REGARDING HISTORY SUBJECT AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This research paper emerged on the basis of the pedagogical observations and interactions with school students as part of the internship program of final year students of a pre-service teacher education course. There seemed to be a huge lag in terms of the theoretical pedagogical concepts with which the interns were engaging at college and the pedagogy in practice which were being observed at the school level. Moreover, there has always been a biased perception that existed with Social Science as a subject in general, and History in particular. This study is an attempt to address these biases, understand the perception of elementary school going students towards History as a subject, provides an insight on the learners' historical understanding or their lack of it, and to know their opinion about the relevance of the subject at school and its future scopes.

Keywords: History pedagogy, school education, historical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Social Science helps build understanding of diverse cultures and perspectives in learners. It encourages rational thinking, skills of analysis and interpretation, and so on. It has become important to know the learner's view in this changing world where more importance is given to teaching Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) to prepare younger students for the technological world. History is introduced at elementary school level so there is a need to know the progress of learners as envisioned by the various curriculum framers. This research study is conducted to know better the perception of elementary school going students towards History as a subject, to address biases regarding the subject if any, provides an insight on the learners' historical understanding or their lack of it, and to know their opinion about the relevance of the subject at school and its future scope.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The existing belief is that Social Science mainly transmits information and the focus is mainly on the textbook which is required to be memorized for examination. In a similar regard, the subject History is viewed as providing unnecessary details about the 'pasts' and also doesn't provide desirable job options ahead. It is perceived as a non-utilitarian and boring subject to study (NCERT, 2006a). But in reality, the nature of History is completely different. On the contrary, it is however a dialogue between the events of the pasts and progressively emerging future ends. The historian's interpretation of the 'pasts', selection of the significant and the relevant events, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals. The selected

happenings are not to be merely narrated; instead, the causal relationships between them are to be analysed and interpreted based on evidence. Learners have to develop connections between processes and events of one place with another, understand interlinkages of different groups and societies, and the overall impact of historical processes in the contemporary world. Kumar (2001) describes how tacit knowledge about the history of family and community is learnt by children during early socialization which is not open to rational enquiry or questioning. Instead, the teaching of history should focus on developing historical thinking by understanding the job of a historian, basic ability to make sense of a text and a clear understanding of the timeframe and perspective, and examining events without being guided by the outcome.

In a foreword given at the start of History school textbook, it tries to address the question of 'Why study History?' It states how the subject is related to economics, social, political and cultural discussion and inquiry related to the past events and the changes therein (NCERT, 2006b). The gradual transformation of human societies and its strong impact in retrospect so that we can begin to see how and why these changes occurred. This enables us to develop important skills such as the ability to analyse and explain problems in the past, it positions us to see patterns that might otherwise be invisible in the present – thus providing a crucial perspective for understanding and analysing the problems that persist in the society. Andrews & Burke (2007) describes the 'five Cs of historical thinking' which they have applied to interpreting and critically challenging evidence-based learning of the 'pasts'. The five Cs would be studying concepts in History through the lens of Change over time, Context, Causality, Contingency and Complexity.

Another important objective of the study of the subject is to develop historical thinking through analysing and interpreting various primary sources; developing relationships between historical evidence and the construction of accounts involving multiple perspectives (Barton & Levstik, 2010). This would help the learners to develop investigative and collaborative skills which are essential for democratic participation. Thus, developing historical thinking in the learners helps them to develop skills which transforms them in an effective citizen of a pluralist participatory democracy. They would build the required skills to evaluate information grounded in evidence. Though there is no guarantee that all learners will develop into effective citizens, it does guarantee they will have taken part in some of its key activities.

The pedagogy considerations is the most crucial step for teaching and learning of any subject and for this the relevant activities and learning materials should be used in the classroom to make the experience interactive and meaningful. Grant and VanSledright (2014) emphasized on the importance of cooperative learning in the classroom as it benefits both types of students; those who learn slowly and those who are fast learners. The curriculum materials could include textbooks, newspapers, blogs, autobiographies, biographies, fictional narratives, children's literature, maps, video resources, to name a few. Practices like imparting factual information actually delay the development of historical thinking as it presents a fixed notion of the past which is to be rote memorized. Instead, the classroom should foster the practice of engaging with sources, investigative study of the pasts, question and debate backed by evidence, and provide logical interpretations. This way they are engaged in the activity because they own the process and the product of reconstructing their own histories (VanSledright, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research of the study has been done in 3 phases. The first phase involved classroom observations of a Sarvodaya Bal Vidhyalaya situated in South Delhi. The interns did both participant and non-participant observations of social science classes at the elementary level. In participant observation, interns were the facilitators conducting the class over a period of three months. Non-participant observations were done when they observed social science classes of the school teachers over a period of two weeks.

In the second phase, interns conducted Group Discussions (GD) with a set of 4 questions to know the overall understanding and participation of learners. These discussions were held separately with learners of grades VI, VII and VIII. Each grade had two sections each so a total of six groups were there. The total number of students who participated in the GD is 162 students.

In the third phase, a questionnaire was designed based on classroom observations and group discussions. The questionnaire had document-based questions having excerpts and pictures. The excerpt was adapted from Eklavya Social Science Textbook, Class 6, Chapter 4 सबसे पुराने शहर -सिंधु- घाटी के शहर and the pictures were sourced from Eklavya Social Science Textbook, Class 6, Chapter 1 शिकारी मानव. A total of 18 students from the three grades filled the questionnaire. Based on the reading of the excerpt and interpretation of the visual, a list of questions was framed.

RESULTS

Learners acknowledged that they want to study the subject but they were not able to think of any pedagogical approaches that were used by their subject teachers. Rather than focusing on the pedagogical experiences, learners were reflecting on the topics which they found interesting in the class. Learners were found to hold the notion that History as a subject only transmits information. They had issues with the long chapters which were information laden and the focus during examinations to write long answers. The teacher seems to be providing all the information by making short notes which learners have to memorize for the examinations. This need to memorize for the exams made it a tedious task for the students and hence they were not able to develop interest for the subject.

After reading the excerpt learners were able to answer the questions which were directly given from the text like, खुदाई करने पर क्या-क्या चीजें मिली? It was a direct question that was given so that the majority of the learners could be able to list down the materials. Learners have much practice writing such questions where they have to copy the text from the passage or excerpt provided. For the understanding-based questions, learners were not able to interpret and hence faced difficulty in listing down the sources of historical information. This was a clear reflection that they were not familiar with source-based study of History despite this being an important aspect of the textbooks which they are engaging with. Most of the students were able to identify the historical events and processes that still continue in present times. But only a few of them are able to make interconnections between these events, processes, and lives of people at different time periods. For instance, they were able to identify the trading system, issues of gender and caste discrimination but only a few of them were able to explain the changes and continuities over time.

Learners were not able to think historically before stating a reason. They were able to focus more on the consequences and not from a historical perspective. For the question, क्या उनको खुद से खुदाई कर लेनी चाहिए

थी, learners were actually considering only one perspective at a time, like the consequence of digging it themselves could be dangerous to them or they may find some kind of treasure. But they were not able to think historically or consider that any lay person digging an archaeological site does not have the expertise and could destroy any kind of evidence. It is mainly because they were not aware the work of an archaeologist nor the right process of excavating a historical site so that there is no distortion of evidence.

On the query regarding relevance of the subject, learners gave responses that studying History helped them understand the past and taught them to learn from mistakes of the past. A couple of them stated that the subject taught them about the freedom struggle and helps build nationalism in learners. Regarding future scope of the subject, many learners gave common responses like historians, archaeologists, teachers and civil services. A couple of them gave different responses like architecture, heritage guides and museum curators, supporting their responses with reasons. Though a certain awareness is seen regarding the subject, much needs to be done to build interest and career opportunities that can be available post the study of the subject.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, we can see that the school teachers were mainly focused on completion of the syllabus and heavily relied on imparting the textbook content to the learners. The textbook should not be treated as the only learning material, rather it should be seen as one of the many materials to be used in the class for developing learners' understanding. Not doing so produces the impression that the subject is textbook centred and needs reproducing the same in the examination. It is also important to reinstate the importance of the subject by not only highlighting their increasing relevance in the service sector, but also by pointing to their indispensability in laying the foundations of an analytical and creative mind.

Developing historical thinking in learners helps them to understand how history is reconstructed based on evidence and it is not about memorizing facts. Learners seem to be clueless as school teachers never focussed on involving them with the investigation and interpretation of primary sources. Classroom activities did not involve perspective building, interpretation, discussion or inquiry; instead, it is heavily teacher centred and lecture based. In order to make the process of learning participatory, there is a need to shift from mere imparting of information to involvement in debate and discussion. There is need to emphasize on conceptual understanding along with skills and values; interventions in pedagogy such as investigative and interpretative activities of primary sources discussion on considering multiple perspectives so that history does not become a myth for them; providing opportunities in the class space to describe, analyse, evaluate, and construct diverse interpretations of the past; and the relevance of context in writing and understanding of the 'pasts'.

The process of assessment needs to be revised with interventions such as the practice of investigating the past through source work. Students can be accustomed to the practice of document-based questions wherein a text, chart, graphs, maps, pictures can be given followed by interpretive questions. These would provide for both assessment of learners' substantive knowledge and also focus on building certain skills such as to question and interpret, challenge their notions regarding the subject that it needs memorization, help make the subject seem more meaningful and interesting.

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