



SELECTION AND ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN A SOCIAL SCIENCE CLASSROOM

Mansi Aneja

Assistant Professor, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

Abstract

The paper raises some pertinent questions in the selection and transaction of social science curriculum at the level of school. Who gets the opportunity to select the curriculum and the mechanisms through which it operates is being discussed with the help of observations of social science classes in a private school of Delhi. The observations yielded interesting insights into teachers' authority and curriculum transaction in a classroom discourse.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Introduction

The given paper seeks to explore what and how knowledge is constituted and function in a classroom (especially in Social science), and the processes by which it is taught and learnt. An attempt has been made to contextualize theoretical understanding of curriculum with its praxis by linking and critiquing the readings that the author read as part of M.Ed curriculum in University of Delhi. It primarily discusses the arguments of Krishna Kumar's 'What is worth teaching' and of Kevin Harris in 'Education and Knowledge: The Structured Misrepresentation of Reality'. The paper also derives inspiration from the themes emerged in Padma Sarangpani's chapter – 'Teaching and Learning: The Regulation of Knowledge' in the book 'Constructing School Knowledge'. The author wrote this paper after observing ten social science Classes in VIIth and VIIIth grades of a reputed private school in Delhi where she worked as a T.G.T for three years. This was done with the permission of college authorities and consent of the author's colleagues. This paper also quotes and produces verbatim and communication records of teachers and the students in exploring the conceptions of power, authority, legitimacy, control and regulation in a classroom space.

In all the observed classes, 'textbook reading' was the quintessential feature. It was expected from the students to be ready with their books on their tables and pencils in hands before the teacher entered the class. The classes usually started with one student reading aloud the content of the textbook with teacher summarizing the crux of what was read, after every two

paragraphs. The teachers did not even discuss any topic or event outside the given textbook and there was always a sense of urgency in their voices to complete the syllabus on time. In the words of Krishna Kumar, ‘The textbook symbolizes the authority under which the teacher must accept to work. It also symbolizes the teachers’ subservient status in the educational culture. At all levels of school education, the textbook acts as a substitute syllabus or rather as the operative part of the syllabus. These observations made the subservient status of teacher very clear. In all the observed classes, children were not consulted and their opinions or feelings were not sought by the teachers. If any student wanted to share or express anything, the reaction of the teacher was to shush that child up and ask them to finish the ‘work’ of reading the textbook. This is evident in the following conversation:

Student A:(While they were reading about the Post-independence scenario of the country and the partition of 1947): Ma’am, my grandmother belonged to Lahore, and during the partition, came to Delhi by sitting on the roof of a train. They ate only boiled chilies and small amount of water. They had to go to a lot of hardship and suffering during this migration....

Teacher interrupted in between and said ‘Gaurav, we all would love to hear your story once we are free, right now let us get back to the reading of the textbook. In this particular observation, the curriculum was strongly framed (Term borrowed from Bernstein’s concept of framing) with an authoritarian teacher and with high degree of insulation between the legitimate school and out of school knowledge. What could have been an excellent opportunity to build the nuanced understanding of mass migration based on personal narratives and life histories heard by the children was lost in the mundane details of migration as specified in a textbook. It could have made the subject of history come to life and evoke the interest levels of children in their shared past.

In most observations, text was read in a routine and mechanical way where students were disinterested and they even yawned occasionally. Any attempts on the part of students to ask question or participate in any discussion was being discouraged. One such conversation is listed as:

Student B:Ma’am, there are so many acts, reforms, movements and commissions....It never ends. I cannot understand their importance in our lives. It is difficult to remember their dates and facts. It all seems to be so confusing and difficult....

Teacher: This is the part of your syllabus. It is given in your book, so you have to learn it. Besides, it is very important for the exams.....

Rather than explaining the relevance and significance of such acts and policies in everyday life of the students, the teacher focused on the examinations and what is important for that. This excessive focus on the 'examination' makes a major contribution to the textbook culture. An important implication of the examination-textbook link was that the curriculum remained alien even hostile and transcended local or regional specificity. According to Krishna Kumar, any specific or locally relevant knowledge of social affairs, politics or even one's own life and one's surroundings was debarred. Sarangpani in the book 'Construction of School Knowledge' discusses three techniques to delegitimize information that children provided and to strengthen the frame boundary. All three techniques were based on the teacher as an epistemic authority responsible for the child's intellectual and moral development, rather than only 'bureaucratic/institutional authority'. The three techniques were to ignore children's contributions, completely by giving the impression that what they were talking was worthless and unimportant, dismissing the information provided on the ground that the student was violating the rules of good behavior and being impatient and disqualifying information that children provided. It was to 'establish' that it was based on false criteria and; therefore could not be considered valid knowledge. Whereas the observations showed that personal experiences of the students were not accommodated in classroom discourse. According to Michael Young in 'Curriculum Studies and the Problem of Knowledge': when the knowledge that transcends social practices is denied, it removes the grounds for a critical relationship between theory and curriculum practice. This is because, the world is not as we experience it, and curriculum knowledge consists of knowledge of powerful - the knowledge of only those people will be considered who have power to select and organize knowledge in the curriculum. Sometimes, this knowledge can be discontinuous with everyday experience. Education presupposes the possibility of both knowledge and truth. Although a discipline like social science would demand a lot of discussions, conversations and interconnections within the real life, teacher thought of it as wastage of time and focused more on syllabus completion.

A lot of time and energy was spent on how to learn, memorize and reproduce the chapters that have been done in the class with the help of flowcharts, schemas, diagrams, mnemonics techniques. The learning did not include understanding and comprehension, making connections with other concepts, applying and solving problems, formulating and doing things etc. Further, with the coming of exams, various types of revision sessions were used – threat and punishment, interrogation, quiz question etc. In one such episode:

Teacher came in the class, looked into Harsh's book, pulled him by his collar and said in a very rude way: You want to go out? He stared back at her, open mouthed. She walked around and asked others to show her their books. She looked into one and said: Now if you make a mistake, you will be thrown out of the class. Concentrate and work! This conception of "work" of keeping quiet and doing what the teachers tell the students to do very much dictated the classroom discourse. Students appeared to be engaged and involving in the task at hand but they were not active participants in their knowledge construction and had no say in the curriculum that they were studying.

References

- Harris, K. (2016). Education and Knowledge: the structured misrepresentation of reality. Routledge.*
- Kumar, K. (2004). What is worth teaching?. Orient Blackswan.*
- Sarangapani, P. M. (2003). Constructing school knowledge: An ethnography of learning in an Indian village. Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd.*
- Young, M. (2003). Curriculum Studies and the Problem of Knowledge: updating the Enlightenment?. Policy Futures in Education, 1(3), 553-564.*