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Participatory Learning and Student Empowerment in the Classroom (Pp. 299-310)

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Abstract

The debate on teaching methodology has served as a useful point to various experiments in the classroom and the testing of various learning approaches in search of teaching idiom that would empower and transform the student learner. This has opened a powerful opportunity for reflection in living classroom environment, exploring the extent it can be harnessed for the transformative development of the learner. The quest for shifts in pedagogical techniques from those which emphasized students as receptacle for knowledge to those which require active participation of both teacher and students, correspond to the necessities for reinvention of alternative classroom interaction. By participating in the process of knowledge construction through collaboration, students develop skills and attitudes such as creativity, problem-solving, decision-making, delegation and leadership considered key to the development of individuals. The focus of this paper is look at how participatory drama activities can empower the learner.

Introduction

With schooling recognized as major indicator of human development index, a lot of money and efforts have been invested in it by individuals and governments without appreciable increase in the quality of outputs. With the

widening interest in education over the past decades, it is time to examine if one is moving in the right direction. The main question to ask is; does the formal school system need to be transformed for true learning to take place, for it to be in consonance with its larger environment and to enable children and educators to live and generate values considered important for human development? These questions are necessary because any investment in education must contribute to creating a vibrant individual, a brilliant community and a democratic state, and any educational system that has failed to achieve this cannot transform the child. For learning to be viable, the present classroom method of instruction should be replaced with a more vibrant one that is inclusive of students' contribution to his/her learning needs, if we are to empower them for their transformative development. The teacher-student relationship in formal school system where the teacher always assume the position of 'a policeman' should be reversed to make way for student centred learning interaction.

The nature of teacher-student relationship in modern educational learning situations has made it inevitably impossible to transform the child for today and tomorrow's needs. The nature of conventional education system is actually responsible for the lapse in present classroom learning method. Children are not involved in classroom learning activities, and therefore, what is to be learnt. What we have seen over the past decades is a miraculous elevation of the child as an interdisciplinary target of study, a partial recognition that the child in many senses provides a symbolic representation of the state of the moral order in society, and the politicization of the real child in everyday life.

In formal educational system the teacher assume the position of all-knowing subject who imparts knowledge to students with the aim of administering examination as the goal of learning. The classroom is not democratically structured to accommodate children's interest and views. Hence, they are always powerless and passive beings at the mercy of the all-knowing teacher. In children's educational programmes there have been constant problems in its packaging, delivery, analysis and so on. Children are understood, handled, processed, governed or managed in the classroom differently according to different social contexts. These range of metaphors used to describe the child's position and articulation within the dominant order testifies to this sense of passivity.

Conventional method, relying as it does on the assumed helplessness of human nature finds its typical expression in Robber Owen (cited in Hergenbahn, 1970, p.127) who once argued that, ‘the character of man is without exception formed for him, not by him’, This view of education resulted in the pedagogy which kept the teacher firmly in command and the students in a submissive role. Its theory underestimated the capabilities and capacities of the great majority of children to undertake any serious study.

The tendency of conventional educational theory and practice alike in most schools has been to treat human beings, especially children as inert objects, which needed to be pushed around in order to get them moving and steer them into the right place. This mode of instruction has been abandoned ever since it reached a dead end in physical science. But the habit still lingers on in many classrooms.

The teacher based learning approach, where the teacher dominates classroom discourse without the pupils’ contribution has reached its dead end. In this learning technique all knowing teacher imposes everything on the students. The students are the passive recipients of received information packaged by the teacher (Freire 1972, p.48). Hence, it suppresses instead of developing their skills and intellectual interests. The students do not talk in class like involved participants but like alienated observers in the exchange of comments in the classroom.

Rote learning and skill drills in conventional classrooms more than bore and mis-educate students; they also inhibit their civil and emotional development (Richmond 1975, p.71). Students learn to be passive and cynical in classes that transfer facts skills or values without meaningful conception to their needs, interest, community culture and environment.

To teach skills and information without relating them to society and to the students contexts turns education into an authoritarian transfer of official words or statements; a process that severely limits students development as democratic citizens. Non-participatory education is not an empowering instrument. It corresponds to the exclusion of the students from their educational policy in school and in society (Shor 1992, p.55). The conventional teaching approach presupposes the learner’s inability to fend for himself. This kind of educational didacticism may no longer be the order of the day, although the belief that most learning takes place at the teacher’s instigation and under his supervision will take long to die.

In contrast to conventional learning method, an empowering education theory with emphases on generative discourse begins from the premise that from birth onwards human beings can and do make something out of their lives (Richmond 1975, p.35); that life is ongoing endowed with intentionality, and that ‘in greater or lesser degree, we are all artists’ (Read 1978, p.87). In this wise, the Socratic method, Dewey’s progressivism; activity method and integrated day curricular in kindergarten and primary and schools, resources for learning, Freire’s generative theory, Illich’s (1985) ‘deschooling’ methods, Gardner’s (1995, p.131) multiple-intelligence and so on, represent an attempt to put into practice the fact that the learner must be encouraged to get education for himself, especially by contributing to classroom discussions.

Conventional learning theory and practice which stress teacher-based learning has failed to find universal acceptance because of its conviction that children were incapable of doing anything on their own and could not be trusted with the responsibility to explore their own academic problems. Hence, stress on teacher-based classroom instruction. ‘The teacher gives to a boy (child) everything the teacher himself believes, loves and hopes for. The boy (child) growing up will add something of his own’ (School of Barbina 1970).

Thus conventional education represents a labour intensive industry with the teachers at command. Yet the research evidence by the various international educational achievement project (UNESCO 1973), has led Husen (1977) to the conclusion that the amount of instruction makes no significant difference as is commonly supposed. The myth of education as agent for people processing, the theory that human beings like raw material in any industrial process, can and need to be converted into finished products by being subjected to graded treatment in special institution, designed for that purpose will not work largely in practice. The falsity of the myth, which would have us believe that learning is dependent upon teaching, needs to be reversed through the application of participatory education theory and practice. That conventional classroom learning is an inefficient method for the mass organisation of learning is, of course, a fact which renowned educational experts have long been aware of (Dewey, 1934; Freire, 1972; Illich, 1976; Habermas, 1985; Shor, 1992).

Arguing against conventional education, Richmond (1975:67) says that ‘the pupils are ‘schooled’ to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement

with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new'. The student imagination is 'schooled' to accept service in place of value. Learning dignity, independence, health and creative endeavour, are defined as little more than the performance of the institution, which claim to serve these purposes. Education should be dispensed and acquired through a multiple of means. An over all participatory learning system helps learners to move within it both horizontally and vertically, and under the range of choice available to them.

However, against the background of ineffectiveness of conventional learning a shift is taking place that is of specific importance to the social position of children. The shift of institutionalized educational programmes focusing on children to life- long and active learning embedded in everyday life. In this wise, learning and impartation of knowledge no longer belong to the teacher and is no longer restricted as pupils join in shaping their own syllabus and world view. Thus, one of the essential principles that needs to be made tangible in the classroom, for equality and integrated learning to occur is the teacher-child relationship which forms the basis for classroom interaction

Learning under this thinking is an integral part of the child's everyday activities. The evolution of institutionalized learning-to-learning process in everyday circumstance changes the classic relation between children and teachers. A classic modern form of educational concepts in which children are the ones who need to be educated passively in the classroom and the teacher qualified to educate them can no longer empower the child for his present and future needs. In this regard, Hengst (2001 p. 59) states that we are witnessing the liberation of children from modernity's educational project. There is the urgent need for participatory form of education that would engage the child physically and mentally.

To enable the teacher to function in a fashion that builds a bond between the student and the teacher certain things need to be in place. The crucial factor is that the atmosphere, the method of interaction and communication in the learning environment needs to become less authoritarian and more humane. This change is urgently needed for effective child transformation in the classroom.

Background to participatory learning

Nowadays, in a diversity of practices dealing with children one can observe strong emphasis on their participation. In this context it is important to

examine the meaning we can give to the participation of children in their learning activities and their role in determining their syllabus.

The learning community inevitably has an influence on the social meaning we give to participation and active learning. Individualization and globalization process generate a growing gap between individualized and isolated citizen on one hand and influential global system and structures on the other. In such a context there is a need for new models to shape education through participatory activities. New participation discourses have risen during the last decades (Freire 1972, Boal 1982, Shor 1992, Illich 1974', Dewey 1934). These discourses aim to bring about new conventions between children and teachers in classroom environment. Van de Veen (2000, p.73) distinguishes between two perspective of acquiring knowledge, to establish new participatory models, namely a system and life -world perspectives.

From a system perspective, participation is interpreted as a requirement for the well functioning of education. Consequently the ideas on children's participation in their educational activities are becoming more significant. It can increase the creative input of participants when looking for solution to a problem. It is because of this that Hart (1992, p. 97) pleads for the participation of children in matters that are of direct interest to them. In the wake of this discourse, students that were mainly subjected to care are stimulated to have an active input in their learning through dramatic activity.

A life- world perspective on active participation seems to open more possibilities for linking active teaching and active learning in a meaningful way. By this perspective children feel challenged by all kinds of matter in which collective interests are at issue (Van de Veen, 2001, p.36). Children are interested in global social themes like environment, love, peace, family and so on. Society, however mainly play upon this in an educational way. The sensibility of children is considered as a solid base for future empowering education and as base for actual participatory learning (Jans. 2004, p.81). Participation is more like a learning process in itself than a predefined learning objective.

For education to be empowering and transforming, it must involve the learner totally in generating, discussing and analysing what is to be learnt. Without such participation the child may be alienated from whatever the teacher generated for his educational purposes. Such participation within the classroom-learning environment is what formal educational system lacks. In conventional classroom education the teacher narrates everything to students

who listen meekly without questioning what is being offered to them. The teacher-student relationship in conventional classroom is what Paulo Freire (1972, p.46) describes as narrative in character, where the teacher deposits knowledge into the students. The students therefore are passive recipients of knowledge from their all-knowing teacher.

The relationship between the teacher and the child has to be on affection and dignity that are the primary values of a good society, rather than fear, humiliation and misuse of power. The teacher need to be made conscious of the cause and effect of their professional behaviour in training programmes to enable them to create a relationship that is functional, not dysfunctional; for learning to occur. We know from experiences that children learn better, with greater comprehension, if the teacher shows interest and if the classroom environment is congenial.

In order to make learning active, empowering and transforming, there is the need to reinvent a new pedagogy that is participatory, dramatic and democratic in nature. This is because conventional teaching methods create a huge gulf between learners and their teacher during the process of transforming the learners. In this type of education the child learner is just passive observer who accepts everything from the teacher uncritically. This has been a source of concern to scholars (Shor, 1992 Freire, 1972, Griggs, 2001, Tassoni and Hucker, 2004, O'Sullivan, 1999).

These views call for rethinking of teaching culture in a way that departs radically from conventional wisdom. A new commitment to extend the boundaries of present teaching method that isolate the learner as a tabularaza appear to be necessary with its condemnation by scholars (Vygotsky 1978, Illich ,1998, Boal 1982, Van de Veen 2001, Thomas and O'kane, 2001, Grover, 2002, Piaget,1975, Dewey ,1964, Cummins, 1986, Beck ,1997). From these scholars, there are pleas for reinventing of a new pedagogy that is not only active but also critical, participatory and democratic for the transformation of the learners.

Participatory education is very valuable to child learning. This is because it is an interactive pedagogy within the classroom environment. Participation is very essential in child transformative activities because it enables them to interact with the group and the environment in the sharing of experience. Participation is action that is essential in gaining knowledge and develops intelligence (Shor 1992). Piaget (1979, p.28) always insists in the relation of action to knowing. For according to him;

knowledge is derived from action ... to know an object is to act upon it and to transform it... to know is therefore to assimilate reality into structures of transformation and these are the structures that intelligence constructs as a direct extension of our action .

With Deweyan emphasis, Piaget reiterates that we learn by doing and by thinking about our experience.

For Dewey (1964, p. 34), participation is the point at which democracy and learning meet in the classroom. Participation is an educational means for learners to gain knowledge and to develop as citizens. Only by active participation in the classroom events could students develop critical method and democratic habits rather than becoming passive pupils waiting to be told what things mean and what to do. For Dewey, participation is democratic when students construct purposes and meanings. To be critical in the classroom students had to take part in making meaning, articulating purposes, carrying out plans and evaluating results. Lack of active participation of students in school alienates them and lowers their productivity in class.

Classroom drama as participatory learning activity

Classroom drama has a very important role to play in the modification of learners thought and behaviour within the classroom environment. There is strong relationship of play to critical thought and social change. Classroom drama employs critical pedagogy in educating the growing child. Although participatory drama activity cannot ipso facto transform the child by itself, it can offer students an empowering education of high quality that can transform them. Therefore, the practice itself is transformative activity. Classroom drama as participatory activity can also give the participants experience of democratic learning and positive living towards the transformation of their intellectual and social life.

As an educational subject, classroom drama is a participatory learning activity that involves the learner in an active learning environment. In its methodology children are called upon to learn through dialogue experimenting with action as they interact within the environment. In this activity the teacher is just a collaborator, a guide and only gives direction or intervenes whenever necessary. He has confidence in the children, thus allowing them to contribute to the learning material. Playing is an interaction in the child's environment. Every day we see children playing and acting out

their desires but can hardly see the reasons for these activities. Classroom drama as participatory activity when approached from a life- world perspective is related to learning process and can even less be considered as the outcome of educational efforts.

Children are curious in nature; they manifest this curiosity diligently and actively giving meaning to their environment. Their ability to learn while playing is often astonishing. Although children are almost continually learning, they go through life in a playful way, especially when growing in sufficiently stimulating circumstances. Actively playing, naming, and giving meaning to objects and life is what children do every day. The application of play in their learning environment will therefore transform them to be better citizens. The games children play and the world around them to which they actively give meaning, is of course, determined by culture and time set factors; but playfulness and giving meaning could very well be a universal characteristic of children. This is important while looking for an empowering educational concept that would transform children for tomorrow's leadership.

This paper is thus about the intersection of classroom drama; one that offers teachers and students a new language for transgressing and creating borders where multiplicity of voices can as, Doyle (1993:29) argues "examine how the power at work in plays is also at work in their lives". By experiencing drama we can look at our lives and situation in different ways. The critical examination of artistic presentation allows one to get behind the pieces itself. In this way we may be able to understand various vested interests, agencies, and mind sets that drive our own world. Theatre contributes to the process of child transformation by probing questions and offering suggestions that can be dramatically open or provided through metaphors. Those who work with drama must realize that the script or ideas we present to an audience are not neutral, value-free, asocial, and a historical; since these ideas represent a snatch of someone's live and circumstances. This is the case with the participatory dramatic activities in the classroom.

Children's play should be interpreted as the imaginary illusory realization of unrealizable desires. At this higher level, play is displaced wish fulfilment often aided by what Vgotsky (1976) calls a pivot; a prop that embodies a feature of sought- for- state, as a stick serves as a horse to ride. The pivot is the symbolic substitute. So play and aimed intention, while contrasting seems of the same coin. The one holds the end constant, while varying the means;

the other requires ends and means, but changes each to suit the other with a kind of measured zest (Bruner, 1974).

This research study therefore, conceptualizes the active input of children in their transformative development through classroom drama activities. In doing this, it deals with the actual participation discourse, the social construction of child learning through an empowering educational pedagogy. On the basis of these elements, the study presents a learning pedagogy based on an empowering participatory classroom activity.

Conclusion

Conventional educational theory relying as it does on the assumed helplessness of human nature found its typical expression on the idea that 'the character of man is without exception formed for him, not by him'. This view of education resulted in pedagogy, which kept the teacher firmly in command and students in submissive role. Its theory underestimated the capacities of great majority of children to undertake any serious study on their own.

The conventional teaching method, which has monopolized the preparation of students for present and future development is counterproductive to the holistic education and progress of our society. There must be the courage and commitment to deconstruct this ineffective system of the dominant culture and replace it with the construction of classroom pedagogy that is empowering for transformative child development

The nature of teacher - student's relationship in the conventional education system has made it virtually impossible for the transformation of the learner. In this system, children are not involved in determining their learning materials or contributing to classroom discussions. The idea that the child is the discoverer of his own world tends to be dismissed as unconvincing and less than helpful. This has placed children in powerless position in school and civil life. In formal education model children are understood, handled, processed, and managed as objects to be protected from a burning house. Thus there are constant problems in the packaging, delivery and analysis of their learning materials. This model is teacher- based, where the students are passive recipients of ideas from the all-knowing teacher. The traditional model is inadequate. The Federal Government National policy on education is not implemented and, when implemented it is not effective for child transformation. Children are not therefore learning skills. Therefore there is a need to upgrade pedagogy. The formal methods of teaching lead to

continuous reproduction of knowledge in a cyclic manner from generation to generation without appreciable increase in human development. Thus, the emphasis on things-shown-and-done-to-the-students has been overdone and an alternative model that is inclusive of students' participation should be used. The application of such alternative pedagogy that would empower the child for his transformative development is recommended by this paper.

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