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REVIEW ARTICLE

IS CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH A NEW WAY OF TEACHING SOCIAL SCIENCE AT UPPER PRIMARY LEVEL?

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ABSTRACT

Social science is a vital subject at upper primary level as it develops among children understanding of human relationships, social values and attitudes. Social science helps young learners to recognize the contemporary problems prevailing in society and prepares them to find out the solutions. Teaching and learning of social science at upper primary level is crucial if we expect our coming generation to become active, responsible citizens for maintaining the democratic values upon which our country was established. Constructivist approach corresponds to learning by doing assuming that the more repeatedly one does something, the more efficient he/she becomes at it. Critical thinking, problem solving approach and analytical skills are assumed to be the essential constructs at upper primary level. Students of upper primary level are very smart and they always crave for some new ways of learning. Traditional methods of teaching social science are monotonous for students. The ways and strategies to be used to teach students at elementary level effectively is the foremost need in present time. Constructivist approach really makes learners active during teaching learning process. By keeping this in view, the present paper reports some essential insights how constructivist approach is a new way of teaching social science at upper primary level.

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INTRODUCTION

Social Science is an indispensable subject at upper primary level, which requires new skills, strategies and techniques for teaching-learning. The educated world has begun to appreciate the enormous potentialities of the subject as it enhances a link between social science and social realities. Therefore, it is the social task of our educational system to take up the challenge of the insistent present and illumine the great realities by which the present and future student generation can live, move and have their well-being. The educational system should help children to develop an insight into human relationships, social values and attitudes. Education must be imparted in such a way that enables children to appreciate Indian cultural heritage. Also it must prepare the young learners to recognize and get rid of what is undesirable and antiquated. Society is characterized by rapid social and technological change. Its ability to orchestrate change frequently outstrips its ability to reflect on the ramifications of what it has done. Are children developing skills to absorb new information in light of the information explosion? Are they learning structures for understanding and adapting to changes in technology, the marketplace, and their own family organization? Are they

beginning to learn about interdependence and the relationship of technology to social conditions? Hence, the objective of teaching social science must cater to answer these questions. Teaching and learning of social science at upper primary level is crucial if we expect our coming generation to become active, responsible citizens for maintaining the democratic values upon which our country was established. Unless children acquire the foundations of knowledge, attitudes, and skills in social science in the pivotal years of elementary education, they will not be able to become effective citizens. Recent developments in NCF 2005 have emphasized the importance of constructivism as a theoretical basis for curriculum development and implementation, and associated school reform, in schools. This paper reports some essential insights how constructivist approach is a new way of teaching social science at upper primary level.

Learners play an active role when taught through constructivist approach

Central to constructivism is the notion that learners play an active role in 'constructing' their own meaning. Knowledge is neither considered as something fixed seen nor existing independently outside the learner. Rather, learning is a process of accommodation or adaptation based on new experiences or ideas (Jenlick and KinnucanWelsch, 1999). Constructivist

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approaches require learners to be active and confident in themselves and their abilities. It takes confidence for learners to admit that there are gaps in their knowledge, or understanding, and to take the risk of learning new ways of thinking. Learners may feel vulnerable about admitting their ignorance to others. This understanding of learner's role in learning process has clear implications for the way in which classrooms should be organized and the quality of the 'learning relationships' which need to exist if learning is to take place. Research suggests that students are more likely to become active participants in classroom learning activities when they feel confident of their abilities and the support of their peers (Collins, 1996). Furthermore, the nurturing of students' self-esteem is seen as one of the primary functions of any system of education (Indoe *et al.*, 1992; Bruner, 1996). Moreover, the role of teacher in developing learning environments cannot be denied. The teacher's skill in establishing learning conversations with and amongst students is also fundamental to the construction of knowledge (Bruner 1996). Learning conversations allow students and teachers to foster dialogue so as to identify prior learning and exploit the gaps in what is already known and what might be constructed as new knowledge. The dialogue process helps to initiate the process of imbibing new information to build new knowledge. Similarly, the importance of teachers moving away from 'teacher centered' conversations, 'to ways of interacting with individual learners in ... relation to a real problem they are solving' is also well established (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2001). However, the limitations of classroom communications and the strategies with which students might conceal their ignorance have long been recognized (Barnes 1979; Cazden 1988).

Constructivism emphasizes students-centered learning task

The idea that knowledge is not fixed and predetermined has serious implications for the ways in which learning tasks are constructed and carried out in the classroom. If students are responsible for constructing their knowledge, it follows that teachers need to encourage and accept student autonomy and initiative. Learning tasks should be student-centered or provide opportunities with some degree of student choice. Learning should be 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of meanings rather than receiving them' (Bruner, 1996). Consequently, teachers have to find:

Inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons so they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value (Wenger 1998). Constructivist approach corresponds to learning by doing assuming that the more repeatedly one does something, the more efficient he/she becomes at it. It consists on different forms and activities including cooperative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning and inquiry learning (Hussain and Sultan 2010). However, it is based on active involvement of learners and their interactions for creation of new knowledge. Critical thinking, problem solving approach and analytical skills are assumed to be the essential constructs at upper primary level. Equipped with such faculties and skills they construct new knowledge based on their previous experiences and involvement in learning process (Li

2001). Similarly, Dhindsa & Emran asserted that "knowledge is constructed through observation, reflection and interaction with the surrounding environment such as their peers, teachers or technology" (Dhindsa and Emran, 2006). It is based on strategies of effective learning and leads them to construct new knowledge by interpreting it in a particular situation. In a constructivist classroom the teacher becomes facilitator to help students in acquiring knowledge through activities (Alesandrini and Larson, 2002; Ornstein and Hunkins 1998). Students' involvement results in their effective learning. Johnson and Johnson stated that effective learning takes place through one's personal involvement in learning experience (Johnson and Johnson, 1999). It requires them to work in groups and interact in social settings based on the principle of Vygotsky's social constructivism. Vygotsky believed in social constructivism and asserted that social interaction among learners spurred the construction of new ideas and enhanced their intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1994). Nonetheless to say that intellectual development and creation of ideas is associated with Bruner's pedagogies (Bruner 1960). Bruner's pedagogies included activity-based and hands-on instruction in which students were expected to use their own direct experiences and observations to acquire information and to solve problems scientifically.

Teacher is an academic leader and facilitator

Understanding constructivist paradigm, a teacher is considered to be the academic leader and facilitator of students. He/she recognizes their potential and directs them in right direction at right time. A constructivist approach is oriented on construction of knowledge by putting students in practical situations under the guidance and tutelage of teachers. It seems to be based on the belief that learners construct their own knowledge through interaction, and the assumption that "knowledge is physically constructed by learners who are involved (actively in learning process)" appears to be substantiating it (Gagnon and Colley, 2001). Knowledge is constructed in social environments where interaction is considered to be a fundamental factor for effective teaching learning process (Sims *et al.*, 2001). Under such circumstances the role of a teacher cannot be neglected rather it becomes more significant in terms of coaching students to selecting appropriate activities for learning. Traditionally, a teacher has been playing an active role in transferring knowledge to passive students. In new settings the stage is set for students to play an active role in learning process through activities. They feel pleasure and confidence in becoming active participant. The study of Lord, Travis, Magill & King revealed greater effects of constructivist learning (learner-centered) approach on weekly test scores of students as compared to students' scores in traditional or teacher-centered environment. The study further elaborated that constructivist learning helped them in enhancing their participation, level of satisfaction, enthusiasm for raising a question or responding to it, and an inclination towards scientific attitude. Constructivism makes teachers design activities and projects to be offered to the students. These may consist on service-learning and community-based projects and activities to involve (Lord *et al.*, 2005). Use of constructivist approach in education has direct effects on students learning. They are active stake holders in the process of knowledge construction and its dissemination. They participate in teaching learning process and assume responsibility of their learning by giving it their own meaning in their respective contexts. Constructivism

offers students opportunities of cooperative and collaborative learning.

Analysis of a study that proved students secured higher grades who were taught by using constructivist approach

A study was conducted by Santmire, Giraud, & Grosskopf and they compared learning achievement of two groups of elementary school students. The researchers found that the students who learned through constructivist approach to education and took a standardized test secured higher grades than their counterparts who were instructed traditionally in the classroom. The students' participation in such projects enhanced their academic performance as well (Santmire, Giraud and Grosskopf, 1999). Constructivism involves students and they participate actively in teaching learning process through different activities. Pratton and Hales (1986) studied the influence of such participation of students on their learning achievement. The study found that the mean achievement of the students who participated actively in teaching learning process was greater than their counterparts who attended traditional classes. The study further explained that the students spent more time in doing activities that required thinking, responding and verifying their knowledge. Therefore, active participation of students was affirmed to be an efficient instructional approach for creating and sustaining motivation and passion for knowledge construction (Pratton and Hales 1986). Hussain & Mahmood stated that quality of education is directly linked with quality of instruction. Quality of instruction is associated with expertise and experience of teacher. An expert teacher adopts innovative instructional approaches (Hussain and Mahmood 2010). If such approaches are used at upper primary level the students would become capable of developing new knowledge instead of mere getting information. Constructivist approach is one of them which aim at involving students in the process of learning.

Conclusion

In short it can be said that constructivism is an epistemological view of knowledge acquisition emphasizing knowledge construction rather than knowledge transmission and the recording of information conveyed by others. Since constructivists believe that the learner must transform or appropriate whatever is learned, one can say that all learning is discovered. To appropriate new understandings from one's social environment and to become an efficient maker of meaning requires the adoption of specific intellectual skills, ones that should be modeled from more competent adults and peers. Thus generative learning strategies (learning-to-learn) may be explicitly taught to students or may be discovered by students as they are trying to find strategies for solving problems. In recent times constructivism has been widely embraced by social science teachers. When a novel conception is introduced it always elicits great resistance. Even as a transformation in general thinking and attitudes develops more support and adherents, there will continue to be resistance to the challenge to the existing order, the comfortable, existing ways of viewing the world. The field of education has undergone a significant shift in thinking about the nature of human learning and the conditions that best promote the varied dimensions of human learning. Thus it can be concluded that constructivist approach though dating back yet got a warm welcome by teachers in teaching social science nowadays. Now students of upper primary level are very smart and they

always crave for some new ways of learning. Traditional methods of teaching social science are monotonous for students. The ways and strategies to be used to teach students at elementary level effectively is the foremost need in present time. Constructivist approach really makes learners active during teaching learning process. Social science consists in itself a vast instructional area; therefore some new and innovative techniques make students learn with great ease and they are able to remember complicated things for a long time.

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