

Understanding the Nepali Classroom Practices: A Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

This article concerns pedagogical practices of schools to meet objectives of the curriculum and provide learning experiences to the students. This article aims to explore teachers' ways of carrying out classroom practices and to locate how the constructivist perspective could foster wider learning experiences of learners. We conducted an ethnographic field study - in one of the schools located in Itahari Sub-metropolitan, Sunsari district – which involves a three-day visit to the school and continuous observation of a particular class to generate the data. Theoretically, this paper focuses on the constructivist perspective to understand the classroom practices of school teachers and locate them to conceptualize the school pedagogy. We highlight that the current school practice, the school teachers are adopting, is a traditionally dominant approach that strongly upholds “the jug to the mug concept” – the teacher as a jug that pours knowledge and information as a form of water to an empty mug as a student. We argue that teachers' traditionally based classroom practice is one of the responsible factors for not shifting Nepalese classroom practices into student-centered or reciprocal classroom practices that embrace the constructivist paradigm. This paper unveils teacher-student power-relations, which is fueling to promote the traditionally focused classroom practices that undermine the possibility of multiplicity in knowledge construction.

Keywords: Constructivism, teacher-centered teaching, scaffolding, shared learning, Zone of Proximal Development.

Introduction

Globally, the current pedagogical practices in school and higher education embrace constructivism, a promising approach to teaching and learning, has not been well adapted to the Nepali classroom practices for the wider learning experiences of the learner. The classroom delivery supports the learner in schools are prescriptive that upholds a top-down approach – a hierarchical relationship and teacher-centered prescription – is believed to accelerate the learning experiences of the learner. Constructivism has an underlying belief

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that the learner is active in the learning process and the creator of his/her reality (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk, 1996). The constructivist notion involves a spontaneous engagement of a learner in knowledge construction and the learner gains the realization of the processes involved in such knowledge construction. In this stance, this paper aims to explore the current school's pedagogical practices and to locate how the constructivist perspective could foster wider learning experiences of learners.

Basing teaching on constructivist notion requires being updated with knowledge and skills corresponding to the time and space which places a professional pressure on the teacher, if not the entire educational system. Focusing on the teacher's teaching-learning behaviors together with the contextual knowledge and understanding of current global practices appear to be an urgent action to revisit Nepali pedagogical activities from the teacher's professional development perspective. On this basis, the preparation and refreshment packages of the teacher's professional development demand a need to subsume the practical strategies of practicing the constructivist notion for pedagogical purposes. This could therefore help deconstruct the traditionally oriented pedagogical practices dwelled in the mind of the existing teaching forces, and schools would begin to realize effects on their teaching-learning practices based on the constructivist notion.

Educating and preparing our schoolteachers in adopting contextually practiced teaching approaches to the classroom teaching and learning may take a longer time than what we expect since it does not occur abruptly but needs to have a commitment and devotion to it in time. This is because, the often-claimed issues are that our teachers have not well transferred their learned knowledge and skills earned during their professional learning, training, and refreshment programs to the classroom (Subedi, 2015; Thapa, 2013). Teaching is not an easy profession since it is a complex human behavior that requires specific skills and knowledge to deal with. The skills and knowledge, as our teachers have, require to be updated communicating the time and space that the education system must address. The current pedagogical notion that our schools are adopting is a less preferred practice by the public since we hear the news about school children are getting corporal punishment and serious infliction on their bodies in schools. As evidence, UNESCO (2013) based on its survey on Nepalese students, 32% of boys and 21% of girls replied they were asked to stand on the bench or the corner of the class (UNESCO, 2002; UNICEF, 2001). There are claims that the punishment in child centers included children being hit, isolated, locked in the toilet, publicly humiliated, and forced to clean floor and toilets (UNICEF, 2001). These are the usually heard problems and issues that our professional education, training, and refreshment programs have not well addressed to improve our teaching-learning and our teachers' traditionally preset mind.

The above-discussed context provides a space for making critiques to the current teaching-learning process of our schools and an emphasis is on drawing attention to the feasible contemporary notions of pedagogical practices. Many of the problems we are facing may have a strong root of modernist ideology dominated by the Cartesian and enlightenment philosophies (Bredlid, 2013) which believes that teacher is prominent, well-informed, knowledgeable, and considered to be superior to students. In this standpoint, we argue to transform, refocus on, and rethink the teacher-centered classroom with a shift into constructivist classroom practices.

Theoretical Underpinning for Classroom Practices

In this section, constructivism as a theoretical lens has been discussed to illuminate the present pedagogical practices of the school succinctly. Constructivism, in much-discussed literature (Pieters & Bruijn, 1991; Jonassen, 1995; Johannsen, et.al., 2012; Carm, et.al., 2015), has appeared to be a promising theory in conceptualizing teaching and learning as one of the shared and collaborative learning practices. It is a philosophical and theoretical notion that gives much focus to the active role of a learner (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk, 1996). A fundamental idea it has emphasized is the knowledge that is constructed by relying on our experiences; as we (Schunk, 1996; Chew & Wee, 2009,) reflect on our experiences leading to the construction of knowledge that depicts our understanding of the world we live.

Theoretically, constructivism emerged primarily from two assumptions: implicit theories which are very close to Piagetian constructivism – individual constructivism and situated cognition that is close to Vygotskian constructivism – social constructivism (Schunk, 1996). The first argues that knowledge is constructed by modifying, remodifying, and transforming previous knowledge and experiences. The latter believes that knowledge construction depends on our physical environment (Woolfolk, 2004). Given these two assumptions, constructivism is discussed and argued connecting them with individual or social constructivism with regards to classroom implication. Piaget’s constructivism more focuses on an individual’s cognition, thinking, rationale, belief system, and motives in the knowledge construction, and the internalization of the constructed knowledge (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk, 1996). Conversely, Vygotsky’s social constructivism holds the notion that knowledge is situated and context-dependent, and a child’s learning is inseparable from such situation or the context, culture in which he/she grows up (Schunk, 1996; Chew & Wee, 2009). In classroom practices, understanding a child’s context or socio-cultural context is important because the child’s understanding, and learning are always located in his/her socio-cultural and historical context (Schunk, 1996).

In practice, social constructivism encompasses the approach - peer collaboration, reciprocal dialogue, apprenticeship, scaffolding, social interaction, zone of proximal development (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk, 1996; UNESCO, 2002) from the classroom implication perspective.

Peer collaboration is one of the important strategies of social constructivism, as it (UNESCO, 2002; Woolfolk, 2004) facilitates the desired learning. The collaboration among the learners or peers facilitates them to promote shared learning as it strategically positions the learner at the center of the learning process (Michalsky & Kramrski, 2010). In the collaboration, peers learn and share the ideas in the non-hierarchical state so that they can reach a shared knowledge and internalize them as a construction of knowledge.

Likewise, a reciprocal dialogue is a kind of social interaction carried out in the classroom that involves interaction to share human experiences (Schunk, 1996). This dialogue is often centered on an issue or a subject matter between the teacher and the student or between students. This means every learner responds to another which leads to the construction of knowledge that is realized by the participants (Woolfolk, 2004).

Another concept used in constructivism is apprenticeship. This strategy involves getting support from the experts like a coacher or mentor that result in shared experiences to which the novice assimilates into his/her existing knowledge (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk,

1996). This is a kind of relationship between an academically and professionally knowledgeable person and an individual who is looking for support.

Scaffolding is a strategy important to help a learner enhance their understanding and cognitive growth (Schunk, 1996; UNESCO, 2002). This is a support that is given to the learner to accelerate the capacity to reach a certain level. The scaffolding is essential to a learner when his/her capacity is maximized to a level – the Zone of proximal development (ZPD) – at which the learner needs support. Vygotsky argues that ZPD is the distance between the actual development level determined through problem-solving under adult or in collaboration with merely capable peers (Schunk, 1996).

The theoretical review, as discussed above, has well conceptualized the constructivism of classroom implication in education. Despite its limited critiques (see, Cerney, 2015), the existing classroom practice of Nepali schools could expectedly be improved by the constructivist notion.

Methods and Materials

We utilized an ethnographic research design to collect empirical data from the field. We carried out this ethnographic study in the one community school of Itahari sub-metropolitan of Sunsari district of Nepal. In this study area, the participant observation (Cohen et.al., 2012) carried out for collecting the instructional practices in the classroom. For collecting the information, we visit the school and community until to reach the data saturation. During the observation, we recorded the information adopting the note-making technique. For this, we observed the grade eight class with taking the consent of head teachers and class teachers. Equally, after observing the teachers students activities, we conducted the site conversation with teachers and students about the instructional activities. The direct narration or verbatim was recorded in Nepali languages so that no information about the classroom happenings would be left out, and the written note was improved after the class observation by meticulously checking up if any information was left or incomplete. Then, the data were transcribed into the English language and grouped for their organization and management to carry out the analysis. Given that the analysis, the data in the form of storyline representing the classroom happening and their intersections with outside events, gained through a short ethnographic interview and conversation and occurrences as well, were developed. Finally, each storyline has been presented as findings and discussed with a drawn theoretical backup together with the underlying research question.

Results and Discussions

While focusing on the Nepalese classroom practices carried out by teachers, it seems that teachers control the classrooms that maintain the status quo and oppose the notion of constructivist classroom practice. A teacher in a short conversation says *“We, the teachers, love to say a change is essential to shift teachers' classroom practices in teaching and learning, but hardly say a paradigm shift is the most desirable one that brings a change in teacher-centered practices”*. However, we need to be clear that a change is not and never implies a paradigm shift. To Brophy and Alleman (1998), this change does not imply a paradigm shift in classroom management, but a refocus and redefinition of roles. Our schoolteachers either may have a lacking proper knowledge on approaching students in their classroom learning and difficulties or exercising the traditional model of teaching that believes *“The child does not learn unless he/she is punished”*. This implies an imposing

attitude of school practices and does constrain children from realizing the learned materials. Even the teacher's remark is more progressive in changing the classroom practices and seems to challenge the knowledge depositing attitude, the practice seems to be not favoring the student-centered approach.

Our observation unveils that the teacher is implicitly exercising the power so that students can become silent and pay attention to him/her and the activities he/she is carrying out. From the teacher's classroom activities, it was observed:

A teacher speaks loudly after erasing the writing board and attempts to draw students' attention towards him/her. All of sudden, one of the students is asked to stand up and answer the question based on the previous class. The student does not answer and steps down his/her head, and all the classmates look at him/her. The teacher asks the same question to another student, but the student also fails to answer. Then the question is open to all to be answered, and a student from the front desk answers. The teacher thanks the student and orders two standing students to sit down with scolding.

Here, the classroom practices indicate a less favorable environment to allow the constructivist learning practices that affect students' learning. It is hard to say whether the teacher's teaching manner, behaviors, attitude, and thinking towards students' learning are working on knowledge construction. The same question asked in the classroom could work for the knowledge construction if it was put on the table of discussion among the teachers and the students. The teacher's assistance to the students can work as scaffolding (Schunk, 1996) to construct the knowledge that students can realize through shared learning. However, this is not the fault of the teacher alone for not being able to proceed with the class in such a way that could lead to the construction of knowledge. The basic understanding and knowledge of constructivism that the teacher does not have is the problem in our schools. Even the mandatory teacher professional development (TPD) training, which has been in practice in school for a long time, has not oriented teachers effectively to the contemporary classroom practices based on constructivism. This explicitly questions the current refreshment and training programs of the government on the teacher's professional development that must have focused on knowledge and practices that promote the ways of carrying out the social learning, collaboration, and shared learning in the classroom (Woolfolk, 2004).

Knowledge construction does not happen in a vacuum, it requires some prerequisite on which knowledge is constructed. Constructivism assumes that we construct our knowledge by modifying, re-modifying, and transforming the previous knowledge and experiences (Schunk, 1996; Woolfolk, 2004). Our teachers in schools may not be aware of these processes of how their teachings can lead to an environment that is conducive for knowledge construction in which students themselves work independently or collaboratively. In a short interview in tiffin time with a student about how he/she used to learn in the classroom.

R: How do you learn every day in the classroom?

S: Umm! what my teachers say I learn in the class accordingly.

R: Which process in the class do you and the teacher interact with?

S: I do not know, but we are sometimes told to read the books, and sometimes assigned classwork independently.

The interview with the student partly reflects students themselves get engaged in the classwork independently involves the notion of constructivist practice. If students themselves independently get engaged in doing any classwork or project work, they learn the process to solve the task to be assigned. As they learn the process, they internalize the process that is the construction of knowledge. Piaget views that when an individual learns something in his/her physical environment independently, his/her cognitive process (see, Schunk, 1996) becomes active which involves individual's rationality, motives, and belief system to internalize the learned materials that result in knowledge construction (Woolfolk, 2004; Scheurman, 1998)). Although we did observe such students' independent works assigned by the teacher during the class hours, the teachers' assigned works in the classroom to the students rarely uphold the perspective of constructivism.

Knowledge could be divergent and productive if multiplicities, as subjectivities, of students' understanding are emphasized on providing richer learning experiences. These multiplicities of knowledge are situated in a particular context or community since children's knowledge construction is the result of situated cognition (Schunk, 2006). In the classroom practice, we observed:

The teacher writes some points on the writing board and asks the students to prepare the answers of them as a classroom assignment. Each student should read them while getting their classwork checked up. Two girl students sitting in the front row, complete the task and draw the teacher's attention, and the teacher checks up their classwork. Then, the teacher asks them the answers. The girls give the answer in their ways, but the teacher looks less willing to accept the answer and provides feedback to them to correct the answers.

However, it shows that the teacher is less prepared to accept and focus on the distinct knowledge and understanding of students brought to school from different cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds; it could be because of the teacher's traditionally oriented belief system, attitude, and concept of teaching. Here, the teacher imposes his/her ideas, instead of fostering knowledge construction of the students as being a mentor. An orientation to teachers about how learning is located in a particular context and how it could be explored in students coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds helps teachers become productive. This could bring out unique learning styles and ways by which students themselves could solve the problems, and their distinct problem-solving strategies lead to a kind of knowledge construction. Enhancing such subjectivities, teachers ought to be creative and supportive and have students explore the learning styles, strategies, and procedures from their ethnic/ indigenous or cultural backgrounds. As Vygotsky, a social constructivist, argues that the sense of knowledge is culturally located and constructed that the meaning is unique and may not be like other contexts or cultural groups have (Woolfolk, 2004; Schunk, 1996). Because of the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of Nepali classrooms, constructivist teaching could promote the subjectivities of such diversity, but our schools appear to be less aware of these possibilities.

In the past, our school education system was influenced by the gurukul system in which the relationship between teacher and student was unique and equal in relation to earning knowledge (Bhattra, 2016). The role of a guru was realized as a person who used to

connect the learner's soul with the cosmos for wider realization. However, the subsequent developments in the education system, the good ethos of the relationship between the guru and the student is found seemingly twisted over time into a hierarchy - a boss and a subordinate, a knowledge transmitter and a knowledge taker, a filled jug, and an empty mug. These hierarchies could be seen as a reflection in many of the Nepali classrooms; for an instance, we observed:

Some students are playing on the ground in their way. All of sudden, a teacher comes out of the office to go to the class. The students run to the class in the way that one of them falls near the class door. They are the students of small class so far, and they try to enter the class through the door at one time.

Here, the question is not why students are running faster to get into the classroom, rather the question is how the relationship between the teacher and the student have. The teacher's traditional backup and its influence on students appear to make them run faster because the kind of frightening has been conditioned in students that the teacher is the supreme who could exercise the power. This avoids all kinds of possibilities that bring both the teachers and the students closer to becoming a good friend, a knowledge sharer, and a collaborator for organizing the knowledge (Woolfolk, 2004; Scheurman, 1998; Schunk, 1996). Rather, this kind of relationship can be leveled, as Black (1999) argues, as a mechanistic and artificial that is often found in the bureaucratic-managerial model in which relationship is hierarchical. Teachers in our public schools, therefore, are the imposer of the knowledge, a transmitter of the knowledge, and a producer of the knowledge, rather than a collaborator, facilitator, knowledge promotor, and creator of the knowledge. This situation may remain constantly challenging unless we fail to deconstruct teacher's education programs, refreshment programs, and professional development programs from constructivist perspectives.

In conclusion, ontologically and epistemologically the Nepalese classroom practice is upholding a traditionally oriented teaching-learning, a teacher-centered approach, as a threatening barrier to shifting classroom practices into a constructivist paradigm.

Conclusion

The trends and tendency of Nepalese classroom practices reflect that teachers are still largely embracing the traditional pedagogical practices guided by positivistic epistemology and ontology. It is need to transform the traditional instructional model of a Nepali classroom into the constructivists or reciprocal instructional model. This constructivist model requires ruling out the one-sided teacher-controlled and disciplined based classroom practices, as a teacher-leader role, for promoting as shared leadership and reciprocal partner is a felt need of Nepalese classroom practices. It is because, as Black, (1999) asserts, a mechanistic worldview is attributed to a patriarchal and hierarchical social pattern that works as a system of control at all levels of the hierarchy. This similar pattern applies to the Nepalese school systems embedded in a traditionally oriented paradigm underpinned by discrete units' hierarchical order between teacher and students. If teachers challenge such paradigm and hierarchy, it could lead our school practices, as Wang, et.al. (2014) perceive, to a way of building on knowledge and experiences through the different modes of connections like collaboration, interaction, modeling, reciprocity.

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