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Exploring Teachers and Students as Partners in the Learning Process

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Abstract

Why do students frequently run to the teachers for validation of the work they are doing? Why are the students showing decreased motivation? Can students make choices in the learning process? By giving students more choices, will teachers lose control over the class? The current study explores such issues in a Delhi School. Teacher-centred environments foster excessive dependence of the students on the teachers. The shift of responsibility from teacher to learner does not exist in a vacuum. However, it results from supportive changes to the curriculum towards more learnercentred learning. This redefined role of teachers and learners stimulates a change in the age-old distribution of power and authority that has plagued the traditional classroom. However, this shift needs an enabling environment characterised by learner-centred learning processes. Learner engagement is critical in addressing tenacious instructive challenges like low achievement, high dropout rates, fatigue, and aggression.

Keywords: Responsibility, Voice, Choice, Relevance, Learner Engagement

Introduction

Young students hovering around the teacher for validation are familiar sites in our classrooms. Several teachers have observed that most children are enthusiastic as they initially join the school. However, over a few years with the pressures to perform, and dealing with failure, excitement gives way to fear and fatigue in many learners. With little choice, the young learner becomes dependent on the adults. They are not given any time to make their own judgment because many teachers believe that young students will make mistakes and waste their time. Often there is no chance or time for learners to explore, examine and analyse what they would genuinely be interested in doing on their own. The students are often seen to be fulfilling the teacher's objectives, which may not connect with their motivations.

This excessive dependence on the teachers impacts the student's engagement with her peers, thus curtailing opportunities to develop crucial social development. Often the overly dependent student has a problem with trust - and the person she has trouble trusting is herself. Students are reluctant to think or make decisions for themselves. Instead of looking inward for answers, they look to adults for support and assistance. Students spend more time at the teacher's desk than at their own.

On the other hand, teachers feel frustrated while dealing with disinterested and unmotivated students in their classes. With the rising pressures for accountability, teachers tend to use safe conventional methods to ensure results. These methods reinforce the dependence of students on adults for their learning. The students become passive learners. Education provided in most schools is not student centred and is merely based on rote memorisation of facts (NCF, 2005). Students need help to get back in touch with their natural motivation, curiosity and uniqueness.

Over the last three decades, concepts like learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum. The autonomous learner takes a proactive role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing herself of learning opportunities rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975)^[3, 22, 21]. This idea is congruent with the theory of constructivism. To Rathbone (1971)^[33], cited in (Candy, 1991)^[4], the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning and an active agent in his learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as a result of his self-initiated interaction with the world. Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorisation; it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on events (Candy, 1991)^[4]. These characteristics may seem too romantic to be real. Even though an autonomous learner seems to be an idealistic goal, a journey towards the ideal can also be enriching. According to this paradigm, autonomous learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for their learning. The primary strategy does not refer directly to independent learning but calls for a focus on the individual needs and abilities of the child. Meaningful learning can occur when children themselves think about their progress, assess themselves, and work with teachers to set their own targets for improvement.

Teacher-student interaction and learner engagement lead to learner autonomy. Learner engagement is critical in addressing tenacious challenges like poor results, absenteeism, burnout, and aggression. According to Sun and Reuda (2012) ^[36], the degree of cooperation in instructing exercises is known as learner engagement. When teachers create an accepting environment where learners experience the freedom to explore, participate and lead their learning their mental need for autonomy is fulfilled (Jang *et al.*, 2016a).

Teachers' instructional style becomes critical as a mediator in class engagement. Learners' motivation is positively correlated with the chances they get to make meaningful choices in their learning. The learners feel empowered to see the impact of their decisions on their learning. According to Nunez & Leon (2019)^[29], the supportive classroom created by the teacher not only fulfills but also encourages class engagement. The educator plays the role of a contextual facilitator in fulfilling the learners' needs. Students experience a sense of self-determination when the teachers fulfill their basic need for autonomy (Hospel & Galand, 2016)^[18].

Teacher–student interaction has a definite impact on student engagement (e.g., Xie & Derakhshan, 2021)^[13]. Besides education, the social-emotional growth of learners is fundamentally negotiated in their classrooms (Hamre *et al.*, 2013)^[15]. The learners not only gain knowledge but also develop a sense of self through their interactions. The experiences within and outside the classroom significantly affect student success Pishghadam *et al.*, (2021)^[32]. According to Hrastinski (2008)^[19], social interaction is a core factor affecting learning.

The process of education is embedded in the socio-cultural context. The classroom manifests an interplay of both social and psychological aspects wherein learners develop their abilities. Learners learn by engaging with their peers through activities, games of mutual choice. In such environments students are more likely to cooperate and support each other in learning. Social interaction can be seen at two levels between the student and the teacher and at the lateral level between the students (Vuopala et al., 2016)^[39]. Teachers have to create opportunities for the learners to be dynamic and motivated in their learning (Chapman & Van Auken, 2001). Therefore, meaningful communication between teachers and learners is crucial (Liu & Wang, 2020) ^[23]. The dynamic relationship between the teacher and the student is a crucial factor in a student's psychosocial and cognitive development. "The gap between the current level of development and the optimal potential for solving problems under the educator's guidance with skilled colleagues is referred to as the zone of proximal development (ZPD)" Lantolf and Appel, (1994), (as cited in Danli, 2017)^[8]. The teacher gradually reduces the support till the learner can complete it independently (Vygotsky, 1978) [40]. As the students develop their skills the teacher moderates inputs so that they develop autonomous abilities in the process (Danli, 2017)^[8]. Educators can impact several aspects of instructional processes through scaffolding.

To develop autonomy in learning and teaching, scaffolding, as a systematic educational method, illustrates how educators can influence and exert control over many aspects and faces of instructional processes (Benson, 2011). Autonomous learning aims to become independent with the learner's ZPDs (Cross, 2003). When learners become autonomous they search for learning methods conducive to their learning styles rather than sitting back and waiting for their educator's directions (Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014)^[28]. Consequently, scaffolding is critical to creating an autonomous learning process (Smith & Craig, 2013). According to Chen (2020)^[5], scaffolding creates a conducive environment where learners can be active seekers of knowledge rather than passive recipients, completely involved in the learning process without much external control.

The Context

The current study has been conducted in a private senior secondary school in Delhi- NEU School, a pseudonym. The new Principal of the school was concerned about the passiveness amongst the students, high absenteeism, and dropping academic achievement levels in most classes. The Principal invited the researcher to help them understand the issues so that they could address the challenges as a team. The school has an internal examination for classes Vth and VIIIth and therefore has its own pressures. Classes VIth and VIIth were selected by mutual consent with the school for observation. The school has had a culture of teacher-centred pedagogies that are supervised and have to follow timelines for efficient outcomes. The underlying assumption is that the students are too young to make choices. Therefore, in the interest of the students' sound development, they should obediently receive whatever the teachers deem fit for them. It was agreed to undertake a short study on what could be done to make learners partners in the learning process, and teachers acknowledge learners as active agents in their learning process.

The current study has the following objectives:

Why do students become dependent on teachers in the learning process?

How can teachers help learners develop ownership in their learning process and become active agents in their learning process?

Methodology

Class VIth and VIIth of the NEU School were identified with the above objectives. Class VIth has 36 students, with 16 girls and 20 boys in the age group of 11-12 years, and VIIth has 35 students, with 16 girls and 19 boys. Seven teachers are teaching different subjects. The classes were observed for ten days each. So, the observation spanned the whole day in class for twenty days.

Both non-participant observation, as well as participant observation, has been used. Non-participant observation is when the observer observes a group passively from a distance without participating in the group activities. Participant observation means watching the events or situations from inside, interacting with the group freely, and participating in the group's activities. Detailed notes were taken. Interview schedules were developed for interacting with the teachers individually. Findings from class observations were shared with the school team.

Discussion

The analysis of data thus collected brought forth various issues that hampered the learners' engagement in the class and many others that created immense opportunities for developing autonomy in the learners. I will start with the

challenges first:

Several teachers shared that healthy student competition motivates them to perform better, and they goad students to compete with each other. Comparison amongst the students concerning their pace of learning can only create panic or a 'giving up' attitude among these students. Learning is an individual process. Uniform methods can not address the different needs of the learners. Linking students' successes or failures to their lack of ability or intelligence can be counter-productive. Students can be exposed to and encouraged to work on their learning habits, efforts and approach.

As perceived by most teachers, one professional goal is to prevent students from making mistakes. The teachers express their disappointment when students make mistakes and use punishments like exclusion from activity or moving their seats into circles of relatively low achievers. Some teachers make the students write their work in pencil, get it corrected and then write in pen. Some make the students repeatedly write their mistakes several times. The students become scared to try out anything different and try to play safe by getting their work checked by the teachers constantly. This process makes the learner extremely dependent on the teachers or adults as she loses her confidence to try out something and may fail but learn to use their mistakes as opportunities to learn. Some teachers tend to add stigma to failure.

On the contrary, students can be taught strategies for learning from mistakes and dealing with disappointment and negative emotions that interfere with learning. Students need to feel better about how they engage with the new content and try to make meaning for themselves. New learning is like an adventure, and it will throw new challenges. Teachers and students need to learn how to handle disappointments and challenges.

There was hardly any space for students' judgement to develop. Several opportunities were missed to build the student's confidence in her judgment to solve problems, thereby reducing reliance on others. Open space for engagement for the learners could have helped to stimulate the student's curiosity and encourage active learning.

The teachers had broken the whole content down to make it simple for the learners. Fragmented, isolated facts and information were presented to the students. On the contrary, without the big picture, the students felt lost and had to memorise it all to "pass the exam" without making meaning or understanding the overall theme/concept. This was reinforced by the quick recall-based questions asked by the teacher in class and quizzes or similar exercises after the class. Students had no time to ask questions or actively contributed to solving problems. Several opportunities for higher-order metacognitive thinking were missed in the teacher-learner engagement. The students were hardly taking any responsibility for their own learning as there needed to be more opportunities to make choices.

The teachers had paired struggling students with those of higher ability and achievement. As the necessary training for positive tutors was not there, the interactions led to greater dependence on others rather than students becoming more confident. In some cases, it led to bullying as well. So, the student's motivation suffered at both ends of the spectrum.

When the teachers assume the competence of struggling and proficient readers, they can focus on individual areas of strength. Labeling and aggressive tracking of struggling learners can shake the confidence of learners.

Teachers were quick to help students find answers, make notes, and repeat drills to perform well in the exams. The teachers were also doing what the students could do on their own. The students hardly had a voice or choice due to the passive strategies used by the teachers. Students should have been given time to follow their questions or look for problems around them. The teacher's feedback could have been specific and relevant in supporting students' learning. Feedback plays a critical role in developing autonomy in the learners. General feedback like "good/average or bad" is not helpful to the students-specific feedback focusing on the effort and process that the student has used makes it meaningful.

Another observation was about the insistence of teachers that students ape their learning strategies. Students can be made aware of their learning styles through a dialogue on why a certain strategy is suitable for them. Awareness of students as self-regulated and strategic learners should be enhanced. Students must be more aware of their needs, interests, values, goals, and aspirations. Only then can the opportunities to make choices relevant to the student. The choice is ineffective unless students develop the "capacity to choose". Some teachers were anxious that 'students might be unable to understand many choices so that it could be futile'. They also felt that 'students might not listen to them as it may reduce their control over the classes'.

Many observations emerged from teacher interviews and class observation, which created spaces for active student engagement in their learning.

The teacher asked the students, "What topic do you want to study". She offered suitable choices consistent with learning objectives. The teacher initiated her class by asking students to pose questions and seek help from peers or teachers when they were stuck.

She was motivating self-monitoring of their understanding of the materials. She encouraged the students to reflect on their learning process by writing in a journal. Some of the exciting rules the teacher had set in the class include the following-

Ask three, then me: If the learner has a question, she must ask three classmates before coming to the teacher.

The five-minute rule: The student must work on a task for at least five minutes before she may ask a question. These five minutes are for finding the answer; then, ask a classmate.

The teacher had a strategy for clingy children. She would give all students a fixed number of stickers at the beginning of the day. The student had to give a sticker back to the teacher for every trip she made to the teacher's table for clarification. To create alternatives in the class, the teacher had dictionaries and other relevant sources from where students could get help. This exercise would help them keep track of the method the learners are using to resolve the challenges faced in the learning.

Studies conducted by Reeve, Nix, and Hamm (2003)^[34] establish, choices offered to the students have a greater impact on self-determination and intrinsic motivation when they are embedded in enabling conditions like explaining the purpose of work undertaken, openness to raise questions, and accepting negative feelings.

Having to perform and be assessed without knowing the meaning and relevance can be extremely difficult. The practice of making learners aware of purpose and choice in activities to carry out the learning is critical. Research evidence supports that learners are capable of engaging in several higher-order processes for controlling lower-order cognitive, affective, and motivational processes. These higher-order or metacognitive processes primarily consist of self-appraisal and self-management of thoughts and feelings; they fundamentally involve realising the role of the self as an agent in the learning process (Roberts & Billings, 2014).

Another teacher was actively assessing students' interests and providing developmentally appropriate options. She gave suitable topics to read based on the student's areas of interest and readiness to read. The teacher knew each student's interests and capabilities very well. She had a range of books on different areas in children's literature like animal stories, fantasy, adventure, etc., The content density was also varying, some with too few words and pictures and others with low difficulty levels that allow students to build increased capacity for high levels of difficulty, more complex, exposing students to new vocabulary sentence structures and concepts. The classroom discussions evoked dialogue about literacy topics, personal stories, and the struggles of others with learning to read.

Consistent opportunities to become aware of their interests, attitudes, and beliefs in varied content areas enable learners to make choices to become autonomous. (Deakin-Crick, 2012) [9]. These learner-centered practices have to be carefully built in the classroom to enable learners to make choices and evaluate the consequences of the same. This method of trial and error requires a teacher. This trial-anderror process requires the teacher unconditional support and motivation. The teacher used pertinent examples about predicting a story using different books, looking for clues in the story's context, identifying unclear sentences or phrases, and thinking about what they already know. The teacher used the strategy to extrapolate the students' knowledge and extend their thinking to new words and concepts. She encouraged the students to rewrite difficult passages in their own words. The classroom had interesting poems and lyrics that stirred emotions at eye level for the students. The students were found to be reading and singing along by themselves. Similarly, math and science projects that included research into areas of personal interest were identified.

Another good practice observed was that the teacher introduced the unknown through the known to energise students' interest and curiosity. She used a familiar concept from a popular video game to describe the mathematics and programming that makes the game work. She then chose to design a game routine based on the same concept. The students remained glued to their tasks well after the class was over.

As the teacher knew the students well, she allowed them to choose their buddies. This buddy can be someone the students trust and can mutually benefit from their personal goals. This process of selecting a buddy preceded a discussion on the role of a buddy.

An explicit focus on lifelong learning and reading dispositions can be constructive. For example, skimming content to see if it is personally engaging, exploring talking to others about the same author or topics, watching films, or playing to generate interest and familiarity with the content. This way, natural curiosity can guide preferences of materials to read.

The teachers are often hard-pressed for time. They have to

prepare students for assessment in a stipulated time. This haste creates a panic to fulfil exam criteria which often differ significantly from individual learners' needs. The whole attempt is to standardise the uniqueness of learners. Time should be considered an empowering facet to develop autonomy in the learner, where there is no haste to impress the adults with predetermined standards but to equip oneself to monitor oneself and learn to learn.

Research by Tishman, Jay, and Perkins (1982) suggested that teachers can teach self-regulated learning by modeling metacognition. The teacher can talk aloud about her thinking while solving a math problem revealing their mental process while making a particular decision. Some teachers use images of a student with a thought bubble over her head, reminding them to take stock of their own thinking as they work.

Teachers are finding creative ways to stimulate learnercentred dialogue to create true leaders and collaborators. Problems from the learners' context can be identified, and students can be asked to study the issues in small teams. Once learners connect with the problem, they can be encouraged to collaborate and empower each other. The learners will learn to inquire, listen to each other, negotiate their points, and collaborate to succeed. These skills are the focus of 21st-century schooling (Hoerr, 2014)^[17].

A lot of research evidence points to learner choice and control positively impacting student motivation to learn. Students use planning and self-monitoring of learning, higher levels of awareness of their growth, resourcefulness in accessing and using varied resources, and enhanced sensitivity to social context (Jones, Bailey, & Jacob, 2014).

The larger impact includes improvement in retention at school, academic achievement, self-regulation of learning, self-esteem, enjoyment, and satisfaction with school (Deci & Ryan, 2016)^[12].

Learners can become self-regulated with consistent opportunities to follow their own learning plans and goals. Learners tend to evolve a sense of personal agency, that they are the ones impacting their choices and actions-when they learn strategies to observe their own thinking (e.g., Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001)^[25]. This leads to enhanced levels motivation and learning achievement.

Much research has shown that emotions and self-views have specific effects on academic achievement. For example, studies by O'Mara, Marsh, Craven, & Debus (2006)^[30] show that interventions (e.g., explicit metacognitive training, praise, feedback) aimed at changing students' views of themselves as successful learners in different subjects can be effective in changing adolescents' self-evaluations. In turn, researchers have shown that increases in students' selfevaluations positively impact their motivation, learning, and achievement (e.g., Billings & Roberts, 2014; Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2014).

Classrooms that offer choice and control enhance students' persistence and performance persistence (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci 2004) ^[38]. Anderman, Gimbert, O'Connell, & Riegel (2014) ^[1] found that student's academic performance can be increased with a whole-learner approach that recognises the role of emotional, social, family and cultural factors in students' development.

Teachers can regularly reflect and assess the impact of their interventions on the learners. Teachers may make a checklist in the form of pre/post student survey to study parameters of

attitudes they are expecting learners to use. They can also record frequency of use by individual student. Some good indicators would include whether learner seeks support from teacher or peers or uses her own resourcefulness, uses different strategies to reach an answer, her outlook to errors or failures, does she choose to explore a topic in-depth (Patrick & Mantzicopoulos, 2014) ^[31]. Opportunities to express their judgement on their learning can be a regular feature for students in the class. This process can be made dialogic when students give suggestions and see them incorporated by the teacher. The students can be encouraged to write their experiences in a daily journal for themselves.

Conclusions

The classroom should be a safe space where students have many opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings, see that their perspectives are valued, can make choices, and take the initiative in their learning. Positive teacher-learner interaction enhances learner engagement. Students take enhanced responsibility in dealing with their thoughts and feelings when they see their active role in constructing their ideas and beliefs. This invariably leads to higher motivation, learning, and achievement. Metacognition shows that if students learn to exercise control over their thinking, they are more likely to become more autonomous and selfregulated learners. In a positive classroom environment, students feel accepted and get the courage to try out, make mistakes, express their thoughts, and make suitable learning choices. Learners coming from diverse cultural groups have varied convictions about ability, capability and self-worth. Teachers may widen their sociocultural outlooks to understand the influence of varied social and cultural factors on students.

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International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

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