

Learning Environment in Schools

A Field Experience

R. K. SHARMA*

ASHA K. V. D. KAMATH**

Abstract

There are several factors which influence the regularity and performance of learners in the school. Learning environment is one such factor which gives the experience of pleasure or pain, success or failure, active involvement or passive listening, to the students. The present study is an attempt to study the learning environment in Government Secondary Schools of Rajasthan, in terms of learner centeredness, learners' hesitation in expressing themselves and learner treatment by the teacher. The study revealed that the classrooms are mainly teacher centered. Almost no activities are conducted for the learners or with the learners in the class. Teaching is highly oriented on textbook and classroom transaction is done with the textbooks in hand. Learners hesitate to participate in the teaching learning process because of abuse and punishment by the teachers for their wrong responses. Sometimes punishments are severe and highly de motivating. Teachers hardly respect the learners as individuals. Learners find it safe to non-participate in the class. Learners do not get sufficient time to think about the answer and their answers are not heard completely by the teachers. The present study is based on the field experience of the two authors in the secondary schools. The first author got an opportunity to perform field work in a government school for three months, while both the authors got the opportunity to observe classroom processes under one of the projects of NCERT. The experiences gained by them during field work and observation of classroom processes in relation to learning environment in those schools, is presented in this paper.

* Assistant Professor in Chemistry, Regional Institute of Education, Pushkar Road, Ajmer, Rajasthan 305004.

** Associate Professor in Education, Regional Institute of Education, Pushkar Road, Ajmer, Rajasthan 305004.

INTRODUCTION

Children of today are citizens of tomorrow. They have their informal learning at home which is often quoted as 'Home is the first school of the child'. From a loving and caring environment of the home, child enters into school which is a formal centre for learning. Child comes in contact with others like, classmates, peers, teachers etc. Though learning can take place anywhere and at any time, every school has its role to play in creating an environment that supports and enhances both teaching and learning - a space where children feel safe, happy and wanted (NCF, 2005). It is expected that the school would provide a caring, loving, joyful and conducive environment for learning where teachers and children create a web of relationship and interact both formally and informally.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The learning environment has physical, social and psychological dimensions. While the physical environment consists of infrastructural facilities and instructional resources; the social environment consists of relationship between and among human beings whom they find in the school. The psychological dimension portrays the feeling of students towards learning, the kind words and actions towards learners, praise and gratitude received by them. All the three dimensions of the environment are important

and are inter-related. When a child is comfortable and feels secure with the learning environment, it supports learning. NCF 2005 has reflected on an enabling environment in schools. According to it, an enabling environment is one where children feel secure, where there is absence of fear and which is governed by relationships of equality and equity. This requires the teacher to practice equality and not discriminate among children. Teacher has to allow children to engage themselves in learning by asking questions, clarifying doubts and sharing related experiences. An ideal learning environment which is open, respectful, caring and safe makes the school an exciting, stimulating and welcoming place. It is vital to the success of the students. A positive learning environment always would allow students to feel comfortable and confident as learners with high achievement levels making it a structured space for guided learning. The environment should give a homely feeling to the child. It should be a home away from home. But what is the extent of such an environment in our schools? A safe and friendly environment is reflected even under Rights of the Child.

THE CONVENTION ON RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (CRC)

Children are important future human resource and are required to be given special protection. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the condition of children all over the world. As the

situation of children in many parts of the world remains critical due to various reasons, a need was felt to promote well being of children and their development. One of the ways of achieving this was by creating an environment where children are allowed to grow as children by allowing them to enjoy their rights.

The Convention on Rights of the Child (1989) contains several rights of the child in its Parts I, II and III with Articles 1-54. In its Article 1 it is stated that for the purpose of the present convention, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier. The CRC further in its Article 2, mentions that State Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind. A look at Article 31 shows that State Parties have to recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in culture life and arts. As per Article 37, no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Other than these, there are also rights like, to get basic education in mother tongue; Right to life; to be protected from all forms of exploitation; to be protected from corporal punishment; not to be subjected to torture or other cruel

inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Right to rest, leisure and play and the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to exercise freedom of expression. But, the NCF 2005 has remarked that children are frequently denied the opportunity to participate in decision making processes and activities that affect their lives and futures. Is this remark observable in the field - at home or schools? The RTE Act 2009 has guaranteed Right to Education to all children and has even indirectly specified the learning environment.

THE RTE ACT 2009

The RTE Act requires the state to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years and to prepare curriculum in consistent with constitutional values. It aims at quality education and protection of the child. A detailed study of the provisions of the Act makes one understand that there is a close relationship between the RTE Act and the Rights of the Child. It provides for learner centered activity based education, abolition of punishment and harassment, free expression and so on. Though the Act is applicable to children of 6-14 years of age group or till the completion of elementary education, the spirit behind can be applied to secondary stage too.

Though Acts and Policies say many things, for any change to occur in schools, it is necessary to

bring about change in the teacher education programmes. Considering this, the curriculum framework of teacher education has attempted at certain shifts in the teacher education programmes.

NCFTE 2009 AND THE TEACHER

The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009), has been sub-titled as 'Towards preparing Professional and Humane Teachers'. This clearly indicates that the teacher preparation programmes were not completely fulfilling the objectives of either being professional or being humane in their outputs. One of the concerns of NCFTE is developing reflective teachers with positive attitudes and values; with skills for the craft of teaching. The document has also given the vision of Teacher Education and states that teachers to be prepared to care for children - enjoy to be with them, seek knowledge, own responsibility towards society, commitment to justice and sensitivity to the problems of the learners. It further states that teachers are to be trained in organising learner centered, activity based, participatory learning experiences - play, projects, discussion, dialogue, observation, visits and so on. Other than these, learners are to be viewed as active participants and learning has to be a search for meaning out of personal experience. Do our teachers in schools give opportunities to the learners to share their experiences? Do they follow learner centered and

activity based learning giving primacy to the learners? NCF 2005 has very clearly given its guidelines for learner centered learning.

NCF 2005 AND THE LEARNER

According to NCF 2005, learner centered education or child centered pedagogy means giving primacy to children's experiences, their voices and their active participation. It also states that the school environment should create opportunities to try out, manipulate, make mistakes and correct oneself. Children are very important component of a school and come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds with diversity of all types. In spite of this, our rigid school system requires all students of a class to study the same textbooks, perform the same tasks, follow the same rules and show high achievement levels. If they fail to perform as per the expectation of the school they are many times, taken to task. Majority of school children are made to view learning at school as a boring, even unpleasant and bitter experience (Yashpal, 1993). They are also several times punished in spite of the Act for protection of child rights.

PUNISHMENTS IN SCHOOLS

The punishments in the schools vary from standing in the class to torturing in the school. Media exposes the way the children are punished and their rights violated. Children are scolded openly, their individual dignity is hurt in the presence of their peers. They

are also being hit by duster, scale and whatever things the teacher gets in the class. There are instances of children made to stand/run/kneel down in the sun. Impositions are regular features of many schools. They are given such impositions which have no educational value. Children are forced to complete their incomplete homework, assignments, class work etc. during the leisure time. They are also mentally harassed. Are these really happening in our schools? Do they affect the children?

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Though there are many studies on school environment, a few are reviewed in the following paragraphs.

Mourel (2000) studied the effect of corporal punishment on children. His study revealed that the use of corporal punishment influences attendance of school children. They remain absent and long absenteeism leads to withdrawal from schools. A study by Ahmad, Said and Khan (2013) through their study concluded that students who are subjected to corporal punishment are less motivated towards learning and hesitate to participate in classroom activities. They recommended that to increase the motivation level of the students, teachers have to create supportive learning environment which may help in learning sustainability of students. Another group of researchers Swan, Bell, Phillips and Shannon (2000) argued that size of the class and its

environment determines students' attitude towards learning. In a friendly and spacious classroom environment, students take interest in the activities, where as in an authoritarian and rigid classroom, students feel dejected. It was further supported by the study of Roussow (2003), whose study revealed that the students who are punished, less actively participate in the learning process. Vijaya (2009) emphasises on giving freedom to children to learn. She said, we need caring and nurturing classrooms and full-blooded, not lifeless teachers. We need opportunities to freely express one's own conclusions, make and learn from one's mistakes and without being obsessed about being right all the time. All the above studies stress the importance of a friendly, fearless, democratic and conducive classroom environment for learning to occur.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

There are some schools which give enough freedom to the learners, teachers understand the learners and their family background and try to make learning joyful. But, their number is limited. Various documents and the review of studies show that the learning environment in schools is not encouraging. Children's voices and experiences do not find expression in the classroom. Often the only voice heard is that of the teacher. Children are often subjected to punishment, classroom

climate is rigid and authoritarian, participation of learners is poor in the teaching learning process, there is presence of fear and anxiety in learners and their specific abilities are not recognised. Secondary stage of education is considered to be an important stage as it is a link between elementary and senior secondary. It is also important, as many students discontinue their education after secondary due to various reasons. But, it is expected that they do acquire certain knowledge, develop skills as well as values that would help them to be responsible citizens of the country. The experiences they get in the schools go a long way in their life.

Concerned with the above aspects of school environment, the authors were prompted to investigate the real situation of some of the schools as the learning environment influences the learner performance as well as behavior.

Fortunately, authors got an opportunity to observe actual learning environment of the schools through working for a project under NCERT. One of the authors also got an opportunity to observe the situation through Field Work for three months in a ST/SC dominated government school.

As the review of studies indicated poor classroom atmosphere, the investigators decided to make use of the opportunity and study about the learning environment in schools with the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To find out to what extent our schools are learner centered.
- To explore the reasons for hesitation of students in expressing themselves.
- To know how the learners are treated by the teachers.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Design of the Study: It was a survey type study. Students responded to the questionnaire and also had personal discussion with the investigators.

Sample: For the first objective, in relation to observation of classroom processes and learner centeredness, 32 classes of class IX and X in different subject areas were observed by the investigators in Government schools of Churu and Jalore districts of Rajasthan.

For the second and third objective, the sample was 54 students (only boys were in the class) of class X of a randomly chosen Government school of Rajasthan in Jaipur district. The school was located in ST/SC dominated area. The students were considered to be not teachable by the teachers.

Tool: In relation to observation of classroom processes and learner centeredness, investigators observed the classes as well as held Focus Group Discussions with the students.

In relation to reasons for hesitation of students in expressing themselves and treatment of learners by the teachers, an open ended

Questionnaire for students was used. It contained questions like,

- Why are you afraid of teachers?
- Why do you hesitate to express yourself?
- Why don't you participate in the class?
- What punishments do you get in the schools?
- Give incidences which have created an impression of fear in you towards the teachers.

The investigator also held interview with the students to know more about the responses given by them in the questionnaire.

Procedure of Data Collection: In relation to observation of classroom processes to collect data on learner centeredness, investigators observed 32 classes of class IX and X in Government schools of Churu and Jalore districts of Rajasthan. After the class, the investigators held Focus Group Discussions with the students who were randomly selected representing all diverse groups of the class. The discussion mainly focused on learner centeredness of the classes.

In relation to collection of data regarding hesitation of the students in expressing themselves and the treatment of the learners by the teachers, the investigator developed rapport with the students and teachers of class X, observed the teaching learning processes and held regular classes for teaching science using activity based learning method. In the beginning the investigator observed

that students were gloomy, quiet, non active and mum in the class. He discussed with the students for their dullness and silence in the class. Later he told them that he would like to know more about the state of affair in the class. They were told about the purpose of the study and asked them to give their response without fear as it is going to be confidential. A Questionnaire which contained five open ended questions was given to 54 students. They took 30 - 40 minutes to respond, though there was no time limit. After analysing the responses of the questionnaires, each of the students was interviewed separately by the investigator to know more about their experiences related to learning environment in schools.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The observations made by the investigators and the responses given by the students were analysed qualitatively and by using percentage wherever needed. The details are given in the following paragraphs.

Learner Centeredness: Classroom observations by the investigators revealed that all the classes were mainly text book oriented, teacher was in the center stage, learners were passive listeners and no activities were held for the learners. Neither teacher asked the questions regularly nor did the students ask the questions in the classes. Though there are illustrations in the textbooks, they were not even referred to by the teachers. None of the classes had discussions, dialogue,

role play, discovery and participation of the students. Though many studies (Tony Evangelisto.2002; Ausubel, 1978; Fosnot, 1996) have proved that activity based learning is very effective in improving the performance of the learners irrespective of the subject, it was not used in any of the classes. In Social Science, though maps are given in the textbook, while reading the text in the class it is very sad that the teacher never referred to them. Completing the textbook was the main purpose as the students had to face Board Examination. This is just different to what Vijaya (2009) expressed. According to her, when there is a nurturing atmosphere in the classroom, where children can express their joy and excitement, anxiety and fear, where the teacher and the children experience the wonder of discovery, where the teacher is more of a facilitator, there will be more meaningful and long lasting learning.

Hesitation in Expressing Themselves:

When the students were asked, why they hesitate to participate in the class, 50% of the students said that they are afraid of giving wrong answers. Suppose, their answer is wrong, they would be punished by the teacher.

As per the response of 22% of the students, when they are punished, their friends tease them. About 10% of the students said that they feel insulted at the reaction of the teacher for their wrong answers. One boy said that one of his friends

could not answer a question and the teacher insulted him at which all the boys in the class laughed. The boy considered it as a bad experience. He never participated in answering any question from that day. As Yashpal (1993) has said, learning at school is viewed as unpleasant and bitter experience by the children. This is true with regard to the above child who stated as bad experience. A few students wrote that they are afraid of parents being called to school. In such cases they get scolding not only by the teachers in front of the parents and classmates but also by the parents at home and many a times beating. Sometimes even parents were scolded in front of their children and others. This is highly humiliating both to the parents and the students. So, non participation keeps them safe. The fear of failure reduces the capacity to try out new things. Though the NCF (2005) and Vijaya (2009) say that students should be allowed to make errors and mistakes, not many schools take them positively.

Learner Treatment by the Teachers:

Teachers have a very important role to play in schools. It is the teacher whose attitude towards the learner influences the likeness or the dislike of the subject by the learners. If they like the teacher, they would surely like the subject taught by the teacher. But, if the teachers treat the students badly without respecting dignity of the individual, there is neither learning nor value development. The school would be indirectly nurturing the

students to be aggressive, violent and anti social elements of the society. In the present study some students have expressed that teachers sometimes ask questions but do not listen to the answers given by them. A few students have said that this behaviour of the teachers de motivates them and even discourages. A few more have said that when they require some time to think, they are not given sufficient time but the teacher demand answer immediately. Many times they do not allow us to complete our answers.

Students have also expressed that they are being punished by the teachers mainly by beating and other physical punishments. The incidences given by them are - once a student was beaten with a rod which pierced into his head. He was badly hurt and profusely bleeding. Another student was badly hit by a wooden stick on his legs and even now sometimes it pains. In another incident, one student was regularly abusing another student. So, he warned him not to repeat. In spite of that, he continued to abuse and even complained about him to the teacher. Teacher instead of telling anything to the student who abused, he caught the boy who warned, pulled his hair and beat him badly.

No children are bad by birth. The students of class X are not so bad as to be physically punished or mentally harassed. Even if they are, there are right and accepted ways of setting them right. They lack affection and appreciation. In fact,

they have dreams to be good citizens and want to enjoy a respectable life. They want to learn and are ready to work hard. They expect their teachers to be friendly with them as they experienced friendly relationship between the teacher and the students in constructivist classes taken by the investigator. Students enjoyed a lot during teaching learning process and produced wonderful results, though these students were reported by their teachers that they are good for nothing and they cannot do anything. Therefore, it is necessary to see that our classes are full of warmth that gives a feeling to every learner that he/she is wanted.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- The classrooms are mainly teacher centered.
- No activities are conducted for the learners or with the learners in the class.
- Teaching is highly text book oriented and classroom transaction is done with the textbooks in hand.
- Learners hesitate to participate in the teaching learning process because of abuse and punishment by the teachers for their wrong response.
- Sometimes punishments are severe and highly de motivating.
- Teachers hardly respect the learners as individuals.
- Learners find it safe to non participate in the class.
- Learners do not get sufficient time to think about the answer

and their answers are not heard completely by the teachers.

- Learners welcome a friendly atmosphere in the school.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study cannot be generalised as the sample is small. However, they throw light on the situations prevailing in the schools. It is necessary to create a friendly and loving atmosphere in schools that makes the learners comfortable. There is a need to orient the teachers and bring about some changes in the pre service teacher education to make the teachers more children friendly. Learner participation is a matter of concern. Preparing professional and humane teachers (NCFTE, 2009)

must be of priority. The experience presented in the paper is an eye opener to all the teachers to know what is expected by the students. Unless students feel comfortable in the class, it is not possible to make them participate in the classroom processes. Let there be every effort from the community of teachers to make learning joyful, participatory and effective, giving primacy to the learners.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are thankful to the RIE, Ajmer and NCERT, New Delhi for giving them opportunity to take up field work and for involving them in the project.

REFERENCES

- AHMAD IQBAL, HAMDAN SAID AND FAISAL KHAN. 2013. Effect of corporal punishment on student's motivation and classroom learning, *Review of European Studies*, Canadian Center of Science and Education. Vol.5, No.4.
- AUSUBEL, D. 1978. in defense of advance organisers: A reply to the critics, *Review of Educational Research*, 48, 251- 259.
- CRC. 1989. *Convention on Rights of the Child*, General Assembly of the United Nations. www.unicef.org/crc
- FOSNOT, CATHERINE TWOMEY (EDITED). 1996. *Constructivism. Theory, Perspectives, and Practice*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- NCF. 2005. *National Curriculum Framework*. New Delhi. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- NCFTE. 2009. *National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education*, New Delhi. National Council for Teacher Education.
- MOUREL, R. 2000. Corporal Punishment, *Education Monitor*, 11 (1) 42
- ROUSSOW, J.P. 2003. Learner Discipline in South African Public Schools: *A Qualitative study*. Koers, 68 (4), 413-435

- SWAN, M., A. BELL, R. PHILLIPS AND A. SHANNON. 2000. The purpose of Mathematical Activities and Pupils' Perception of them, *Research in Education*. 63, 17-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/RIE.63.2>
- TONY EVANGELISTO. 2002. *Constructivist Approaches to Teaching and Learning, Bridging Professional Perspectives*, The Twelfth Annual Conference on Educating Adjudicated, Incarcerated and At-Risk Youth Palm Springs, California.
- VIJAYA SUBRAMANIAM, Give Children the Freedom to Learn, *The Financial Express*. Dated 30-11-2009, Page, 10.
- YASHPAL. 1993. *Learning without Burden*, Report of the National Advisory Committee, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, Govt. of India.