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Students' Attitude Towards Studying History and Teaching Practices

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Abstract

As an academic subject taught in schools, history provides infinite opportunities to develop analytical skills, value judgment and expression of creativity. But the actual classroom reality tells a different story. The linear approach to history teaching makes the subject extremely dull, monotonous and burdensome to the students. It is this attitude towards history teaching which breeds the perceptions of history being a non-utility subject, having no relevance with the present or future. The present paper synthesizes the findings of an empirical data collected to study the attitude of students towards history and the scope of creativity in history classrooms. The data were collected through classroom observations and questionnaires in three different schools of Delhi. Data analysis highlighted that majority of students did not like studying history or pursuing history as a career choice. Classroom observations found history teaching too much textbook centric and unrelated to students' experiences. Content loaded and rigid methods of teaching history were the plausible reasons for students possessing negative attitude towards history.

Keywords: Attitudes, Teaching Practices

1. Introduction

History is boring. It's all about dates. There is so much to mug up. You will get tired of writing long answers. You can never score good in history. It takes up all my time. It's so irrelevant I don't know why do they even teach it? (Comments from school students of History, Delhi, 2019).

From the initial stages of schooling, it is often presented that history is all about knowing the past, exhaustively fermented with dates and monotony. Textbooks are considered as the ideal source of reproducing this 'past' in classrooms. Teachers merely dictate the factual information stated in textbooks and the classroom transactions in a history class today are one where students have to rote memorize dates, names and territories as important historical milestones 'essential to their exam preparation'. In this process of teaching and learning of historical facts, very less scope is given to students to critically analyze the facts presented before them. Neither are they given space to make their own interpretations based on their individualistic understandings. This linear approach

to History teaching makes the subject extremely dull, monotonous and burdensome to the students. It is this attitude towards history teaching which breeds the perceptions of history being a non-utility subject, having no relevance with the present or future.

Schick (1991) in the famous work on students' perception of studying history claimed that students either have negative feelings about history or they are neutral about it. The Position Paper on Teaching of Social Sciences, NCF (2005)¹ also raised similar concerns over teaching of history and highlighted that the students find history teaching too textbook centric and information loaded with no immediate connection with everyday reality. Raising the concern on history not being considered as a serious subject, the U.S History National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report (2018) outlined that American society is not raising history literate youth. History teaching provides little scope of creativity, imagination or self-expression to its learners, which are essential virtues to adjust and grow in a highly complex and independent world.

Attitudes are our beliefs and predispositions towards objects of attitude. Amengor (2007) defined attitude as human evaluation of objects of thought having three components: a cognitive, affective and behavioral component. Cognitive component comprises beliefs people hold for the object of attitude; affective component is made up of emotions stimulated by the object of thought and behavior component consists of our predispositions to act in a particular way towards object of attitude. Students' abilities and willingness towards learning are determined by their attitudes towards learning. (Ministry of Education, Guyana, 2016). Learning as an individual performance influenced by positive and negative attitude (Sen, 2013) claims that positive attitude makes a student more open to learning and reduces the anxiety level.

As an academic subject taught in schools, history provides infinite opportunities to develop analytical skills, value judgment and expression of creativity. Working on the scope of creativity in history teaching (Jackson, 2005), concluded that creativity is the central of being a historian because historians use their creativity to translate the past by understanding structures, cultures and belief systems that are not presented in the mind. The aim of teaching history at school level is to inculcate social, cultural and analytical skills in students. As per the National curriculum in England (History programs of study, 2013) highlighted that studying history should help students understand the process of change, complexities of human lives, diversities and relationships between different groups and establishing identities through the process of change and development. It further suggests that teaching history should inspire students to know more about the past and prepare them to weigh evidences; raise critical questions; put up arguments and develop perspectives.

The present paper synthesizes the findings of an empirical research to study the attitude of students towards history and the scope of creativity in history classrooms. The data was collected in three different schools of Delhi. The process of data collection and analysis has been delineated in the subsequent sections.

2. Review of related literature

In one of the seminal survey research done by (Schug, 1982), grade 6 to 12 students were asked to rank their favorite subjects in order of preference from the most favorite to the least favorite. In the findings social science was ranked as one of the least favorite subjects. Students' choices were based on the skills needed for future career. Amengor (2007) in his research work with senior secondary school students found that majority of students hold a negative impression and perceptions about history. Analyzing the responses of the senior secondary students, Amengor found that students hold misconception that history was a dead subject and of no use and one of the dullest subjects in school. Harper (n.d) working with 1500 students from grade 7 and 8 found that 72% students placed history as one of the most disliked subjects. The four more prominent reasons mentioned by the students were: too much memorization; lack of continuity in the subject matter; dull and uninterested subject matter and

¹ NCF is the National Curriculum Framework prepared in 2005 by National Council of Education, Research and Training (NCERT) to suggest curriculum plan for all subjects across all grades. NCERT is the autonomous organization under Government of India to assist and plan policies for qualitative improvement in school education.

unimportance. Working with secondary school students (Obeidat et al., 2011), found that students were reluctant to study history because of lack of opportunities to dialogue and participate, too much emphasis on memorization and no real connection with real lives. The main reason of the reluctance was that history becomes more cumbersome and details-laden in higher classes. In a survey study conducted in Sargodha city of Pakistan by (Ahmad & Maryam, 2016), to examine the attitude of students toward social science, the results showed that students were more interested in studying natural science subjects as it could get them attractive and high paying jobs. Boadu (2016) conducted an empirical study in Ghana on 32 history teachers and 18 senior high school students to find out teacher' perceptions of the problems faced in teaching of history. The findings concluded that teachers and students struggled with overloaded syllabus; insufficient teaching resources and lack of academic support made teaching and studying history a challenge for the teachers and students respectively.

3. Methodology

The study was situated in classrooms of three Delhi schools. The data was collected through direct observations and questionnaires.

The objectives of the study were:

- to find out attitude of students towards history;
- to analyze the teaching methods used in the classroom.

The three schools are named as S1, S2 and S3 for the convenience of the readers. S1 was a private senior secondary or high school and S2 was a government funded senior secondary school. In both schools, history was offered as an elective subject choice in grade XI and XII. S3 was a private senior secondary school where history was taught as part of integrated social science and only till grade X. Data was collected through classroom observation and a questionnaire for the students. Table 1 presents the details of schools and observation schedules:

Table 1: Types of Schools and Observation Schedule

School	Type of school	Classes observed and number of students	Classroom observation hours
S1	Private school with history as an elective subject in grades XI and XII	Grade 7 No. of students:43	06 hours
		Grade 9 No. of students:38	
		Grade 11 No. of students:22	
S2	Government run school with history as an elective subject in grades XI and XII	Grade 7 No. of students:36	06 hours
		Grade 9 No. of students:42	
		Grade 11 No. of students:16	
S3	Private school with History subject taught till grade X	Grade 7 No. of students:36	04 hours
		Grade 9 No. of students:39	

Due permissions were taken from the schools before collection of data. Brief discussions were done with the teachers before starting the observations in their respective classes. The discussion was centered around teachers' planning of the day. A detailed observation schedule was prepared so that observations remained focused and all-important aspects were covered in the observation. The observation schedule consisted of seven focus points. The focus points emphasized on classroom discourses and opportunities given to students to raise questions, develop

perspectives, put forth arguments, critically analyze the facts and how teachers connected the present lives of students in the light of past developments. The seven-point observation schedule consisted of the following points:

- Delivery of content
- Use of textbook
- Use of learning resources
- Students' participation and level of participation
- Nature of questions asked
- Learning opportunities beyond textbooks
- Linking with present and practical life

Observations were done around each focus point and a brief description was instantly written. The last part of the observation schedule was kept open to write any other important highlight of the class that was not covered in the focus points. Observations were done by sitting at the last bench of the class. The observations continued for four consecutive history classes in each grade. The duration of each class was 30-40 minutes. After first day of observation in each class, students were asked to fill up a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions related to students' likings, perceptions and aspirations of studying history. Students were to choose one category out of three categories (yes, no or can't say). Not all students however answered the questionnaire. 67 students from grade 7, 52 students from grade 9 and 22 students from grade 11 completed the questionnaire. The recorded observations and filled questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively though quantitative analysis was also done.

4. Analysis of data

4.1 Analysis of classroom observations

Sixteen hours of observations in three different grades across three different schools were recorded as per the observation schedule. An overall analysis was done on the existing practices of teaching history across different grades. Analysis was also done across grade levels: middle grades (grade 6-8); secondary grades (9-10) and senior secondary grades (11-12) to get an insight on how teaching at lower grades affects students' attitude towards history in senior years. During the initial stage of analysis, all recorded observations were complied around each focus point and analyzed. It was found that in almost all the classes the method of content delivery was to read aloud from the textbooks. In few classes teachers were reading through the text and students were following from their personal textbooks whereas in few other cases, teachers asked the students to read the content from the textbooks. In many cases, teachers asked students to highlight important points. Teachers also explained important points in-between the textbook readings. In four instances, teachers also wrote important points on the blackboard. Only 10-12% students were taking notes though majority students followed the instructions given by the teachers. In all the classroom observations, textbook was the most popular resource used by the teachers. The teaching was majorly focused on textbook. Teachers' own interpretations or explanations were used as an additive support to the textbook information. In most of the classes, textbook was the sole resource used by the teacher though in three classes teachers also used large-scale maps to help students identify the different places mentioned in the text.

In most of the classes, students were passive recipients of information. In almost every class only a handful of students used to respond repeatedly whenever the teacher asked a question. In majority cases, teachers did not encourage all students to respond. A single response from anyone student was considered enough to move to the next question. The frequency of questions asked in the history class was also not very high. The average number of questions asked per class was 3.1 with a range of minimum questions asked 1 and maximum number of questions was 5. In most cases, questions were either from the practice exercise at the back of the chapter or from the text content. Most questions required students to retrieve the information from the textbook. In one of the class in grade 7, teacher referred to historical monuments in Delhi built by Mughal emperors. There were very few learning opportunities beyond textbooks. The entire teaching-learning process was focused around the textbook.

The recorded observations were compared across grade levels. Not much difference was found in practicing methods of teaching history in grades 7, 9 or 11. In grade 7, teachers read the textbook for students whereas in grade 9 and 11 students read the books and teachers explained in –between the readings. In grade 7, teachers dictated the answers of the questions; in grade 9 teachers highlighted the answers in the textbook and in grade 11 teachers discussed the answers and students were asked to write final answers on their own.

4.2 Analysis of Questionnaire

The analysis of the questionnaire was done for each question item. Responses of each question item were tabulated, compared and analyzed. As shown in Table 3 the responses are tabulated as per the rating scale:

Table 3: Responses of students

Question Items	No	Can't say	Yes
Do you like history?	67%	21%	12%
Do you enjoy history class?	48%	25%	27%
Do you want to study history in your free time?	64%	25%	11%
Do you find history a difficult subject?	43%	20%	37%
Do you want to study history in higher classes/ in the college?	38%	44%	18%
Do you want to pursue a career in history?	54%	35%	11%
Do you find studying history useful for present or future lives?	76%	12%	12%
Do you like to watch movies on historical themes?	15%	22%	63%
Do you want to know about history of your country?	7%	9%	84%
Do you like to watch history channels or history documentaries?	12%	24%	64%
Do you want to take part in history related activities such as debates; plays; history clubs etc?	7%	15%	78%
Do you think history is a creative subject?	88%	8%	4%

The responses listed above clearly highlighted that majority of students don't possess a favorable attitude or liking towards history. 67% students don't want to study history. Only 12% students responded positively. Out of those 12% responses, 87% responses were from grade 11 students. 64% students don't want to study in their free time. 53% students consider history as a difficult subject out of which 72% responses were from grade 11 students. Close to 50% students don't enjoy their history classes where as more than three quarter of students don't find history useful or relevant to their lives. Contrast to classroom experiences, more than 60% students wanted to engage in history related activities beyond classroom. 63-64% would like to watch movies on historical themes and history documentaries and 78% students wanted to participate in history related activities. The responses highlighted that the students did not like history because they did not find history teaching relevant and did not see any scope of studying history with future careers. The reason many students did not want to pursue history in higher classes because they were not able to relate history with their lives and hence could not see history as a potential career choice. Classroom observations highlighted that history teaching was rigidly textbook-centric. It could be a plausible reason that students found history as a dull and non-creative subject. The over emphasis on textbook based notes making and encouraging memorization of historical facts hampered the students ability to make connections between the past and present.

5. Conclusion

When we talk of an innovative and interactive history classroom today, we often see its implementation restricted solely to scholarly work and policy drafts. The way in which history is reproduced in classrooms is what makes it look like a stagnant stock of irrelevant dates and monotonous events. History however, was never meant to be boring and dull. It was meant to leave its explorers in awe and amazement. If the nature of history is rightfully

decoded, one sees that the very bedrock of history teaching is based on fostering creativity and learning the art of critical analysis. History teaching today sees a huge gap between that which is mentioned in the text and that which is in the immediate environment of the child. History educators should attempt at bridging this gap in order to break the stereotypes of irrelevance and uselessness attached to the subject. It should ignite pupils' curiosity to know more about the past and equip them to ask innumerable questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments, and develop logical judgments. History should help pupils to understand the complexity of people's lives, the process of change, the diversity of societies and relationships between different groups, as well as their own identity and the challenges of their time. Most significant of all, it should imbibe the values of gratitude and appreciation towards the rich heritage students interact with every day.

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