



PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING, Vol. 2, (3), pp. 31-37 (E), July 2016

(International Refereed Journal of Education)

E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526.

Abstracted and **Indexed** in: Google Scholar, ResearchBib, CiteFactor
International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Scientific Indexing Services (SIS),
WorldCDRJI; **Impact Factor: 0.787**, Web: <http://pedagogyoflearning.com/>

Recommended Citation:

Singh, A.K. (2016). Violence and schooling: understanding children's observation.
Pedagogy of Learning, 2 (3), 31-37.

Violence and Schooling: Understanding Children's Observation

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Article Received : 30-06-2016

Article Revised : 11-07-2016

Article Accepted : 24-07-2016

Abstract: *This paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted in a village affected by the Naxal conflict. The village selected for the study is situated in Bihar, one of the least developed states of India. This paper focuses on questions like how do 'we' come to believe that violence may lead to the fulfilment of some objectives (social, political, economic or psychological)? How do children experience and understand violence? How does school education engage with violence? To engage with these questions this paper draws theoretical support from the works from different disciplines and domains including works of Lorenz (1963), Geertz (1973), Freud (1986) and Jung (2003). To examine experiences of violence in relation to children, this paper engages with the conceptual category of childhood with the help of Aries (1973), Kakar (1981) and Kumar (1994). The works of Tagore (1931) Gandhi (1949) and Freire (1996) inform the connections drawn to education, conflict and violence.*

Keywords: *Social Violence, Politics of Education, Pedagogy of Peace*

Background

This paper is based on an ethnographic study conducted in a village in Bhojpur, Bihar, India, with children who have experienced conflict and violence in one or more forms. The village is one among the many in Bihar that have been affected by the Naxal conflict. In this context, this paper explores the connections between children's experience of violence and school education.

The area selected for the study is Bihar, one of the least developed states of India. The main reason for the selection is the presence of decade long history of social violence together with other forms of violence in the area. The area has historical evidence of conflict related to violence caused by land distribution. A preliminary study of the secondary literature

provides us with evidence to understand the ‘reproduction of violence’ in various phases and forms in the area. While writing for the Gazetteer of Bihar in 1934-35, Solomon (1937, 116-117) highlights the congenial relations between landlords and agricultural labourers. But the following three consecutive Gazetteers mention various incidents of conflict between the two above-mentioned groups. (Wasi 1938, 96-97; 1941, 107; 1942, 86-87). Taking various forms, this initial struggle evolved into an armed conflict by the seventies (Urmilesh 1991), and, towards the nineties into the establishment of private armies (Louis, 2002; Bhatia, 2005) that created an ethos whereby the characteristics of violence were quite visible on a daily basis in the area.

Why do people think that violence may provide any kind of solution to a conflicting situation? How do ‘we’ come to believe that violence may lead to the fulfilment of some objectives (social, political, economic or psychological)? How does this understanding develop? How do children experience and understand violence? How does school education engage with violence? These questions have a wide range of answers in different discourses and disciplines. An inquiry into the historical events leads us to the understanding that there has always been some kind of conflict behind violence. These conflicts, on the one hand, have been a part of the processes involved in establishing dominance, and on the other, they have also appeared on the social scene in the form of struggle against deprivation. To engage with these questions and connect strands with academia theoretically, this paper draws from the works from different disciplines and domains including psychology, anthropology, sociology and education. The works of Lorenz (1963), Geertz (1973), Freud (1986) and Jung (2003) are central in building an understanding of violence. To examine experiences of violence in relation to children, this paper engages with the conceptual category of childhood with the help of Aries (1973), Kakar (1981) and (Kumar 1994). The works of Tagore (1931) Gandhi (1949) and Freire (1996) inform the connections drawn to education, conflict and violence.

Structure and Violence

Conflict and violence (of varied forms) continue to structure the social and pedagogical world of school in general and Children’s cognitive domain in particular. In various forms and styles, conflict and violence also reflect in how the politics of education is played out in society. While educational research registers conflicts and violence involving apparent physical implications, the subtleties of children’s experience(s) of these phenomena are not empirically well-studied in educational discourse in India. Also, as is the case with all social categories (such as caste and violence), the understanding of impact of violence and its relation to children’s education has been largely ‘hegemonised’ and shaped by the adult world-view. In this context, this paper underlines the need and a ‘pedagogy’ for engaging with the experiential world(s) of children amidst more than one form of violence and conflicts (both apparent and implicit). The main objective of the paper is to underline the character of various forms of and tendencies towards violence [both a. the permanent violence inherited in social structures, and b. immediate violence (Prasad, 1974)], experienced by children (particularly in a village context in India). An attempt has been made to explore the role of children’s experience in reproduction of violence and to suggest an alternative, located in the process of education, to counter it.

In the above context, the paper makes an attempt to understand the overall matrix of conflicts and violence constructed by children and explores questions such as –How (if at all) do children relate or differentiate between various kinds of conflicts (caste, class, gender, adult-child, and the like)? How the children’s identities get implicated in these

processes? How is school as an institution involved in this context? How can school education counter violence? In this process, the paper engages with the archaeology of experience during childhood responsible for formation of children's 'psyche' and 'cognitive world' which perceives violence as a 'solution' in confrontational situations. The field evidences demonstrates a range of experiences during childhood that are responsible for the formation of children's idea of violence as the only solution to tense conflicting situations. Further, the findings help in understanding 'violence' as a form of the adult male domination in the society.

The Inevitability of Violence and Education

Conflict and violence have been many-a-time underlined as inevitable (Lorenz 1963). The inevitability of violence reflected in cultural practices is also reflected in the understanding that every people love its own form of violence (Geertz, 1973). Drawing from psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1986) it can be hypothesised that one of the prominent explanations or "causes" of violence can be traced to the experiences during childhood that constitute the unconscious. Psychoanalysis also engages with the 'collective unconsciousness' as another powerful explanation of violence (Jung 2003). [Jung's (2003) idea of archetype explains that practices of violence can be deciphered in various metaphor, images and memories].

Contrary to above arguments reading of Tagore (1931), Gandhi (1949) and Freire (1996) suggests that it is possible to respond violence through education in general and schooling in particular. In order to respond to violence, Tagore (1931) suggests that it is important to understand child's cognitive world. This is possible only through a creative engagement with the child. Gandhi (1949) highlighted the limitation of violence as tool to achieve any end. His understanding enables the imagination of an educational framework that responds to violence as a social & collective action, as does Freire's (1996) work.

Third and another important concern is adult child relation. While talking of school education and children's experience, this paper argues from the perspective that childhood is not merely a social and cultural position manifested by historical process (Aries 1973; Kakar 1981). Rather, it is a political construction of a society dominated by adults (Kumar 1994). It is important to locate social violence as a part of this political framework that directly influences the social context of childhood and cognitive world(s) of children. It has been argued by some prominent educational thinkers' children are deeply aware of social conflicts and its reflection in the form of violence (Kumar, 1996, 2007; Giroux 1983, 1996). In general this awareness leads to ideas, questions and anxieties about the past, present and future. However, given their social location, children seldom find the opportunities to express themselves. They do not have the spaces, neither in school nor in society, to voice these anxieties and make sense of these concerns. Yet, children actively construct their own 'rationales' and 'meanings' of violence, which have an implication on their understanding of the larger social matrix.

Observation and learning of Violence

The field work shows that children often observe, or are forced to observe, the methods of resolving conflict resorted to by adults. These methods largely resort to violent alternatives as in case of Naxal movement. Experiences based on the day to day observations, are strengthened by the social cultural traditions, folk-practices, social trends and popular icons, media (i.e., radio, television and films). These tradition, sign and icons interact with children on regular basis. Yet, there is strong evidence from the field that demonstrates that the

children are able to make a fine differentiation between violence to establish domination and protect them from domination.

Within the public spheres of the pattern of discipline ensured by the village culture, where the role of people who control and people who follow are fixed. Breach of discipline leads to some form of a penalty, and it is necessary to avoid penalties; one should follow the established disciplines. There are occasions when many established disciplines have been broken and at the same time there are many processes in the opposition that thrive. It was a special order of these procedures and this order or pattern is not only observed by children, but it creates a meaning for them as well.

The process we referred to as the socialization of children is a result of many processes and this creates specific habits among children, and they follow certain ways of behaviours, rituals & discipline. In this order, children encounter many cultural and social processes on a day-to-day basis. Agriculture-based economy is apparently reflected in the village's annual cycle where rituals are repeated annually. 9-10 years old children become deeply familiar with the cultural rituals of the village and they seem to distill their own way. Most children between 9-14 years were not just familiar with the annual cycle and rituals, but they were aware of the cultural contexts of those rituals and were also in a position to tell. It is important to note that children are able to identify that violent activities are more frequent during the end of the agricultural cycle. The relationship between the agricultural cycle and violence, explained by children, is apparent but restricted to their casual observation.

The second critical thing is children's engagement in those rituals and cultural practices. It is apparent that children are not only learning through observation of ongoing social violence but cultural practices also play a significant role. Using Prasad (1974) vocabulary it is not only immediate violence but children are also learning through permanent violence. For children it is easily observable in social cultural traditions, folk-practices, social trends and popular icons, and they are also in a position to decode the meaning of symbols and violence inherent in it. These traditions, signs and icons interact with children on a regular basis. The power of performance whether it is a festival or social practice or act of punishing a child on his/her 'unacceptable' behaviour are not 'just an act' but they are also a form of communication for children. Eventually it all together constructs a new kind of social relations, composes and cognizes a world. The engagement of culture is not just restricted to religious belief and practice, but also includes the 'operation' and 'behaviour' of the village where 'norms' are derived from village hierarchy. These practices and behaviours, not just match the economy of the village, but also serve a mechanism to keep up social orders.

It is important to know what the children mean anything to retrieve such rituals or habits. While weaving these observations in order to make meaning and they are conscious or without any conscious learning of village social order things. But this is not a uniform learning. The social positioning of a child dictates the nature of his/her observation and experiences of violence, it may be from a dominated group or a defender. While discussing Naxal violence children were able to demonstrate this difference by categorising violence into observing violence, bearing violence and involvement in violence with a fine differentiation between violence to establish domination and prevent ourself from domination. Children are able to draw the relationship between violence and conflict but they are not able to draw meaning (or relation) from their learning at school to construct or reconstruct the social reality.

Schooling and Children Experiences

We can categorise the children's experience of violence into three selected parameters in order to draw an outline of child's cognitive world in relation to conflict and violence, and anticipated response of school:

1. Schools are unable to adopt the substantive corpus of diverse and sometime conflicting experiences in society by children

As we stated earlier the relationship between adults and children is a significant context to understand violence, where childhood is not merely a social and cultural position manifested by historical process, rather it is a political institution which sustains itself by socialising children into its frameworks. Based on this understanding it is apparent that idea of violence is transacting from one generation to another generation through behaviour, practices and memory of an adult. Adult memory and its interaction with children creates and augments experience of accumulated violence in children's cognitive domain. So in a way, during the process of meaning making from experiences child depends on a prejudiced framework from adults in child's immediate environments. But school neither supports nor rejects the framework that the child gets familiar through their environments. Close observation of classrooms reveals that it's not only the curriculum but notion of 'ethic' and apprehension to avoid any discussion on conflict allow children to construct meaning as per their own experiences in village.

2. No space for representation of experiences within school pedagogy (includes questions related to whose experiences and what is the nature of experience) and quest to understand conflict and violence in school premises

It has been observed that children's learning are actually disconnected from village, it's a kind of silence. For example - Such as when they study history, they are unable to relate the word "revolutionist" in their text book and the same used in village (*karatikari* or *Karanti*). This is an incident of history class. When they learn about revolutionist? The class devoted to "kakori incident". Parallel to this class they also learn word 'revolution' through poster in the village posted by Naxals. However they are not in position to make any relation or differentiation between the two. Within school and prevalent pedagogy, there are more significance of those dimensions that are the result of mental exercise, are simply considered to be completed in contrast to children's evidences from experience and observation. Within schools there is a situation that children seem to believe that their own experiences and observation are imperfect and incomplete. In this environment when children are trying to explain or resist some rules based on their observation and interpretation of a thing, that eventually become physical and less important for the teacher. These explanations of children are not like a mystery. So they are not as attractive as those ideas based on purely mental exercise. The education process in school has this duality where 'observation', 'evidence' and 'experience' are less powerful and 'word' or 'institutional logic' was much louder.

3. Issues in official structure of schooling for acceptance of experiences and validation processes

As we stated earlier theoretically it seems possible to compete conflict and violence through education. The principles acknowledge the inherent human tendency to violence, there are also those who provide basis to argue that conflict and violence can be countered through within duality of education. Observation and children's conversation made during field work

in this village , which is grossly affected by Naxal movement, shows that children are heavily resister immediate violence however micro level detailing and in-depth description, however observation of children's day to day life shows that there are more profound impact of persisted violence. It is one thing that the prevailing scripture of pedagogy and schooling does condone both of these experiences. Schooling, in this entire period, not only remains 'silent' but also reinforces the violence based methods through structure and popular pedagogy such as 'competition'.

The extension of these three can be seen in the question of identity and dilemma of adjustment. In most of the cases, the conflict remains unarticulated by the community living in it, although the community people remain on a constant search for literature, movement, social metaphor, social events, collective activities etc for articulating their conflict. But for children school is probably only one site to consolidate the problem. While this is one part of the finding, it also comes across from the field that schools can potentially be visualized beyond mechanistic view of social reproduction or idea which suggests that violence is essentially intrinsic to the mere concept of schooling (Niell, 1968).

Pedagogy for Peace

One of the findings of this study goes in sync with Freire's (1996) idea of a different and a community pedagogy for the oppressed and Vygotsky's (1978) idea that community is the most significant factor in learning, and culture being the most significant tool in it. As we discussed earlier children often observe, or are forced to observe, the methods of resolving conflict resorted to by adults in their surroundings. These methods are rarely based on peaceful negotiations. Experiences based on day to day observations are strengthened by the media like television and films. Schooling, in this entire period, not only remains latent but also reinforces their conviction towards the violence based methods. Even though it is being expected from schools that they work towards the enhancement of peace processes (NCERT 2005). It is rightly explained by Davis (2004)

"The reproduction of conflict has received far less attention, except in institutional terms with studies of deviance and labelling. Studies within the psychology of education can give us insights into individual conflicts within the school and the aetiology of aggression. Yet we lack a suitable theoretical framework which can explain the macro issues of how education can act to reproduce conflict on a global scale, or conversely how some educational arenas are active in the struggle for peace and how some schools in conflict zones are resilient while others crumble)." (p 19)

It is also significant to understand John Dewey's understanding of knowledge 'as reconstruction of experiences' in relation to what does it implies for a child, or a group of children, to experience violence in one or more than one forms of violence at the same time? Finally how school can respond to those experiences. Prima-facie the answer these question demand understandings of, 1) the formation of subconscious due to experiences of early childhood (as per Freud 0-6), 2) The socialization during middle childhood (6-12) and 3) understanding of the world during adolescence age (late childhood). This is the role expected from schools -- that as social institutions these should work towards the enhancement of peace processes (N.C.E.R.T., 2005; Giroux, 1989).

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