Constructivism and Revitalizing Social Studies

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THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE), created by the Constitution of 1971, has a relatively short history of official education. Prior to the 1960s, there was no formal schooling system in Abu Dhabi, the city that is now the UAE's capital; it is only in the very early 1970s that schools operated officially.[1]

Public schools in the UAE are segregated and co-education is non-existent in public schools. As indicated by the Ministry of Education, the education system in the UAE has been undergoing transformation.[2] The biggest challenge Abu Dhabi is facing is in the area of educational reforms and reinventing the wheel for the educational system, in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, school management, educational leadership, and teachers' training.[3]

Reforms in Abu Dhabi are taking place through Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC). ADEC is a non-federal government authority that has taken charge to develop education since 2006. According to ADEC, "Under the strong leadership of HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces and the Chairman of Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC), and Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Presidential Affairs and Deputy Chairman of ADEC, the education system in the emirate of Abu Dhabi has begun a journey of growth and modernization."[4] The education system as well as ADEC itself have been undergoing

transformation in recent years. The "Law No. 8 of 2008 reorganized the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) so that it incorporates the three education zones [including the city of Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, and the Western Region], and expands the autonomy of the education system in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi from the Ministry of Education."[5] ADEC is working hard to enable Emirati students to emerge from high-quality schools to pursue further higher education. The challenges involve developing the quality of education at the school level by means of teachers' training both in-service and pre-service.[6] Dr. Mugheer Al Khaili, the Director General of ADEC, stated that ADEC is aiming at high quality of education that suits the twenty-first-century trends, in terms of curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy. He remarked, "We don't just want to improve our education system, our schools and the performance of our students … we want to be ranked as one of the best education systems in the world."[7]

Dr. Al Khaili criticizes the current status of education in Abu Dhabi, stating, "Abu Dhabi hasn't gone as far as it should in changing the way we teach and what we teach in our classrooms. Teaching is still very traditional with the teachers doing most of the talking and students listening passively. Students are viewed as empty vessels that we must fill with content knowledge. We then expect them to memorize all they've learnt and write it down in exams."[8] During 2009, ADEC developed an action agenda to enhance changes in education to be in harmony with the new modern trends of education to meet the expectations of ADEC's vision in terms of lifting education in Abu Dhabi to an international standard.[9] These changes included mainly managerial and leadership changes as well as curricular changes in Math, English, and Science.[10] Nevertheless, Social Studies was not included in the umbrella of these changes, since in the past years, Social Studies as a school subject was under the autonomy of Abu Dhabi Education Zone (Ministry of Education); just during 2009, ADEC took more autonomy over education in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Eventually, changes in Social Studies need to take place to promote better constructivist teaching-learning.

At the moment, as I have seen through the Social Studies classroom visitations and observations I encountered as a practicum supervisor, there is an urge for improving Social Studies curriculum and pedagogy. This case study is trying to probe the areas of development needed in Social Studies as a school subject.

The participants of this case study are Social Studies in-service teachers at the public schools in Abu Dhabi. I have known these participants in the capacity of being their instructor (I taught them three courses of Curriculum Studies-Social Studies). These participants are students at the Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE).

ECAE was founded in 2006 by Abu Dhabi Education Council, and is the only teachers' college in Abu Dhabi. These participants were enrolled in the Post Graduate Diploma of Education Program (PGDE). The PGDE is offered for students who have a bachelor degree in a subject area and need to become qualified teachers in their subject specialization. The PGDE in-service student-teachers who participated in this case study have completed the PGDE requirements within twelve months. Requirements included courses in Educational Psychology, Information and Communications Technology, Communication Skills, Social Context of Education, Classroom Management, and three courses of Curriculum Studies (we offer curriculum studies for the following majors: Arabic, Islamic Studies, Social Studies, English, Math, and Science). These courses were delivered by bilingual Arabic/English teachers or bilingually (i.e., delivered in English with the help of native Arabic teaching associate translators). All courses were offered bilingually except for English Curriculum Studies (delivered in English), and Arabic and Islamic Curriculum Studies (delivered in Arabic).

Prior to this study, the PGDE participants took three courses of Curriculum Studies-Social Studies with me (CS1, CS2, and CS3). CS1 covered mainly the theoretical framework of teaching of Social Studies. This included the Social Studies content, teaching strategies, and assessments; CS2 covered curriculum and instruction, and CS3 was the practicum course. During this course, students worked on preparing their teaching portfolio, were observed once while teaching in their actual classroom setup, and, accordingly, were given a feedback on their teaching.

I have worked with the participants as their lecturer for CS1, CS2, and CS3 and supervised their practicum. I have conducted one classroom observation for each in-service Social Studies teacher and provided them with feedback on the areas they need to develop in their teaching. The practicum took place towards the end of CS3, i.e., mainly after covering the theories of teaching and instruction.

Rationale

The UAE is developing its Social Studies curriculum and pedagogy for public schools.[11] Practically speaking, teaching Social Studies in the UAE is still based on the traditional way of teaching; route memorization is the means of acquiring knowledge. In order to enhance Social Studies constructivist teaching-learning, we need to shed the light on the current obstacles that teachers are experiencing in terms of curriculum organization. This renders this paper significant in terms of a) what current Social Studies teachers need to say as far as the constraints they are facing, and

b) what alterations Abu Dhabi Education Zone and Abu Dhabi Education Council need to introduce on the following levels: curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Research Questions

The case study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Post Graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) in-service student-teachers (ISTs) at Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE) have a basic understanding of constructivism?
2. Do ISTs at ECAE apply/integrate constructivism in their instructional material?
3. What factors inhibit the implementation of Social Studies constructivist teaching-learning in public schools?

Methodology

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted at the college, each for a duration of twenty to thirty minutes. These semi-structured interviews were addressed in Arabic (the native language of the participants) and then translated to English. Data collection was based on the instructional material and interview responses of twenty-one Emirati history, geography, economics, civic education, and social studies teachers, at the post-primary level in Abu Dhabi public schools, including Al-Ghad Schools. These are fifty government schools spread all over the United Arab Emirates and run by the Ministry of Education. These schools have been allocated special care of the human resources and equipment levels and assisted by the Ministry of Education to promote better quality education as compared to regular government schools. Model Schools are supervised by the regional education zones within the United Arab Emirates. Public-Private Partnership Schools (PPP) are run by Abu Dhabi Education Council with the aid of private education providers. The participants were teachers who only taught in Abu Dhabi at the above-mentioned schools. It is worth mentioning that these Social Studies PGDE participants use Arabic as a medium of instruction.

The twenty-one teachers were the entire population enrolled at the only teachers' college in Abu Dhabi (ECAE). This population is the total sample of PGDE Social Studies in-service student-teachers (ISTs) that took part in this study. The PGDE-ISTs were asked to submit a portfolio of the instructional material they have prepared for a variety of Social Studies lessons, including history, economics, civics, geography, and social studies. This portfolio was a required assignment that was col-

lected from the ISTs. The instructional materials analysed were randomly selected and submitted by the ISTs in order to examine the application of constructivism. Constructivism has been discussed and covered, theoretically speaking, in three PGDE courses: Social Context of Education and Curriculum Studies-Social Studies 1 and 2, as well as prior to the interviews conducted.

The responses from the interviews reflect the theoretical implication of the Social Studies teachers' attitudes towards constructivism and the constraints they are facing in applying constructivism. The data were analysed according to a Social Studies constructivist teaching-learning checklist presented by Brooks and Brooks.[12]

Literature Review

Constructivism intends to refine students' knowledge, develop inquiry skills through critical thinking, and lead to students developing opinions about the world around them. According to Cannella and Reiff[13] and Richardson,[14] learning activities in a constructivist setting are characterized by active engagement, inquiry, problem solving, and collaboration with others. According to Zevin, correct answers and single interpretations are de-emphasised in constructivist learning.[15] McKay writes that the constructivist approach is skill and problem solving-based.[16] Nuthall adds that the teacher needs to offer multiple perspectives and a variety of formats in which the information can be presented.[17] What is suggested by Cannella and Reiff, Zevin, McKay, and Nuthall is restricted in conservative postcolonial conservative societies. Melikian views that in newly independent states (Arabian Gulf Countries, the UAE included), learning and knowledge acquisition is based on socialization and assimilation to one's national culture, and thus attitudes, opinions, and values are societal rather than internally processed and constructed.[18]

Social Studies constructivist learning is enhanced when students begin processing what they have learned on multiple levels, which leads to higher-level thinking and strays away from strict factual information; whereas in postcolonial conservative communities, socio-cultural constraints are imposed on the students, hindering the promotion of constructivist teaching-learning in general, including Social Studies.[19] According to Ediger, "Social Studies needs to use a variety of methods and procedures to assist each pupil to achieve as optimally as possible. Learners individually possess diverse learning styles and intelligences."[20]

When we are talking about social constructivism and teaching Social Studies, we are not only addressing the pedagogy and strategies, we need also to address the content and how much constructivism is embedded in

the teaching material that coincides with constructivist pedagogy. This includes the depth and the scope of the content that allows for constructivist teaching-learning to take place[21] and this in-depth teaching-learning may be not allowed in ethnocentric conservative communities.[22]

In my opinion, postcolonial conservative societies that intend to teach Social Studies through constructivist teaching-learning strategies may face more constraints than in open societies. Teague adds that due to socio-cultural constraints, teaching through multiple perspectives is sometimes hard to attain in an ethnocentric society; the fact that "others' prior knowledge that is in harmony with communal norm negates other views and perspectives."[23] Furthermore, Gergen argues that in ethnocentric communities, "the meaning of words and actions 'is not derived by comparing them against the subjectivity of their authors, but against the governing conventions of the communities in which we reside.'"[24] This will restrict the promotion of Social Studies teaching from a reflective inquiry, hence hindering the dimensions of Social Studies constructivist teaching-learning.

Sunal and Hass indicate that meaningful Social Studies should develop reflective inquiry skills.[25] Constructivist Social Studies curriculum needs to recognize the child as an active constructor of his/her own meaning within a community of others who provide a forum for the social negotiation of shared meanings. This premise is not accepted in postcolonial conservative societies such as Qatar and the UAE, where change is resented since values and opinions are developed within a societal dimension rather than a personal individual dimension.[26] Due to the fact that values and norms are preconceived externally through the socio-cultural setup, construction of Social Studies values and skills in the cognitive and affective domains are resented.

Conclusively, constructing opinions and values through inquiry-based learning, self-learning, and student centred-learning in the discipline of Social Studies is not encouraged or even permitted and thus, teaching strategies that promote constructivist teaching-learning are resented by conservative communities, especially in the discipline of Social Studies. This resentment stems from the parents' and administrators' perception of learning, which is characterized by being teacher-centred and content-based, where students are recipients of knowledge. Moreover, there exists a communal belief that knowledge has to be in harmony with the social and cultural values and norms of the learner.[27]

Socio-cultural conservation and the societal and cultural values are highly prioritized in postcolonial conservative societies, which is a constrain to promote constructivist learners.[28] Nevertheless, in spite of the socio-cultural elements argued above and the assumption that these ele-

ments restrict constructivist Social Studies teaching-learning, surprisingly enough, the Social Studies teachers who participated in this case study did not indicate that the conservative socio-cultural context of Abu Dhabi as far as the traditional role of the Social Studies teachers, the socio-cultural content of the subject, and the outdated methods that are still in practice in the 21st century are determinants of constraints.

In the past two centuries, the discipline of Social Studies has become very complex and dynamic. Worldwide as well as regional changes are taking place that need to be addressed in Social Studies as an academic subject. Nevertheless, in conservative communities, these changes are not accepted neither on the teachers' level (they still believe that teaching should be teacher-centred) nor on the pedagogical-content level and as a result, the vehicle of a progressive constructivist Social Studies teaching is not welcomed.[29]

In a postcolonial era and particularly in newly independent states, Social Studies teaching-learning is caught between conservatism (cultural preservation) and constructivism as two polarized trends. This creates a pedagogical and curricular dilemma at the Abu Dhabi Social Studies teaching-learning front. This dilemma is characterized by the UAE nationals holding tightly to their ethnic identity and national Social Studies teachings versus the level of globalization they want to adopt or even introduce to their Social Studies curriculum and pedagogy. The dilemma explained above was not explicitly mentioned; instead, the ISTs focused on the external constraints that hinder the adoption of constructivist Social Studies teaching-learning. The fact that the IST responses did not reflect any self-criticism to neither their own teaching nor the socio-cultural constraints (except when Internet access and field trips were forbidden/restricted in girls' schools) indicates that more in-depth renovations need to be done on the human resource side of constructivist Social Studies teaching-learning. These renovations include developing the reflection skills of ISTs to embody descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection.

Promoting constructivist Social Studies teaching-learning cannot be materialized unless we design a curriculum that tends to teach through constructivist strategies. Nevertheless, in light of the nature of the postcolonial conservative argument presented above, there are constraints and inhibitions on the socio-cultural context that Abu Dhabi policy makers need to be aware of while designing a constructivist Social Studies curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, a close look should be taken on the process of Social Studies teachers' training as well as administrative reforms.

Interview Findings and Analysis

The first question addressed traced the basic understanding of constructivism. All of the twenty-one participants had heard of constructivism. Eighteen participants gave satisfactory responses that reflect their basic understanding of constructivism. The eighteen responses revolved around the following: cooperative learning; learning by research and looking for information; discovery learning; document analysis; avoidance of route memorization and recitation; explaining facts; higher level of thinking including analysis, synthesis, student-centred learning; and linking between learning and technology. Only three responses reflected misconception of the meaning of constructivism. They stated that constructivism is "when the students fulfil the learning objectives and outcomes", "is looking for information in the book and finding it", and is "when the students fulfil what he/she is asked to do".

As for the constructivist teaching-learning strategies and the ISTs' familiarity with these strategies, the following was found:

Out of twenty-one participants, two participants (9.5%) were not familiar with constructivist teaching-learning strategies. The remaining 90.5% were familiar with constructivist teaching-learning strategies. There was a consistency between the responses of the two participants who said that they were not familiar with constructivist teaching-learning and the instructional material they have presented, which traced no constructivist approach. ISTs were familiar with cooperative learning, independent learning, problem solving, discovery learning, and research-based learning. However, eleven participants (52.3%) were familiar with cooperative teaching-learning strategies in addition to other teaching-learning strategies. The remaining eight participants (37.7%) were familiar with a variety of other strategies such as learning through research, discovery learning, self-learning, and problem solving.

It is interesting to note here that since the question addressed teaching-learning strategies, all participants had ignored the teaching component of the question in their responses, did not include the constructivist teaching strategy they used, and instead talked about constructivist learning in general. This is significant, as it implies the ISTs' lack of application in using constructivist teaching strategies.

ISTs were asked whether they have integrated constructivist methods or strategies in their teachings, and which ones they practically used. One participant (4.7%) said, "I am not sure whether I use it or not." Another participant (4.7%) used it with limitations due to social constraints, since Internet access and discovery and independent learning through field trips were not allowed for girls (at her school). Another one of the participants

(4.7%) indicated that he used constructivist teaching, stating, "I did not take into consideration its features (rubric, mixed groups, size of group, time frame), and thus its results were not pedagogically successful."

Yet another one of the participants (4.7%) claimed that he used constructivist strategies. Nevertheless, his response indicated a misunderstanding of constructivist application: "I used it through giving a certain topic and then showing the students how this topic is linked to the previous lesson and the next lesson, and I tried to bridge the gaps among lessons." This response reflected inconsistency between his theoretical and practical applications of constructivism. The rest of the participants (80.9%) mentioned that they used cooperative learning, research-based learning, student-centred learning, analysing case studies, and problem solving. The responses on this question reflected the theoretical notion of teaching strategies and did not trace the application in a real classroom teaching. This showed significantly the theoretical understanding of constructivist teaching and the misinterpretation of cooperative learning. Though the responses suggested that ISTs have used cooperative learning, in reality and through their responses, the participants had mixed up the notion of group work with constructivist-cooperative teaching-learning. The participants who indicated using cooperative learning basically divided their classes into different groups; however, in constructivism, there is more into cooperative teaching-learning than what was anticipated by the responses given.

Asking the ISTs whether they have ever integrated constructivism in their worksheets, activities, and assessments gave profound findings on whether the ISTs applied constructivism as they claimed. After analysing the worksheets, activity sheets, assessment sheets, and enrichment activities, learning outcomes, and lesson plans, it was found that only two participants (9.5%) integrated constructivism feebly and in a very limited manner (quantitatively, just one task reflected constructivist learning) in their instructional material. The first participant gave her students a historical document to analyse and then asked them to deduce historical facts through indicating cause and effect relationships, and the second participant gave his students geographic charts and graph bars in order to deduce demographic changes and suggest solutions. These two tasks were in harmony with the features of constructivist learning as presented by Brooks and Brooks.[30] Four participants said that they did not use constructivism. Nevertheless, one of these four, practically speaking, did use it. Conclusively, 14.2% of participants claimed that they had not used constructivism in preparing their Social Studies material, yet their responses actually coincided with their instructional material analysed. 14.2% of participants said they use constructivism in a limited extent in preparing their instructional material, however, practically speaking, they

did not integrate constructivism. One participant (4.7%) said that he/she used constructivism, but not in graded work for the following reason:

> I integrate thinking exercises in activities that are not graded or part of the assessment sheets, because the supervisors want us to write direct questions and direct application questions in the graded work, and they assume higher thinking skills are hard to answer; thus the student will fail and they don't want to fail any student.

Though the above participant claimed to have used constructivism in ungraded work, from the random samples he/she submitted, constructivism was not evident in his/her instructional material. In fact, by linking the responses relevant to the practical application of constructivism to the instructional material presented by the participants, it appeared that only 9.5% of participants applied constructivism in a limited manner.

The ISTs stated that they faced one or more difficulties in applying constructivism in their Social Studies teachings. One participant stated, "Using constructivist teaching-learning was chaotic, since students were not responsible and prepared to use cooperative learning." Social-administrative constraints restricted constructivist teaching-learning, as one participant explained:

> I want to take the girls on field trips; I want them to write their observations, during a field trip, but unfortunately, most parents don't allow their daughters to go on school field trips. They don't know its importance for the learning process, so these female students are left behind, at the school deprived of the opportunity of becoming self/independent learners.

Difficulties in Applying Constructivism

It was hard to calculate the percentage per participant relevant to difficulties faced since many participants faced more than one difficulty; thus, the percentages were aggregated into overall categories. According to evidence collected from the ESTs, the difficulties were within the following areas (the percentages for the areas of difficulties follow each explanation):

1. *Classes and schools are unequipped.* One participant said, "we have one computer for the 700 female students to use." Another participant added, "I face some difficulties because the classrooms are not well-equipped for cooperative learning." (38%)

2. *Teachers are unfamiliar with constructivist teaching strategies.* Teachers lack the skills for applying constructivist teaching strategies and are unable to manage the classes during constructivist teaching-learning. One IST indicated, "the unfamiliarity of the teacher with the constructivist

teaching strategies and its implementation in the classroom is a major problem. The teachers lack the skills and training to implement cooperative learning." Another IST stated, "I am not familiar with teaching strategies to implement constructivist teaching-learning." Yet another IST indicated, "the difficulty in applying constructivist teaching-learning is embedded in the inability of some teachers to write and structure thinking questions." (33%)

3. *Weakness and un-readiness exists among some students.* Some students are not capable of researching or answering higher thinking skills questions. Students have low academic standards, are unfamiliar with independent learning strategies, and they lack analysis and synthesis skills. Most of the time, they even cannot attain or acquire simple knowledge. One IST stated, "I have weak students on the language level and thinking level." Another said, "when I ask students to research, they don't do this. They are lazy to fulfil what I ask them to do, because they are used to spoon-feeding learning." One IST stated, "the students we have are not readers, they are very shallow, and not thinkers. This restricts constructivist learning." (19%)

4. *Students are not ready for cooperative learning.* They lack the social responsibility, and it is hard to make them adjust to constructivist learning. One participant stated, "students think that cooperative learning is an opportunity for chatting and they abuse the Internet accessibility for social chatting." (9.5 %)

5. *Socio-administrative constraints limit independent and self-learning through restrictions on field trips and Internet use at girls' schools.* One participant indicated, "sometimes when I want to apply self-independent learning with the girls, I am not allowed by the administration because it involves using the Internet as a self-learning tool, and parents don't allow their daughters to use the Internet because they are afraid the girls will chat with the boys and this is against the social norms among most of UAE families." (9.5%)

6. *Textbooks are largely unsuitable for presenting constructivist activities and exercises.* Exceptions exist in grade 7 (History) and grade 11 (Economics), which use new textbooks. One IST stated, "The content is shallow and basic and does not allow constructivist teaching-learning. It focuses on acquiring simple knowledge. The textbook does not include constructivist skills, which require higher-level thinking. The way the curriculum is loaded with content hinders constructivism. The content that teachers are assigned to complete is too extensive and loaded with topics and the time allocated for its completion is not enough." (9.5%)

7. *Gaps exist in the content.* The content does not flow logically and smoothly. One IST stated, "teachers have to restructure the content; this takes time, so we spend time fixing the content rather than preparing

constructivist lesson plans and constructivist teaching material." Another IST stated, "the content in some textbooks lacks connectiveness and there are gaps in the ideas presented, so I spend time fixing the content rather than plan for constructivist teaching-learning." (9.5%)

8. *Administrative limitations can affect student-centred learning.* One IST stated, "the school administration expects teaching to be teacher-centred, providing students with model answers, and textbook-based." (9.5%)

9. *Time constraints affect implementation.* One IST indicated, "due to the little time allocated for teaching Social Studies, there isn't enough time to implement constructivist learning, that's why we focus on traditional teaching and memorizations which require less teaching time than teaching higher thinking skills." (4.7%)

10. *Parents object to independent work.* Parents assume that thinking questions are too difficult for their children, and it will affect their marks. An IST stated, "parents prefer direct questions and application questions in worksheets and assessments. Parents object to research work because it is a burden on them, since they end up doing the work." (4.7%)

11. *Students are not in charge of their learning.* They are dependent on private tutors, which limit independent and self-learning. An IST stated, "students want to be informed; students are not independent learners, because they depend on private tutors." (4.7%)

12. *Students are linguistically challenged with their Arabic mother tongue,* thus limiting independent self-learning and the implementation of constructivist learning. One IST stated, "students have weak Arabic language reading and comprehension skills; which hinders constructivist learning." (4.7%)

13. *Extensive load allocated to teachers restricts preparation for constructivist teaching-learning.* The teaching load ranges from eighteen to twenty-five periods and preparations range from two to four preparations. As portrayed by one participant, "on the teacher's side there is difficulty, since the teacher has a heavy teaching load and so many non-teaching responsibilities; thus he/she does not have time to prepare a constructivist lesson plan. Constructivist lesson planning needs more preparation time." (4.7 %)

14. *Professional librarians are unavailable to teach library skills and to monitor interdisciplinary learning and self-learning.* (4.7 %)

15. *Assessments mandated by Abu Dhabi Education Zone (ADEZ) are not in harmony with constructivist teaching-learning assessments.* The traditional way of assessing students followed by ADEZ hinders the application of constructivist teaching-learning. One participant stated, "common exams that address direct questions are prepared by ADEZ. These questions lack analysis and synthesis, whereas if teachers want

to apply and implement constructivist teaching-learning, the assessment tasks should be different from the traditional ADEZ common exams." Another participant stated, "I can apply and implement constructivism in grades 11 and 7 because the new textbooks include constructivist activities; these constructivist activities coincide with the common assessment papers Abu Dhabi Education Zone is mandating." Another IST stated, "I can't apply constructivist teaching-learning, because the assessments from ADEZ don't coincide with constructivist learning activities." (4.7%)

16. *There is a lack of interdisciplinary thinking skills.* One IST stated, "the lack of harmony among the thinking skills of various subject areas does not enhance constructivist learning across the curriculum; thus limiting the implementation of constructivist learning in Social Studies." (4.7%)

17. *Classrooms are crowded.* There are approximately twenty-seven to thirty students in a classroom due to demographic changes in the newly developed Abu Dhabi suburbs. (4.7%)

18. *"I don't know what constructivist teaching-learning difficulties are."* (4.7%)

19. *"I have no difficulties using constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies."* (4.7%)

The restrictive factors were categorized by the participants as follows:

a. Administrative
b. Students' abilities and readiness
c. Curricular issues
d. Teachers' training
e. Parents' perception on learning

Though just 9.5% of the participants considered the administrative limitations among the difficulties teachers face in implementing constructivism, analysing this 9.5% nevertheless came to be more significant than what the number initially indicated. Administrative restrictions were categorized and viewed as being critical by the respondents and were addressed vividly in the last question, shedding light on the intervening administrative/organizational factors that restrict constructivist teaching-learning. In some instances, ISTs stated more than one administrative constraint; for this reason, these constraints were calculated per responses and not per participants. Administrative restrictions were categorized by ISTs in terms of the following: Traditional Teaching and Assessment, Teaching Load, Class Size, Resources and Equipment, Curricular Issues, Teachers' Training, and Cross-Curriculum Organization.

Administrative Restrictions:
Traditional Teaching and Assessment

There are limitations from ADEZ as far as assessments. Assessment papers came from ADEZ with conventional route memorization and direct comprehension questions. An IST stated:

> We are not allowed to create our own mid-year and final exams. We have to follow ADEZ exams. We are not allowed to include thinking questions because ADEZ thinks it is hard and students are unable to answer them and they will fail; the school does not want anyone to fail.

It was explained by another IST, "due to the inability of the students to deal with constructivist learning, they will fail and the school does not want to implement constructivist teaching-learning, for this reason." Few participants indicated that ADEZ wanted them to implement the traditional strategies of teacher-centred learning, where traditional assessment is characterized by direct application and memorization. Few ISTs indicated that ADEZ supervisors and administrators do not want them to go beyond the textbook teaching and the assigned content, and this restricts ISTs from implementing constructivist teaching-learning. They added that the different philosophies that administrators and supervisors have about constructivist teaching-learning create a dilemma on "how" and "what" to prepare in a lesson and how to deliver it. In the responses, 61.9% indicated that the imposition of traditional structure of teaching and assessments followed in the government school system restricts the implementation of constructivist teaching-learning.

Administrative Restrictions:
Teaching Load

In the responses, 33.3% indicated that the heavy load allocated to teachers does not allow the preparation of a constructivist lesson. One IST mentioned, "we have a heavy teaching load, and on top of that, we are allocated non-academic administrative responsibilities; it becomes really hard to plan for constructivist teaching-learning since such planning requires more time than teacher-centred traditional teaching."

Administrative Restrictions:
Class Size

In the responses, 33.3% reflected that the big numbers in classes restricts the implementation of constructivist teaching-learning.

Administrative Restrictions:
Resources and Equipment

One participant stated, "The administration does not understand the notion and application of constructivist teaching-learning; thus, teachers are not provided with the resources and technology required to enhance constructivist teaching-learning." It was added, "the instructional material for enhancing constructivist teaching-learning is not available and there are no resource centres for the teachers." Another participant stated, "we don't have a resource room in order to implement cooperative learning." One participant added, "the resource centres are not enough and have very few books and resources in the library." In the responses, 28.5% view the lack of and limited resources as restricting them from implementing constructivist teaching-learning.

Administrative Restrictions:
Curricular Issues

In the responses, 19% indicated that the lack of implementation of constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies is due to the curriculum itself. "The curriculum is too extensive and loaded with content and teachers must complete; thus, we don't have time to teach higher thinking learning skills."

Administrative Restrictions:
Teachers' Training

In the responses, 4.7% indicated that the school administration does not provide teachers with in-service training to learn the strategies of how to apply and implement constructivist teaching-learning in a classroom.

Administrative Restrictions:
Cross-Curriculum Organization

In the responses, 4.7% reflected that "the school administration does not functionalize self-learning, which should be part of constructivist learning across the various subject areas; that should go hand-in-hand with constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies." Conclusively, as indicated by the ISTs, the administrative decision affected the implementation of constructivist teaching-learning through the above-mentioned dimensions. It is worth mentioning also, that one participant (4.7%)

indicated that she does not know how administrative factors hinder or restrict the application of constructivist teaching-learning.

Instructional Material Analysis and Findings

The following findings regarding instructional material were inferred:

- Learning outcomes, worksheets, assessment sheets, and enrichment activities address lower learning domains.

- Skills and knowledge presentation in worksheets, assessment sheets, and learning outcomes are less than the grade level expectations, due to the shallow content and its lack of depth as far as constructivist material is concerned.

- There exists a complete lack of value characterization.

- Learning outcomes, worksheets, and assessment sheets revolve around "What questions."

- Worksheets and assessment sheets structure is characterized by "true and false questions" (guessing), fill in the blanks (basic knowledge questions), and simple short questions reflecting basic knowledge.

- Teachers may ask students to conclude and analyse without providing the students with a document to conclude from, for example, using the word "conclude" without a textual framework that goes with the question. Thus, concluding and synthesizing are based on the students' prior knowledge and recitation of the content without any analysis of documents, with no documents given on which to base the analysis, synthesis, and conclusion.

- Research skills are restricted to looking for information rather than constructing knowledge, valuing this knowledge, evaluating it, and linking it to worthwhile, meaningful, real-life experiences.

- There is a lack of writing skills for preparing constructivist instructional material for the following reasons:

  a. Questions and tasks often have weak structure. Some questions are not logical and are addressed vaguely due to the wrong Arabic language structure and wording.

  b. The context of the words used to reflect constructivism is misused. For example, the word "conclude" is used in worksheets and assessment sheets in the context of "in summary" rather than "deducing from previous or given facts" (which requires thinking). Comparing was not used in the context of showing differences and similarities or advantages and disadvantages, but it was used in the context of filling a table with a list of characteristics or concepts or facts without knowing or identifying how are they were different or similar. There was no comparative skills and depth in the comparison questions addressed.

In summary, the jargon of constructivism was used in some instructional material, but it was not used within the contextual notion of constructivism.

Limitations

The following limitations existed:

1. The total number of participants from PGDE (from the first- and second-year ISTs) is 21. The number of male participants outnumbered the female participants. The participants included 6 females and 15 males (Social Studies PGDE enrolment at ECAE when this research was conducted in 2009 was 11 females and 19 males; a ratio of 1:1.7). This gender element is a limitation, because more social constraints affecting constructivist teaching-learning was traced in the girls' schools.

2. I have analysed the instructional material provided by the Social Studies ISTs, though they were not particularly asked to provide evidence that constructivism was integrated in the instructional material submitted. Thus, ISTs may have been able to prepare better constructivist material if they were asked to do so.

3. Due to my close work with the Social Studies ISTs, it was noticeable that few of them have a problem in writing well-structured thinking questions. They have good ideas about what is a higher thinking exercise or question; nevertheless, few were incapable of structuring or writing a well-formulated task reflecting thinking. Consequently, they have presented instructional material that failed to reflect constructivism, not necessarily as a result of their unfamiliarity with the notion of constructivism, but due to their structured Arabic writing limitation.

4. Some teachers teach two Social Studies subjects, though they are specialized in one area (geography, history, or economics). In fact, few teachers were teaching for the first time a Social Studies subject that was not within their specialty. Thus, they were weak in the subject area and consequently unable to produce satisfactory teaching material. The subject limitation hindered their preparation of constructivist instructional material.

5. There is an inability of most of the teachers to reflect genuinely and realistically on their teachings, being unable to face or admit their shortcomings as teachers.

Conclusion

The impact of whether ISTs were teaching at government schools, Public-Private Partnership Schools, Al-Ghad Schools, or Model Schools was not significant in terms of understanding and implementing constructivism, or being subject to more or fewer constraints. Social constraints

affecting constructivist teaching-learning were inferred more in girls' schools, in terms of self-learning and independent inquiry-based learning. This is related to the fact that Abu Dhabi is a conservative community where education in a postcolonial era has not been emancipated from the traditional framework of teaching, and in some cases, some parents lack formal schooling.

The ISTs responses conveyed that parents are unaware of the changing role of teachers, where teaching-learning needs to be student-centred rather than teacher-centred. Since formal education in Abu Dhabi only started in the early 1970s, the parents are unaware of the new pedagogical teaching-learning trends and often resent the new wave of constructivist teaching-learning, thus impacting the implementation of constructivist learning.

There was no misunderstanding among ISTs concerning the basic understanding of constructivism (as compared to the criterion presented by Brooks and Brooks in relevance to constructivist Social Studies teaching-learning); nevertheless, it was not applied, as claimed by ISTs.

There was a wide variety of responses as far as the difficulties faced by ISTs. Though this variety does not indicate a numerical significance, it reflected a series of significant difficulties that need to be remedied if constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies is to be implemented. The most significant responses were associated with unequipped classes (38%), unfamiliarity with the constructivist teaching-learning strategies (33%), and the students' academic weaknesses (19%). Most ISTs viewed the weaknesses of students' thinking levels as a limitation or constraint, but in fact this is a result of the lack of the application of constructivist teaching-learning rather than a cause for constraint.

The administrative restrictions were viewed by ISTs as important, though the responses were only 9.5%. Nevertheless, this 9.5% came to be more significant than what the number indicated. Administrative restrictions were categorized and viewed as being critical. Within the responses, 61.9% reflected administrative constraints as hindering constructivism in terms of traditional teaching and traditional assessments imposed on them by ADEZ. Another 33% of responses conveyed administrative restrictions as related to the lack of teaching load. Yet another 33% of responses were related to administrative constraints relevant to class size. A slightly smaller 28.5% of responses were relevant to administrative constraints in terms of resources and equipment. Curricular issues that constituted administrative constraints were addressed in 19% of responses.

In conclusion, the roots of the constraints were administrative and this is worth further investigation, since administrative reformation and restructuring goes hand-in-hand with redesigning and developing a con-structivist pedagogy and curriculum. I was astonished with the passive

attitude the PGDE-ISTs had as far as not indicating the role of ECAE as a teachers' college. Though this study was conducted towards the end of completing the requirements of the PGDE, none of the participants stated that they needed more practical training in order to implement constructivist teaching-learning; which is, in my personal opinion, a shortcoming on the behalf of ECAE as a teachers' college. Despite the fact that the PGDE-ISTs have covered constructivism in two courses (prior to participating in this case study) and were still not implementing it or even integrating it in their instructional material draws to our attention the fact that teachers' training needs to be adjusted where practice rather than theory needs to be prioritized.

Moreover, I would like to explain why the PGDE-ISTs have focused on the external administrative constraints and overlooked their role as teachers and the ECAE's role in terms of enhancing constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies. Because they were still receivers of knowledge rather than inquisitive and reflective due to their upbringing and school learning, they have always been receptive to the system.[31] Thus, they lacked mainly self-criticism and, to an extent, criticism of the system, as indicated by Freire, which is very typical of societies that are going through postcolonial transformation in their educational systems.[32] The lack of ISTs' ability to reflect on their teaching inhibits their professional development and hinders their awareness of the areas that need further development in their teaching practice. In summary, internal and external constraints need to be looked at to enhance educational reforms in Abu Dhabi, where recommendations need to be addressed on micro and macro levels.

Recommendations

On the micro level, the Emirates College for Advanced Education, as a teachers' college, plays a major role in improving the quality of teaching-learning at Abu Dhabi Public schools. The following needs to be considered to improve the PGDE program at ECAE:

The application of constructivism should be modeled in terms of classroom-based in-service training. As the findings indicated (from the interview and the instructional material produced by the teachers), the in-service teachers are aware of the theoretical notion of constructivism yet are incapable of producing constructivist instructional material. Thus, a teachers' resource centre needs to be established to assist the in-service teachers in producing and delivering constructivist teaching-learning material.

ISTs need to develop their reflective skills to become more critical. They should be trained to conduct not only descriptive reflection, but also go

beyond this stage to demonstrate dialogic and critical reflections. Eventually, ISTs need to be involved in action research in order to be involved in spiral reflection to discover their shortcomings in the profession of teaching and gain insights in how to develop themselves professionally.

On the macro level, the Ministry of Education, Abu Dhabi Education Zone, and Abu Dhabi Education Council need to simultaneously develop the Social Studies content and pedagogy. At the moment, the way the Social Studies curriculum is organized does not allow constructivist teaching-learning to take place, neither on the pedagogical level nor on the content level. Currently, the content including the learning and enrichment activities are based on lower thinking skills and the pedagogies are limited to knowledge delivery rather than knowledge processing. It was evident from the instructional material reviewed and analysed that the Social Studies curriculum is teacher-centred and lacked student-centred and self-learning activities that enhance constructivist teaching-learning. These changes need to be addressed and enhanced within ADEC's School Development Unit.

Moreover, administrative and structural organizational reforms at the school level go hand-in-hand with the curriculum organization, consequently leading to constructivist teaching-learning. Administrative reforms need to be introduced in relevance to amending the nature of assessment tools to suit the learning outcomes of constructivist learning. Currently, assessment is content-based that focuses on knowledge reception, which is founded on the lower cognitive domain and characterized by recitation and route memorization instead of problem-based, discovery-based, and inquiry-based assessment tasks. Another dimension where the centralized and decentralized educational authorities need to review is the teachers' heavy load. Due to time constraints, teachers cannot prepare constructivist resources and teaching material; thus, they regenerate outdated instructional material, which is not in harmony with constructivist teaching-learning material.

Another point to be elaborated on, as far as what the school administration needs to enhance, is parental involvement. Parental involvement is very basic to enlighten the parents about constructivist teaching-learning approaches. This will support the teachers' changing role in the new trend of constructivist teaching-learning, especially since the teachers' role is going through a developmental transformation in terms of teaching-learning becoming student-centred. Moreover, girls were subject to social constraints in relation to not being permitted to use Internet search or conduct independent learning, impacting constructivist learning. It is the parents' responsibility to facilitate girls' constructivist learning through giving them academic freedom to practice independent and discovery self-

learning. However, this cannot take place without involving the parents through workshops to explain and demonstrate how constructivist teaching-learning takes place.

Enhancing constructivist teaching-learning in Social Studies is a multi-layered process that needs to be unfolded pragmatically and progressively and triangulated on the content, pedagogical, and administrative levels by means of the teachers and educational administration on the micro and macro levels, as well as with parental involvement.

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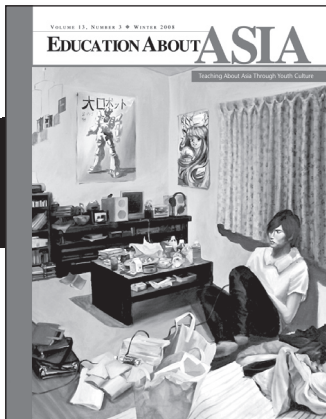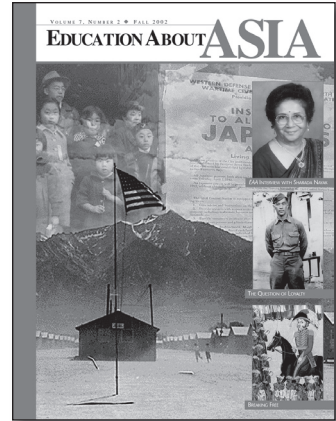
Appendix

Guidelines for Interview Questions

1. Does the word "constructivism" mean anything to you? What does it mean?

2. Are you familiar with constructivist teaching-learning strategies? Which strategies are you familiar with?

3. Have you used any of the constructivist methods or strategies in your teaching? Which ones? How did you practically use it?

4. Have you come across constructivism through the worksheets, activities, and assessment tasks you have prepared for your students? Can you give an example?

5. Have you ever faced difficulty in teaching through using constructivism? What sort of difficulty?

6. Are there factors that may hinder you from implementing constructivism in your classroom? If yes, what are these factors? Name three. Why do you think these factors are restrictive? Explain.

7. Which of the above factors do you consider to be the most restrictive? Why?

8. What are the intervening administrative/organizational factors that may restrict you as a teacher for using constructivism in teaching-learning Social Studies? List two factors and explain.
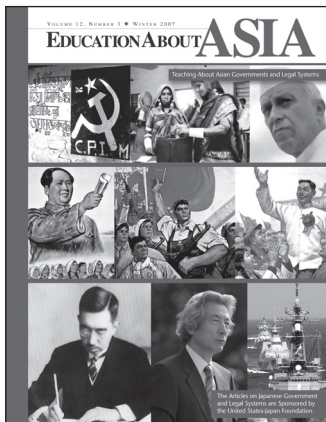
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