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Young children's perceptions of their school experience: a comparative study between England and India

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Abstract

The research aimed at exploring young children's perceptions of their school experience using three different (but interrelated) theoretical perspectives: the interactionist, systemic and socio-cultural perspectives. Twelve five-six year old children from a state funded primary school in south-east England and fifteen five-six year old children from a university campus school in north India formed the sample for the study. Three different methods for collecting qualitative data were used: (a) children's drawings (b) children's paired interviews and (c) photographic/video evidence of different areas of the class/setting, taken/videoed by children themselves. Findings from England and India, both, revealed similar results that children liked coming to school and enjoyed doing a range of activities with their teacher(s) and friends. They however, wanted to spend more time outside. Their perceptions of why they attend school ranged from adult-imposed reasons to those which might be of benefit to themselves. The main difference between the two groups was in their perceptions of the outside space and the use of school facilities. These differences could be attributed to the different socio-cultural and economic state of the settings in respective countries. These differences are understood and discussed in relation to different theoretical perspectives, as mentioned earlier.
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Keywords: Young children; school experience; England; India

1. Introduction

Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child by almost all countries since 1989, children's right to have a voice, and to have their opinions heard, has led many providers in the field of education to seek ways to involve children's perspectives in the development and delivery of practice. It is believed to have long term implications for sustained educational experiences (Pascal and Bertram, 2009).

Researchers in early childhood have been strongly advocating youngest children to be viewed as active subjects, rather than objects. The importance of participation has been recognized in empowering children as learners, enabling them to make choices, express their ideas and opinions and develop a positive sense of self (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Researchers have been suggesting practices for including children's voices, as young as under 5s' to promote participatory tools. One such comprehensive approach is suggested by Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003). Their work has been generally well received under the name of the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark, Kiorholt, and Moss

2005), which promotes the use of participatory tools for children, including the use of cameras, bookmaking, tours and map making. The name 'Mosaic' refers to the drawing together pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children's perspectives.

Another approach which offers a means to appreciate children's perspectives is the 'RAMPS' (R: Recognising children's many languages, A: Allocating communication spaces, M: Making time, P: Providing choice and S: Subscribing to reflective practice), introduced by Lancaster (2006). RAMPS provide a framework for evaluating the nature and extent of participatory practice with young children.

Research indicates that the impact of listening to young children can occur at three levels: individual, institutional and strategic. At individual level, it can be linked to children's increased self esteem, social competence and an insight into decision-making processes. At institutional level, it may help practitioners/teachers reflect on their practice which further may impact on a setting's related policies, for example, the design of outdoor and indoor spaces. There are also a few examples on the impact of young children's views on change at a strategic level (Clark, McQuail and Moss, 2003*).* They however highlight the need of comparative studies in identifying approaches to listening to young children in other countries.

Hence this research comes as an attempt to identify children's perspectives of their school experience in two different settings in England and India. The aim is to understand their perceptions in relation to interactionist, systemic and socio-cultural theory.

2. Methodology

Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) indicate that the researchers and practitioners have been using imaginative methods to listen to and to consult young children, for example, interviews, questionnaires, group work and participatory games. Inspired by this literature, we attempted to use a combination of qualitatively three different methods: children's drawings; paired interviews; and photographs and video cameras to capture children's views of their school experience. By comparing and combining different sources of information we aimed to use these tools to help us reach a better understanding of children's perspectives (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

In order to ensure ethical procedures and research rights of the participants, parental permission in the form of written forms was sought before collecting children's assent. Assent from children was taken with the help of picture cues. Easy to comprehend pictures were included in the assent form showing them the activities that they will be doing as part of the research. All 12 children from England and 15 children from India readily gave their assent to participate in the research.

2.1 Methods used with children

2.1.1. Children's drawings: Using a research instrument designed by Armstrong (2007), children were asked to draw two pictures; (i) a picture of their 'actual school experience' and (ii) what they anticipate as their 'ideal school experience'. In the 'actual school experience' they were asked to draw the day-to-day things that they do in school/class. In their 'ideal school experience' they were asked to use their imagination and draw the things that they 'would like to see themselves doing in the school'. They were made clear that the two drawings could be similar or different and that in both drawings they had to put themselves, their teacher, and a friend or two in the picture. They had to make sure that everyone was doing something and also, if possible, label the people in their drawing. Before the start of the drawing activity, each participating child was made fully aware that they will be asked to explain their drawings to the researchers and that the threads of discussion of their drawing narrative will be tape recorded. To make them familiar with the instrument, it was shown prior to the data collection and they were given time and space to have a play with the recorder. For the children to become comfortable with the researcher, every attempt was made to be a part of the classroom setting for the children to get a sense of familiarity. In order to achieve this, the data was collected on the second visit to the school. The whole procedure was negotiated with the class teacher. As the participating children were quite young, they were given space and time to explain the meanings of their drawings. It is recognised that for young children the meaning of the picture occurs during the actual process of drawing itself, hence children's voice was listened to whilst they were actively engaged in the process of drawing (Roberts-Holmes, 2008). This gave us a good insight into what the picture represented for the child.

2.1.2. Children's interviews: Considering the age of children, they were interviewed in pairs so that they could offer (emotional) support to each other, if needed. In order to make it fun for them, a toy telephone was used as an interview medium. A minimum number of questions were asked during interview as persistent adult questioning has been shown to decrease children's competence in making responses (Wood & Wood, 1998).

Children were asked three questions and their voices were tape recorded. The questions asked were as follows:

> Why do you come to school?
> What do you like about coming to school/class?
> If there is anything at all that you do not like about your school/class?

The chosen methodology for interviews was inspired by the phenomenographic method devised by Marton (1986). The theoretical basis for the approach is grounded in the notion that for a given phenomenon or aspect of the world, there are a limited number of qualitatively different ways in which people perceive, experience or understand it. During analysis, the aim was to 'pull out' the categories of description from the qualitative data collected.

2.1.3. Photographic and video evidence: Children were given (disposable) cameras and were asked to take pictures of different areas in their classroom and outside, that they particularly like or dislike. They were also given video cameras to briefly record these areas with a running commentary discussing the reasons behind their likes/dislikes. The photographs taken were then organised into broad categories of their learning environment, depending on the number of times they were taken by the children.

3. Findings

3.1 Children's drawings

3.1.1. Actual school experience drawing:

In England, children's drawings of 'actual school experience' show a majority of them engaged in doing class work, mainly, literacy and numeracy.

Similarly, in India, children's drawings of 'actual school experience' show a majority of them being engaged in class work and the teacher sitting or standing by the blackboard. They see the blackboard being used for writing activities. Interestingly some children have shown their home and friends in the 'actual school experience' picture. This could either be due to them not understanding the instructions properly or may be due to the continuation of school work (in the form of home work). They may have found it difficult to separate the two ideas.

3.1.2. Ideal school experience drawing:

In England, all children view themselves playing outside, the majority on a roundabout. Drawings by children in India suggest that children either view themselves as playing outside or studying inside with the teacher, who is always sitting/standing near the blackboard. This may suggest that children found it difficult to differentiate between their actual and ideal school experience. One reason for the indifference could be the likelihood of having less experiences or opportunities to draw upon. The learning environment and the opportunities provided have shown to have a direct impact on children's experiences (Woodhead and Montgomery, 2003). It also has shown to influence the level of their cognitive operations (Donaldson, 1987). The value of this argument could be evidenced in England's 'ideal' school drawing. Children were able to comprehend the instructions and thereby use their imagination to create drawings that filled in their gap between the 'actual' and 'ideal' school experience. This goes back to the difference in pedagogical processes between the two schools, where England schools are seen as using more 'constructivist' approaches than India. However this analysis does not intend to impose a deficit model of children's creativity in India. A majority of them drew scenic views with their school building, such as river, trees, pond, and flower beds, showing their appreciation for aesthetic beauty. It may be worth considering that the school building has a mountain view on one side, clearly visible in good weather. The children also see provision of a range of services, such as snacks (like juice), fridge and provision of IT facilities (with comfortable chairs) for their age group. Some expressed their ideal school as having *'better'* fans and tube lights and even an inverter (due to power

cuts). This demonstrates the conflicting transition that India is going through at present time where people have access to a range of media, impacting children's imagination and creativity, but the government and educational institutions being unable to provide similar facilities or equipments in the school environment. Also, as a majority of children coming to Campus school belong to middle-class families, coming from well equipped homes but find it difficult to comprehend the lack of facilities at school.

"The teacher is saying 'Now class' in the speech bubble and asking us Maths questions. She asks 'Is 3+3=7?' I say 'No', and then I say '6' is my answer. I then ask the teacher if I could go to the toilet. I have drawn my friends Caitlin and Antony in the picture. They are chatting to each other and being a bit naughty. These green things are socks in the classroom. The carpet is all blue. I drew a red chair".

Figure 1.1: An example of 'Actual school' drawing by a child in England

"In this picture I am going on the monkey bar, because I always wanted to have a monkey bar in our school. My friends are saying 'Wow!' as I climb on the monkey bar. The teacher is saying 'Very Good' as I climb on the monkey bar".
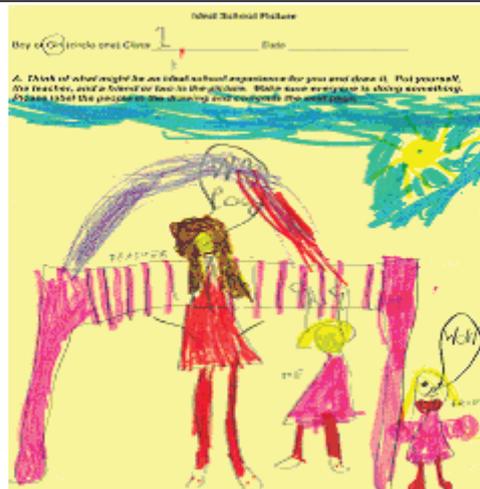
Figure 1.2: An example of 'Ideal school' drawing by the same child in England

"That's my teacher standing by the black board. She is teaching us. That's her desk and chair. We are all sitting in the classroom and studying."
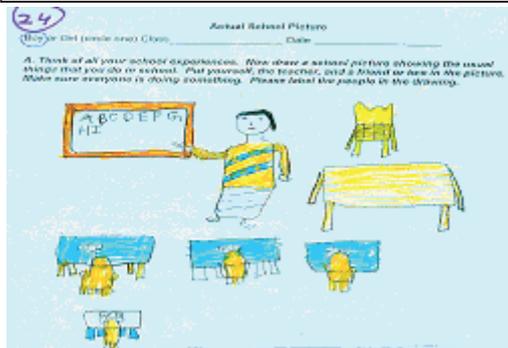
Figure 2.1: An example of 'Actual school' drawing by a child in India

"This is our class room. As you can see there are some good fans and tube-lights. In the middle is school playground. The bottom one is school building and so is the top. One important thing we need in our school is: inverter".

Figure 2.2: An example of 'Ideal school' drawing by the same child in India

To summarise, children in England were much more creative and confident in narrating their drawings to the researchers. Looking at the education system in India, textbooks and tests have long been the two defining words (Support India Together, 2005). Adoption of this approach shifts the power to the teacher, where children wait for the instructions from the teacher and answer the questions asked by the teacher. This may lead us to believe that children in India are not used to getting their perspectives heard, particularly in a typical school environment. In order to capture children's perspectives effectively, Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer (2008) suggest some preconditions. They believe that children require both room and space (physical and mental) to be able to make choices and to take the initiative. Research from different countries has shown that some countries are struggling to give the children room for more play and choices while others already allow the children plenty of space and freedom (Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer, 2008).

3.2 Children's interviews

Children's interviews rendered similar results against all three questions. The main categories of description emerging from each of the three questions are shown in table (1):

Table 1: Children's interview response in England and India

Interview question	Categories of description	Country
Why do you come to school	self-gratifying- like coming to school and meeting their teacher and friends	Both, England and India
	practical- so that they can take part in certain activities such as colouring	Both, England and India
	play- so that they can play	Both, England and India
	educational- so that they can learn things	Both, England and India
	better future- it will be good for their future	England
	parents wish- parents have asked them to come to school	India
What do you like about your school/class	symbolic- activities involving imaginative/pretend play, like, puppet, home corner	England
	sensory-motor activities: involving the use of materials such as colour, paint, water, etc;	Both, England and India
	gross-motor- gross-motor activities such as running, playing football	Both, England and India
	educational-	
	- activities that involve reading/writing or other educational and group work, like making a display, ICT	England
	- activities that involve reading/writing (such as the use of black board) or other educational work	India
	extra curricular- activities that involve use of space, like stage	England
	comfort- things that give them comfort, such as fan and big open windows as they help them to keep cool, tube light as it keeps the room bright, bags to help them store books, desk and chair as it provides them good space for reading and writing, umbrella and raincoat as it saves them from rain	India
If there is anything at all that you do not like about your school/class	activities-	
	- for example, maths, physical education, assembly	England
	- reading, writing, blackboard work (it may involve too much writing), group discussions,	India
	aggression (mild)- children mentioned aggressive acts (like pushing) committed against them by other children	Both, England and India

discomfort-

- did not like sitting on the carpet as it makes them hot	England
- did not like sitting on uncomfortable desk and chair, fan as they look old and sometimes throw hot air, any pointed parts of windows as they may hurt themselves	India
structure- they would like to have more snack time during the day	England
cleanliness- more general cleanliness, such as around the windows, classroom slabs, dustbin area and outside space, especially when it rains.	India
satisfied- there was nothing that they did not like.	Both, England and India

On the basis of interviews (as evident in Table 1), children's perceptions of why they attend school ranged from adult-imposed reasons (better future, parents' wish) to reasons which might be of benefit to themselves (self-gratifying, practical, educational). When making responses concerning what they like about their school experience, all the children mentioned particular activities. Interestingly, however, when talking about their dislikes, comparatively few mentioned specific activities; instead they were 'satisfied' (liked everything or could not think of anything they disliked), or mentioned factors which might cause them physical or emotional harm (mild aggression and discomfort). These findings concur with those from Evans and Fuller's (1998) research with 4-5 year old nursery children.

3.3 Photographic and video evidence

The most common areas photographed and videoed by children were as follows (not in any particular order):

Table 2: Classroom/school areas as photographed or videoed by children in England and India

S.No.	Class/school area (England)	Class/school area (India)
1	The white board	The blackboard
2	The book area	Teacher's sitting area(desk and chair)
3	Phonics area	Play area (one climbing frame)
4	Outside (playground)	Outside (playground)
5	(Various) class displays	(One) Display area
6	Work table	Reading/writing on the desk
7	Colouring time/ area	Colouring time
8	Craft area	Fans and tube-lights
9	Computer area	Windows
10	Puppet area	Friends (friendship)
11	Coat peg area	Bottle (and lunchbox)

As evident from the Table (2), children in England have access to a range of activities/areas, whereas children in India have a few things that constitute their learning environment. The difference is obvious in terms of 'structure variables' (the physical environment) and the 'process variables' (interaction between the subjects and learning environment) (Woodhead and Montgomery, 2003). This is more likely to contribute in diversifying their experiences of any underlying activity(ies) that they do in their class/school. The learning environment thus constructed (a combination of structure and process variables) is believed to have a direct impact on children's learning experiences and imagination (Walsh *et al.,* 2006), as discussed under 'children's drawings' section.

After categorizing photographs into the above areas, children were then asked whether they liked that area/disliked or if they were not sure. A majority of the children in England liked all these areas in the classroom and the outside space with a few not being sure of some displays : as *'they were old'*, the white board: as *'it may involve reading'*, peg area: as *'it is boring'*, phonics area: as *'it involves sounding out letters'*, puppet area: as *'it is*

boring', book area: as *'it involves reading'* and work table: as *'it involves studying'*. The majority of the children in India also liked all class/school areas with a few not being sure of some areas, like windows: as *'they are not clean'*, outside area: as *'it becomes mucky'* and fans and tube lights, as *'they throw hot air and the room looks dark at the time of power cut'*. However, both, in England and India, there was no resounding dislike for any of the areas. Children's perceptions of why they like these areas was a general like towards activities that underpin the working of these areas, like, colouring, making a display, reading interesting books, playing football and doing art and craft work.

To summarise, children's perception of their education, both in England and India, is a positive one. They like coming to school and enjoy doing a range of activities with their teacher(s) and friends. They may want to spend more time outside, which is something the schools may wish to consider for future.

4. Discussion on the education system and socio-cultural context of the two countries

In order to understand the similarities and differences between the educational approaches of two schools, it is first essential to consider their socio-cultural context. This could be understood via undertaking three different (but interrelated) theoretical perspectives. The first being the 'interactionistic theories' suggesting that pedagogical quality and processes take shape and develop through the interaction between people, and people and objects, in the learning contexts of schools. This perspective takes into account the norms, values, traditions, cultural specifics, contextual specifics and heritage of society (Sheridan, 2007a). As the participating schools are quite different in the way they perceive education, hence they vary in the ways they implement pedagogical processes that support the right of the child to learn and develop, to participate and influence ongoing processes and activities.

The second perspective that links with the interactionist approach is that of the 'systemic theory'. The ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains how micro-systems (family), meso-systems (preschool and school), macro-systems (economic and social policies) of cultures and societies and chrono-systems (time) influence conditions for children's learning. The macro-level of England and India indicates the differences in their ideological, economical, historical and political values and conditions within both cultures. In order to fully understand children's experiences in schools, all these systems need to be considered as integrating with each other. England, for example, has a range of frameworks that support the professionals working in the field of education and care provide a quality experience to young children, like, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2007) which is a quality framework supporting children's learning and development from Birth to 5 years (Department for Children, Schools and Families). It recognises the developmental continuum for children and is delivered through a well planned, play based approach to learning and development. Right at the heart of EYFS is 'Every Child Matters' (ECM: 2003) 'which is a shared programme of change to improve outcomes for all children and young people'. The Children's Plan (Department for Children, Schools and Families) explains these initiatives as part of a vision for making England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. A majority of these programmes or frameworks have evolved through consultation and research. These quality frameworks then interact with the micro and meso level leading to (better) outcomes for children. The education system in India, however, is going through a phase of change through the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework (2005). According to this framework, children in schools should be able to "connect knowledge to life outside school" and "ensure that learning is shifted away from rote methods". It recommends that teachers should encourage children not just to answer questions but also to frame questions themselves, and "plan lessons so that children are challenged to think and not simply repeat what is told to them." The framework emphasises not just the role of the child, but also that of the teacher. But like any new approach, this framework dissemination is not going without any criticism. Deepa (2005) questions the translation of this framework to reality. She questions when many schools have no infrastructure to speak of, when teachers are hired on contract to teach for a few hours daily, will it be possible to make the child the centre of learning? Similarly Thapar (2005) states that not only the textbooks but schoolteacher need to become child-friendly too. She says that teachers need a more intensive exposure to social science concepts, changes in data and methods in history, and critical enquiry. Others (like Kumar Sharma, 2005) argue that not enough support is being provided to teachers to effect this paradigm shift. He adds that "teachers sometimes simply don't understand, or do not care to understand, where the child is coming from." However, despite all the criticism, Krishna Kumar (2005) says that the National Council for Teacher Education, a statutory body that lays down guidelines for regulating teachers' education in the country, has welcomed NCF 2005. The

council has agreed to reorganise Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programmes on the basis of NCF. The National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT) is also looking at conducting brief in-service programmes and release audio and video programmes to supplement its framework. Overall, the NCF is still in its conception stage but seems to be a welcoming and promising framework which will help to overtake and shift the current didactic processes into a more inclusive and interactive methodology towards education.

The third and the last perspective helping us understand the difference in cultural context is Rogoff's (2003) socio-cultural framework that emphasises three distinct foci: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural/institutional. She emphasises the need to understand individuals as participants in cultural communities. According to this approach we, as researchers, need to develop an understanding of the practices (in this case pedagogies and children's participation) and integrate it with the relationship betweeen a community's practices, including routine practices in which an indivdual partcipates (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003). Hence in this case, before making any judgement about the level of chldren's participation in England and India, it is important to understand the routine practices that children and teacher go through, collectively, in a school environment. In India, children's participation may not be regarded as an important criterion for high quality. While there are observable changes in the classroom in the use of instructional aids and activities during instruction, the essential characteristics of traditional practice, namely rote and repetition has not changed much (Clarke, 2003). Both teachers' openness and resistance to reform are portrayed as embedded in the cultural construction of teaching and learning (ibid). Linking it to Rogoff's socio-cultural perspective (2003), this does not imply that these schools are working on a deficit model. It could be argued that this is the way children and teachers interact with each other and is part of their common routine practice. However, Sheridan (2007) suggests an alternative that participation in not always a question of leaving the decision to the child. The core of this issue is to involve children. "To make them feel that they are competent to participate in decision-making processes by communicating with them, asking questions, listening to them in order to encourage them to develop skills and a desire to argue for their standpoints." (Sheridan , 2007: 204 and 205).

5. Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, the findings from present research, considering the above socio-cultural perspectives, highlight the importance of gaining young children's opinions of their educational experience. This is not only to draw attention to a problem, but also to celebrate good practice that recognizes and appreciates the work and effort that teachers/practitioners put in to educate young children. It should be used as an opportunity not only to empower children, but also give the much needed confidence boost to the teacher(s)/practitioner(s) working with young children.

The research was an initial exploratory study but indicates that the three methods of data collection could be used effectively to capture children's views about their school experience. This triangulation of methods has also given research the validity, making findings more convincing (Hughes, 2001). The categories of description sufficiently represent what children might say about their perceptions or opinions of their school experience (Evans and Fuller, 1988). Further exploration of children's perceptions in a larger sample of classes may reveal more categories of description and/or different patterns. Similarly, children's perceptions in different types of education provision (e.g. , state and private school) would be worth exploring.

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