

Working with Large Class Size: dispositions of early childhood teachers in India

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ABSTRACT Using sociocultural-historical constructivism, and post-colonial theory, the author conducted a study to examine, through the perceptions of teachers, school principals, and teacher educators, the relationship between the preparation and practice of early childhood teachers in private schools in New Delhi, India. The research questions collectively focused upon the aims of education that were prioritized by the educators, the philosophical and theoretical sources these educational aims drew upon, and the teachers' perceptions of their classroom practice, of the effectiveness of teacher education programs, and of the strongest influences on their teaching practice. One emergent finding of the study illustrated how early childhood teachers worked in classes that averaged 43 children. This article describes the aims of education that were prioritized by the early childhood teachers, and how they implemented these aims in their large classes. The author provides examples of teaching strategies and teacher dispositions through her own observations and through the teachers' articulation of their practice. The author also presents the teachers' perceptions of successful teaching and how they evaluated themselves as being successful, or not, at the end of a school year. The article concludes with an analysis that contextualizes large class size in Indian schools and a discussion on the relationship between small class size, Western developmental discourse, and issues of privilege and power.

Introduction

Class size has been an area of intense research in the field of childhood education and studies have presented a variety of findings on the topic. Despite studies that indicate the positive effects of small class size, a consistent and integrated explanation for the same is yet to be articulated and supported by

empirical data (Finn et al, 2003). Zurawsky (2003) outlines the following conditions that must be met in order for small class size to have the maximum benefits:

1. early intervention should be provided when required;
2. the number of students in a classroom must not exceed 17;
3. resources, if inadequate, must first target at-risk students;
4. students should experience small classes on a daily basis for between at least two and four years.

But what happens in situations where small class size is not an option and early childhood teachers have to proceed with their pedagogical practices aimed toward students' academic proficiency as well as ensure overall successful school experiences for the students despite the constraints of numbers, space, and prescribed curricula?

This article describes a particular finding in the author's doctoral dissertation and presents the issue of class size as it was seen to exist in early childhood classrooms in urban private schools in New Delhi, India. It will briefly outline the study and focus specifically on how early childhood teachers in India worked with their large classes. The article will present the educational aims that were prioritized by the teacher participants and describe how they articulated the implementation of these aims in their large classes. It will also describe what the teacher participants' perceptions were of successful teaching and learning. The article will then contextualize the circumstances of large classes in an Indian school and will conclude by raising the issue of the relationship between small class size and privilege.

The Study

Using sociocultural-historical constructivism, and post-colonial theory, this study examined, through the perceptions of early childhood educators, the relationship between the preparation and practice of early childhood educators in private schools in New Delhi. The research questions collectively focused upon the aims of education the educators prioritized for young children, the philosophical and theoretical sources these educational aims drew upon, and the teacher participants' perceptions of their classroom practice, of the effectiveness of teacher education programs, and of the strongest influences on their teaching practice.

Participants for the study included early childhood educators in private schools, the principals of these schools, and faculty members from the colleges of education that the teacher participants attended. Data collection occurred in two phases. Phase 1 provided *intensive* data, and consisted of in-depth interviews with three early childhood teachers in a school, the three supervisors of these teachers (the school principal, the headmistress, and the nursery school coordinator), and two teacher educators from the colleges of education these three teachers attended.

Phase 2 of the data collection provided data of an *extensive* scope and consisted of sending a survey questionnaire to 45 early childhood teachers in 15 other private schools, the school principals or administrators of these schools, and 15 teacher educators. The questionnaire was designed around four or five key themes that emerged from the interview data.

Closed data analysis produced findings that were directly related to the research questions. Open data analysis revealed three emergent findings of significant interest to the study. One of the emergent findings illuminated how early childhood teachers in India faced the challenge of teaching classes that averaged 43 children, and it is the discussion of this finding that forms the basis of the present article.

The three early childhood teachers who were interviewed worked at a private school that will be referred to as 'The School'. The teachers were Charu, who taught second grade, Malvika, a first grade teacher, and Vasudha, who taught a nursery class. The classes in each of the three cases were comprised of 40 children. Findings from the survey that was sent to the 45 early childhood teachers indicated that the size of the classes in all 16 schools included in the study ranged from 30 to 56 children per class, with the average class having 43 children. The author now proceeds to present the educational aims for young children as prioritized by the early childhood teachers in this study.

The Important Aims of Education Professed by Early Childhood Teachers

One of the research questions the study addressed was: *What are the aims of education most commonly expressed in terms of values, skills, and knowledge that children are expected to learn in early and elementary private schools in New Delhi?*

In order to discover the aims of education that were prioritized by the participants, they were asked to describe what, in their perception, was an ideal education and what was most important for young children to learn. The four top educational aims for young children as professed by all the participants were, in order of priority: the teaching of values and correct attitudes; developing the intellect and the ability to think; developing academic proficiency; and encouraging cultural and religious diversity. The first aim, the teaching of values and attitudes, reflects the importance given to the same in the Indian world view, and these are the same values and attitudes practiced by people in India in their daily lives. The second aim of developing the ability to think also reflects the prominence given to the development of the intellect in Indian philosophy. The third aim, developing academic proficiency in the students, is held to be necessary in a national system of education that is driven by tests and examinations. The fourth aim, recognizing and supporting cultural and religious diversity in schools, is not only promoted by the belief systems underlying Indian philosophy, but is also mandated by the Constitution of India. This mandate becomes manifest at the national level when all schools

are closed on holidays reflecting not only Hindu, but also Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist faiths.

This article will now provide examples from the interview texts of Charu, Vasudha, and Malvika, the three teachers who were interviewed in depth, that illustrate and describe their classroom practice to achieve these educational aims. Although several examples could be used, due to restriction on space only a few examples will be included in this article.

How Teachers Implement Educational Aims in Large Classes

This section addresses another research question: *How do some early childhood and elementary school teachers in private schools in New Delhi describe their teaching of these values, skills and knowledge in their classrooms?*

The author presents the perceptions of Charu, Vasudha, and Malvika as they reflected on and talked about their classroom practice, and shared their teaching strategies, which were aimed at implementing their educational goals.

All three teachers who were interviewed worked within the same schedule in terms of the length of their school day. Classes began at 7.30 a.m. and ended at 12.30 p.m., which gave them exactly five hours, including break time, in which to complete their daily teaching responsibilities and requirements. Each of the three classes comprised 40 children. There were two teachers in both the nursery and first grade classrooms and only one teacher in the second grade classroom. The following descriptions emerged from the teachers' own perceptions about their classroom practice.

Implementing the Teaching of Values

Some of the values that were specified by the participants as being important for children to learn were: respect for elders and guests; inner strength to face hardships in life; appropriate behaviors and the social norms valued in Indian society; learning to live together in harmony; integrity and strength of character; dedication towards work; moral values and beliefs; being conscious first of duties and then of individual rights; humility and tolerance; and the more universal virtues, such as kindness, caring, citizenship, honesty, confidence, and so forth.

The teaching of values was perceived as a curriculum separate from the academic curriculum. Completing the academic curriculum was the primary goal for the year because, in India, students are evaluated through a series of tests and exams on how much they have learned academically. At every level, beginning with the first grade, students are required to take monthly tests in all subject areas. Consequently, the teaching of values can either be done by teachers who personally value developing an awareness in children about virtues and correct attitudes, or it can be done if the school as a whole supports this goal and a separate parallel curriculum is adopted solely for this purpose. In the case of The School, both factors seemed to be true. There was a school-

wide focus on teaching values as well as an enthusiasm and commitment on the part of the teachers for doing the same. The author recalls having been struck by the fact that charts and posters emphasizing virtues and values as marks of good character were displayed all along walls and bulletin boards inside classrooms, in the hallways, and even in the reception area of the school.

Charu's teaching approach incorporated a high degree of personalized teaching of values and awareness just through the things she said and shared with the children in her second grade class, emphasizing sharing, generosity, and being kind to those who are less fortunate:

When we had those Christmas decorations ... they were told to bring gifts which were ... exchanged and everybody got a gift. So I had asked them, in case anyone has extra gifts that you can get, bring them. And they said, 'Ma'am, but why?' I said that we have *ayahs* ['maids'] and they must be having children. So we'll give [the extra gifts] to them ... And the children were so excited and we called the *ayahs*. And we have a Christian *ayah*. I told them that this is her festival. So we gave all of them gifts.

She further recognized that the children were more engaged when her teaching occurred in a context that appealed to them. Sharing her own personal experiences and stories enabled her to get their attention more readily and increased the value of the virtues and attitudes she was promoting:

But whenever I'm teaching I try and have discussions with them and then I tell them a lot of stories about my own life and experiences ... So that's more important than studies. They'll study on their own anyway ... I make sure that they learn even little things – not to waste water, electricity, paper ... these are the more important parts of my teaching, I feel, than teaching just English.

Charu also encouraged self-reliance and self-help skills in the children by reminding them to perform their own chores and do their own personal work themselves. According to her, this helped children become more independent and also more sensitive to domestic help, such as their maids and servants: 'So I keep telling them to clear your room yourself, do things yourself. After all, servants are also human beings.' Due to the success she got out of this more personalized approach in her teaching, she avoided using the books on morals and values that had been prescribed by the school, feeling them to be too boring and didactic.

Malvika also made use of teachable moments to stress values and attitudes. She provided an example of how she used snack time to create an awareness in her first grade children of respect for teachers and elders:

I would tell them that whatever you eat, if there is an elder there or a teacher there, you must offer them ... It's not that the teacher has to take whatever is being offered, but they must have this much respect for the teachers ... we were never told to incorporate and teach this value but still I

want them to learn this value ... let them develop that habit of sharing, caring, respecting.

Malvika was honest in admitting that many attitudes could be learnt only over a period of time and by exercising much discipline. One such attitude was to uncomplainingly accept life for what it is and she confessed that: 'One thing I would love to teach them ... whatever you find in life be comfortable with that ... so I'm trying to work hard on that thing. And I think I'll be successful one day.'

Vasudha, the nursery class teacher, explained that the nursery school, with its 240 four-year-olds, had its own Values Education program within which a particular value or virtue was highlighted each month in the school's curriculum and activities. At the time of the interview, the topics for the month were mercy and justice, and she had been assigned the task of creating a story about these values and developing a puppet show based on that story for all the nursery classes to watch. Other virtues, like honesty, sharing, kindness, and so forth, would also be explored through similar activities. In addition, Vasudha pointed out that several elements of Indian culture and values were incorporated through other school activities. The first example was the class schedule and how she started the day for her class:

In the morning when the child comes, the first period is basically warming up exercises. We have a prayer. We have a *Gayatri Mantra* [a prayer from the Veda that is considered to be one of the most important Hindu mantras] for the children. Which is very important. And not only the *Gayatri Mantra*, there are some other Vedic mantras also which the children recite. Then there is one prayer in English, one prayer in Hindi. And then after that we have circle time.

The second example she shared was related to the assembly that she had to organize for the whole school. On a periodic basis every teacher was responsible for conducting an assembly in front of the whole school that was based on a particular theme or topic and included the participation of her students in some form of creative activity, such as dance, music, poetry, art, drama, and so forth. Vasudha opted to base her assembly on the Indian epic *Ramayana* since she had her turn close to the festival of Diwali. The epic *Ramayana* tells the story of Lord Rama and his victories over evil. Diwali, the 'festival of lights', is celebrated in honor of his return to his kingdom after 14 years:

Like, I had *Ramayan* Assembly this time and I had written the whole script on my own. And I'm not much into Sanskrit or anything. But then I went down to the children's level and I made those *Chaupais* [four-line verses resembling the actual format in which the story of *Ramayana* is written] according to the children – so that they could understand ... I had written the lyrics also for their age. I was so happy that I had written something on my own and something that the children could relate to, and have enjoyed.

From these descriptions it is evident that, in addition to the non-negotiable academic curriculum, there is a very distinct parallel curriculum that is imparted through various school activities and events, and is shaped by the personalities of individual teachers. This curriculum is neither the prescribed academic curriculum nor the hidden curriculum, but is one that is purposefully aimed towards the teaching of values, virtues, and correct attitudes, with the objective of helping children develop into strong human beings who are conscious of their duties.

Implementing the Teaching of the Academic Curriculum through Activities

Academic excellence is an educational goal that is high priority in most private schools in New Delhi. The School, for instance, boasts of delivering some of the best academic results in the nation. Its students qualify for the best medical, engineering, and law schools in India, and colleges in countries such as the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and so forth. A recent school brochure mentioned that more than 95% of its almost 1000 seniors graduated in the First Division in the year 2002.

The author noted that, although the teachers had to work with large numbers and a highly structured and rigid academic curriculum for each of their classes, they tried to implement the year's academic goals by using an activity-oriented approach. All three of the teacher participants admitted the challenges of a large class, but also acknowledged the importance of being able to translate the academic curriculum into a form that would be interesting and comprehensible to the children. Charu was quite clear about the non-negotiability of the academic curriculum and emphasized how she tried to work with the given system:

We have to follow a special pattern, a syllabus. A lot of time goes in that, whereas I as a teacher would rather teach them general things – more than what is required in the syllabus ... as a teacher, I initially try to complete whatever is given in the syllabus. Still I always try to keep some time – a week or 10 days – to take off from that and do anything extra.

She illustrated her attempts to incorporate activities into the second grade curriculum in the following examples, when she was teaching her class about weather and food:

And then we have weather ... now they know what's a weather vane, what's a barometer. And the thermometer ... Even for a wind vane, we used streamers and went out and saw how it went in one direction. And I had a compass so I said let's see what direction this is ... when we did food, we brought in wheat grains and then flour, and the entire process we did in class. Making *chapattis* [a type of Indian bread]. We didn't actually cook it. But even then I want to make them learn naturally. Not just knowing what it is. Actually seeing and doing it. So they should actually experience as much as possible. Not so much is possible because we have 40 children and

it really hampers any activity because so much noise is generated. Plus because we have so little time and so much syllabus.

Charu provided another example, which explained how she planned her lesson to teach English grammar – more specifically nouns or naming words. She said:

If I just tell them, 'OK, naming words are words that are names of this, this', some would understand, some wouldn't ... So I explain them in Hindi, then I play a game with them – Name, Place, Animal, Thing. Then I make them write homework, 'OK – today's newspaper, see what words you see are naming words and cut that out.'

Clearly there was a tremendous pressure to complete the vast academic syllabus for the year, but the teachers skillfully conducted their teaching in as interesting and as creative a way as possible.

Even with the younger children in the nursery classes the curriculum was clearly divided into academic and non-academic components. Every day there were two half-hour periods devoted to academic teaching – one hour each for numbers and letters. The goals of the academic instruction of the four-year-olds were the recognition of numbers and alphabets, and knowing their numerical values and sounds respectively. According to Vasudha, writing was not a mandatory goal for the four-year-olds: 'We just give them a crayon, and if they can write it, it's fine, otherwise we don't pressure them ... They just recognize numbers from 1 to 10.' In order to teach the value of a number, Vasudha described how she used concrete objects, such as counters and fruit, and asked the children to count out a particular number of the objects. She also gave them shapes and asked them to create different forms:

I just give them rectangles or triangles ... and I tell them, 'OK, now you stick eight of these rectangles and make whatever you want to. Stick these rectangles, take the crayon and make whatever you want to make.' So somebody will make a car with the wheels, if we give them squares – they come up with such lovely ideas – somebody will make computers. If I give them triangles, they'll make a telephone. So whatever they can think of. That way the concept has also gone into them that they have to pick up eight of these [shapes]. Then after this, after 10, we move on to after, before, one less than, one more than, and we do lots of activities on them. Basically we are covering numbers 1 to 10. And in alphabets A to Z, the small [lower case] and the capital [upper case], and the sound.

Although the academic concentration increased with each higher grade, it was evident that high academic standards were set even in the activity-based nursery curriculum. These were maintained as the children got older and they moved up the grades. Furthermore, there appears to be a continuity between school and home values that makes school experiences successful for many children in India. As indicated in other findings of the study, there is an underlying understanding that teachers and parents expect the same educational objectives for children in terms of values and correct attitudes,

intellectual development, and academic proficiency. Due to the existing phenomenon of the extended family, and the fact that children spend more time at home than in school, a lot of social and emotional growth takes place within the home environment, leaving the teachers to focus closely on the school's academic curriculum. The school's academic curriculum is also reinforced in many homes through an extensive system of tutoring done by parents, paid tutors, or family friends.

Fostering Cultural and Religious Diversity

India has always been a nation of tremendous diversity of all kinds – linguistic, religious, social, and economic. The diversity is not due to recent migrations and globalization, but has existed for thousands of years. Historically, foreign conquests have extended India's culture and most city children grow up seeing different customs and costumes, eating different foods, and hearing different languages. In general, most people in urban, cosmopolitan India are at least bilingual, if not trilingual. Although The School is a private institution and the majority of pupils are middle- to upper-middle-class children from north India, it does celebrate religious and cultural differences, as do all the other schools in New Delhi.

Charu described how her class participated in the celebrations of different holidays along with the rest of The School. As a teacher she took particular care to include those children from minority backgrounds:

For Diwali ... we have a *diya* [oil lamps made of clay] making competition, and *diya* decorating and Diwali cards, and we light *diyas* in class. For Christmas, as you saw, we had been decorating ... the class and all. So we do try and incorporate most of the festivals ... we have only two Sikh boys, but I made sure that when it was Guru Nanak's Birthday [a major Sikh holiday in India] they all knew what it was, and after that I told those two boys to find out whatever they could and tell us about Guru Nanak. So they read it out ... and how they celebrate it also they talked about. And I have a Muslim girl also, who did the same when Eid [Eid being an important Islamic holiday in India] came.

Malvika recognized that her practice, like that of her colleagues, was implicitly imbued with elements of Indian culture and diversity. The celebration of holidays was a more concrete and explicit form of that practice, while the hidden curriculum was more covert but nonetheless very powerful in teaching deep-rooted Indian beliefs. These beliefs and values were also played out in the children's social and personal worlds, and conversations between people necessarily brought out the diverse manifestations of Indian beliefs. She explained the logic behind talking about Indian culture with children in the classroom: 'Someway or the other we are practicing it [Indian culture] ... so why not tell him [the child] about that also at the same time? So he'll have a better understanding of the same thing.'

Vasudha, the nursery class teacher, described the various activities she did with her children to celebrate holidays such as Eid, GURPURAB, JANAMASHTAMI, DIWALI, and CHRISTMAS through stories, songs, dressing up, and art. Enthusiastically and earnestly she said that: 'For every festival there is a lot of festivity.' In addition, Vasudha noted how she celebrated ethnic diversity in a different way in her own classroom:

We have our own Food Festival, and I assign things to the children. And especially the Bengalis will get their own Bengali food like *rasgullas* [a traditional Bengali sweet made from cottage cheese] and all, and the Punjabis get their own. And if there's a Maharashtran then that child will get *bhel puri* [a spicy snack typical of central India] and ... the south Indians do get lots of *dosas* and *idlis* [traditional foods from south India] ... And then we have India Week, in which if I have a Kashmiri in my class, then the child will get small models or something from that state, and wear the costume of that state. So all the other children will get to see the costume and know about the culture of that state, food of that state. Similarly, all the other children will also get – so that mingling of culture is there. The child gets to know what is there in the other culture, but they're all together.

Apart from celebrations, daily school activities such as art and craft, music and dance also served as platforms to present the wide diversity in crafts, music, and dance from different parts of India.

It might seem that these celebrations focused on tangible forms of diversity only, in what is known as a 'tourist curriculum' in the field of multicultural education in the USA. Here the author notes that the larger differences between the different states of India are, indeed, those that are tangible. The underlying beliefs and values, on the other hand, share more similarities because of the common philosophical ethos that permeates Indian society.

The researcher was also presented with the opportunity to observe the rehearsals for the nursery school's Annual Day event in which the entire school was performing *The Lion King* to music and dance. This was no easy task considering that about 240 four-year-olds were scheduled to be participating in this massive production! School activities not only reflected Indian cultures but also Western art forms, and young children experienced these activities in large groups not only within their classrooms, but also in events involving the whole school.

The second most important educational aim for the teachers – developing the intellect and ability to think in young children – was infused consistently throughout the teaching-learning process. This was noted in all the classroom observations and was evident in many of the teacher-student interactions. Classroom dynamics will be discussed at greater length in a later section.

Evaluating Successful Teaching

From the teachers' perspective, working with a large number of students in one class was not as big a constraint on the teaching–learning process as it might be perceived from a Western perspective. The size of the classes of all the teachers who participated in the research ranged from 30 to 56 children per class. The average size of an early childhood class in a private school in New Delhi, as suggested by this study, worked out at 43 students. The data revealed that, to a large extent, the three early childhood teacher participants were able to work successfully with their classes of 40 children each. The researcher identifies the following indicators of success from the in-depth interviews with the teacher participants (listed in no particular order):

1. teachers were able to complete the large academic syllabus for the year;
2. teachers made the academic lessons as activity-oriented as possible;
3. teachers knew the individual children in their class and their families;
4. all children participated in extra-curricular activities of their choice;
5. all children were encouraged to participate in assemblies, holiday celebrations, and sociocultural events involving the whole school;
6. teachers created the space and time to allow for the teaching of values in an academically rigorous curriculum.

Other indicators were highlighted in the replies received from early childhood teachers working in other private schools in response to the following survey question: *At the end of an academic year, do you feel that you have accomplished your goals as a teacher? How do you know?*

Indicators to measure successful teaching	Responses from teachers
Enhancement in children's behaviors, attitudes, confidence, curiosity, keenness to come to school, ability to think, creativity, active participation, getting along with peers.	18
Academic improvement in children's progress report cards.	9
Positive and encouraging feedback from the parents.	9
Children coming back to visit their previous year's teacher with fondness and affection even after they have graduated to the next class.	4
The smiling faces of the children who are excited and happy to come to school.	3
The ability to complete the syllabus for the year.	3
Compliments from the children's next class teachers.	4
A review of annual plans to evaluate whether goals were met.	2
Feedback from the supervisor.	2
The achievement of a class culture of the teacher's liking.	1

Table I. Survey responses for indicators to measure successful teaching.

Table I presents the categories of indicators of successful teaching as perceived by the teachers who responded to the survey question. Some participants also indicated that no teacher could be 100% successful, but several considered themselves to be largely (90 %) successful.

From their conversations as well as from some of the classroom observations conducted by the author, it was apparent that the teachers were able to implement discussion and activity-based teaching even with their large classes. Their teaching was not all lecturing, and their goal was not the mere learning of content through rote memorization. Furthermore, the children were certainly not passive in any sense of the word, as the following section will illustrate.

Classroom Dynamics – energetic and meaningful

When working with large numbers, maintaining a semblance of order becomes key for any activity to be productive and constructive. This, on the one hand, explains why teachers in India are closely attentive to behavior management, class control, some degree of silence, discipline such as taking turns in answering, sharing, and the reason why there is minimal physical movement and group project work in the classrooms. On the other hand, the author also observed that, although the 40 children in a classroom were physically restricted in terms of space and were engaged in one activity or lesson, there was no sign of quiet submission, cowering, fear, or inertia in the room. Rather, in every classroom the author observed, she experienced a high intensity of energy in the form of enthusiasm; a rapid raising of hands as children wanted to answer questions and give comments; children jumping to their feet in their eagerness to participate in the conversations with teachers; children coming up to the teacher to clarify assignments without any hesitation; children chatting and discussing with the teachers, voicing their own opinions, and offering their own solutions to situations. The children, their faces bright and their eyes sparkling, were alert and quick to respond, and there was, amidst a sense of humor and frequent laughter, a tangible feeling of comfort, ease, and energy on the part of the teachers as well as the students.

The author saw children in the classrooms who had to be mindful of the overall rules and regulations governing behavior and performance, and yet had many opportunities to ‘create and choose friendships, control their own social worlds, to be as active or quiet as they needed to be’ (Viruru, 2001). They had the freedom to walk up to the teacher as many times as they needed, to engage in conversations with partners, and to choose topics for projects. During Charu’s reading class, even as the teacher read out the story from the book, there was a look of interest and engagement on the faces of the children in their shared sense of enjoyment.

The author was struck by the enormous level of verbal and intellectual energy in the classrooms, which was very different from the more physical energy evident in an American progressive early childhood classroom. This

raises more critical questions: Is one kind of energy more important than another kind of energy? And, if so, who makes that decision? How important is evidence of physical energy in a country where physical and outdoor activities have lower priority than, say, in a country such as the USA where sports and outdoor activities are so important? Are the 40 children in an Indian classroom, which is characterized by low levels of physical energy but high levels of mental energy, any less engaged or being offered any less of a learning experience than, perhaps, the 15 children in a Western classroom, which is characterized by a higher degree of momentum and physical energy? And, if so, who defines good learning experiences and learning styles, appropriate teaching styles and modes of engagement? The concept of a one-on-one interaction with the teacher and logical reasoning during conversations seemed to have no place in this classroom. Perhaps that works best when there are a few people in a classroom, but when the 'environment is teeming with people and many different issues need to be handled at once, perhaps one needs a different way of thinking in order to survive' (Viruru, 2001, p. 31).

The Large Class Size Contextualized

As the author struggles to make sense of this phenomenon of large class size, she emphasizes that the case of large numbers of humans in a given group is not only found in the classrooms of India. It is a phenomenon pervasive throughout the country because India is a country with a population of over one billion. In any given situation large numbers of people are seen in close proximity, whether in extended family systems, on the crowded streets, in the huge number of vehicles on the roads, in the markets, bazaars, and department stores, in schools and colleges, competing in the job market, or at the workplace. This appears to be the very nature of human existence in Indian society. A room with a few human bodies would be an atypical feature in India.

When viewed in this light, would a small class size be against the very grain of life in Indian society? Would it be doing justice to the overall development of the Indian child if he or she were placed in a small group environment, which would be unnatural in the context of life outside that environment? Further, who defines the appropriate size of a group within a given context? In India even 40 children may be considered a small group in comparison with some Indian schools where there are 60 children in a classroom.

And yet, schools in India do not graduate students who are socially and emotionally inept. In urban India children grow up to live in very competitive environments, always having to compete with large numbers, whether in family, educational, or work settings. Large classes do perhaps foster the skills that are required for success in such a life. The following is a description of Vasudha's personal struggle and determination to appear for the examination in order to gain admission into the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program and become a teacher:

After my [college] degree I had to take the entrance exam for B.Ed. On the day of the exam it happened to pour like cats and dogs. There was water above my waist. And still the exam had to take place. It was scheduled for that day. My father and brother said that we can't even take out the car. But I had to go. And I walked and walked and walked. I was fully drenched. There was no auto [autorickshaw], no taxi. Nothing could be done ... finally I could somehow manage to get a bus ... I was about 25 minutes late for that exam ... So I sat for the exam ... my name didn't come on the first list [was not included in the first list of successful candidates]. I was very – really unhappy ... And then my name was there on the second list ... So then I did my B.Ed.

This experience may be typical of the stress that most students must endure to gain admission into a professional degree program after earning their undergraduate degrees. The competition for the few available places for the vast number of applicants is enormous and usually no allowance is made for any delays or illnesses on the part of the candidates.

The question that is raised here is: under such systemic and societal circumstances, would it be appropriate for children in urban Indian classrooms to learn from the very beginning that the survival of the fittest and best is a real concept in the daily lives of children and adults in India? When children in Indian cities live and grow in a world of fierce competition, surrounded by large numbers of people everywhere, would small class size work to their advantage? From what the author observed in the classrooms, there was a high degree of learning and engagement even within the large groups, and children exhibited a high degree of competence in terms of socializing, comprehending the lessons, arguing and debating answers amongst themselves, being attentive in order to keep up with the pace of the work, and competing healthily with their peers for the teachers' attention. Who was to define the measure and quality of the skills that children developed or did not develop in a large group?

The concept of small class size is rooted in learning theories that have been driven by psychological and developmental paradigms in early childhood education in the West and shaped by Western middle-class values (Cannella, 1997). Can the Eurocentric view of the development of the individual within a small group with a high degree of teacher attention be applied to a large group of Indian children who are raised in a very different cultural context? 'Developmentally appropriate practices' and the 'emergent curriculum' are not concepts that can be readily applied to a group of 43 children. It would be nearly impossible to implement a curriculum that could be driven by the developmental stages or the interests of 43 children. Further, Kumar (1992) suggests that children's interests are constantly changing, and it would be difficult to keep track of the changing themes of a group of 43 in order to design a curriculum. This makes it necessary for the use of a pre-planned curriculum. The issue of small class size and the quality of one-on-one interaction between teachers and students becomes further irrelevant when the real issue in many urban and rural classrooms is the struggle to acquire the

foundations of literacy amidst a paucity of resources, such as space, pencils, paper, books, crayons, and even food and clothes. For hundreds of years India has had a huge population and Indian children have studied in large classes with limited resources. Is a small class size even an option in the Indian context where resources are scarce and people are many? The concept of small class size appears to be ideal only from the perspective of a privileged society.

Changing the class profile to smaller groups of children can ultimately be done only in financially well-off schools that have the resources for more physical space as well as for buying more materials and hiring more teachers. Consequently, what percentage of children in India would actually have the privilege of studying in small classes? Further, this would only widen the gap between private and government, and urban and rural schools. One would have to carefully consider the resources required to meet the conditions necessary to reap the benefits of small class size (Zurawsky, 2003), as well as the disadvantage of a corresponding reduction in the overall egalitarian objectives. Large class size will continue to be the norm in Indian schools unless the real challenge of population control is addressed.

Children in India are not raised in sparsely populated towns, homes, families, and communities. Their growth happens in a context with a high degree of human and social interaction, dominated by intergenerational experiences. Children learn to wait for their turn and to share their meager toys and books with siblings, cousins, and neighbors; they learn to appreciate the scarcity of commodities such as picture books, art and craft materials, and so forth. Before applying the class size standard to the Indian classroom using a Eurocentric educational discourse, it would help if educators were to first consider what the educational aims for a populous Indian society are. Secondly, they should also consider whether those aims are rooted in Western educational philosophies or whether they are shaped by the underlying beliefs of Indian philosophy. And it might help to acknowledge that, perhaps, these are the very skills and bodies of knowledge that will allow children in India to continue to live competently in densely populated sections of the nation such as cities like New Delhi.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the author recognizes that successful teaching and learning in large classes may not occur in classrooms in other contexts such as rural, government, or economically poorer schools. However, although this study was restricted to urban private schools in New Delhi, data was collected across 15 other such schools and 35 other early childhood teachers who responded to the survey, and some conclusions might be appropriately drawn. The author notes that the successful experiences in the classrooms observed in the study were largely a result of the attitudes and dispositions of the teachers, administrators, parents, and students. These attitudes and dispositions were defined by a common cultural ethos. The author highlights the following

elements that contributed to successful teaching and learning even in the large classes:

1. the large class size was a non-negotiable norm across the nation;
2. there was a strong teacher commitment and a positive attitude to making it work;
3. teachers viewed their students as their own children, wanting them to do their best in everything;
4. teaching was considered to be a noble and respectable profession;
5. teachers were respected by students and their parents;
6. both teachers and parents were in agreement about their expectations of the students – they wanted them to learn good values and to achieve high academic standards, which resulted in children being ‘taught’ the same things in school and at home.

The biggest advantage of a small class size is greater individualization (Molnar et al, 1999), and the author observes that in India, the tutoring that many children receive at home is nothing but individualized and focused attention. Further, small class size does not automatically improve learning and teaching behaviors, and, in fact, can lead to a more interrupted teacher–learner interaction, as children expect to have their demands met immediately. ‘The benefits of having fewer children will not flow in any inevitable way – teachers have to work just as hard to manage learning effectively’ (Blatchford et al, 2002). Perhaps early childhood teachers in urban Indian classrooms learn to teach themselves how best to manage effective teaching in their large classes.

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