Social Constructivism: The future of the primary classroom or just another “ism”? 

Abstract

Social constructivism is one of the two most common forms of constructivism. It focuses on learners being actively involved in their own learning through social and cultural interactions. This theory has been increasing in popularity over the past decade, yet, there is not overwhelming evidence of its pedagogical implementation within the primary classroom. The resistance of teachers to adopt this pedagogy may be due to their preconceived image of a teacher as the provider of knowledge rather than a guide to assist students through their own learning. If the teacher is motivated to adopt a social constructivist approach within their classroom they will be allowing their students to build many skills that will assist in their future acquisition of knowledge.

Introduction

The constructivist theory of learning was developed predominantly by Jean Piaget and has been supported by the work of many, including; Vygotsky, Bruner, Rogoff and Dewey. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 310) Piaget believed that children “are not blank slates but rather creators of their own learning.” (Van De Walle et al, 2010, p 20) Piaget viewed learning as a process of constructing knowledge out of the world and the making “meaning out of what is encountered.” (Reiser & Dempsey, 2012, p 45)
It is a key element to constructivist theory’s that students are actively engaged in their own learning and that they are able to make meaning from this learning. (Reiser, et al, 2012, p 46) In contrast to a traditional classroom in which the students may be required to learn their timetables by means of rote learning, a constructivist approach would focus on the students developing an understanding of the meaning behind each timetable equation. The belief is by reflecting on their prior knowledge children will be able to make connections to the new concept and build on the knowledge they already have. (Van De Walle, 2010, p 21)

Constructivism is not based on one theory alone. The two most widely discussed forms of constructivism are; cognitive constructivism (or psychological constructivism) and social constructivism (or socio-constructivism). Cognitive constructivism focuses on the way in which ideas are constructed through interactions and are then personally processed. (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p 241)

Social constructivism, on the other hand, focuses on the process of constructing learning through our interactions with others, specifically the interactions which take place within a “specific socio-cultural context.” (Oldfather, 1999, p 8)

**A closer look at social constructivism**

Social Constructivism is based predominantly on the work of Lev Vygotsky. Woolfolk (2010) stated that Vygotsky focused on the importance of “social interaction, cultural tools and activity in shaping an individuals development and learning.” (p 312)
It was Vygotsky’s belief that social interactions are critical in developing new knowledge. He explored the idea that as language is the basis of thought it is therefore “entwined with thought and thus lies at the heart of our sense making about the world.” He continued in exploring the connection between our inner thought and language and suggests they are also inherently social such as language. (Oldfather, 1999, Pgs 10 - 11)

Vygotsky believed learners actively build their understanding while being offered scaffolding by others, such as a Teacher or more knowledgeable peer. Gradually they will become “more aware of and able to regulate their own learning through metacognition.” (Watson, 2001, p 140) At this stage the scaffolding can gradually be withdrawn.

Much of Vygotsky’s work explored the link between “inner speech, meanings and external speech.” He found that understanding the speech of others does not enable full understanding of the other individuals thoughts. Yet, he continued in stating that even understanding the others thoughts, does not suggest that the meaning behind these thoughts is known. It is the meaning behind the thoughts that assists in developing new knowledge. (Jarvis et al, 2003, p 38)

Social Constructivism is generally implemented within a classroom through the use of inquiry based learning and problem based learning. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 317) Inquiry based learning requires the teacher to provide students with a “puzzling event, question or problem”. The students then; formulate a hypothesis, collect data and test their hypothesis, they then draw conclusions and
reflect on the original problem. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 317) This form of learning has become increasingly popular in Primary schools over the past decade.

On the other hand, problem based learning involves; familiarising the students to the problem, preparing the students for study, assisting students independent and group investigation, the students will be required to develop and present artefacts, dioramas and exhibits, finally the students analyse and evaluate the problem solving process that they used in working through the problem. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 320) Reiser, et al (2012), comments that problem based learning has been found to be “successful in terms of student learning.” (p 47)

**Strengths of Social constructivism**

There are many advantages to social constructivist pedagogy in the classroom. Powell et al (2009) believes that social constructivism is a “highly effective method of teaching” as all students benefit from the social interactions and partnership that this theory relies upon. (p 243)

Additionally, Sullivan (2011) believes that this approach assists in making “learning much more sophisticated.” (p 30) This is due to the teacher being seen not as the provider of knowledge but rather a guide to support and assist students in their own learning as well as the fact that this approach considers both psychological and social thinking. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 312)

By creating a classroom based on social constructivist pedagogy it can assist in developing the students own intrinsic motivation to learn. (Oldfather, 1999, p 15)
This is in contrast to a behaviourist approach which focuses on providing extrinsic motivation, punishment and reward in attempt to intrinsically motivate students. Social constructivism suggests that students can simply be motivated intrinsically by the desire to learn. This is possible in a social constructivist classroom as the teacher enables the students to understand that they are “co-constructors of knowledge” and that they can make sense of things themselves. This allows the student to be aware of their own ability to seek knowledge and in turn understand the world. (Oldfather, 1999, p 16)

Van De Walle et al (2010), also comments that social constructivist pedagogy allows for errors to be treated as opportunities for further learning. Errors in this situation may be a result of lacking prior knowledge needed to complete the task or a misconception that had been established as prior knowledge. (Pgs 22 – 23)

Additionally, Brophy (2006) states that the image of a teacher guiding and scaffolding students through discussion while co-constructing knowledge is a far more attractive image than that of a traditional classroom with “passive listeners.” (p 530)

Social Constructivist pedagogy can also assist in honouring diversity within the classroom. As the culture of the classroom plays a large part in the creation of knowledge, the ability to access the prior knowledge of students from different backgrounds and experiences will only make for a richer development among all students. (Van De Walle et al, 2010, p 23)
Ultimately, in a social constructivist classroom the students are able to feel that they are capable of success and will approach a challenging experience with the confidence and knowledge that they will be able to complete it and ultimately have a greater sense of self worth. (Oldfather, 1999, p 16)

**Weaknesses of Social constructivism**

Social Constructivism has its critics, as do all learning theories. Some of the criticisms include the difficulty for teachers to employ social constructivist pedagogy due to its lack specificity and the disbelief of many that learners are able to construct their own reality. (Reiser, et al, 2012, p 46) Sullivan (2011) feels that the complexity of implementing this learning theory evokes the question of whether there is merit in developing this theory any further. (p 30)

Many of the criticisms of social constructivism are actually based around the implementation and ability of the teacher to identify each student’s prior knowledge and consequently provide the right amount of scaffolding to each student. Sullivan (2011), states that overcoming the resistance of students to become active in their own learning and the varying levels of prior knowledge that exist within a class may be very time consuming and arduous for teachers to manage. (p 26)

Brophy (2006), when commenting on the work of Graham Nuthall suggested that the social dimension involved in this learning theory may not be effective in the classroom. According to Nuthall’s research students often carry on personal conversations with nearby peers during lessons rather than dialogue focused on
the topic. Additionally, approximately “25% of what students learn about academic concepts and principles is rooted in input they receive from a peer rather than the teacher.” This leads to the possibility of students being exposed to misleading or incorrect ideas or statements from their peers, which will have an impact on their ability to further develop concepts successfully. (p 536)

Brophy continued in noting that there are many who disagree with the belief of social constructivists that all students are active participants in classroom discussions. He commented that it is more “common for a subset to be highly active and another subset to remain mostly silent.” (Brophy, 2006, p 532) This suggests that this learning theory would be maintaining the inequalities that are present in traditional classroom settings. (Hunter et al, 2005, p 350)

Powell (2009) suggests that teachers often view talking during class in a negative way, yet, this “verbal energy” could be used to promote discussions on the current material and enhance the students meaning making. (p 245) Yet, teachers may find it difficult to embrace this pedagogy and revert to a more behaviourist approach as the provider of knowledge. This is often the way in which the teachers themselves were taught and they may feel more comfortable implementing this pedagogy. (Sullivan, 2011, p 27)

In a recent study of primary school teachers it was found that the majority believe that social constructivism requires teachers to have a significant amount of knowledge on each specific subject-matter due to the unpredictability of the direction the student’s investigation and questioning will take. Requiring the
teacher to have extensive knowledge to provide scaffolding and guidance where it is needed. (Brophy, 2006, p 530)

Graham Nuthall concluded that there were very legitimate doubts surrounding the achievability and cost effectiveness of social constructivist “approaches to classroom teaching.” (Brophy, 2006, p 530)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, social constructivist pedagogy has both its benefits and weaknesses. The weaknesses seem to be centred mainly on the teacher, whereas, the benefits are related to the students. Therefore, the lack of widespread implementation of this learning theory may be due to the resistance of teachers to move out of their comfort zone and push themselves to provide a more meaningful education to their students. Reiser et al (2012), agrees that getting students to the point at which they are responsible for their own learning and truly engaged can be an incredibly arduous task, yet, it can be enormously satisfying for a teacher to witness their students achieving this. (p 48)

If social constructivist pedagogy is to be effectively implemented the teacher will need to provide a classroom environment which allows for social interactions and dialogue and with relevant learning materials. The teacher themselves will need to be knowledgeable of the topic, this will allow for multiple perspectives to be explored. Teachers will also need a good understanding of the prior knowledge of each students and an awareness of the required level of scaffolding each student will need to build new knowledge. (Woolfolk, 2010, p 314)
In my classroom I aim to employ constructivist pedagogy. I was horrified while on placement to witness a student question their teacher about what the “AM” in regard to time refers to. The teacher looked at me and asked if I knew, I replied that I was unsure. The teacher then whispered to me, “Ignore the question and she will get the point and go away.” I couldn’t believe that a student was seeking knowledge and required the guidance of her teacher; yet, the teacher rejected the student as well as the opportunity for that student to learn.

In summation, teachers may benefit from employing a combination of constructivist approaches, such as social and cognitive constructivism. This would assist in developing the most effective constructivist pedagogy within the classroom. (Powell et al, 2009, p 241) Therefore, it appears that social constructivist pedagogy should form the basis for a successful primary classroom of the future.

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