

Understanding the Development of Teacher Autonomy Using a Cultural Historical Approach

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Abstract

Thinking, which has been seen largely as something taking place within an individual psyche, has undergone a reformulation in the work of Vygotsky, who views it primarily as social, cultural and historical. According to him, 'higher mental functions', specific to humans, are mainly social activities mediated by cultural tools that develop historically. This perspective, which places cognition in the realm of culture and history, implies a cultural historical approach to the study of mental phenomenon. In my paper, I explore the methodological implications of these ideas for understanding how teachers develop and what enhances their autonomy or agentive power and enables them to move in trajectories that would stretch their potentialities for change. The specific educational context in which my work as a teacher and teacher educator is embedded forms the live empirical basis for this investigation.

Introduction

This paper uses Vygotsky's cultural historical approach to understand the complexities involved in the process of development of teacher autonomy and its implications for teacher education. At the outset, I would like to explain the sense in which I use the term 'teacher autonomy'¹ in order to highlight the relevance of this approach to both understanding and promoting it.

My reflections on teacher autonomy have been prompted by a paradox that I have observed in my educational context, which, I believe, is also true more generally (e.g., Hoban, 2002), i.e., teachers' reluctance to change in a changing society that places new demands on them. In the area of ESL teaching, which is the particular concern of this study, this paradox gives rise to a gap between what teachers do and what students need. While the changes brought about by the rapidly developing Information and Communication Technology requires teachers to pay attention to how students construct language and meaning as autonomous learners, away from unproductive rote practices (NCERT, 2005), classroom investigation shows teachers still falling into a repetitive pattern of conventional practice that fails to promote students' ability to use language spontaneously for communication. This foregrounds the issue of teacher learning and change for the promotion of learner autonomy.² My view of teacher autonomy is in consonance with the notion of 'teacher-learner autonomy' (Smith, 2001), which focuses on teacher development for promoting learner autonomy. I see teacher autonomy as the development of teachers' agentive power to move in trajectories that would stretch their potentialities for change.

The cultural pattern displayed by teachers' thinking and practice points to the need of a social orientation in understanding the problem of teacher autonomy. The social nature of learning and development has received much attention since the work

1 McGrath (2000), for example, identifies different dimensions of teacher autonomy.

2 There is growing recognition of the close association between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy (e.g., Benson 2007; Smith, 2001; Little, 1995).

of Vygotsky (1978, 1987). His cultural historical approach is relevant to my study, because it helps capture the mediation of the social in the individual teacher's development.

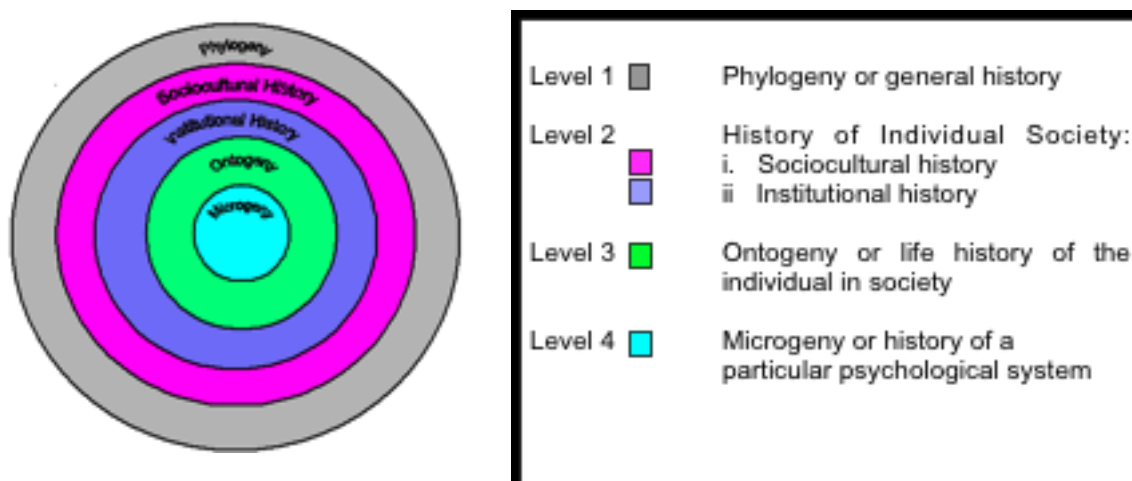
Applying Cultural Historical Approach to the Study of Teacher Autonomy

According to Vygotsky ((1978), psychological functions are socially generated through 'internalisation' of cultural tools that regulate human behaviour. These historically evolved cultural signs that mediate the formation of an internal plane of consciousness, link individual and social processes. This makes it necessary to study the developing individual in relation to the developing historical context and suggests the following two questions for teacher development:

1. What opportunities does the teachers' workplace afford for the development of teacher autonomy?
2. What impact does the introduction of alternative cultural tools into the flow of their thinking have on the development of autonomy?

In my study, these questions refer to two interrelated contexts that teachers inhabit simultaneously; one is the teachers' workplace, and the other, an informal Teacher Development Group (henceforth, TDG). While the first question involves an analysis of the state and reasons for it of teacher autonomy in the workplace, the second question deals with an analysis based on an intervention in the form of a TDG. The data for these two case studies are drawn from a longitudinal study of ESL teachers in my sociocultural context. The first case interweaves historical and ethnographic methods to understand the cultural resources and constraints to teacher autonomy. The second case uses an experimental method to throw into relief the process of teacher development. Together, these methods help place the role of individual teachers and the social world in successively broader timeframes as indicated in the figure below. It is important to access these historical levels to understand the dialectical relationship between teachers' mental functioning and their historical context of practice.

Figure 1: The Study Model - Levels of History³



³ This model is an adaptation of Vygotsky's (1978) historical framework to suit this study. Ratnam (2006) has details of the modifications.

In the above figure, *Phylogeny* refers to the general capacity of human beings to develop cultural artefacts to mediate their relationship with the world (Vygotsky, 1978). Although my study does not focus on the phylogenetic level, it is built on this basic capacity of human beings for cultural mediation (Cole, 1990). *Social history* is the history of individual society (Scribner, 1985) and *Institutional history* refers to the specific context in which individual work is set. *Ontogeny* is the development of the individual in society. *Microgeny* focuses on the formation of psychological processes in a concrete limited context of time and space as in an activity that an individual is involved in. The first case, which deals with the development of teacher autonomy in the workplace, links the sociocultural level involving teachers' collective past and institutional background with their ontogeny. The analysis at the sociocultural level is motivated by the need to understand the dynamics by which observed commonalities in the current behaviour of teachers have evolved. The historical analysis at the institutional level examines the inherent tensions created by the opposing pulls exerted on teachers by policy expectations and ground reality. The ethnographic study at the ontogenetic level focuses on the phenomenological world of 24 teachers to capture their lived experience. The data from various sources such as documents, questionnaires, in-depth interviews of teachers, students and administrators, class observations and field notes pertaining to the sociocultural, institutional and ontogenetic levels help to unravel the material conditions in which teacher development is situated.

The second case focuses on an experimental study at the microgenetic level to explore the nature of the environment in which teachers can enhance their autonomy in ways that extend their practice. The collaborative activity set up of the TDG provides the venue for this exploration. In this cultural space, teachers had opportunities for dialogic and reflective engagement. I was part of this group in the role of a more experienced peer. The inquiry activities in which teachers participated were designed to help teachers access and problematise their held conceptions of teaching. At the same time, it helped me access the complex process of teacher development. For the limits of the study, three teachers' participation in TDG over time has been captured in the form of audiotaped group discussions and lesson planning, videotaped collaborative teaching, teacher questionnaire and in-depth interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Case 1

The data from the teachers' workplace shows a gap between teachers' espoused beliefs and practice. For instance, in the matter of social relations operating in the classroom, teachers hold democratic ideals and claim that they regard all students equally and encourage everyone to participate actively. However, their practice shows a different bias, namely, one of differential treatment of students. This affects students' access to learning and inhibits the development of their identity as autonomous learners as the following excerpt from a classroom interaction illustrates.

[**SS1**: student 1; **SS2**: student 2; **T**: teacher; **R**: researcher]

T: I have given you 5 questions to answer. Now, I want you to give me the answers. Will you please read the answers along with the questions one by one?...Who will start? [A girl makes a movement to show that she wants to answer and the teacher nods] OK.

***SS1**: Who is the narrator here?
The barber is the narrator here.*

T: The barber is the narrator. Good.

SS1: [continues] who is the customer?

Captain is the customer.

T: Captain is the customer. Very good!

[looks around] Question number three? [points to a student]

SS2: What did the customer do when he entered the saloon?

The bullet studded....studded belt that is the, the holster dangled.

T: Who will give me the correct answer?

[SS1 stands up to read]

SS1: The customer took off the bullet studded belt and hung it upon a wall when he entered the saloon.

T: Repeat, repeat [to the class] she will repeat the answer.

SS1: [reads the same answer again]

T: Fine. [to SS2] Please copy down the answer from her.

The above episode illuminates the hidden discourse of power that is at work in the classroom. There is a marked difference in the way the teacher treats the two students in this example. While SS1 is appreciated every time she answers, SS2's contribution is dismissed by the teacher who redirects the question, 'Who can give me the correct answer?' There is no discussion to engage SS2 in meaning negotiation. By asking him to copy the given answer without providing the experience of the process of meaning construction, the teacher is allowing the student to be other regulated. While the teacher's preferential treatment of SS1 boosts her confidence to participate with an increased sense of eagerness and importance, his attitude to SS2 places the student in a position of passive receiver, lacking in agency. The play of power in the production of these identities remains, for the most part, out of the awareness of the teacher, who, in this case, had assumed that he was helping SS2 by asking him to copy the answer from SS1.

This kind of differentiating interactional sequence is not an exception. It forms an integral part of classroom interaction and reflects the mediating influence of larger sociocultural patterns. The analysis at the sociocultural level has made it possible to trace the ways teachers think back to the ancient *Vedic*⁴ ideal of *Guru-Sishya* (teacher-learner), itself embedded in other structural hierarchical relationships, notably, caste, father-son, and adult-child relationships prevalent in the wider society. This dominant social structure of power relationships can be seen to frame the teacher-learner relationship through 'transference' (Basch, 1989; Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford & Early et al., 2005). There is no scope to provide details of the evolution of social relations in the classroom and the parallel evolution of epistemic views of knowledge, teaching and learning. Suffice it to say that the historical analysis has provided patterns from which the present implicit beliefs of teachers can be seen to derive. These are, for instance, beliefs that the teacher is the knower with superior authority, who should be obeyed and not contradicted, correct pronunciation and grammar as important components of language learning, teaching as passing on the contents of the text and learning as memorising the given. Teachers seem to survive

4 The period in which the Vedas, the oldest preserved Indo-Aryan texts, were produced.

the changes ushered in by the changing social conditions without themselves being motivated to change by the 'power of compensation' (Jacobi, 1968) exerted by these unconscious beliefs.

The autonomy of teachers' collectively and implicitly held beliefs is reinforced by the contradictions inherent in the institutional contexts as the data shows. Teachers work under constraints of time, class strength, syllabus and examination demands. The top-down pressure to contain drop-out rates and boost results lies heavily on teachers in an environment that provides no sustained support to teachers to address these challenges autonomously and inventively. The culture of individualism dominant in the teachers' workplace and official perceptions, which tacitly endorse rote practices in the belief that it will help students pass the examination, provide no scope for promoting transformative learning. Thus the cultural environment of the teachers' workplace and teachers' implicit beliefs that have evolved socioculturally seem to constrain the development of teachers' autonomy.

Case 2

Teacher development, taking place within the broader meaning system of their workplace, created a generative tension-filled path for teachers to negotiate. The process of development of teachers' autonomy shows a non-linear path as they respond to the divergent pulls exerted by their individual and collective histories, workplace expectations and the alternative ways of teaching promoted in the TDG. The following example shows the gradual and recursive development of teachers' view of the difference between, what Gallimore and Tharp (1990) call, 'instructional talk' or teaching as telling and 'instructional conversation' that sees teaching as mutual engagement of teacher and learners in meaning construction.

Teachers entered TDG with spontaneous views of teaching that were inclined toward seeing teaching as instructional talk. For instance, all three teachers, Ashitha, Kaan and Prasanna (pseudonyms) focused on the mechanics of reading and giving meaning as the following excerpt shows:

Kaan: *They [the students] read that too with many mistakes. We have to correct and explain the meaning. (20-5-2001)*

Against this strongly implanted view of teaching, ideas of learning through negotiating meaning modelled to them in the TDG seemed to pose a puzzle. The following comment from one of the teachers on this process of negotiation in one of the TDG classes he observed illustrates this:

Prasanna: *You took more than five minutes to make them understand one word. (21-7-2001)*

At this point, it seemed to him that leading students to discover meaning was longwinded when the same could be achieved more efficiently by giving the meaning in the mother tongue. With time, however, teachers learned to discern the difference between instructional talk and instructional conversation as the following excerpt illustrates:

Ashitha: *We give all the answers and then ask questions. But here reaction takes place. Teacher changes according to what students say.... You are involving students from the beginning itself. They are not simply listening. (4-8-2001)*

Participating in process-oriented classroom practices made teachers question the value of instructional talk as a tool for promoting language learning. This can be seen in the following excerpt from a group discussion:

Prasanna: ...*This interaction method works better for English medium students. It is difficult for Kannada [vernacular] medium students. They are not able to respond. They don't have the basics. So, I myself have to explain.*

Ashitha: *By explaining, you are giving the meaning to them. There is no contribution from them. That means they are not actively involved.*

Kaan: *When we involve them, it is a type of motivation to participate.*

Ashitha: *Students know something, but they find it difficult to express that one. So, we are helping them with some language input, so that, with that help, they can try to express their ideas. When they do it, they will learn.*

Kaan: *This is what we are seeing. They [students] are trying to use language, right or wrong. In that process, they are learning.*

Prasanna: *Yeah, this method is ok for language learning. But, will they be able to score marks? The writing part, we have to help. We have to prepare them for the exams.* (7-9-2002)

In the above conversation, the clash of voices between Prasanna, on the one hand, and Ashitha and Kaan, on the other, shows the difference in the epistemological location from which they view practice. Prasanna's thinking shows that it is still organised using traditional discourse while Ashitha and Kaan seem to have built a better understanding of the concept of 'instructional conversation'. More gradually, Prasanna's thinking shows a better grasp of this concept as is indicated in a comment he made during a reflective video-watching session:

Prasanna: *Earlier, I used to think, why can't we simply explain.... To get two words 'timid' and 'bold', how much interaction and learning is taking place.* (10-1-2004)

Understanding the implications of alternative discourses to teachers' practice is a significant aspect of their development of autonomy, because the ability to see which alternative speaks to the transformative pedagogical goals they cherish provides the motivation to pursue it even in the face of the living contradictions experienced by them in their cultural environment where several opposing forces such as workplace expectations, goal of examination, lack of confidence in students' ability to participate in instructional conversation and the safety of confirmed practices mediate teachers' thinking. Although teachers' practice continues to have traditional features, they now try to make it more meaningful by consciously trying to promote identity of participation in the students. These teachers use tools to get students to think and express meaning instead of giving meaning as they used to do earlier. Signs of development of teacher autonomy can be seen in teachers' growing awareness of the inconsistency between their intention and practice and in the increasing capacity to expand their repertoire of conscious acts to reduce this mismatch within the constraints posed by the workplace culture.

Conclusion: Features That Play a Facilitative Role in Fostering the Development of Teacher Autonomy

An investigation of teachers' developmental trajectories in two interrelated contexts has helped address the two questions posited by this study. It shows that teachers tend to work within the box in the workplace due to system inertia that provides no support for the development of teacher autonomy. The collaborative space of the TDG, on the other hand, enables teachers to become aware of their implicitly held convictions and develop the autonomy to integrate their new awareness into classroom practice.

The results of this study seem to suggest that teacher autonomy can be promoted by:

- Acknowledging teachers' spontaneously and collectively held implicit beliefs
- Creating opportunities for inquiry learning
- Building a reflective community of practice

The development of teachers is situated in the histories and contexts of their work. As contexts for development of teacher autonomy, the difference between teachers' workplace and the TDG seems to lie largely in the mediational means available to teachers. The TDG acknowledges teachers' implicit beliefs. It is through the co-existence of the old and the new that teachers become conscious of their learned responses. They become more intentional and infuse new meaning into their routine practices.

In the TDG, my challenge was meeting teachers on their own terms by accepting their conceptions of teaching as legitimate premises for further learning. Using an inquiry approach helped teachers hold up their past to scrutiny and reflectively appropriate the new tools introduced to them in dialectic with the old.

As has been pointed out, the mediating influence of teachers' workplace culture and teachers' own implicit beliefs renders teacher development non-linear. This calls for sustained support to help them through a recursive path of development. Building a reflective community of teachers provides supportive contexts for collegial learning. Working together as a community, teachers feel safe to take risks and develop the strength to face the dilemmas created by the collision of diverse 'voices' in them. Teachers develop autonomy in the historically developing work environment by finding an orientation among the contradictory pulls that they experience.

The Author

Tara Ratnam is an ESL teacher, teacher educator and researcher from India. She has obtained her doctoral degree from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Her research addresses a very important question regarding socio-cultural and psychological forces shaping the professional development and classroom performance of ESL teachers. Her extra-mural activities include production of ESL and teacher resource materials. She is the convener of an informal teacher development group that provides a cultural space for collective teacher reflection and action. The disciplines that feed into her work are History, Cultural Psychology, Sociology of Education, Multiculturalism, Curriculum Development and Critical Pedagogy.

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