The Disadvantaged Child's Negotiation of the Dimensions of Time, Space and Relationality in an Elite Private School

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Abstract

This article explores the narrative experiences of a disadvantaged child in an elite private school. It problematises the 'deep structure' of the school and explains how the child negotiates them in order to learn. Looked at from the dimensions of time, space and relationality, as proposed by Reay, it draws attention to the need to acknowledge the identity of the child to make teaching-learning more sensitive, responsive and meaningful.

Background

Access to full time formal education is mandated by the RTE Act (2009) but there is considerable resistance by the elite private schools that refuse to admit these children by terming them as 'culturally different'. This 'cultural difference' is premised on the middle-class values of cleanliness, regularity, punctuality, deference to adult authority and a 'refined' language. Resistance to admitting disadvantaged children is so rigid that the elite private schools opposed the state mandate of admitting 25% children of the marginalised groups Economically Weaker Sections (ESW) legally and by involving the authoritarian middle class parents (Apple, 1982). They highlighted the difficulties that these children would face by sitting on the same benches as the elite class and it also presented a sense of loss of standard as a result of this integration. Their arguments were that the poor "children who lack academic support from their families are likely to remain low performing, and may suffer by comparison." Two,

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that, "they would be faced with difficulties that stem from the contrast in social markers such as dress, possessions, parental profiles etc. All this could seriously affect the self-esteem of underprivileged students." And three, that the government should improve its own schools rather than levying the burden on the well endowed private schools. It was even suggested that "instead of integrating them in elite schools, these private schools should establish separate schools for poor children" (The Hindu, 5 May, 2012).

On the face of it, the first argument seems to empathise with the poor child. Looking deeper, it acknowledges that the social relations, organisation of time, space and resources are favourable to the affluent individuals. This shows how schools perpetuate social order and are resistant to change towards a diverse composition of students. The second argument lays bare the deep set values of possessive individualism preserved by the school. The third argument points to the stark 'apartheid-like' separatism practised by the schools. Apparently empathetic, all the arguments reflect the neo-conservative view (Apple, 1982) of individualism, competition and a clear divide between 'us' and 'them'. Here, "they are sapping our way of life, most of our economic resources, and creating government control over our lives." (Apple, 2000, p.29). To add to this, the virtuous 'we' even want to open 'separate' schools for the disadvantaged.

Contesting these arguments, a non-government organisation made an accord (Apple) with one elite private school in Delhi to admit some of the children living within its Children's Home called *sneh ghar* (translated as Home of Love). This study is conducted with children from one such Home attending an elite private school. The admission in the elite public school is due to an informal partnership forged between the director of the Home and the school. The school, which is a member of a philanthropic society, bears the cost for the children's fees, books, uniforms, picnics and annual day expenses.

Elite Public School

The enrolment of children in the elite private school is seen as a matter of pride by the Home staff as well as children, as it is considered to be better in term of 'standards'. These perceived better standards that distinguish an elite private school from other schools are related to the imposing physical structure, social and cultural demands of regularity, punctuality, discipline and academic demands of individuality and competitiveness; all qualities expected of the metropolitan upper middle classes that are rich, competitive and individualist. Such

elite public schools cater to the social class that occupies a dominant position. These schools are characterised by the reproduction of culture by the elite groups and a degree of social closure to other groups of society.

Objective of the Study

The children of the Home, enrolled in the elite private school, carry a strong conviction that this will provide them crucial opportunities for educational advantage generally not available to them or their parents. The Home gives them an identity apart from their identity as beggars, rag-pickers and street vendors. This awareness motivates them to negotiate the differences they encounter in school, as disadvantaged children from a hostel rather than as children of the street.

The negotiation of differences that emerge in the interaction between the children, school and the Home affect the schooling experience of all children. These negotiations also lead to resistance and/or adjustment to school processes and penetrate many areas of later life. It is critical to understand these, as schooling contributes to individual adjustment in an ongoing social, economic and political order (Apple, 1982). For doing so, the present paper uses instances of negotiations of difference of one girl, Simmi, out of the four girls from the hostel, enrolled in class V in this school.

The Child

Simmi was rendered homeless when the state government demolished her slum in 2008, for beautification of the city for the Commonwealth Games. Her shanty was demolished two days after the notice for doing so was put up (Source: http://www.countercurrents.org/hrln.pdf). She has a mother, a brother and a sister. Her father is dead. Her father passed away due to a fatal insect bite when she was very young. Her sister Saira lives with her in the Home. Prior to coming here, she worked as a rag picker with her mother. Now her mother is a street vendor in the Jama Masjid area. Simmi too was engaged in street vending when she was contacted by the fieldworker from the Home. Her initial expectations from the institution were to address her health and educational needs. She consented to stay in residential care for protection, education and personality development (as mentioned in the form filled out by the fieldworker). She wishes to be a teacher.

The reason for choosing Simmi was to focus on elementary school children who constitute a pre-adolescent group, and at this age actively begin to explore ways in

which they can fit into society. At one level they think of who they are, and at the other, how people think of them in a societal frame of reference. They are not closely monitored by their parents or guardians (Weigert, Teitge and Teitge, 1986). The choice of her class (Class 5) was made because teachers were using continuous and comprehensive evaluation methods to assess their learning. As a part of this process children had more scope to work collaboratively and individually than when they are assessed using written examinations only.

Understanding Negotiation and Difference

Narratives were considered central to understanding the negotiation of difference in the classroom context. This included conversations with children, observing their actions within the classroom to guide formulation of questions regarding their negotiations. It also consisted of unstructured interviews with the teachers, members from the hostel, and observations in the English, Math, Art, Games and EVS classes. Observations in the school and classroom were focussed on issues surrounding children's negotiation of difference. Adopting the concept of the 'minority child', as proposed by James and Prout (1997) it considers children's actions as constrained within the structural dimension of the school where children are a segregated and regulated group. It also looks from the vantage point of their socio-cultural grouping and their individual agency to act, resist and reformulate the structural and ideological constraints imposed on them by the adults in school.

These structures at the institutional level are the school culture, the 'deep structure' (Apple, 2004) of the school that includes the underlying meanings that are negotiated and transmitted in school behind the transaction of the actual formal curriculum. These are seen in the everyday course of interaction between the teachers and children by interrogating the teacher's use of the categories of normality and deviance. In case of the children of the Home, this could be seen in the way the children were introduced to the class, the seating arrangement, the group activities, their identification as learners during the course of teaching-learning and so on. This was helpful in understanding the classroom interactions and children's own negotiations to uncover the boundaries "between different groups, the self and the others" which, as per Giroux, is important to "create a politics of trust and solidarity that supports a common life based on democratic principles that create the ideological

and institutional preconditions for both diversity and the public good (Giroux, 2005, p.28).

It is widely recognised that elite schools play a role in sustaining hierarchies of class and class segments through propagating and practising the culture of the dominant class. Here, 'culture' has a dual form. "One is culture as lived and another is culture as commodified in the form of 'cultural capital' which is the key to the differential access to school success by different socio-economic groups" (Apple, 1982, p.19). Culture as lived refers to the children's different socio-cultural identities where identity is a process as well as a hierarchical "multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of the collectivities" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5).

Negotiating Differences

Looking at the classroom context, how children interact with each other, engage with the texts and make sense of the teaching-learning process, depends on who they are. For instance, while reading a text a child understands it from where s/he is located in terms of gender, religion, region, language and so on. This way, s/he understands and even interacts with others, depending on what s/he thinks s/he is, what s/he thinks the others are and what s/he thinks the others think about her/him (Jenkins, 2008). The way s/he enacts or performs identities in the classroom context depends on her/his experiences in her/his family, institutions as well as the larger social and political frameworks (McCarthey and Moje, 2002). Conversely, schools as institutions too, shape the formation of socio-cultural identity, and as such, become arenas in which social and cultural tensions and conflicts take place. These tensions are a result of the culture of schooling shaped and controlled by the dominant class, which poses cultural demands of regularity, punctuality, hard work, individuality, competitiveness and so on (Apple, 1982). These cultural values are 'natural' for some groups as the "kinds of knowledges, classroom language, teaching styles and assessment strategies which are given priority, reflect values, assumptions and practices which operate in the interests of students from one type of background or another" (Treuba, 1988, p 6). Termed 'cultural capital', (Bourdieu, 1997) these demands are negotiated differentially by different socio-cultural groups. Here, negotiation means enacting agency from the vantage point of one's socio-cultural identity to perform, compete, collaborate, co-operate or withdraw from cultural demands that are experienced by an individual or a

group. In other words, individuals and groups negotiate contradictory relations between the Home and school. This negotiation includes not only acting within the external structural and ideological constraints, but also enacting the subjective dimension to resist and reformulate these constraints.

By a careful study of the field, including the sites of the school and the Home, using narrative inquiry methods and reading the way children from disadvantaged backgrounds negotiate differences, I realised they do so across temporal, spatial and relational dimensions of 'culture as lived' and 'culture as commodified' (Reay, 2010). To these we now turn.

Of Temporality

While sitting in a group with six other children from her class, Simmi struggles to think what to draw as her family tree. She looks at me as if seeking help. I ask her to draw the family tree of her Home and she does so. She hasn't revealed her family identity to her classmates. Her friend knows her as a poor girl, staying in a hostel away from her mother, in order to study. Her past as a street vendor becomes real when she goes home, during vacations or when her mother comes to the Home to attend parent-teacher meetings. But her family identity she keeps as a part of her past, as she negotiates in time to project her present institutional identity (of the Home). In the Home, she stays in a room with eight other girls who attend the same school. All of them sit at night and do their homework. Sometimes when there is a shortage of staff, she and her room mates do not get time to do the homework. This is because those days they have to cook, clean and take care of the younger ones at the Home. Yet she somehow manages to negotiate time to complete her homework at school, in between classes, when one teacher goes out and the other comes in, or in the recess. This brings to attention the serious question of lack of 'personal time' that children from the Home face, as they have to attend to several tasks cooperatively and collectively, as against children from middle class families who get individual attention and support from their parents (mostly mothers) or through tuition classes (Vincent and Menon, 2011). Aware of this fact, Simmi sits in silent and rapt attention in every class, so she can listen to the teacher to understand the text even in a language (English) she normally finds difficult to negotiate. When the teacher alludes to other resources such as novels, the internet and newspapers to use for her homework, Simmi knows she does not have access to this 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997). All she has is contained in her bag that she carries

to school every day, instead of selectively following the time-table to bring only those required, as she is afraid her books might be misplaced at the Home and she doesn't want to risk being called 'careless' by the teacher. While at school, the teaching-learning is organised such that the students work at individual skill levels, on pre-specified individual tasks or worksheets and the "pedagogic activity is designed in such a way that the students only interact with the teacher on a one-to-one level, not with each other (except during the breaks)" (Apple, 1982, p. 32). As a result, Simmi does not get to interact and share with her classmates and thus does not have friends apart from the girls who belong to the Home. Time, here, does not permit forging friendships.

Here we have seen how Simmi negotiates the dimension of time which constitutes the continuity of her past identity in the present. She spends time for co-operative work in the Home and accomplishes her unfinished tasks in the time in-between classes at school. Further, her school day is structured into a time-table which constrains her from forging friendships.

Of Spatiality

Children of the Home remain spatially distant from the other children. They are comfortable with their own group, as they share similar cultural values which are different from the values practised in school. In a study done to understand adjustment of children from the economically weaker section in a private school, it was reported that "each of them commented on the fact that the children from the privileged backgrounds ... disrespect teachers" whereas teachers thought that these children are "unable to meet the so called 'standards' of the privileged children which is why they prefer to stay alone" (Mathur, 2008, p.62). These differences in perspectives arise due to the position that one is located in. Given space to work together in groups can help in reworking these perspectives. In a similar attempt, to let children work in a mixed group, the environmental science teacher told them to make their usual house-wise groups and prepare for the next day's group work. She appointed Simmi the leader of the group.

Simmi, reluctant to work in the group, said she would not be coming to school the next day. So, while the children have formed house-based groups to do experiments, which would be marked for formative assessment, Simmi sits on the fourth bench with her hands folded. The children (around 10 of them) have crowded the first three benches. She is sitting alone. Now she gets up

to find space on the first three benches where children are huddled and discussing. She doesn't find a place, mutters something and comes back to stand next to the fourth bench. She comes back to the third bench and peeps into the circle of heads discussing so she may be a part of it. She negotiates the space of the group to be in it but is not noticed and goes back. Later, she shares with me her feeling of being repeatedly rejected by her group mates, who do not include her and had refused her a part in the play once before, on the pretext of having no place for her.

Another time, she and her friends from the Home, are denied the opportunity to perform in any school function by the teachers. This was a 'penalty' to the entire group from the Home because one of them did not turn up for her dance on the day of the last year's annual function. When called up from school, she had not answered the phone. The school co-ordinator was angry as the school bears all their expenses. "They attend all picnics but they do not come for the annual function," she said. Then she had chastised the entire group by barring them from taking part in any function of the school. So the entire group is essentialised as one kind, not considering the fact that most of them did not absent themselves and wanted to take part. When asked if they talked to the co-ordinator regarding this, so they could take part in the Independence Day parade where all children were participating, Simmi said, "*Par yahan ka function 14/8 ko hai aur Home mein bhi. To yahan part lein ya wahan humarey liye to dono acchey hain"* (But we have a function here on 14th August and even at the Home. So we can either participate here or there; both are equally good.) She negotiates the rejection in school space by acceptance in the space of the Home. When asked why she did not talk to the co-ordinator regarding this penalty for the entire group instead of talking to the girl concerned, she says, "*unsey dar lagta hai*" (I am scared of her.). This is in stark contrast to the situation at the Home where their 'papa' (father to all the girls and the director of the Home) listens to their problems and complaints. The children learn to negotiate the impervious power structure within the school by keeping silent, whereas at the Home, they can share their problems.

On another occasion, (Teacher's Day) the school allowed them to take part in the selection process, thus providing them access to compete. The selection criteria were decided by the children who were organising the Teacher's Day. They qualified the selection by confidently performing a dance on stage. Some of these girls have also qualified for participating

in the competition for karate and will be representing their school in the zonal competition. The involvement of these children in various co-curricular activities at Home, such as programme, dance, karate, singing and theatre with volunteers, in their holidays and vacations, gives them the 'cultural capital' to negotiate this space in school. This way the Home is acting like a middle-class home where parents "provide the sort of cultural experiences, ranging from shared reading activities to music tuitions and involvement in clubs and other activities outside the home which have significant benefits in terms of success in schools" (Hatcher, 2006, p. 212).

Here, Simmi negotiated the restriction and denial of use of space by projecting her knowledge which was valued by the school. While she is denied the use of space in school, she owns the space at the Home where her opinions are valued.

Of Relationality

The relational aspect of education reveals the power differential among socio-cultural groups, which leads to what is often uncritically seen as the naturalness, ease, confidence and effort of one group as compared to that of the other in negotiating school expectations. It is seen that the children who are more in consonance with the school culture belong to the middle-class. This class is more likely to equip the children with cultural experiences like reading activities, music, dance, tuitions, to involvement in various kinds of workshops outside the home, to gain advantage over the others in terms of success in schools. Middle-class parents are more likely to possess instrumental knowledge about how to aid their children's success in the education system by choosing a 'good' school, negotiating with the teachers, in order to secure a place for the child in a higher set and effectively supporting the child's homework or assessed coursework. In short, these parents possess the knowledge, communication skills and confidence to maximise their positional advantage in school (Hatcher, 2006). Expecting the residential home to provide the same level of engagement with the children, disregarding the backgrounds they belong to, makes the school coordinator say, "*Inka itna paisa maaf hota hai to inko iska fayeda uthana chahiye. Par inki taraf sey koi effort nahin hai.*" (They should make use of the fact that they are not charged a penny. But there is no effort from their side.). She believes that the children are privileged to study in an elite public school and they should utilise this opportunity to the best of their ability. Rather, she believes that neither the children nor the Home

is making any effort, thus placing on them the onus of non-negotiability of the cultural demands posed by the school. As regards the teachers who are aware of the background of the children, they sympathise with them and, more damagingly, do not have expectations from them, misguidedly asserting that, "*Yeh padhna nahin chahtey*" (They do not want to study.).

Similar beliefs of teachers are seen to influence the performance and participation of disadvantaged children in different school cultures (Ahuja, 2012), as was also documented in an urban slum where, aware of the problems faced by the slum children, teachers still asserted that "these children are not intelligent enough to learn and it is useless to spend time educating them" (Jha and Jhingran, 2002, p. 211). The reasons attributed to this insensitivity are teachers' demand for the norms of discipline, punctuality, cleanliness, regularity in attendance and homework and discrimination due to the 'structural divide' that governs the school culture as well as the relationships among and between teachers, children and, in this case, the Home.

While the class teacher is worried about their attendance, as these children often absent themselves, she never tries to find the reasons for that. Rather their absenteeism has given them the label of 'unmotivated', 'unambitious' and 'underachieving' children. Previously, the teacher who taught them was concerned about their work. She used to intervene when they did not perform well on tasks. As Simmi recalls, "*...jab kabhi humara kaam kharaab honey lagtaa thaa vo humsey khoob batein karti thi. Jaise Sabroon aur main kuchh din kahin aur rehney chaley gaye they (summer mein) Sabroon ka kaam kharaab ho gayaa thaa to unhoney bulaakar roz samjhaaya aur kaam vapis acchaa ho gayaa. Vo kaam bhi kum deti thi ki bacchey khel sakein. Nani ke ghar jaa sakein.*" (She used to talk to us when we did not do well at school. For instance, Sabroon and I went for longer (to our home in summers), Sabroon's work deteriorated so she called her and counselled her and she improved her work. She gave lesser work so the children could play. So they could go to their maternal grandma's house.). Here she also reveals the fact that children are loaded with homework during the vacations in order to structure their vacation time. So even when they are away from school, they are constrained by it.

Their absence, silence and aloofness from the children from the more advantaged backgrounds makes teachers and other students think of them as 'lesser able'. As a result, Simmi gets rejected by her group when they have to perform a

play. She says, "*Pehley merey group waaley mujhey nahin le rahey they. Bol rahey they ab bacchey poorey ho gaye. To mainey ma'am se poochhaa. Unhoney bolaa doosra group join kar lo. Uskey baad unkey group mein bacchey kum pad gaye. To unhoney ma'am se bola ki maine doosra group join kar liyaa hai. Phir mainey unke group mein bhi bola."* (Earlier my group mates were not including me. They said they had enough participants. Then I asked ma'am. She suggested I join another group. Later they were short of children in their group. Then they told ma'am that I had joined another group. Then I spoke in their group too.) This incident reveals the double-bind that she has to negotiate. In the first place, the children refuse her entry in the group and suggest she becomes a part of another group. When she joins the other, she is blamed for crossing over to another group. She negotiates this double bind by becoming a part of both groups.

At the same time, when children see that she has valued cultural knowledge, they appreciate her. This came to the fore when, during a formative assessment project, all children had to make rope baskets. The children appreciated her basket and commented that hers was the best. However, when she went to show it to the teacher she mechanically asked, 'Now what will you put in this?', and then returned it to her without even an encouraging glance.

Simmi's classmate and friend Saiba, who is not from the residential home, is appreciative of her: "*Kuchh cheezein ye humse zyaadaa accha kartey hain...jaise, yeh humse zyada accha dance kartey hain."* (They do some things better than us…like they dance better than us.).

Simmi and all girls from the Home are supported by volunteers, who teach them dance, karate, art and theatre. As a result, they develop the cultural resources that position them better, to strategise being valued in school. For instance, Simmi is artistic and creative and she uses this knowledge to do well in projects and other practical work in the school. The math teacher says,

"They are good at math. In fact last year they had to make a project and their project was better than the others. It was on area of the leaf."

The relational dimension shows how children from the Home negotiate differences in relation to the privileged class, how school expects the Home to serve as a middle-class family, how school children are appreciative of the children from the Home due to their possession of culturally valued knowledge, despite their marginalised position in the social order. This shows that while they

struggle to learn the language, styles and academic demands posed by the dominant school culture, they also have valued knowledge in certain domains which the other children want to learn.

Conclusion

We began the paper by showing how creatively Simmi reacts, to the rejection by a group of children in school, by pretending to participate in an activity organised by the Home where she feels more accepted and valued, as compared to that in school. Tracing her negotiations over time, space and relational dimensions reveals the struggle she and children like her have to undergo, due to their marginalised social grouping, in an elite public school.

The dimension of time in relation to the educational process shows how the marginalised children's past and present socio-cultural grouping restricts entry and access to opportunities that are available at school. There is a lack of understanding by the school that children like her, have a relatively low level of access to material, cultural and psychological resources that aid educational success which results in considering these children as inferior. These further lead to the issues of othering that feed into and are fed by socio-cultural inequalities.

The dimension of space shows the relationship of the homeless street child to the Home and the school space. At school, these socio-cultural differences as lived and commodified in the form of 'cultural capital', are negotiated with the help of the Home providing opportunities to learn cultural activities valued at school.

The relational dimension reveals the crucial role of power within the institutions where all children become responsible for their success and failures, regardless of their socio-cultural identities. For those who have the resources to afford private tuitions, the degree of confidence and the power to negotiate with the school culture, lends pervasive mentality of intellectual superiority over the children belonging to the marginalised backgrounds. These dimensions are crucial to uncover the role education plays in augmenting these inequalities and to understand the manifestation and construction of difference within school so these can be addressed through a more responsive education.

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