

Relevance of Child's School Diary for Improving Classroom Processes

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Abstract

In this article, the author examines various school diaries. On analysis, it is found that the school diaries mainly focused on the twin purposes. First, it provides an understanding of the objectives of learning as advocated by the school. Second, it examines the views of teachers and parents as recorded in the diary. The article has been divided into three sections. Section I examines the scope of the diary in terms of printed instructions it contains, Section II studies the communication among the child, parents and teachers and Section III presents the findings of the study and makes suggestions for enhancing the quality of interaction between teachers and students and between school and home in the process of schooling of children.

Introduction

School diary which is regularly carried in the school bag of a child has an important role to play in the child's learning. It acts as a ready reference for schedule of activities, functions, tests, examinations and holidays which are spread throughout the academic year. It is a means of paper-based communication between the parents

and teachers. Communications such as reminders, date change, signing up sheets of assignments, dates for parent-teacher meetings are important aspects highlighted in the diaries. This study has been undertaken on a pilot basis. The study includes primary as well as secondary data. The researcher studied and analyzed school diaries of the students studying at primary, secondary and higher secondary stages.

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Objectives

- (i) To assess the role of school diary in improving classroom process.
- (ii) To understand the role of school diary in assessing and helping children perform better.
- (iii) To assess the effectiveness of school diary in communicating child's strength and weakness to the various stakeholders.

Methodology

The study was based on the primary as well as secondary sources. This study was undertaken in the metropolitan city of Delhi in the third quarter of the academic year, i.e. November-December 2010. The examination of diaries was carried out at both private as well as public schools.

Students were interviewed personally by the researcher. The researcher had informal discussions with the students, teachers and parents. The responses collected were then organised in a systematic way for analysis. The content of the school diaries was also studied by the researcher. The printed instructions as well as the parents', teachers' and administrators' remarks were examined by the researcher. Quotations and references have been used throughout the study.

Sample

The school diaries were collected at random by the researcher. These diaries belonged to the students from the primary stage to secondary stage.

However, the researcher mostly focused on the diaries of primary stage, i.e. children from Classes III to V. In all, 30 diaries were examined, out of which 20 diaries belonged to students from primary stage. Few school diaries available on the internet were also examined.

SECTION 1: Analysis of Instructions in the Diary

School diaries reflect the rules, regulations, norms and policies adopted by the particular institutions. The study was undertaken to see its relevance for the school administration, parents, teachers and the child.

Various aspects associated with the school diary relate to ethical practices as advocated by the school, payment of fees, attendance of children, assignment given by the school, uniforms prescribed by the school, information regarding infrastructure provided by the schools like science lab, audio-visual lab and mathematics lab, and so on. The study indicates that educational philosophy of the school rests on the measures taken for maintaining discipline and order in the school. The child is trained to obey the rules, follow a code of conduct through regularity of work, punctuality, time management, respect and obedience to parents and elders, etc. Parent support is also solicited in ensuring discipline in the school. The diary also makes cautionary mention about the forbidden practices like 'use of tobacco or drug', 'gambling', 'damaging school

property', 'use of mobile', and any kind of violence. In case of schools having co-education, the schools warn against 'sexual harassment'. Some of the schools discourage private tuition thereby implying that classroom teaching is sufficient for understanding a lesson.

Some of these rules are important part of institutions. These rules dominate the child's life, and are important in helping individuals construct meaning and relate productively to others (Carter and Doyle, 2006). The importance of good rules in promoting productive classroom life was underscored in a study by Marzona (2003). He found that in classes where rules and procedures were implemented effectively, the number of disruptions was about 28 percentile points less than in the classrooms where rules and procedures were not implemented effectively. However, it cannot be denied that there are rules which stifle creativity and curiosity among the children. There are arguments which suggest that creativity takes place within the context of overcoming the limits. The task is that of establishing fair rules that do not hinder creativity and curiosity in a productive way.

The schools appear too strict regarding collection of school fees. Striking of names from rolls of the school in case of 'non payment of school dues', 'failing to pay fees with fine within one month of the expiry of due

date', 'if fees along with fine are not paid for two consecutive instalments', etc. are given.

The infrastructure support provided by a school plays a role in building self-learning skills among children. Children are exposed to variety of books for reading from the very beginning of the school life. Educational magazines, periodicals and newspapers can be procured from the school library. There is also a mention of science lab, audio visual room, and other such rooms indicating the facilities provided by the school and at the same time justifying the high fees charged by the private school.

In an interview with the students, it was evident from their responses that they were aware of the rules and regulations prescribed by the school, such as 'they will not pluck flowers from the school campus;' 'they will borrow books from library only when their turn comes;' 'they will be careful in using apparatus in the science lab;' 'they will not damage school property', etc. They also agreed to conform to the rules of 'writing on the wall is strictly prohibited'; only those paintings which have been approved by the school teachers can be displayed and that too, on the board or space provided by the class teacher. It appears that focus is more on discipline rather than on nurturing the creativity among children.

The diary also includes timetable to be followed by every student in the

class. The students set his/her school bags as per the timetable. This prevents wastage of time in deciding the books to be carried to school, homework to be completed and making preparation for the examination.

Some schools provide an identical diary for all students from upper primary stage to higher secondary stage. On examining the school diaries the researcher came across frequent communications between parents and teachers at the lower stage than in the higher secondary stage. At the higher secondary stage the concerned student had used his school diary for taking class notes. Those who are regular are particular about carrying diaries in their school bags.

SECTION 2: Analysis of Communication between Teachers and Parents

The pages filled in the diary had information related to homework, sickness, specified reasons for leave, reminder for photograph, materials to be procured for project, school dress, and disobedience shown by the child by not bringing things on time or arguing with the school teachers. Some of the teachers reported that they start ignoring the students when parents do not respond to their noting in diaries.

Failing Tests

The Times of India, dated 11 February, 2012 reported that a teacher was stabbed to death by a 15-year-old student in a Chennai school. On investigation, it was found that the

teacher had made 13 adverse remarks in the boy's school diary reprimanding him for failing tests and for poor performance. Should noting in the school diary arouse aggression that it amounts to losing one's life?

Students face stress before and after the examination. Continuous haranguing by the teacher upsets the students. Poor performance in the exam tends to loose his/her confidence. He/She sees no reason why he/she should be reprimanded by the concerned teacher. He/she is broken to the extent that he/she accepts poor performance in the classroom. In some schools teachers are also penalised for the poor performance of the students by stopping their increments or transferring them to remote places. On a discussion, a teacher pointed out the children are demoralised to such an extent that they develop an ill feeling towards the concerned teacher. She stressed that such children have to be dealt with sympathetically. They are given special attention in the classroom. The teacher said she calls the students after the class gets over, takes him/her into confidence and discusses the problem with him/her. She sits with him/her and tries to tutor him/her till he/she is confident to take the exam.

1. Homework

A large number of studies have focused on the views of teachers and parents towards homework (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2001). However, children's views

regarding homework remain noticeably absent from much contemporary homework literature (Bryan, Nelson and Mathur, 1995; Leung, 1993; Warton, 2001; Xu and Yuan, 2003).

The pages of several diaries indicated several reminders for not doing the homework, or not bringing respective subject copies or misbehaving in the classroom. The teacher then writes a note to the parents to look into the matter. Some examples of communication between parents and teacher are as follows:

Teacher: Dear parents, please help Suvin to complete his homework in mathematics.

Parents: Dear teacher, thanks for the reminder. We have helped Suvin complete his assignment in mathematics.

The teacher could have thanked parents for showing cooperation in completing his homework.

Xu and Yuan (2003) examined the way homework was perceived by teacher, student and parents. He found out that the purpose of homework was to review, practice and reinforce what students learned in the class. Another reason stated for homework was developing a sense of personal responsibility and study skills.

Hari's parents changed their evening schedule, so that Hari could sit with them, share the school experience and do the homework. Watching television or reading newspaper or doing any other household work was

avoided by the parents. A regular schedule fixed in this manner benefited Hari (Singh 2009)

The importance of parents' role was evident in another study (Leone and Richards, 1989). Some of the findings as revealed from their study are:

Children were most attentive to homework when they completed it with a parent, rather than with a peer or on their own. It cannot be denied that family involvement in homework may be influenced by a range of variables, including types of homework help, frequency of help, and quality of help as perceived by children (Xu and Corno 2003).

Teacher: Dear Parents, Mayank has not completed his assignment in English, Hindi and Mathematics.

In an informal discussion with the parents, the researcher was informed regarding the adverse impact upon the child. Sometimes when parents read an adverse remark as given above, they behave and react to the problem in an adverse manner. For example, a parent reminding a child to do homework shouts at his child. This shouting further escalates into nagging and yelling, and the child refuses to comply to such a threatening situation. The child also shouts back, and becomes upset, and gets into his room without doing the homework. When problems have persisted, it is possible for family members to have lost confidence in themselves. They can develop a 'problem dominated' view of themselves

and look for evidence that support their view (Durrant, M. 1995).

2. Reminders for Missing Copy

The researcher came across such an incident in her neighbouring house.

Teacher: Dear Parents, Sri is not bringing the class note copies in the classroom. He is copying all his lessons in the loose sheets. Help him to locate the copies in the house and make him write all the class notes in the respective subject copies.

Teacher appeared worried as the loose sheets may be lost and the child will not be able to learn the notes for the class test.

Parents: Dear teacher, we are happy for the concern shown towards Sri. We'll see that Sri carries all his copies in the bag.

The parents then helped him to arrange his bag as per the timetable set for the class. The class note copies along with the homework copy were automatically included in the bag. The child, too, felt comfortable as he was saved from the regular harangue of his class teacher for not bringing the class notes copy in the classroom.

3. Confrontations in the Classroom

Teacher: Dear parents, Sonu appears restless in the classroom, refuses to listen, and argues for petty things.

Parents: Dear teacher, we are sorry for Sonu's behaviour in the classroom and assure you that he will listen to his teachers in the classroom.

The researcher while attending a parent-teacher meeting came across such an incident. The teacher, after reading reconciliatory note from the parent was pleased, in the absence of which, she would have forwarded the case to the school management authorities.

There are times when the teacher has to face unpleasant situation in the classroom. It occurs when the child and the teacher is occupied in heated and emotional confrontation on some issues. The teacher then makes a noting for the parents that 'child misbehaved with teacher' in the classroom. The parents are then expected to interfere on behalf of the teacher and warn him/her against argument in the classroom. As is indicated, it is confirmed that teacher is the sole authority in the classroom and the student cannot challenge her authority. On the other hand, a successful teacher can guess ahead of time that confrontation could develop. The ability to deal and avoid such confrontations is crucial to the effective management of discipline. They are then able to use a variety of social skills and techniques, including humour, to alter the heated discussion and to give both the teacher and the child a face-saving solution to the incident (Smith and Laslett, 1992).

How a teacher can use innovative methods to make children pay attention to the lesson being taught is explained through the following examples. A

teacher noticed a student named Vishal being distracted in the classroom. She shouted from her desk, "Vishal please concentrate in the classroom". There were other children also being distracted in the classroom. The teacher's eye caught hold of only Vishal. Vishal felt humiliated and answered back, "I am concentrating in the class." This was followed by a heated discussion between Vishal and the class teacher. The teacher had made a noting for Vishal's parents in diary which did not make much difference for Vishal. In the next class while another teacher was teaching a lesson on solar system, she too found Vishal distracted in the classroom. The teacher instead of shouting on Vishal raised a question about the planet to him. Vishal became alert when he heard his name being announced in the classroom. His tendency was to hunt for the answer from the textbooks but he had no clue to the question. He felt guilty and apologized for not being attentive in the classroom. The teacher was successful in drawing Vishal's attention in the classroom even without shouting or noting in the diary.

4. Sickness

Attendance problem is a form of passive resistance. Some students make a regular complaint against the school. They do have a feeling of being unwelcome in school. They make several excuses to avoid attending the school. Some communications as shared with the researcher from parents

in this regard are given here as examples:

Parents (1): Dear Madam, Anu was not well. She had vomited whole night on 9th July and hence could not attend the school.

Parents (2): Dear Madam, Abhi has developed severe allergy rashes all over (including eyes) and has high fever. Please excuse his absence from the school from 22-28 July, 2010.

The teacher believed the excuses given by the parents. The teacher needs to be more sensitive to the children's problems. She did not enquire about Anu's health when she attended the school after two days of her illness. The teacher needs to talk with the students who are chronically absent or tardy. Allowing them to explain their situation can often lead them to satisfy the need of the students as well as the teachers (Savage, T.V. 2010).

5. School Uniform

The details regarding the school uniform have been mentioned in the school diary. Some schools have prescribed different uniforms to suit the seasons and it also varied according to the activities volunteered by the child. Students are expected to be neatly dressed up for the school. To ensure its sanctity in the school there is regular checking of the uniform. One of the common arguments against school uniform is that it hinges upon the student's freedom of expression. This has been counter argued that in

the absence of school uniform it might instigate students to come in fancy dresses which can be disruptive to the learning process. Thus school uniforms have been favoured as they prevent indiscipline problems, and create more learning environment (Savage 2010). The researcher noted down the following communication:

Parents (1): Dear Teacher,

My ward is not wearing the school dress since they have been misplaced by the washerwoman.

Sorry for the inconvenience.

Parents (2): Dear Madam,

My ward has not worn the school shoes since they are wet.

The child is so apprehensive that she is prepared to put on wet shoes but her mother prevents her from doing so. The child then lets her mother write a note in the diary requesting her teacher to excuse her for not coming in the school shoes.

Some schools have a regular checking of the school uniform, and in the absence of proper uniform, students are penalised by reducing the marks from his group.

6. Procurement of Raw Material for the Activities

Allowing students to engage in activities makes the classroom learning enjoyable. Jones (2001) believes that activities are convenient and at the same time have an educational purpose. An elementary class teacher had difficulty in handling a group of

students. She decided to engage the class with the help of an activity. Each day she set aside time for engaging students in an activity. Students started enjoying the classroom and the time wasted in managing the misbehaviour was reduced. The class members put pressure on each other to follow the rules. In short, the problems almost disappeared (Jones 1987).

The teacher desired to conduct an experiment in science and made a noting in the diary:

Please procure one or two thermocol, black sheets, 100 cm cotton, glue, scissors, for the science class tomorrow.

On analyzing Neha's diary, this incident was narrated to the researcher. Neha, on return from the school showed it to her mother. Neha's mother Priya rang up her husband Manoj to get the above mentioned things for school. Unfortunately, Manoj was stuck in an important official meeting. He forgot to purchase things mentioned by Priya. Next day, Neha cried and refused to go to school on the pretext that the teacher would not entertain her in the classroom. Her parents did not listen to Neha's excuse and sent her to school. As expected, the concerned teacher punished the child in the classroom and made a noting in the diary:

Neha had not brought the material for science experiment.

Students can benefit from the timely procurement of the art material for the purpose of doing any activity in the

classroom. The teachers should ask the students to procure the raw material a week in advance to avoid non-compliance of the instructions.

SECTION 3: Findings

School diary acts as a ready reference to school schedule of activities, functions, assignments, vacation and other information which are important for both parents and teachers. These activities are spread evenly throughout the year, and information regarding them is available to the users as and when required. It is a paper-based communication between the parents and the teachers. On analysis, some diaries, indicated one sided communication where the parents are set out to carry the command given by the teachers. On analyzing the diaries, the researcher found that some teachers have not acknowledged the cooperation shown by the parents. The school diary acts as a mirror in reflecting the academic records, discipline and daily performance of the students. In some of the diaries, the frequency of reminders regarding missing copies, homework not done and an incomplete project is high. The diary does not provide much space for child's achievement.

Most of the schools prescribe similar kind of school diary from elementary to higher secondary stage. However, the purpose of diary changes as child moves from primary stage to higher secondary stage. In the initial stage, the communication between the

parent and the teacher is high. At the later stage, the diary is used by the students to write assignments and correspondence among the peer group. Parents' initiative and suggestions do not find mention in any stage of the school diary.

Students who were regular in the school were more likely to carry a school diary. Non regular students appeared casual regarding school diary. The study revealed similar kind of finding with respect to the interaction between the parents and teachers. The teachers, too, appeared reluctant when parents did not respond to their comment in the school diaries. On the other hand there was frequent communication between those parents who instantly responded to the teacher's comments. It was also evident that students who receive help from their parents are more likely to carry diary than students who did not receive help from the family members.

The school diary mentions about infrastructure facilities like science lab, library and so on. However, the diary does not mention about safety and security provided to the child. The school does not make any special provision for the protection of the child in summer, winter or rainy season. It has no mention of evacuation during contingencies like flood, earthquake, or any other vagaries of the nature.

Suggestions

School diaries do facilitate teaching-learning in the classroom. The students

need to keep to their timetable, assignments and reminders for future activities. It is an essential part of the student's life. Sooner they are introduced to the child, the easier it is for them to follow. If a teacher decides to apprise the child of large projects, she can plan and break the work into small chunks to allow child to feel comfortable while doing the projects. Instead of complaining, encouragement should be provided to the child. Parents' initiative and encouragement should not be seen as interference in their domain of work, rather, cooperation is needed for the holistic development of the child.

Written comments by the teacher, too, have a very important role to play in the child's life. This should not be ignored by the parents, rather, full support needs to be provided to overcome the child's weakness as pointed by the teacher. At the beginning of the school year parents should have an opportunity to meet and socialise with the teachers, administrators. Parents with special skills or interests, willing to share their knowledge, give demonstration, or help teachers in

conducting an activity, should be invited. The school diary then would be helpful in building positive attitude between the parents and teachers. Regarding assessment, Position Paper on Examination Reforms suggests that it should be beyond the cognitive domain, and beyond pen and paper. It should not be seen as a burden, rather, a tool for diagnosis and further learning. Implementing this vision will require a lot of re-training and education of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Looking at the important role played by the school diary, its regular use should be encouraged by both the teacher as well as the parents.

Future Research

Further research needs to be carried out with respect to students belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds in urban and rural settings. The study should also focus on the children with special needs. Investigations on this topic need to continue to identify conditions that appear to affect changes in the way teachers as well as students view the school diary.

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