

Teaching the children of the Marginalised

Dr. Susmita Ram*

Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Jesus and Mary College,
University of Delhi, Delhi, India

sram@jmc.du.ac.in

Abstract: This study examines how teachers' beliefs, expectations, and classroom practices influence the educational experiences of children from marginalized socioeconomic backgrounds in government schools. Drawing on non-participant classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted across two phases spanning more than two decades (1996–2001 and 2023–2024), the study explores whether major educational reforms, including the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Education Policy (2020), have translated into meaningful changes in classroom practice. The findings reveal that while policy frameworks emphasize equity and inclusion, many classrooms continue to be characterized by low teacher expectations, textbook-centred pedagogy, minimal student engagement, and discriminatory attitudes towards learners from disadvantaged communities. Teachers frequently equated poverty with low academic ability, resulting in reduced opportunities for meaningful learning, diminished teacher–student interactions, and pedagogical practices that reinforced existing social inequalities. A small number of teachers demonstrated that supportive relationships, activity-based learning, and high expectations could foster more inclusive learning environments, highlighting the importance of teacher beliefs and institutional support. The study argues that educational equity requires more than universal access to schooling; it demands pedagogical practices that recognize the capabilities of marginalized learners and actively bridge the gap between home and school experiences. Strengthening teacher preparation, fostering reflective practice, and creating supportive school cultures are essential for ensuring that schools become instruments of social mobility rather than mechanisms for reproducing inequality.

Keywords: Education of the marginalized, science education, teacher expectations

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge construction is fundamentally an interpretative process mediated by the learner's prior experiences, existing worldviews, beliefs, and perceptions. Cognitively, this process centers on two dialectic themes: the learner's foundational "prior knowledge" and the active "construction" of new understanding. These pre-concepts serve as the cognitive foundation upon which new schematic structures are built, deeply influencing the resultant knowledge. However, if knowledge is individually constructed, the mechanism of social negotiation becomes a critical inquiry; because learners construct divergent mental models of identical

experiences. Consequently, constructivism operates simultaneously across personal and social dimensions: while the individual actively constructs internal cognitive structures, the surrounding culture and context determine, both personal interpretations and shared meanings.

When the learner and the teacher do not share a culture or context, it is likely to cause a barrier to understanding, particularly if the latter is from a dominating class and the learner belongs to a poor/ suppressed/ minority status. In such cases, the authority and position of the teacher prepare the basis of expectations of the content to learn, the pedagogy and assessment patterns of the learner.

In his classic longitudinal study of children from the ghetto who had entered kindergarten, Rist (1970) showed how the teacher placed students at varying tables based on her superficial 'assessment' of how they were likely to perform in class. According to Rist "The teacher herself informed me that the first table consisted of her 'fast learners' while those at the last two tables "had no idea of what was going on in the classroom"(p447). The assessment of the teacher was based on appearance and background of the child. The evaluation by the teacher occurred within 8 days of admission. The types of interactions between the teacher and the children seated at different tables was determined by her "evaluation". The study revealed how the school (the teacher) reinforced the class structure of society.

The differential treatment accorded to the students based on teacher expectations, has been studied by many researchers. Babad's (1979) study showed that 'biased' teachers based their expectations on demographic considerations though actual classroom observations were not carried out by him.

According to Good and Brophy (1997), the term "teacher expectations", refers to "inferences that teachers make about the present and future academic achievement and general classroom behaviour of their students" (p. 79). These expectations may be for individual students, groups of students, and/or for the class as a whole (Brophy,1983).

Research studies have established that teachers have lower expectations for low-SES students in comparison to students of middle- and high-SES (Van den Bergh et al., 2010; Ready & Chu, 2015; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). A few studies have also shown that teacher expectations are based on academic achievement level, school-level SES, and school culture composition. Ready and Wright (2011) explored the possible influences of student background and

classroom context on teacher expectations. The study by Van den Bergh et al. (2010) found that the interactions between a teacher who is prejudiced about student ethnicity showed significant negative expectations.

Al-Fadhli and Singh's (2006) study revealed that teachers of schools with high achievement base their expectations on student ability, however teachers in low-achieving schools based their expectations on student characteristics (physical appearance, classroom behaviour, education level and support by parents).

Rubie-Davies identified teachers as high-expectation and low-expectation teachers. High-expectation teachers differed significantly from low-expectation teachers in their pedagogical beliefs, instructional practices, classroom interactions with students, and the socioemotional environment they created in classrooms (Rubie-Davies, 2007). As a result, students with high-expectation teachers performed better than students who had low-expectation teachers (Li and Rubie-Davies, 2017).

The Right to free and compulsory education (from age 6-14) was included under Article 21a of the Indian Constitution. The Act states in point 17 "(1) No child shall be subjected to physical punishment or mental harassment. (2) Whoever contravenes the provisions of subsection (1) shall be liable to disciplinary action under the service rules applicable to such person" (p5). The Act gave all children the right to go to school, the right to be treated with love and care, and most importantly, the right to be treated equally and with dignity.

The National Educational Policy (NEP-2020) has categorically stated the importance of education to achieve social justice and equality. The Policy reiterates the need for linking the gaps in learning across social divide. The policy outlines "multiplicity of factors, including lack of access to quality schools, poverty, social mores & customs, and language have had a detrimental effect on rates of enrolment and retention among the Scheduled Castes. Bridging these gaps in access, participation, and learning outcomes of children belonging to Scheduled Castes will continue to be one of the major goals. Also, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) which have been identified on the basis of historically being socially and educationally backward also need special focus." (p25). It is with this context that the present study has been undertaken.

The paper is a culmination of over 5 years of observation in government schools for 6 years (1997-2002 and 2022-23) as a researcher.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Observations of science lessons in middle school (grades 6-8) classrooms was carried out 8-10 times in the initial period (1996-2001), and in the next period, for 4-6 times. The idea to revisit the field was inspired by Rist (2000). The classroom chronicles and interviews of the teachers during the early observations had been carefully preserved. Non-participant observation was used. The researcher initially obtained permission from the principal, then consent from the teacher to be observed. Twenty-two teachers were observed during the first period and nine during the second part. Unfortunately, the teachers in the second phase were different as the gap in time was considerable. Seven schools were observed in the initial part, of these two were repeated in the second part; a new school was also included here.

An in-depth semi-structured interview of the teacher was also conducted that also included the teachers' opinions regarding students.

During the period 2001-2023, The right to education (RTE) which mandated universal education for all children (6-14 years) had come into place. Further, a new Education policy (NPE-2020) and two new National Curricular Frameworks (NCF-2005 and NCF2023) have been articulated. The researcher was interested in how these impacted learning.

Analyses were carried out by linking observations of lessons in conjunction with interviews with the concerned teacher.

It is necessary to state the researcher's own beliefs as part of the study. The researcher is a teacher educator by profession. Thus, it was important to be careful to focus on the science lesson in progress without assessment. The researcher's degrees in science and education, had made the field familiar.

SAMPLE

Observation was carried out in government and local body schools wherein the fee is minimal; up to Rs 10 per month. These schools are run by the Education Departments of Delhi Administration (D.A.), the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), and the New Delhi

Municipal Corporation (NDMC). The students are provided with free books, uniform, and a mid-day meal.

Initially, the study was carried out over a period of 5 years for a doctoral thesis (1996-2001) in 8 schools. Two of them were revisited and a new school was selected and observations carried out for six months (Aug2023-Feb2024). Observations have been carried out in grades 6-8. The focus of the study was on how teachers interacted with students while teaching science in schools.

Twenty-two teachers (5 male and 17 female) were observed during the first period and nine (2 male and 7 female) during the second part. Unfortunately, the teachers in the second phase were different as the gap in time was considerable. Seven schools were observed in the initial part, of these two were repeated in the second part; a new school was also included here.

Anonymity has been ensured for the school and the concerned teacher. Pseudonyms have been given to the teacher and the school to guarantee the same.

FINDINGS

The aim of the study was on the science teacher and the manner in which they taught science and interacted with the students; individual, group or/and whole class. This type of observation permitted continuity of events. The initial observations have been marked 'A' and the subsequent observations (Aug2023-Feb2024) as 'B' alongside the observations and quotations.

Being in Class

The minimum requirement expected from teachers is their physical presence in the classroom. During the early period of observations, the researcher felt rather uneasy when the teachers were absent from the classrooms. These teachers signed the attendance register at the beginning and end of the school day, yet they were nowhere to be seen on the premises during the school hours. Another type of teacher went into or out of the classroom at their own will. They taught, or made the students read the textbook aloud or write assignments while they did some other work. These were not preplanned decisions but depended on their mood at any given time.

Giri's class was scheduled to be observed during a certain period. He was found having tea with other colleagues. On seeing the researcher, he uttered: "*Oh! You have come. Actually, I was not in the mood to go to class today.*" **A**

In another incident, students came rushing to the staff room where Ms Thukral was seated, calling her to the classroom. Initially the teacher denied having a class at that time. But on finding it scheduled in her own timetable, she sent the girls away to find an empty room somewhere near the staff room where she could engage them. As the girls rushed off, she remarked that she did not feel like climbing stairs that day. By the time the girls located and shifted to a vacant classroom, only ten minutes were left in that period. The alarming aspect was the teacher who did not go to class." **A**

Lata continued to sit in the staffroom for two periods without going to class. When the student monitor came to inquire, she replied "*I am coming.*" However, she stayed back. **B**

The teachers had students read the textbook aloud while they filled in the attendance register/ corrected copies or wrote their planning diary. (Shiksha **A**, Pushpa **A**, Swarn **A**, Dhruv **B**, Lata **B**).

These episodes exemplify the practice of teaching science by certain teachers. The teachers either did not go to the class or used tactics to 'fill' time. This again indicates a complete lack of willingness of certain teachers to do their duty. Such episodes were noticed especially where the principal was lax in discipline. Both periods of observations were found to have teachers who were absent from the classroom or 'filling' time during class.

No teaching was done for one week after the term tests were over **A and B**, as the teachers were busy correcting the answer papers. The students were left on their own with no constructive activity. Many students did not come to school during this time.

Teaching Patterns

The teachers were found to use only two teaching strategies. The first was reading aloud of the text book (either by them or by students turn-wise, this was followed by the teacher paraphrasing the text (as explanation). The second strategy was a lecture interspersed with reading aloud of the textbook. None of the teachers showed demonstrations, did any activities in class or interacted meaningfully with the students about the topic being taught that day. In

these schools, the lecture method and textbook reading were used. Many teachers followed the pattern of reading the textbook aloud, paraphrasing portions as explanations, followed by a question-answer session using questions listed at the end of the chapter. The teacher would walk into the class and ask a student to “give” her the textbook. This aspect in particular links with the opinion that the teachers held about the students

1. Reading aloud from the textbook

The teacher of this category was present regularly, but would ask the students to open a certain page of the textbook. Thence followed a read-aloud session where either she, or the students took turns and read parts of the text loudly. These were then ‘explained’ by the teacher. The explanation consisted of either translating the passage or by rephrasing it. If the topic was ‘important’, it would be concluded by asking a set of questions, otherwise, the next few paragraphs would be read.

2. Giving a lecture

This type of teacher used the instruction method for teaching. The focus of this teacher was dissemination of content and the lecture would use up most of the period. In the sample surveyed, a large number of teachers confined their transaction of science to the lecture method. It was as though, by their very act of presenting the content the students would gain knowledge. Yet, when asked about their views about science they emphasized the experimental basis of science and its application in the life of a child. A few mentioned how science can stimulate curiosity and generate awareness. Their statements contradicted the actual practice I observed.

According to Bhushan, most students in his school are basically dull, belonging to poor families. *“Any one with even little money sends his child to private schools.”* **B**

Here both the teacher and the head of the school have been guilty of a dereliction of their duty towards the school and the students. The occurrence also indicates the need to empower the section of people who send their children to the government school. There is a complete lack of accountability on the part of people who have been authorized to manage the school. RTE has clearly mentioned that teachers need to be accountable for their actions. Paradoxically, it is in the government system, that accountability is at stake, that too in the capital of India.

Two teachers are being considered simultaneously in this case; they are Mrs Mitra and Mrs Thukral A (I could never get their first names, as even they addressed each other by their surname. According to Mrs Thukral, the two have been friends of long standing. Both joined the Ashok Nagar Girls School within three months of each other and have continued their close association “(pakki dosti)” for well over 20 years. They are middle-aged and upper middle-class women with grown up children. Both belong to the same income group and have similar family backgrounds. Mrs Thukral has a II division and Mrs Mitra a II division in their first degree in science. Both teachers went in for a B.Ed. degree because their families suggested the course as suitable.

Mrs Thukral got a I division in the Teacher Education programme from Delhi University. She secured a distinction in practice teaching, and Mrs Mitra received a II division from Rohtak. Both the teachers employ a number of strategies to reduce their teaching work. These include going late to class, “forgetting” that they had a class to teach and leaving the class early. The teachers also employ the method of ‘filling time’ whereby students are made to copy down tables, figures or answers from the textbook. Mrs Mitra gave students a table to copy out, and went to the staff room to make tea. “Today the tea-lady has not come and I am in charge.” However, this was in the third period and she was free in the fourth period before the recess.

For these teachers ‘teaching’ is not satisfying, as according to them, the “*students do not deserve to be taught*”. During my first observation, Mrs Thukral tells me in English.

T: “*They come from very poor families. They don’t know anything, nor do they learn anything at home.*”

(turning in the direction of the students she speaks in Hindi).

T: *Aisse hi bag utthakar chale aate hain pankhe ki hawa khane* (they just pick up their bags and come to enjoy the cool air under the fan).

A few days later, after this incident the teacher asks me again in the classroom.

T: *The students are nikamme* (useless) *in both the classes you are observing, aren’t they?*

Mrs Thukral is the more acerbic and ruder of the two. However, both teachers mentioned in their interviews that for them the students are a lost cause. According to Ms Thukral, the

situation has become bad to worse because of compulsory education, “*now all the children of the jhuggi-jhopri (slums) come to class, they do not even have basic intelligence to come up.*”

Mrs Mitra says “*science is too difficult for government schools especially those where 80% of the students come from resettlement colonies.*” “*Up to VIII class they study, fail few times in class VI*”. However, she feels that the children who come up to XI class are good; these are from among the other 20% in the school.

Mitra adds, “*behaviour-wise the students are good – use no ‘gaali’ (verbal abuse), come neat to school, (however) intelligence wise – hopeless*”. Ms Thukral repeats this statement in her interview.

It is perhaps this prejudiced and unsympathetic view about the inabilities of students that has created these behaviour patterns among the teachers. Ms Thukral had a distinction in her teaching practical from the Department of Education, University of Delhi. She also gave T.V. lessons in chemistry from 1972 to 1979. At the present time, she does not even care to reach the class on time.

I consciously took up the case studies of these two teachers for reasons given above who have been teaching science to the same grades. Their voices echo each other’s thoughts; I could see many similarities in their sentiments. The sameness of thought is likely to have evolved over the years of supporting each other’s half thoughts, triumphs and failures shared together. This kind of support to each other may have come about particularly as the system is so unrewarding in terms of student achievement, salary and promotions. Yet in an adverse way, the support has strengthened the negative roles the teachers play.

For these two teachers, science is the study of knowledge. While Mrs Mitra adds that this knowledge is gained through observations and experimentation, it is made clear that the process is what scientists do. However, in schools the objective of science education is to provide “knowledge of facts”. This interpretation of what science education is, and with the view that the students are not intelligent enough to learn the facts, has been internalized by the teachers and what perhaps guides their approach to teach.

The case study of the two allies Mrs Thukral and Mrs Mitra who teach in a government school highlights the various influences that affect a teachers’ work. The two were close friends and shared their frustrations and views with each other for the 20 years. Over time, their belief in

the inability of students to do science has been strengthened and become internalised. Such a view would not be changed by any amount of external pressure.

In the next two cases, the approach and attitude of two teachers towards their students have been contrasted. Pushpa **B** shows scorn for them while Anju **A** treats them with affection, uses a friendly tone while talking to them and affectionate gestures like patting. However, both teachers do not have a high expectancy of student's abilities and achievements or possibilities of a career choice. Both teachers talk about the Nature of Science in terms of knowledge gained through experiments. Yet while teaching science, they focus on science only as a body of knowledge.

Pushpa **A** usually started each class by admonishing students for one reason or the other – “*sit straight, all of you should wish me together*”, etc. This was perhaps to gain attention or to assert her authority over the students. She next gave orders “*Open the book Whose turn was it to read?*” Students read one paragraph at a time according to their roll numbers. Pushpa helped out with pronunciation, and then rephrased the text as explanation. All examples she used were from the text. In Pushpa's class, even tables printed in the text were read out. Alongside reading, Pushpa would point out important points.

After each subtopic was covered, Pushpa would ask questions. The students were expected to read out answers from the relevant page numbers from the text. Sometimes Pushpa would modify these answers in which case the students added or deleted the words in the printed text. The questions given at the end of each chapter were handled similarly. According to Pushpa, the students are not at all motivated. “*At most they finish class VIII, a few do X and even fewer go up to class XII*”. Assignments given to students include memorizing and writing down answers to a given set of questions and reading of a topic or a sub-topic.

When asked about her ideas on science Pushpa says “*Science is the knowledge of various topics. Teaching method is learning by doing.*” However, no ‘doing’ was observed in her lessons. Pushpa did not mention carrying out activities in class while talking about science teaching, although she gave instances where she used demonstrations such as by showing leaves and parts of a flower.

Pushpa also feels that the students are not intelligent enough to do science. She has no empathy with her students or has knowledge about their conditions at home.

All the teachers who use the textbook to teach have also remarked that they do not need to study to be able to teach. Anju A is one such teacher who uses only the read aloud method, followed by question-answer sessions. She also teaches an English medium section in the Mandir Chowk School. She encourages students to read, does not find fault with the way the students read. Anju rephrases the paragraph read out in a translated version. She also allows the students to speak out the answers in Hindi, whereupon she translates the answer to English with the help of students.

Though Anju uses the method of reading the textbook, unlike the other teachers in this category, she carries her own book to the class. In addition, she remembers the exact point in the text, where the lesson broke off the previous day, a significant departure from other teachers. When I commented on it, Anju shrugged her shoulders and said, *"I just remember"*. However, I consider it as a type of planning for the lesson.

The teacher-student relationship in Anju's class is one of affection on both sides. Anju says the *"only thing permanent is affection, these children are basically good, not everyone is capable of everything. My job is to see that I try to teach all of them."*

The University Model School A was the only school where the teacher used demonstrations, group activities along with short lectures and discussions although reading aloud was also done as *"otherwise children would not go through the books"*. In her interview, the teacher Isha A mentioned how the Head Mistress encouraged and guided her to try out these methods.

The influence of the social group was seen to impact the teacher's daily routine. In the schools, which had one or two large staff rooms, the teachers mixed with their colleagues socially. These groups were commonly based on the gender of the teacher, common interests, social background, age and length of service in the school.

The social groups are relevant to the work of the teacher in creating a pressure for members to conform to the norms (Morrison and McIntyre, 1969) established by the group. This pressure in turn influences the teaching patterns as well as establishes the teacher's relationships with students. This was evident in the Mandir Chowk School A where the male teachers had a separate staff room for themselves. During the tenure of my observation, I came across the male teachers sitting and chatting in their room. I had an appointment to observe Giri A. When I went to meet him, the other teachers dissuaded him from going to class, because 'that'

day they ‘were in the mood to chat’. Had Giri complied with my request, he would have had to disagree with his colleagues. Later on, he rescheduled the time of observation. I had developed sufficient rapport with Giri, for him to justify his action of the previous day. “*You will go away in a few days, but I have to continue to stay here*”, implying that he had to fall in line with the group decisions.

It takes a lot of courage to act differently from others in a social setting. In a teacher’s case, it is more so because of the amount of planning needed and the resources to be garnered to do active teaching. A supportive environment would encourage good teaching practices. In the case of Saroj, (mentioned later) the environment is not conducive, and therefore Saroj herself feels that in a year or two she would revert to her earlier style of teaching (using the textbook to read or lecture), as her senior colleagues have been doing.

Renu **B** taught for nine years in two public schools before joining the government school system. She confessed that the “teaching aspect was more enjoyable” in the previous schools. Her reasons for taking up a job in the government school included job security and allowances, such as paid maternity leave and travel leave concession (LTC). She also stated that she had to work longer hours in a day and prepare more thoroughly for teaching in the private schools.

The procedure for evolving the lesson were strongly teacher-directed. The teacher decided the lesson, the form it would take and the students followed. The teacher, who also directed which student would respond, asked most questions. The teacher taught and the students received the instruction passively. The monotony of this was broken by groups of students in their own ways such as playing games silently or going through brief spells of daydreaming.

Classroom Interactions

By and large, the teachers interacted with the students as though the latter were less than normal. The degrees of separatism [us (the teachers) and them (the students)] varied. This was not very obvious in the University Model School, the Rani Vihar School and in the case of a few individual teachers in other schools such as Kranti of Mandir Chowk, Neena of Kadam Nagar and Saroj of Akbar Colony. During my observations, I have also noticed students being addressed with sarcasm, jeered at, ignored and on occasions even severely beaten up.

During the first week of observation at Ashok Nagar (Girls) School **B**, the teacher stated aloud in the presence of the students “*Did I not tell you that this material* (referring to the girls) *is*

useless?” I was pained that my presence had caused the students to hear an adverse pronouncement on their calibre. However, in the subsequent classes, and in other schools, I was sickened by the anguish perpetrated by the teachers on the students.

In one incident, A the teacher (Pritam) walked into class VI. The students spoke in chorus: Good afternoon, Sir.

T: All those who do not have a textbook stand up.

The students did so. The teacher walked towards one of them and flogged him and pulled his ears.

T: Have you come to a fair? You are a ‘repeater’ (students who failed in the annual examination). Pritam gave similar for treatment to two other students.

The punishment meted out was for not bringing the textbook to the class. Yet the teacher himself or for that matter, all the teachers who used the textbook (with one exception) extensively in the classrooms did not carry their own textbooks.

In 2023, many classrooms had a CCTV, with the monitor kept in the principal’s room. This has not curtailed physical punishment. The teacher took the student to the staffroom to beat the student.

It is through these interchanges that the norms of behaviour, rules, and punishment on infringement of rules become established. However, they apply only to students. The control is in the hands of the teachers; to whom the same set of rules do not apply.

Teachers’ Views about Students

One of the factors that contributes to the dissatisfaction that has percolated through the government schools is the teachers’ expectancy about the students in terms of their intellectual abilities, and the kinds of jobs the students are likely to have after they complete (or do not complete) schooling or other openings for further learning. Most teachers in the government schools feel that the students lack the ability to ‘do’ science, and that they are not intelligent. The notion has its roots in the obvious class differences between the teachers and the students and the belief that children of weaker or deprived social groups are also low on intelligence.

The viewpoint that certain groups of people have not reached a level of abstract thinking required to understand science promotes the theory of cultural deficit (Cobern, 1998). This position has been taken in the past by western societies with established science, and by the British during pre-independent era in our own country (Hartog Commission, 1929). The frame of reference implies that the less developed or minority people constitute pre-scientific societies.

It has been found that children from the slums or ghettos are able to do abstract reasoning with regard to social interactions and complex interpersonal relations, which is basic to their survival in their social environment. However, the schools require a kind of reasoning which is disconnected to the 'out of school' life of the student. In addition, many of these children are first generation learners who are unable to get the required academic support at home. The teacher at school is unable or unwilling to provide for extra persuasion, incentive and more time to the student to learn the necessary reasoning to cope up with the science and mathematics content of the school curriculum.

Furthermore, Willis (1977) in his book 'Learning to Labour' discusses about the school patterning itself on the social stratification prevalent outside the school. His work focuses on the children who have internalised mediocrity, and therefore choose not to do well at school. In my study the comments made by teachers reflect the manner in which they have 'internalised' the inability of students.

T: "*Yahaan ka maal hi kharab hai*" (The material that comes here is bad) **A**

T: "*Yeh to nikamme hai*" (these students are hopeless). **A**

T: "*Did I not tell you madam, these kids are worthless, don't waste your time here.*" (This was said to me in front of the entire class). **B**

While in Willis' study, students taunted others who showed a modicum of achievement in class; in my study, the peer pressure of older and more experienced teachers prevented the younger teachers from trying to bring about a change.

The school intervention programme carried out by IASE, Delhi University, in a slum resettlement colony included the Akbar Colony School **A**. The programme also included holding workshops for all the teachers where they learnt alternate ways of teaching concepts.

The programme lasted over one year. The researcher visited the school six months A after its completion and found that with one exception (Saroj) the other teachers only used the textbook reading sessions for teaching and interaction. Saroj A tried out activities in the class, built group efforts but did so in secrecy, for fear of the sarcastic remarks she would be subjected to from her peers. She also requested me not to share my observations with the other teachers of the school. As she herself put it *“Right now I feel motivated to try out these methods, however I do not know how long I will be able to sustain it without support.”* Saroj regretted the absence of a supportive environment both in terms of the principal and the more experienced colleagues. When I asked her about the constraints caused by fewer resources, Saroj replied that she tried to *“use easily available material, even things available in the classroom.”* According to her the NCERT textbook had suggested a number of activities, which did not need materials only available in the science laboratories. Saroj had also been inspired by the workshops held by the University intervention programme during which she had learnt to use locally available materials. Her previous experience in teaching in private schools perhaps also led to an understanding of the significance of doing activities in science.

Saroj A was in her early thirties, has less teaching experience than the other two teachers observed, who have had many more years to internalise ideas about science teaching and expectancy of students’ achievement. It is more likely for them to act in accordance with their comfort levels than to change the system or their way of handling it.

It appears that by and large, the teachers do not even try to make the efforts required to reach out to the students. The differences among teachers and their teaching styles were reflected by the variations perceived among the students with several types of social backgrounds, who are admitted to these government schools. Accordingly, government schools located in ‘better’ areas have ‘better’ students and therefore perhaps ‘better’ teachers. A school in Akbar Colony, which caters to the children of slum areas, has teachers who are less motivated.

There is another factor that influences, and therefore also accounts for the development of certain government schools at the cost of others. This is the perceived power of the parents. Consequently, better teaching practices and more equitable teacher-student interactions take place in those schools where the parents of students are more vocal and actively participate in the parent-teacher association meetings or keep a track of their children’s progress.

The University Intervention Programme involved the community during the initial phases of intervention. Some members had also participated in teacher workshops and volunteered to make and supply kits to aid teaching. Yet six months later, many teachers had reverted to the exclusive use of textbooks and poor interactive patterns. The community participation was not noticeable during the tenure of the researcher's observations

The schools where many students are first generation learners and whose parents are unaware that they have a stake in the educational process, do not accord adequate dignity to the child. This is noticeable in the tone of the teachers' voice, in the verbal and physical abuse meted out to the children and in the totally uninspired teaching (or lack of teaching) that takes place. The policies adopted by the State further aggravate the social dichotomies occurring even among those children who can only afford to study in the low fee schools. A school improvement programme can be sustained by empowering the community. However, the community participation needs to be a continual one.

The first-generation learner or a child from a socially disadvantaged group does not receive the inputs of intellectual stimulation from her home environment. However, it has been observed that the child in the slums has the ability to comprehend and deal with the social complexities. The development of abstract reasoning for processing the socio-personal complex relationships is an indication that the child is capable of abstract thinking. Nonetheless, the lack of academic inputs in this child's environment reduces her readiness to handle symbolic information processing, an outcome of the technological society.

The ability to do symbolic processing is not nurtured in the deprived environment and the child is less likely to spontaneously develop an affinity, thereby fostering the impression that she is incapable of abstract reasoning.

It may be noted that children have a natural affinity for comprehending their worlds even though they may not have the language or accepted terminology to express it. According to Biggs (1992), the children are 'pre-prepared' to comprehend and relate to their environment meaningfully. The children are inherently curious and interested in the world around them. They assign meanings to objects and to the interrelations of these objects indicating their capability to reason logically about physical stimuli. However, when symbols, such as language or scientific terminology, replace real objects, processes, etc. the children are required to learn the symbols in order to deal with it. However, younger children find applying

logic to symbols difficult. Symbols and signs are cultural tools and therefore are consensual and not absolute. Formal language including the language of science is learned outside and inside school through social interaction. The language or the terminology has to be learnt to the point of it becoming automatic. It is this automaticity with regard to basic content and skills, which results in smooth cognitive functioning (Sternberg and Berg, 1992).

While children may pick up a language very fast, the words are those that are used in everyday vocabulary and hence meaningful to them. However, in the academic world, the physical stimulus manifests itself through symbols, which is culture specific. A learner needs to develop the ability to decipher and use the symbolic representation, an act for which she is not naturally motivated. This necessitates incentives, persuasion and the necessary skills to learn.

The child reared in an environment that provides her with intellectual stimulation and exposure to information processing via discussions, printed material and technological inputs at home is more likely to be pre-prepared to develop the abilities to process symbolic information in comparison to a child who has not received a similar environment.

There is an exigent need for teachers to recognise the significance of the social environment of the child and her intrinsic capabilities. The function of the learning environment of the school would be to induct the child into symbolic information processing thereby bridging the gap existing between children with favoured 'pre preparedness' and those with deprived environment. The teacher in the school comprising children from learning disadvantaged families is required to provide the extra inputs such as enrichment and remedial teaching and providing extra motivation for learning. The resources to be used, time allocation and development of the skills for this pressing need will be necessarily different as compared to those of children coming from enriched backgrounds. Learning would take a more formative approach.

With these basic views as the background, it is reasonable to infer that children coming from academically deprived background lack vocabulary and concepts, which dominate the school curriculum. On the other hand, children from intellectually enriched and stimulating backgrounds come to school with relatively better symbolic tools. Bruner defines cognition as acquisition of cultural tools. Evidently, the cultural tool kit particularly pertaining to scholastic content with which children come to school differs significantly among children from differing socio-economic backgrounds. The gap that exists in "readiness" for scholastic

learning has to be taken care of by the school system. It is therefore incumbent upon the schools to provide the necessary tool kit - the prosthetic devices essential for school learning.

The other important point, which needs mention, is that it is erroneous to believe that children from 'unschooled' cultures are less capable of abstract reasoning. It has been pointed out that children from slums or ghettos successfully manage their survival in complex social environments indicating that it is more a matter of what is important for survival in one's life than any deficiencies in capabilities. Children from deprived background do not necessarily lack the ability to do abstract logical reasoning but they do so with respect to different subject matter. Since Piaget's claim of "structure de ensemble" (structure of the whole) is no longer tenable, to expect students to automatically transfer their 'out of school' skills to classroom activity is unreasonable. Two points are being made here: (a) that children from deprived background are capable of abstract reasoning, (b) they need training in applying this reasoning to the subject matter with which they are not familiar because i) they may be first generation learners, ii) reared in academically and intellectually depriving background, iii) lack the necessary tool kit to handle school learning content.

Whereas the children belonging to higher income groups may have an intellectually stimulating environment both in terms of physical and psychological tools (equipment and advanced symbol system) and therefore are better prepared to receive the 'school material'. The children may spontaneously take on symbolic information processing which characterises school education, since these skills are nurtured at home.

Therefore, equity demands that extra inputs with regard to preparing children to receive school subject matter be imperative for schools where children from deprived background come to study. The teachers in LF schools must essentially provide the necessary inputs required to cope up with school learning. These inputs may be in terms of more time (extractive) equipping the children with learning skills and strategies, developing and enriching language, which is used in school, and enabling them to acquire the language of science.

Thus, to a certain extent reading of the textbook in a science class can be justified for meeting the objective of acquiring the basic tools to learn science. It cannot be an end in itself as found in most of the schools.

If one would articulate ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky (McCormick and Paechter, 1999), it seems reasonable that children first engage in activity which will result in development of schema and also be provided with its symbolic representation. Furthermore, they should be provided with the language to denote their experiences. Activity and textbook reading may make better sense for children who learn from textbooks as there is no other support at home. The ability to meaningfully comprehend the text given in the book and use it for further learning will empower them and therefore provide a more enabling experience. Going back and forth from activity to textbook may actually work better for all students who are not learning in their mother tongue.

An implication for the pre-service teacher education programme would be to situate the student-teacher in schools with disadvantaged learners where she is guided to develop strategies to equip the children with skills to process symbolic information besides providing experience in the middle- and high-income groups.

When teachers align their expectations with a student's socioeconomic status, operating under the assumption that higher social capital correlates directly with cognitive potential, students from marginalized backgrounds face institutional stigmatization. Here the greater misfortune lies not merely in the application of the "incapable" label, but in its behavioral operationalization. The systematic deployment of control-oriented disciplinary measures, the profound deficit in meaningful teacher-student interaction, peer-group ridicule, and the caste-like stratification of low-tier pedagogy used collectively compromise the child's academic identity. Ultimately, these early pedagogical inequities have severe, long-term implications for the student's future lifestyle opportunities and their internal valuation of formal education.

Rist (1970) states this very effectively when he asks the question "Given the treatment of low-income children from the beginning of their kindergarten experience, for what class strata are they being prepared other than that of the lower class?" Here, the government school system seems to knowingly contribute to maintaining the inequalities.

Thirty years after, Rist published his initial work, he stated in another article (Rist,2000) that there was little evidence to show that schools had shown an improvement in how they addressed this problem. "Poor children in general have a hard time making it through school. Poor children who are also minority children have an even tougher time making it through."

CONCLUSIONS

While socioeconomically privileged learners have the resources for public perceptions through media dominance, marginalized populations lack equivalent communicative capital. This study protects these narratives from being obscured by the reductive aggregation of quantitative surveys or the unexplained variance inherent in regression equations. By offering an observed window into the varied realities of marginalized groups, the inquiry serves as a need for institutional conscientization.

This paper has explored the intricate interplay between individual cognition, institutional bias, and the epistemological frameworks required to bridge the gap between marginalized communities and transaction of policies. By examining these dimensions, several critical conclusions emerge regarding how knowledge is formed, how it is weaponized within educational institutions, and how qualitative research serves as a necessary intervention for equity.

First, the foundational premise of constructivism establishes that knowledge acquisition is never a neutral act; rather, it is an explanatory process mediated by a learner's distinctive pre-concepts, lived experiences, and cultural contexts. While individuals internally construct these cognitive frameworks, their ultimate legitimacy is determined through experiential fitness and social negotiation within a community of practitioners. However, when these individual and collective meaning-making processes enter rigid institutional spaces, they are frequently disrupted by systemic asymmetries.

In the context of education, teachers tend to consider a student's socioeconomic status with their cognitive abilities. This basis operationalizes harmful stereotypes, causing increased controlling classroom ethos, reduces teacher-student dialogue, and poor pedagogies. These institutional practices do not merely misinterpret the learner's capability; they structurally impose a lasting stigma that alters the child's academic identity, constrain their future lifestyle opportunities, and diminishes their long-term valuation of education.

While dominant social groups use their power and resources to shape public narratives, marginalized populations are systematically denied equivalent communicative capital. Decision-makers frequently operate under the flawed assumption that they possess an intuitive understanding of the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities, this results in

policies that merely reflect the insular values of the governing elite. Only by legitimating the stakes that marginalized individuals hold in their own futures can we dismantle structural inequities and move toward a more just, consensual, and inclusive social order.

The expectations that teachers hold for their students could affect the ways that teachers interact with their students and influence pedagogy, which in turn would influence student learning outcomes.

The comprehensive study by Wang et al. (2018) suggests that teachers would greatly benefit by becoming aware that how their own biases and prejudices may lead them to underestimate their students and therefore provide equal learning opportunities for all students. This would likely impact the contribution to school teaching and learning.

It is important to understand teacher beliefs since it is these that influence the pedagogic choices made by them, the class ethos they create and therefore the impact their teaching has on how students learn.

It is not the initial labeling of a student as a low achiever, but the subsequent pedagogical transactions that are the actual issues. These include poor teaching strategies, low teacher-student interactions, control-oriented discipline, that weaken the student's academic self-concept and are likely to impact their future socioeconomic mobility. This raises a critical ideological position that the public school system actively perpetuates the very socioeconomic barriers it is ideologically directed to diminish.

When the marginalized students experience systemic deficits in both the quality and quantity of their education, intervention becomes imperative. To leave these pedagogical methods unexamined is to deliberately endorse the reproduction of entrenched social hierarchies and unequal access to wealth, mobility, and healthcare. Low-income children, marginalized early on as intellectually inferior, are systematically routed toward underemployment and peripheral social roles as adults.

The treatment accorded to the students perceived as having dissimilar social status remained the same over two decades despite policy changes. This implies a deep-rooted belief about the children of the marginalized leading to low expectations by the teachers who perceive them as 'less capable'. Teacher education programmes must address this larger issue, only then will learning be created in an ethos of mutual respect and dignity.

This study demonstrates that despite significant policy reforms over the past two decades, including the Right to Education Act and the National Education Policy 2020, many government school classrooms continue to reproduce rather than reduce educational inequality. The observations reveal that teachers' expectations are often shaped by students' socioeconomic backgrounds, leading to low academic expectations, limited pedagogical engagement, and classroom practices that undermine learners' confidence and achievement. Such practices are not merely individual shortcomings but are embedded within institutional cultures that normalize low expectations and discourage innovation.

These patterns are neither universal nor inevitable. Teachers who view students as capable learners are more likely to develop positive relationships, and employ interactive teaching methods thereby creating more inclusive and productive classroom environments despite working within the same resource constraints.

The findings reinforce the need to move beyond ensuring access to education towards ensuring equity in learning opportunities. Children from marginalized communities often enter school with fewer opportunities for academic language development and symbolic learning, not because of limited cognitive ability but because of unequal social and educational experiences. Schools therefore have a responsibility to provide additional academic, linguistic, and motivational support rather than lowering expectations. Teacher education programmes must explicitly address unconscious bias, equitable pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching while equipping teachers with strategies to support first-generation learners. Equally important is the creation of supportive school leadership and professional cultures that encourage reflective practice and sustained pedagogical improvement.

Ultimately, educational justice cannot be achieved through policy alone. It requires classrooms where every child is treated with dignity, challenged intellectually, and provided with meaningful opportunities to learn. Unless schools consciously reject deficit views of marginalized learners and replace them with high expectations, inclusive pedagogy, and institutional accountability, they risk perpetuating the very social inequalities they are intended to overcome.

References

1. Al-Fadhli, H., & Singh, M. (2006). Teachers' expectancy and efficacy as correlates of school achievement in Delta, Mississippi. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 19, 51–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-007-9032-9>
2. Babad, E. (1979). Personality correlates of susceptibility to biasing information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(2), 195–202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.2.195>
3. Biggs, J. B. (1992). Modes of learning, forms of knowing and ways of schooling. In R. J. Sternberg & C. A. Berg (Eds.), *Intellectual development* (pp. 31–78). Cambridge University Press.
4. Bouderbane, A. (2020). Student social background and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 16(1), 17–22.
5. Brophy, J. E. (1983). Research on the self-fulfilling prophecy and teacher expectations. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 75(5), 631–661. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.75.5.631>
6. Bruner, J. S. (1997). *The culture of education*. Harvard University Press.
7. Cobern, W. W. (1998). Science and a social constructivist view of science education. In W. W. Cobern (Ed.), *Socio-cultural perspectives on science education: An international dialogue*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
8. Fitzpatrick, C., Côté-Lussier, C., & Blair, C. (2016). Dressed and groomed for success in elementary school: Student appearance and academic adjustment. *The Elementary School Journal*, 117(1), 30–45.
9. Good, T. L., & Brophy, J. E. (1997). *Looking in classrooms* (7th ed.). Longman.
10. Li, Z., & Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2017). Teachers matter: Expectancy effects in Chinese university English-as-a-foreign-language classrooms. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(11), 2042–2060. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1130692>
11. McCormick, R., & Paechter, C. (1999). Introduction: Learning and knowledge construction. In R. McCormick & C. Paechter (Eds.), *Learning and knowledge*. Paul Chapman Publishing.
12. Morrison, A., & McIntyre, D. (1969). *Teachers and teaching*. Penguin.

13. Ready, D. D., & Chu, E. M. (2015). Sociodemographic inequality in early literacy development: The role of teacher perceptual accuracy. *Early Education and Development*, 26(7), 970–987. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2015.1004516>
14. Ready, D. D., & Wright, D. L. (2011). Accuracy and inaccuracy in teachers' perceptions of young children's cognitive abilities: The role of child background and classroom context. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 335–360. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210374874>
15. Rist, R. C. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 411–451.
16. Rist, R. C. (2000). HER classic reprint—Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70(3), 257–302.
17. Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2007). Classroom interactions: Exploring the practices of high- and low-expectation teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77(2), 289–306. <https://doi.org/10.1348/000709906X101601>
18. Government of India. (2009). The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. [https://righttoeducation.in/sites/default/files/Right%20of%20Children%20to%20Free%20and%20Compulsory%20Education%20Act%202009%20\(English\).pdf](https://righttoeducation.in/sites/default/files/Right%20of%20Children%20to%20Free%20and%20Compulsory%20Education%20Act%202009%20(English).pdf)
19. Van Houtte, M., Demanet, J., & Stevens, P. A. J. (2013). Curriculum tracking and teacher evaluations of individual students: Selection, adjustment, or labeling? *Social Psychology of Education*, 16(2), 329–352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-013-9216-8>
20. Wang, S., Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Meissel, K. (2018). A systematic review of the teacher expectation literature over the past 30 years. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 24(3–5), 124–179.
21. Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs*. Saxon House.