

A Comparative Study of Discrimination in Education: The Learning Environment and Behaviours of Students and Teachers in Iran

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Abstract

It is the learners' right to get an education free from discrimination. Discrimination in education ranges from gender to race, age, social class, financial status, and other characteristics. In this study the focus is on discrimination in education in regard to social class and financial status. The paper describes observations of the school building layout and corresponding activities and behaviours in language education classes. The researcher observed 10 English language classes from different districts during 10 years from 2004 through 2014 and took notes on the activities and behaviours provided in the classroom to identify whether there was any correspondence with educational behaviours. The investigation in this study concluded that the language classes of most of the public (state) schools and some semi-private schools included a curriculum based on translation and memorization teaching methods. In these schools, learners exhibited stress and inattention that disturbed their learning. In these classes learners were threatened by laughing or rough criticizing by the teachers. The observation results were analyzed to make comparisons between schools and inform the level of equality in different schools.

Keywords: discrimination in education; language classes; parent; social class; financial status; curricular activities.

Introduction

It is important to recognize how quickly and how profoundly legal understanding of the concepts of ‘equality’ and equality law have changed and continue to change (Mountfield & Chambers, 2009). The current study aims at identifying the level of equality and discrimination in educational settings in a province in Iran. As Isaxanli et al. (2002) have stated, “among the changes occurring throughout the world is the requirement that social justice is gained in societies.” In recent times, different ideologies and notions about social justice through education have arisen. Gordon Brown, prime minister in England believed that “It is education which provides the rungs on the ladder of social mobility.” (Brown as cited in Smith, 2012, p. 2). Smith (2012) described a political perspective on educational equality following political economist Thurow (1980). In this perspective, the educational experiences of the poor prevent them from competing with better educated groups and social mobility stalls. Although there is a view that poor are poor because they failed to work hard and take advantage of educational opportunities, the moderate view is that the poor are poor because of inadequate education, inferior schools and disrupted families.

Different people need different considerations, quoting the Roman Emperor Justinian, “justice is the constant will to render to each his due” (cited in Miller, 2003 p.76). In other words, everyone should receive what they deserve. Do the poor deserve to be hungry, uneducated or sick? How can we realize who deserves what? Miller (2003) and Garner, Wagner, and Kawulich (2009) provide three concepts to consider: (a) if two students behave in a similar way, the punishment or reward should be similar; (b) the treatment should be relevant, for example a person should not be punished because his/her name begins with a specific letter; (c) the treatment should be proportionate, meaning that if we have to behave differently with different people that treatment ought to be in proportion to what they have done.

This study aims at investigating whether there is justice in educational conditions for learners in the Mazandaran province in Iran and to what extent the probable differences in social and financial status may be related to education discrimination.

Literature Review

The Significance of Education and Teaching Language in Particular

Education is a basic human right and very significant in the development of countries and societies. Having an appropriate educational situation for all children will assist in reducing poverty, diseases related to poverty, maternal diseases, and hunger. Education can lead to economic growth in the country. Michaelowa (2000) declared, “Education affects the life of individuals, their participation in economic activities, and overall economic development” (p. 1). It has been noted in UNESCO's pamphlet (2000) that everyone has the right to education and it shall be free.

In this paper, English language education and language classes are investigated. Language education is the teaching and learning of a foreign or second language. Globalization has created a need for communicating in multiple languages. An optimum learning environment is necessary to assist learners in the language learning process.

The Significance of Teachers and the Learning Environment

Teacher quality is very important in education. Many researchers have concluded that student achievement is affected by their teachers (Hanushek, 1971; Murnane, 1975; Amor, 1975; Park and Hannum, 2002; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; and Aaronson et al., 2003). A study by

Earthman (2004) investigating student academic achievement and building conditions concluded that the quality of the physical environment significantly affects student achievement. In a review of school environments by Higgins Hall, Wall, Woolner, and McCaughey (2005) significant improvements in the learning environment was identified as leading to better attitudes toward teaching and learning.

The importance of the learning environment in language education led to the current study conducted to investigate the relationship between the possibility of education discrimination in language classroom learning environments and the educational behaviours of both teachers and learners.

Educational Status in Iran

Education in Iran is divided into K-12 education and higher education. K-12 education under consideration in this paper is supervised by the Ministry of Education. The structure of the Iranian education system in schools is divided into the following stages: Pre-school Education (1 year in length, called *Pishdabestan*, is not compulsory), Primary Education (five years, called *Dabestan*), Middle school (three years, also called Guidance or *Rahnamaie*), and Secondary Education (four years, called *Dabirestan*). English as a second language is introduced from grade 7 (the beginning of middle school). In Iran, private schools were permitted to re-open in 1988 as non-profit institutions. Although education is free until the end of secondary education and compulsory for the first five years of schooling, there are differences between different regions in the country regarding the school facilities and programs.

The Importance of Comparative Studies on Education

Comparative education is a fully established academic field of study that examines two or more educational systems or situations in one country (or group of countries) by using data and insights drawn from observing the practices and context. Comparative international research is an attempt to understand local problems from a global perspective (Villalon, Suzuki, Herrera & Mathiesen, 2002). A list of quality measures helps to see a more comprehensive picture as well as make informed decisions about what is important and what should be modified, added or removed (Limlingan, 2011). As McNaught, Lok, Yin, Lee, & Song (2014) stated, although most comparative education research tends to contrast different curriculum and educational practices across different countries, internal studies are also helpful for considering the differences within the same national context. Attention to comparative education has increased significantly in recent decades; however, more comparative studies that include classroom observation are needed. This paper aims to make a comparative view in considering the significance of teachers and the learning environment through observations in English language classrooms.

Methods

In this study, the researcher compared four districts in a province in Iran (Mazandaran, located in the north of Iran) regarding their educational status in language learning. The target was to evaluate the extent to which variations among schools may lead to learners' and teachers' educational behaviors and to investigate education discrimination in different schools. The schools under study were selected based on three criteria: type and appearance. The selection method will be presented in the procedure section. In this article, the researcher aims at answering the following research question: To what extent do language teachers' and learners'

behaviours and their educational status in classrooms vary regarding the physical environment of the schools and the regions in which they are located?

The Participants

The language learners of ten schools in four different cities in Mazandaran province (figure 1) were selected for the study. Two of these four cities (figure 2) are located in the west of the province and two others in the east. 542,549 students are educated in primary, secondary, and high schools in Mazandaran. This province is one of the most important provinces in the country. There are 27,063 classes in its 6,043 schools. These four cities were selected in this province for the current study because of their geographical location. Two of them are located in the east and two in the west. As there are some cultural differences between west and east of this province, the researcher tried to select the schools in order to generalize the results to most parts of the province to some extent.

The participants were 260 learners who attended these ten secondary schools in Noshahr, Noor, Qaemshahr and Behshahr. All of them are in secondary school, year 3, and female. They were chosen among 80 secondary schools for female learners in the mentioned cities.



Figure 1. Mazandaran Province in Iran



Figure 2. Mazandaran Province and its selected cities for the study

The Procedure

The first step was to select ten schools out of the 80 *Rahnamaei* (middle schools). To do so, the cities of Noshahr and Noor in the west, Qaemshahr and Behshahr in the east were chosen because of their geographical location. Afterwards, three schools in Noshahr, three others in Qaemshahr, two schools in Noor and two others in Behshahr were selected. There were two main criteria for selection: (a) physical environment and (b) type of school. Each of these main criteria were rated as excellent, medium or inappropriate.

Ratings and Coding

The buildings in the study were evaluated based on the layout, whether it is timeworn, new or refreshed. The facilities were identified: projector, whiteboard, blackboard, appropriate chairs, computer, smart board, and others. Based on these three criteria, the schools were identified as A, B & C. A for an excellent, B for a medium and C for an inappropriate physical environment. The locations of the schools were noted based on rural or urban. The types of schools in the province were coded according to public, semi-private and private schools (table 1). The school types ranged from 1 to 3. 1 was assigned for a public school, 2 for a semi-private and 3 for a private school. All the information were gathered by close observation.

Table 1. The selected schools in four cities in Mazandaran Province

Name of the City	Kinds of schools		
<i>Noshahr</i>	C1	B1	A2
<i>Qaemshahr</i>	C1	B1	A3
<i>Noor</i>	C1	A3	
<i>Behshahr</i>	B1	B2	

The researcher observed classes during the nine-month academic year during a period of ten years, from 2004 to 2014. Through these ten years, the researcher observed the classroom situations in her role as either teacher or examiner and took notes of behaviours and actions in the classrooms. The three schools in Qaemshahr were observed from 2004 to 2007. Behshahr, Noor and Noshahr were observed from 2007-2009, 2009-2011 and 2011-2014 respectively. All of the selected language classes were held at 8:00 to 9:15 AM to homogenize the groups and reduce the effect of time on teachers' and learners' behaviours' in the classroom. It should be noted that based on the Ministry of Education in Iran, all the textbooks and contents of learning materials are the same, although the school facilities are different from one another.

Findings

During ten years of observing educational situations of these ten language classes, the researcher tried to take note of every behaviour and activity in the classroom. Researcher notes describing one session in three classes in C1, B1 and A3 types respectively are presented in the following.

C1 denotes a public school with an inappropriate physical environment, B1 denotes a public school with a medium physical environment, and A3 denotes a private school with excellent physical environment

Table 2. Activities of an English class in C1 school (public school with an inappropriate physical environment)

Activities of a sample session Time: 8:00-9:15 AM
<p>The English class began at 8:00 AM. The program was to ask questions about the previous lesson. Before asking, the teacher checked the learners' assignments and put a minus mark for everyone who does not have an acceptable homework. While checking the homework, a student was writing the proper answers of the questions of the book (page 7) on the board and others were copying. Afterwards the teacher called some learners to get ready for answering the previous lesson questions. The learners were asked to read the English text. Their pronunciation was not accurate but there was no correction or attention by the teacher. After asking questions, the teacher wrote "How many" and "How much" on the board and made two questions by them. Then she answered the questions by "a little," "a few," "some," "much," "many," and " a lot of," respectively. Then she asked the students to read the conversation in their books using "how many" and "how much." She read aloud the sentences in the dialogue and translated them sentence by sentence. She did the same for the reading and patterns sections of the textbook. The teacher used criticism and laughing for those learners who made some mistakes while reading. She used some penalties for those who did not do their homework well that would range from writing that part twice to sending them to the dean's office for punishment. She threatened the weak students that she will read their names aloud in front of all of the other learners in the school as weak ones. The considerable factor was the teacher's action toward penalties. She did not pay enough attention to them while checking and it caused the writing of the same errors several times by learners. While observing learners' behaviors in the classroom, the observer could often see cheating, inattention and stress.</p>

Table 3. Activities of an English class in a B1 school (A public school with a medium physical environment)

Activities of a sample session Time: 8:00-9:15 AM
<p>The class began at 8:00 AM. The teacher started to teach grammar and asked the learners to take notes in their notebooks. She was teaching adverbs and adjectives. After writing the notes on the board, she waited for some minute to let the learners write them. She walked among learners to solve their probable problems. She taught structure deductively. Afterwards, she asked learners to make some sample sentences with selected adjectives and adverbs. Then she referred to the sentences in the book and asked the learners to find adjectives and adverbs there. She translated the sentences after reading. Then she identified the homework for next session. She asked them to prepare a wall-newspaper about this lesson in groups. The important learners' behaviors were memorization, and a little stress in the classroom. The point that attracted the attention of the observer was the environment of the classroom. All of the walls were covered by student made, colorful wall-newspapers about different lessons.</p>

Table 4. Activities of an English class in an A3 school (a private school with an excellent physical environment)

<p>Activities of a sample session Time: 8:00-9:15</p> <p>The class began at 8:00 AM. The teacher checked the learners' assignments by the help of group leaders. Then she asked two of learners who did not do their homework to stay at the classroom after finishing the session to talk about the problem. After addressing the homework problem, she asked the class to watch a short film about time travel and asked them to talk about it. She warmed up the discussion by asking some questions such as, "What occurred in the film?" and "Do you think it is possible to travel in time?"</p> <p>The learners were involved in the teaching process. They could laugh and talk aloud without any stress. The teacher used the Smart Board to show a PowerPoint about time travel to teach future tense. Afterwards she distributed information about some famous teams in the country and asked the learners to predict the probable results of the plays using future tense. The assignments were done in groups and the best predictor group was encouraged by rewards. The learners were collaborating with each other in the class freely. They could walk in the class and asked the other classmates' assistance. The teacher walked among them to solve probable problems. After finishing the activity, for the next session, the teacher asked the students to write a composition about what they expect to be in the future.</p>
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Four cities were considered in this study from different geographical parts of the province. Five schools were selected in the west and in the east among 80 schools in the district. The differences between these ten schools in Mazandaran province in Iran were identified. Although there were some differences between all of the classes, the similarities between public schools and some semi-private ones were distinguishable in contrast with private ones. Most private schools had a well-prepared building and campus and afforded appropriate facilities for teaching. The teacher/learner activities in private schools included cooperative learning and rewards and discipline that fit the circumstances. The lessons were based on Communicative Language Teaching, engaging the students in lively discussions on interesting topics. The teacher/learner activities in the public schools and semi-private schools involved more memorization and isolated grammar lessons.

The teaching/learning activities in the ten schools can be thought of as a continuum with the A3, or private schools with excellent physical environments on one end and public schools with inadequate physical environments on the other end of the continuum, with some schools falling in between these two points. The private schools with excellent physical environments were found to have the following characteristics:

- Cooperative learning
- Understanding
- Less Cheating
- Considerable attention
- Reasonable teacher behaviours regarding learners' mistakes
- Student involvement in the teaching/learning process
- Cooperative teaching
- Meaningful learning

- Less stress
- Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method

Most of the private schools tried to attract the best teachers and accepted more qualified learners. Some of the private schools had entrance examinations. The most important point was not the exam, but the tuition the families must pay for registering their qualified learners. In fact, even learners with excellent grades who could not afford the tuition, could not register. In other words, it is the learners' parents who afford their children with the best school facilities. In such schools most of the parents are educated and wealthy. Some of them even donate some equipment such as expensive Smart Boards to their children's schools.

The public schools with inadequate physical environments were found to have these characteristics:

- Translation
- Memorization
- Considerable Cheating
- Inattention
- Rough criticizing by the teachers
- Boredom
- Grammar teaching
- Repetition
- Stress
- Grammar Translation Method (GTM) or Audio-lingual Method (ALM)

As shown in table 5, the teacher and learner activities in classrooms vary according to differences in the physical environment and types of schools. The public schools more highly relied on the translation method and memorization, whereas the private schools were eager to implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Semi-private schools are similar to private ones but differ in the amount of tuition and types of facilities. The tuition is less than private schools and higher than public ones. Although public schools only require a small fee for insurance and some other expenses in the beginning of the year, there are some parents in Iran that cannot even pay the expenses of a public school.

Table 5. The main characteristics of each of ten target classes and the teacher/learner activities

City	Qaemshahr		Behsahr		Noor		Noshahr			
Types of schools	A3	B1	C1	B1	B2	A3	C1	A2	B1	C1
Observation year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Class size	30	30	30	29	27	30	15	32	31	14
Main teaching method	Co-operative teaching	Structural teaching method and co-op teaching	Translation	Repetition and audio-lingual method	Translation and grammar teaching	CLT method and cooperative teaching	Translation and structure teaching	Communicative teaching	Audio-lingual method	Translation and memorization
Main learning activities	Group learning	Working in groups to promote their structural learning	Translation	Repeating and memorizing	Taking notes and memorizing	Working in pairs	Repeating and taking notes	Cooperative learning	Repeating and memorizing	Memorizing and translating
Main student problems	Not allowing the learners to work with the smart board because of big number of learners' in the class	Large class size	Persian interference in learning	Not remembering well the memorized items and having stress	Bored students	Not allowing the learners to work with the smart board because of the rule of the school	Cheating and inattention	Large class size	Boring situation	Stress and boring situation
Main teachers' problems	Teaching learners in different levels in one single class	Large class size	Not having enough ability in speaking English	Not enough energetic	Large class size	Teaching learners in different levels in one single class	A lot of weak students in the classroom	Teaching learners in different levels in one single class	Not enough energetic	A lot of weak students in the class

Conclusion

Quality education is the right of every child in the world based on UNESCO's disciplines and human rights (2000). Education can create a clear picture of one's surroundings and kindles the flame of curiosity and the ability to reason. Economically, the best jobs are provided for the best educated persons and results in a better quality of life. In other words, social and cultural deficiency in a country arises from the lack or deficit of education. Education is such an effective factor in improving society that it must be promoted through the expenditure of time and money. In this study, observations of language class activities were related to the physical and financial status of the schools. Based on the results of these observations, there is a considerable gap between language class activities in different schools based on their physical status and the school types. This provided an answer to the research question: To what extent do language teachers' and learners' behaviours and their educational status in classrooms vary regarding the physical environment of the schools and the regions in which they are located?

Limitations of the Study

More schools and classes from all over the country or even the world would allow for more helpful and generalizable results, but it was not possible for the researcher to include more schools or classes. Some potential school observations had to be dropped because school cooperation was difficult to attain. A suggestion for the future is another longitudinal study of teacher and learner behaviour in different classrooms encompassing a larger population using comparative research methods to achieve more generalizable results.

This study attempted to identify the relationship between the physical environment and types of schools with language learning/teaching activities in the classroom. Further research can be done to investigate this relationship in other subjects in schools universities. The findings of such research can inform the amount of discrimination in education at all levels of education and its effect on the learning/teaching process. This study is one beginning step toward further research on the solutions and strategies for understanding the problem of discrimination in education.

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