

Nomadic Learning Culture: Narratives of a Teacher

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Abstract: In this study using the narratives of the teacher of a nomadic tribe during his first year of teaching, we tried to understand the learning culture of itinerant nomadic schools. This study is a narrative inquiry-based research, the one that is belonging to qualitative and interpretative paradigm. The teacher's diaries revolved around a series of interrelated subjects dealing with his educational setting. The focal point is the students' learning experiences, with other concepts being the conceptual peripheries. The data analysis shows that students' learning and corporal punishment are the main concerns of the nomadic teacher. This study shows that several features of nomads' lifestyle cause disruption in the teacher instruction, which leads to corporal punishment.

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1. Introduction

For more than two decades, education scholars have been warning about the improbability of transformational reform in educational systems and curricula without taking the element of culture into consideration. Bruner for the first time addressed the correlation between culture and education in a systematic fashion in his "Culture and Education" (1997). Besides Bruner, other scholars such as Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, and Green (2011) believe that development, implementation and assessment of curriculum is productive if the cultural settings are taken into consideration. Thus, the present article aims to present a deeper understanding of the learning culture in a unique type of school in Iran, namely the nomadic school, relying on the assumption that transformation in education entails consideration of the learning culture.

During the past six millennia, Iran has witnessed the three basic forms of living, which are nomadic, rural and urban (Amanelahi Baharvand, 2004). As time has passed, economic, social and cultural transformations have influenced both the rural and urban modes of living in Iran. Nonetheless, the nomadic lifestyle has undergone less powerful changes according to some scholars, in a manner that has even deprived them of full usage of the recent achievements of the modern age (Akbari & Mizban, 2004).

From the 1920s, there emerged volunteers to establish modern schools for the nomads and teachers from urban areas were recruited in these modern schools. Since 1923, nomadic education has passed through several stages of evolution, increasing its enrolment and diversifying its activities. Such efforts earned an award from UNESCO in 1976 for fighting illiteracy (Bahman-Beigi, 2005). The General Office of Nomadic Education is now in charge of training more

than 168,000 students across the country (Abbasi, 2008).

In this paper, using the narratives of the teacher of a nomadic tribe during his first year of teaching, we try to understand the learning culture of itinerant nomadic schools. According to Iran's Center of Statistics, moving nomads are defined as those communities which hold at least the following three characteristics: tribal structure, reliance on animal farming and shepherding as the key element of lifestyle (Goudarzi, 1994). In other words, moving nomads are those communities that due to their specific way of living should have an itinerary in the summer and winter twice in a year and blood relations form their social relations.

The school in which the teacher carries out his duty is a multi-grade class with 11 students, which come from eight households. The school is located in the nomadic region of Poshtkouh in province of Lorestan in Iran.

2. Research Method

This study is utilizing a narrative inquiry-based approach, the one that is belonging to qualitative and interpretative researches paradigm. In narrative inquiry-based approach, story is the focal subject under investigation. As a research methodology, this approach requires a phenomenological viewpoint where an experience is studied as a phenomenon (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative is "meaning-making through the shaping or ordering of experience" (Chase, 2011, p. 430). Polkinghorne (2007, in Chase, 2011) points out that narrative research makes claims about how people understand situations, others, and themselves. According to Rushton (2004), narrative in the form of stories is a strong tool for research in educational settings. Sá (2002) holds that written language in the

form of diaries has two functions including the development of skills to think about facts and provision of strong potentialities for analysing and understanding of what is going on in the classroom.

The narrative inquiry-based approach shares four characteristics with other qualitative research approaches: 1) emphasis on natural setting, 2) interest in conception and understanding, 3) inductive analysis; and 4) development of theory (Bartlett, Burton, & Peim, 2002). But unlike the common qualitative researchers who usually present short excerpts from interviews or fieldwork in their published work, narrative researches often publish longer stories from individuals' narratives (Chase, 2011).

As its main source of information, the present paper draws upon the diaries of a nomadic teacher, written during a single school year. Like other qualitative approaches, this approach does not employ data analysis in a linear fashion, namely, after data collection. The researcher analyzes the data while collecting them and encodes the data. More data is obtained and encoded during the research process and old data is reviewed through data analysis and comparison. Finally, the researcher classifies the codes according to their perceived significance and discards some codes.

3. Results

3.1. *Learning and corporal punishment as the main themes*

The teacher's diaries revolved around a series of interrelated subjects dealing with his educational setting. The focal point is the students' learning experiences, with other concepts being the conceptual peripheries. Since the beginning, the teacher tries to teach in a manner which facilitates optimum learning among students. The students, however, show reluctance in learning and interrupt his teaching in the classroom. He applies several teaching methods to control the class but to no avail. Advice, punishment, talking to the parents, giving extra assignments, cutting the recess time, and so forth, also failed to prove effective. Some other factors reinforce using corporal punishment as an educational method, including parents' expectations, children's convictions about corporal punishment and educational inspector's recommendations. Parents expect the teacher to use corporal punishment as a tool to educate the students. As the teacher says: "All this time the families have told me that if I don't beat the students they would not pay attention to me". While the teacher tells the families that corporal punishment is not a correct behavior, they respond: "these kids won't bow with peaceful behavior."

Even the children believe that only corporal punishment can force them to study. As Maryam, a

female student, tells the teacher: "kids in here are corrected only with beating." This is such dominant a belief among the nomads that during the composition class, when the teacher asks the students to write about their future career, one writes: "when I grow up I want to be a teacher and beat the students if they have unwashed hands or faces;" or "I want to be a teacher and teach the students well but eat their [food] rations [allocated by the Ministry of Education to rural and nomadic schools] myself, and if they become noisy beat them as much as I can."

Better education, studying and keeping calm are the advantages of corporal punishment according to the parents and the students. On the other hand, the teacher believes that escaping from schools, cutting classes for several days, and evading the teacher in face-to-face confrontations are some consequences of corporal punishment, an observation that research justifies. Boldaji's research titled "sociocultural and educational factors contributing to school leave among the middle school students of Lordegan and Ardal nomadic schools" cites corporal punishment in school among the factors which encourage school leave (cited in Elham, 2008).

Finally, several factors convince the teacher to embrace corporal punishment as an educational instrument. These include increasing pressure from the parents who believe in corporal punishment as an effective instrument to educate children and think of a punishment-avoiding teacher as inefficient, children's perception of an authoritative teacher, the educational inspectors' pressure to improve the students' learning records and the need for better control of the students. The teacher writes:

"Students should not be excessively respected and smiled at ... I'm coming to the conclusion that except for Maryam and Ahmadreza and the first grade students, the others are hard to control with mild verbal methods and need to be physically punished, of course periodically."

In the following section of this article, we will attempt to analyze the situation of the nomadic teacher by the main themes of his narrated memories.

3.2. *Nomadic Lifestyle and the Teacher's Situation*

We can understand the roots of the teacher's situation, which convinces him to use punishment against his own beliefs, with regard to nomadic lifestyle and its consequences in their life. In his "Dehkouh Children", Eric Friedel (1997, cited in Fazeli, 2011) states that nomadic parents consider their children as 'property' and have to follow strict, authoritative structure of the family with God placed at the top, followed by father and then nature. Unyielding educational norms are enforced in a top-down manner and the father can use force whenever deemed necessary. The obedience structure is bottom-up and

the children should obey the father's orders. In Dehkouh, the authority hierarchy is based on age and gender. Women hold a lower status than ten-year old boys and children and younger girls stand at the bottom of the hierarchy. At the peak of the structure, men are the all-powerful authority. The authoritative social relations in Dehkouh, and in Iranian nomadic families in general with their specific moral norms and rationality, place excessive burden on the children.

In summary, nomadic culture gives little space to dialogue and persuasion, a trend that is reflected in their learning culture. The teacher writes: "One thing I discovered throughout this time about discussions among the nomads is that they are neither the type of ready-to-explain people nor have enough patience to follow a lengthy subject."

3.3. Teacher's Stature among the Nomads

During the winter period, the teacher is unable to prepare food since he teaches in two subsequent shifts. In the meantime, tradition holds that the teacher's food be prepared by the students' families. In fact, families may find teacher's rejection of their offer of food as offensive. That is why most unlike their urban colleagues, nomadic teachers are satisfied with their career. As the teacher of Poshtkouh nomads says: "My everyday confrontation with such behavior engendered the belief in me that the stature teachers used to hold in the past has remained untouched here and the teachers still enjoy their true value here."

The teacher is treated as a member of the family. "They told me feel at home and regard them as my own family." Drivers even do not take fare from a teacher and place them at the front seat as a sign of respect. The teacher writes:

"While returning home on foot from the educational facility in a car-unfriendly route, an automobile pulled off to give me a ride. Interestingly, they immediately ask who we are and where we go. As soon as I tell them that I am a teacher, they prepare the front seat for me, even if that means moving the front seat occupant to the backseat; unless a senile occupant is there which I myself do not feel comfortable about. Anyway, the driver brought me to the front seat. Whenever I pay a visit to a student's house, or while returning, as soon as the residents of the area find out about my job, they turn friendlier. Most drivers who pick me up on the way will not even take my fare. They ask for my exact destination and sometimes insist that I be their guest".

The teacher's stature among the nomads increased his sense of responsibility and even encouraged emotional responses:

"Sometimes I feel I will shoulder a great debt if there is shortcoming in my teaching. Maybe it's because I bother them for meals every day. Every time I visit the home of a student who has problems with

their lessons, I feel ashamed for failing to improve their performance. Now I understand why the last year soldier-cum-teacher had told one of the students that he gives top grades to students because of [the kindness of] their families".

Occasionally, the nomads have further expectations from the teachers, and assign them other duties. The teacher in this case says:

Today was the [Muslim holiday of] Eidul Adha and Arash's grandmother wanted to sacrifice a lamb. With the Mafateeh al-Janaan book [which contains religious prayers] that a guide had brought for me an hour earlier, I left for their house and recited the special prayer for sacrifice; and of course I was invited to dinner."

Apparently, the nomadic teacher enjoys significant authority and influence and accordingly, it is expected him to use his authority to educate his students by corporal punishment.

3.4. Working Nomadic Lifestyle

Manderscheid (2001) distinguishes working nomadic lifestyle from other forms of tribal life. According to Manderscheid (2001), family members in nomadic life divide the husbandry tasks among family members (family enterprise). The teacher says:

Nomadic life is difficult. From wake-up to sleep they are working. The poor men have to be alert even at night to protect the cattle from thieves or wolves. Of course, here, women work along men, and even more than the men. Besides the daily household chores, they have to look after the children and bring water from the spring, which is perhaps two kilometers away from their houses. Feeding the sheep, putting them inside the barn, and milking the cattle are their duty and when the men leave the abode, it is the women who have to graze the cattle."

Children also help their families in pasture, which stops them from adequate study of their lessons. Studies by Torimiro, Dionco-Adetayo, and Okorie (2003), shows that among Nigerian nomads the children start helping the family in pasturage from the age of 4 to 14 and the older they become, the more they become interested. Torimiro et al. (2003), consider this as a basic reason for nomadic children's neglect of education. The teacher in our study recalls:

"Just like the early spring, I first trod the asphalt road and then the dirt road to get to their village, but found out that like Amin's village, they have not erected the black tents here. As I entered the village, I saw Maryam and Ahmad who were standing beside the grazing cows. Maryam had a "Let's Write" book in his hand while Ahmad was playfully hopping around. I waved my hand but they did not notice me, so I thought I might have misidentified them. However, as I went closer, I saw that they are those I guessed. I called them and they came so that I could

take the exam. Maryam said that somebody had to take care of the cows but no one was free so she had to stay there. I said that it was ok and I would take the exam right there, so I told Ahmad to call Saman for the exam and to bring books and pencils for himself and Maryam.”

Golzadeh and Safarnejad (2008) state that animal farming and moving are major obstacles against the education of nomadic children. They maintain that even if they pass the basic educational stages, the students ultimately have to choose between continuing their academic studies and living among their nomads. The irrelevance of educational subject and the nomads' needs usually create a dilemma, the authors claim. Consequently, this lifestyle generates some disadvantages. Parents have no time to support their children and participate in their academic tasks, so they have a high expectation of the teacher. In addition, the children have a limited time to do their homework. During the daytime, they are expected help their parents in animal rearing and after nightfall, because of lack of facilities such as electricity, they could not meet the teacher's expectations.

Torimiro et al. (2003), hold that animal rearing by nomads' children has developed in them some characteristic such as boldness, aggressiveness, and resistance to foreign culture. As the teacher tells:

“They [parents] tell me the story of the teacher who came here two years ago and was disrespected by the students and since he refused to beat them, they started to mock him (and even Maryam once called him a ‘giraffe’ in his face). They also recall another teacher who frequently beat the students at the first month, such that they were frightened even when hearing his name. The interesting point is that the parents give great credit to the second teacher.”

Another feature of nomadic lifestyle, addressed by Manderscheid (2001), is the changeability of their residence according to the availability of pastures and needs of animals. As the teacher writes, due to migration, nomadic schools' academic year is quite short. All the time, the teacher has to keep pace in order to hold final exams in simultaneity with national final exams across the country. The pace of teaching troubles some students in keeping along with the class procedures. On the other hand, for different reasons mentioned earlier such as family members' working all together, the students' families could not really help the students and sometimes even ask the teacher to press their children to achieve a desirable score. The teacher may resort to corporal punishment and that ultimately fosters negative attitude towards school among the students.

The main characteristic of nomadic lifestyle is that animal husbandry is an important means of

subsistence (Manderscheid, 2001). Children are involved in animal husbandry and follow the animals in their migration for pasturage; this created among the children an emotional connection to the cattle. Besides that, most of their time is spent on taking care of the animals. Goudarzi (1994) asserts that in this lifestyle, the people are forced to make at least two yeylagh and gheslagh migrations during summer and winter when they may fall victim to bandits or other tribes. In such circumstances, unity and solidarity, and helping each other to facilitate their migration, provides an opportunity to defend the tribal members against foreigners. Of course, this attitude fosters a sense of excessive pride that permeates interpersonal relations among nomads and occasionally causes problems. Goudarzi (1994) explains that in nomadic culture, similarities and differences, even family roots, can cause feud. The nomads have taken shape throughout tens of generations and genealogy is a definitive characteristic of identity for them. The father teaches the names of ancestors to the children since early childhood and instructs them to memorize the names. Bragging about ancestors and bearing grudge over their enemies, rivals and perhaps murderers is transferred from one generation to another.

Accordingly, relations between classmates from different tribes are usually laden with self-centeredness and counterproductive competition along with strong tribal affiliations. In these relations, all try to prove that they are the best. This is of course a common trend in smaller societies having limited contact with the outside world (Fazeli, 2011). This nomadic personality, which stems from nomads' lifestyle, is one of the main causes of indiscipline that occasionally arouse teacher complaints. The teacher writes that the children manifest their hostility in different modes including:

- In recess time, when the students play in teams, they want victory at any price to prove their superiority.
- Every individual confrontation, whether verbal of physical, quickly turns into a group fight.
- Ridiculing and humiliating each other
- Posing a riddle to the others and refusing to give the answer.
- Ostentation with family wealth to prove superiority.
- Blind educational competition inside the class.

As mentioned earlier, animal husbandry is the main source of nomadic subsistence and all members of the family work for survival. This kind of living limits the time for true parenthood. The result is increasing expectation among the parents that the teacher holds responsibility for their children's upbringing. Nomadic parents have little time to attend

to their children and spend most of the day making ends meet. On the contrary, in urban schools, the increasingly educated parents are paying more and more attention to their children's education, sometimes interfering with the teacher's responsibilities and asserting their opinion. Nomadic parents on the other hand are too occupied to monitor their children's education and prefer to shift all duties to the teacher. Besides, nomadic mothers lack the required level of literacy to complement the teacher's role at home, so they put all responsibilities on the teacher. The teacher is not merely the conveyor of education. The nomadic teacher recalls what one of the parents said once: "as I was talking to Farid's father today, he told me that they expect the teacher to teach the correct behavior to students, more than they want them to educate the students".

So far, we mentioned several factors, which influence the behavior of nomadic children in school; it is necessary to mention that those who have achieved success through education rarely come from nomadic communities. This creates a sense of reluctance, especially among the young girls, to attend school. It becomes worse when the families say that all they want is that their children become literate otherwise there is no benefit in their schooling. Of course, their argument may not be that irrelevant. As Sohrabi (1994) reports on the value of literacy among the nomadic tribes in his "Education among the Iranian Nomads", literacy has made no difference in their social and economic structure, has brought no progress in removing injustice and poverty dominating the community and could not improve the status quo. In fact, literacy has had no impact on employment and social status, and that has lessened motivation to achieve literacy. Sohrabi's account of the nomadic tribes in older times still sounds more or less true.

4. Conclusion

In this article, we tried to describe and analyze the difficult situation which a nomadic teacher has confronted during an academic year. Class control and corporal punishment were his main challenges. We explained his position with regard to the broader context of nomadic culture and analyzed his situation regarding nomads' lifestyle. Such conditions have been observed in other nomadic regions in countries such as Nigeria. Tahir, Muhammad, and Mohammed (2005) noted that some major constraints in nomadic education include constant migration, children's involvement in animal rearing, incompatibility of nomadic lifestyle and school curriculum, schedule and nomads' physical isolation from the rest of society. Some states have tried to solve educational problems of nomads and their other problems by sedentarisation. In India until the mid-1980s, the state encouraged nomads to choose a sedentary lifestyle (Dyer, 2001).

Nonetheless, in Iran the policy of sedentarisation has been unsuccessful and in some cases has destroyed the grasslands (Tavakoli & Zia Tavana, 2009).

As Umar and Tahir (2000) have stated, what we need is an effective educational system for nomads, which recognizes their educational needs and culture and truly intends to solve problems that create many challenges for teaching in and management of nomadic classes.

It is quite necessary to adjust the nomadic children's curriculum to their lifestyle. Some countries have taken steps in this path including Tibetan nomadic schools that have been allowed to localize as much as 20% of the curriculum of their regional schools (Bangsbo, 2008). Such initiatives provide an opportunity to develop a curriculum related to nomadic communities' lifestyle with which the children are familiar. The curriculum development system in Iran should dispense with the centralized educational system and supply some contents specially tailored to the nomadic lifestyle, and take into consideration the differences between urban, rural and nomadic settings.

In addition, adopting a flexible timetable for nomadic schools is necessary. In winter and summer, nomads usually migrate to areas which provide grass and water resources for their herd. Regarding this unique lifestyle feature, it seems that the existing curriculum is hardly compatible with the nomadic lifestyle and slows down the learning pace of nomadic students.

The time spent by students inside the class should be also shortened. Nomadic parents need their children to assist them in animal rearing, so some of them do not send their children to school, even though they value the children's education. By decreasing this time, parents could be convinced to send their children to schools, particularly if we consider that there is no correlation between students' time of attendance in school and their academic achievements.

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