

Book Review

American Journal of Qualitative Research
December 2017, Vol.1 No. 1, pp. 32-36

www.ajqr.org

Brooks, J. G., & Brooks, M. G. (2001). *In search of understanding: The case for constructivist classrooms* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. 136 pp., ISBN: 0-13060-662-6. \$21.20 (Paperback).

Reviewed by: *Clarisse Halpern, Florida Gulf Coast University, USA*

In the book, *In search of understanding: The case for constructivist classrooms*, Brooks and Brooks discussed the concepts, challenges, and strategies for applying constructivism in classrooms in a clear and straightforward manner. The book itself is divided into three parts. In part one, the authors defined constructivism explaining that students construct meanings through a quest for understanding their experiences, as they pondered about the challenges of implementing constructivism in an education system that emphasizes achievements measured by test scores rather than meaning and understanding. Following, in the second part of the book, Brooks and Brooks addressed the main criticism of the constructivist approach as well as common challenges for its implementation. Lastly, in part three, the authors exemplified through teachers' journal entries the reasons that tend to influence on teachers' decision in not applying constructivism to their classrooms, as well as offered recommendations regarding school reform.

The definitions and examples described throughout the book agree with theories regarding the psychological foundations of curriculum and instruction. Indeed, constructivism comprises the construction of meaningful and authentic learning experiences based on the learners' prior knowledge, interests, and motivation, favored by social interactions among students and mediated by the teacher (Huang, 2002; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013; Parkay, Anctil, & Hass, 2014). Brooks and Brooks cited distinguished curriculum theorists and scholars in the field of education such as Bobbitt, Bruner, Dewey, Gardner, and Piaget to support their case as to why it is important to implement constructivism to American classrooms. In fact, this book differs from others particularly in the practical manner that it addressed constructivism; instead of presenting a theoretical discussion among constructivist theorists, it goes beyond by showing how teachers can apply it to their daily classroom practices.

When Brooks and Brooks proposed practical examples of the constructivist approach being applied to different classes, contexts, contents, and grade levels, they built a bridge between theory and practice. Furthermore, they exemplified that constructivism must be lived and experienced to be understood; in other words, the best way to understand constructivism is through experience. By demonstrating the constructivist approach through examples, such as engaging students in experiments to understand concepts of physics, they tried to evoke the essence of constructivism itself, not as something static or dogmatic, but as a learning experience that is progressively built. In this sense, Brooks and Brooks invited readers to experiment the constructivist approach so that they can reach their own conclusions, rather than blindly trusting dry theories.

The authors explained that the main criticism to the constructivist approach is related to creating and raising students' interests through teacher mediation. Also, they emphasized that constructivist teachers must value and take their students' points of view into consideration by recognizing and addressing them. Hence, it is paramount that teachers listen to their students and help them overcome the fear of expressing their ideas and reasoning when asked for elaboration or when the teachers challenge their ideas. Additionally, the authors explained that teachers should not impose adult expectations on their students' learning process, because their error is part of the process of understanding and, ultimately, learning. Thus, an "error" should not be avoided or condemned; rather must be seen as an opportunity to assess the student's progression.

In effect, Brooks and Brooks highlighted the importance of the constructivist approach to promote an educational reform that values active learning processes rather than those based on rote memorization often related to the dominant high-stakes tests culture in the current American education system (Damgaci, 2014). Accordingly, they argued that an education system that overstresses achievements measured by test scores rather than accomplishments obtained from the search for meanings and understandings runs counter to the constructivist perspective. In fact, this is a largely discussed topic by scholars that criticize the system of accountability and the employment of standardized tests, and their consequences to students' learning, teachers' instruction, and schools' survival, that often reinforce social injustices (Biesta, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Padilla, 2014).

Consequently, Brooks and Brooks criticized teachers who adhere to the traditional education system stating that it is too compelling for them to have their students repeat information rather than internalize and reshape new cognitive structures. However, the structure of the current education system does not encourage teachers' creativity or autonomy in the classroom because the focus should be solely on tests' content (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008; Popham, 2001). To make matters worse, repetition requires less time than actively engaging students to re-signify knowledge and produce more meaningful experiences.

Conversely from standardized tests, assessment in constructivism does not take into consideration the students' results in isolation, but holistically and continually. Assessment should be done through authentic activities that aim to find what students have internalized and learned; and this process takes time, not only quantitatively, but qualitatively. For that reason, constructivism significantly differs from the traditionally prescribed scope curriculum that demands teachers to follow a prearranged sequence and to obey to a timeline that often pressures the teacher to structure standardized instructional practices.

Thus, Brooks and Brooks presented journal entries wherein teachers expressed their reasons for not implementing constructivism in their classrooms. Despite agreeing that it offers means to understand how people learn, teachers' refusals tend to spring from a rigid curriculum and an unsupportive attitude from their administrators. Other teachers have stated their opposition based on beliefs that their instructional methods have proven effective with their students passing important tests, while others expressed their concerns regarding classroom control and students learning from other methods rather than teacher- and subject-centered ones. The authors justified teachers' resistance to change stating that most of them were not educated or trained in a constructivist setting, having deeper roots in and being committed to other instructional practices. On the contrary, the behaviors of a constructivist teacher start by nurturing their students' autonomy, initiative, and natural curiosity. For such, teachers must encourage students to ask thoughtful questions and seek elaboration of answers. Consequently, after asking a question, teachers should allow some wait time to let students think about their responses, giving them a chance to construct relationships. In addition, dialogue among students and discussions about their experiences would allow them to construct knowledge and find meaning. For that reason, teachers should use cognitive terminology, present

students with raw data and primary sources, and take their responses as guidelines to prepare the lessons and to assess their understandings.

Regarding school reform, Brooks and Brooks asserted that a meaningful one must be done to change the ways teaching and learning have been carried out by traditionalists so that constructivism can be applied in classrooms. Accordingly, they suggested restructuring preservice and in-service teacher education around constructivist's principles and practices, focusing on teachers' professional training and development in place of using textbooks. The authors also proposed more meaningful assessments to students than those of standardized tests, proposing to abolish letter and number grades. Their final recommendations were to establish school-based study groups, and to offer annual seminars on teaching and learning for administrators and school board members to educate them about the benefits of having constructivist approaches applied to schools.

Throughout the reading, recurrent questions may arise, especially concerning the present education system and on how hard it is to "go against the prevailing system" and to overcome mindsets. One could ask why the current culture of measurement is still compelling despite its notorious deleterious effects. Decontextualized learning, instruction reduced to "teaching to the test," alienation among students and teachers, rivalry among students that pushes them to engage in endless competition that aims to reveal winners and losers; all of those effects contribute to reproducing the current social hierarchies (Padilla, 2014). The current educational landscape is the exact opposite of what constructivist theory postulates.

Although the book praised constructivism as an approach to education that values students' learning and their construction of knowledge through interaction and inquiry, the authors did not ignore criticisms, like the belief that it only stimulates learning around pre-existing interests. On the contrary, the authors tried to explain that the core proposal of constructivism is to enlighten the relevance of contents and sparkle students' interests through teacher mediation. In effect, they presented a series of potential problems and their possible answers when applying constructivism to different curriculum contents, suggesting a myriad of strategies to help teachers incorporate constructivism into their classrooms.

On the one hand, the book's strengths were the examples provided as well as teachers' journal entries proving how effective constructivism can be in shaping individual knowledge, emphasizing how students' learning can be greatly benefited, ensuring a long-term understanding. On the other hand, despite mentioning the challenges and resistance to implement constructivism to classrooms, the authors did not offer alternatives to overcome them. Besides, the authors emphasized and supported the application of constructivist approaches to schools, but did not mention its implementation to postsecondary education settings.

Also, Brooks and Brooks focused on school's classrooms, as a microcosm, without further discussions about the political and structural intricacies that create hindrances to implementing constructivism to the American education system. Therefore, the debate lied on the end of the process, that is, on instruction, learning, assessment, and educational outcomes, if constructivism was applied to classrooms. Conversely, the political and economic interests that move education, governing curriculum and people's lives, were left out of the discussion (Biesta, 2009; Hoyle, 1985; Marsh & Willis, 2007; Spring, 2014).

In spite of its limitations, the book was engaging and captivating, bringing awareness to its readers about the benefits of implementing constructivist practices in schools and classrooms. It can also serve as inspiration to pre-service teachers willing to take the authors' insights and ideas to improve their instruction through constructivist approaches to their students.

Finally, the book triggered a discussion about a change of mentality towards the implementation of a more inclusive educational approach, that is, constructivism. Nonetheless, to create constructivist classrooms, teachers must go through a paradigmatic shift, abandoning past

preconceptions to foster a learning environment to their students that broaden their abilities and help them find meaning through the knowledge that is presented to them. In other words, to become a constructivist teacher in the face of the current accountability and standardized education system, one must deconstruct oneself from the constraints of being standardized for too long.

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Manuscript received December 19, 2017
Final revision received December 28, 2017
Accepted December 30, 2017

Clarisse Halpern, is a doctoral candidate in the department of curriculum, instruction, and culture at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her research interests are globalization in education, comparative education, and diversity. E-mail: clari_halpern@hotmail.com