EXPLORING GENDER RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF SCHOOL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Gender is the most pervasive form of inequality that exists in the society today. This form of inequality is more prevalent in developing countries where both women and men have well defined roles to play in the society. Any deviation from those roles is strongly disapproved. If this gender discrimination is to be removed it can be only possible through education. When educational institutions will teach students to be gender sensitive, a significant change in the society can be expected. This study was undertaken to understand the teacher's perceptions on school and classroom practices in the context of gender relations and to analyse children's ideas on gender preferences in peer interaction. The study was conducted in a government school in Delhi.

The sample consisted of 8 teachers and 8 students from classes III to VI who were randomly selected. The students and teachers were interviewed based on a semi-structured interview schedule. The data collected was analysed on various themes like students organisation in classroom and school gatherings, teacher's allotment of tasks to boys and girls, teacher's notions on co-curricular space for boys and girls, teacher's perception on importance of education for boys and girls and students preferences in peer-interaction.

KEYWORDS: Gender Identity, Inequality, Perception, Interest Patterns, Peer Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Gender is the most pervasive form of inequality that operates across societies. Gender roles are largely pre defined in a society and learned through the process of socialisation wherein individuals internalize norms, values, attitudes and expectations of the social groups to which they belong. Certain behaviour patterns are expected of each sex. There is thus an undue pressure on boys and girls to live up to the established norms of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Girls are seen as physically weak and in need of protection, boys on the other hand are seen as strong, active and less dependent. Aggression and assertiveness usually discouraged among girls is approved of as a sign of 'masculinity' among boys.

The division of labour within the family also forcefully brings home to children gender differences in role and status of their 'significant others'. Children observe that roles of mother and father are not only distinct but also evaluated differently. Such gender socialisation within the family results in differential acquisition of abilities and aptitudes among boys and girls. These social processes have implications for the education of girls in general and schooling in particular as schools do not operate in isolation from gender norms and cultural attributes that are prevalent in the society. There are fewer studies on the education of girls in India and barely any systematic focus on school and classroom processes which include the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher attitudes, poor interactions as well as institutionalized rituals and practices.

Feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of a gender perspective to understand and explain the dynamics of education for girl children. According to National Family Health Survey 2000, while the 'social stratification'

of attributes and qualities into 'Masculine' and 'feminine' are reflected in the realm of culture, the material basis and unequal power that underlie social relations between men and women influence the allocation of resource, roles and entitlements at the level of individual households and thereby influences decision making in relation to the education of children. Other dimensions of social structure in India such as caste and community status are also constitutive of gender dynamics and influence the nature of participation in educational institution.

The making of gender identity begins in the family as children internalize what are seen as culturally appropriate qualities and attitudes associated with being 'masculine' and 'feminine' through socialization.

The Gender schema theory proposes that sex typing, which is essentially the acquisition of sex appropriate preferences, skills, personality attributes, behaviours and self concept derives in large measure from gender schematic processing, from a generalized readiness on the part of the child to encode and to organize information including information about the self according to the cultures definition of maleness and femaleness.

It is important to note here that the process of socialization varies among different social groups but gender inequality in general and patriarchy in particular is so pervasive that it runs across societies. The concern with the protection and control of female sexuality and notions of 'family honour' linked to norms of appropriate behaviour for women bring home to the girl the centrality of home and hearth in their lives. **Millet (1970)** describes patriarchy as a 'social constant' running through all political, social and economic structures and found in every historical and contemporary society. The different roles of men and women have their origin in a process of 'conditioning', from a very young age boys and girls are encouraged to very specific gender identities. This process takes place largely within the family, 'Patriarchy's chief institution', but the pressure to adopt gender typed behaviour pattern converges on the developing child from a variety of other sources too like teachers, friends, TV and books.

Girls are rewarded by their mothers for playing with same sex toys and punished for playing with cross sex toys. In contrast boys were both punished and rewarded by their mothers for playing with cross sex toys. However fathers rewarded play with some sex toys and punished play with cross sex toys for both sons and daughters (Langlois and Downs 1980). Thus during socialization, children are taught to behave in sex appropriate ways, boys are encouraged to develop 'masculine' traits while girls are encouraged to develop 'feminine' traits.

According to **Bandura (1980)**, reinforcement and modelling play an important role in shaping sex roles In the learning of sex roles, children frequently learn through observation, the behaviour of both sexes, however they usually perform only the behaviour appropriate to their own sex because that is what they have been reinforced to do. As children grow older influences from outside the family become increasingly important in shaping sex role typing.

According to **Mukhopadhyay (1992)** families provide different academic environments for boys and girls in terms of resources invested in their education, time space and range of educational experience made available to pursue their studies as well as the nature of support and guidance offered. She observes "even the well off, education oriented families.... view educational achievement, especially in scientific fields differently for girls than boys and are less inclined to invest family resources in the academic success of daughters than sons". Cultural norms as well as family livelihood strategies place girl's education at a greater risk than that of boys. Parents are less enthusiastic about sending girls to schools for reasons that are economic as well as socio-cultural.

However it is important here to understand that apart from the socio-cultural and economic constraints to girls education, gender inequality is reinforced in the school itself in many subtle ways. To understand the dynamics of school children today, it is important to relate their participation in schools to broader socio-cultural structures which sustain gender inequalities.

The school as an institution of learning ought to create equal spaces for overall growth and development of girls and boys. This calls for promoting gender sensitivity among all teachers through workshops and training. However gender sensitization programs also need to be encouraged in pre-service teacher training programs. Since teachers influence the students in a significant way, therefore teachers need to adopt a gender sensitive approach towards their pupils. Thus there is an urgent need to pay attention to the socialization of girls and boys in schools so that gender differentiation and inequality originating within the family does not perpetuate further in the society via schools.

"Sitting in the same classroom reading the same textbook listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different education." The socialization of gender within our schools assures that girls are made aware that they are unequal to boys. Every time students are seated as lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently.

"Because classrooms are microcosms of society mirroring its strengths and ills alike, it follows that the normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms" (Marshall, 1997)

Yet gender bias in education reaches beyond socialization patterns, bias is embedded in textbooks, lessons and teachers interactions with the students. This type of gender bias is part of the hidden curriculum of lessons taught implicitly to students through every functioning of their classroom. Gender bias is also taught implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. Researches in the field of psychology have shown that use of gender equitable materials allows students to have more gender balanced knowledge and develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles yet teachers in school continue to use gender biased texts. Hence it becomes critically important for teachers to reflect over their classroom strategies and pedagogy in general.

The study has been undertaken to critically examine the classroom and school practices through the vantage point of gender relations.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine teacher's perceptions on classroom practices in the context of gender relations.

- To assess the teacher's perceptions on school practices in the context of gender relations.

- To analyse children's idea on gender preferences in peer interaction.

- To suggest some strategies to promote gender equality in the classroom

SAMPLE

The sample for the study consisted of 4 male teachers, 4 female teachers, 4 boys and 4 girls from standard III to VI of a co-educational senior secondary government school in Delhi.

TOOLS

The tool used for data collection was semi structured interview schedule. Separate Interview Schedules were formulated for teachers and students respectively. Interviews were separately conducted with each subject at a time. Probing was extensively undertaken so that details could be elicited. The two set of responses were carefully reviewed and the content was analyzed qualitatively by identifying the emerging issues. The issues so identified were organized under broader themes concerned with teacher's perception on classroom and school practices and students preferences in peer interaction. The themes formed under each set of response are not rigid and some overlapping exists between them.

The themes that emerged from the data of teachers are as follows:

- **Student's Organisation in Classroom and Other School Gatherings**

Gender is often used as an organizational category in schools. It appears to be the significant factor in seating children in classrooms or arranging them in groups for various activities. Boys and girls often make separate rows while going to the assembly, playground, yoga room or any other school gathering.

The data collected from the interviews of the teachers revealed that 5 teachers preferred gender based seating arrangement in the classroom while 6 teachers preferred gendered segregation of students in other school gatherings like the morning assembly, yoga and sports period. Thus there were 3 teachers who discouraged and disapproved gender based seating arrangement in the classroom while there were two teachers who disapproved of gender based segregation of students in the morning assembly, yoga and play. The data revealed that in the classrooms many teachers either do not follow any fixed seating arrangement or follow the seating pattern based on the roll numbers of the students. Thus in the absence of any fixed seating arrangement students have the freedom to change their seating as per their choice. The teacher in this case does not control student's arrangement and as a result students sit with their close circle of friends. However these close circles are usually groups of same sex peers.

In cases where roll number based seating arrangement is practiced, an interesting observation was made. It was seen that within the attendance register names of students are entered in a sequence in consonance with their gender. Thus names of boys would come together followed by names of girls. On being asked why they preferred roll number based seating arrangement, the two teachers replied,

- In my class students sit according to their roll numbers. It becomes easy to take attendance.

- Students sit according to their roll numbers and this is the only method. In exams also they sit like this.

The response of these two teachers reveals that according to them roll number based seating arrangement is simply an adherence to the policy followed by the authorities during exams and thus comes with an official approval. However it needs to be analysed that the polices such as these are not gender sensitive and thus perpetuate the existing gender inequality in schools since they come with an official approval therefore teachers do not challenge them and abide by them.

A teacher who believed that student's organization in both classroom and school gatherings should be gender based stated, 'There should be separate lines for girls and boys. There are separate washrooms for girls and boys. It is clear that there is a difference in them, therefore they sit separately.' This response of the teacher reveals that he not only

favoured gender based segregation of students but also viewed it as an extension of real practices in society, thus conformity to this social organization becomes essential. It can be seen that teacher through such practices is likely to perpetuate the hierarchy that exists between males and females in the society. It appears that he also encourages the dichotomy between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' that is socially constructed and practiced in the society.

Response of two teachers to students segregated organization in yoga class reveals that teachers believe that students themselves prefer to sit with their same sex peers. Hence according to them, it is not that teachers force students to sit separately rather the students themselves prefer to sit with their same sex peers. According to another teacher, as children grow they develop their gendered identity and as a result of this they begin to identify with their same sex peers. Such a view of the teacher is in line with Freud's psycho-sexual analysis according to which, as children enter their latency phase (6-11yrs) they develop their gender identity and thus begin to identify with their same sex peers. However it needs to be analysed that the teachers in this case, do not encourage an interaction between boys and girls rather they ignore the formation of same sex peer groups as a developmental behaviour.

Another teacher was of the opinion that it is the media which is promoting 'vulgarity' and 'sex' which are deeply impacting the minds of young viewers and they in turn begin to imitate it. As a result it becomes essential for the teacher to make them sit separately

The response of the teacher reveals that he discourages cross sex interaction as according to him children today are exposed to a lot of information that are not appropriate for their age and due to excessive exposure to such programs their minds get influenced towards vulgarity and sex. Hence it becomes essential to discourage interactions between boys and girls.

However it is important here to understand that segregating the children is not the correct approach to deal with this issue. Since children are already exposed to a lot of information therefore it is essential to deal with it very sensitively. By suppressing such an issue, children's curiosity towards it will be enhanced. Hence instead of ignoring and suppressing the issue, the teachers should deal with it with greater sensitivity.

It needs to be understood that since most students in standard IV are over 10 yrs of age, hence according to Freud's psychosexual stage theory children at this age enter the genital stage in which puberty causes the sexual impulse of the phallic stage to reappear. According to Erikson's (1968) psychosocial analysis in this age the children begin to question their identity, and if this psychosocial conflict is resolved successfully then it leads to the formation of a consolidated positive identity else a negative outcome may lead to identity confusion. Hence it is essential for the teacher to understand that if such issues emerge they should not be suppressed, rather by encouraging a healthy interaction they can be successfully resolved.

The response of another teacher reveals that she is opposed to an interaction between boys and girls. Moreover she views the school to be a grooming place where girls are encouraged to follow a 'feminine' code of conduct, and groomed for future roles expected of them as their stay in their natal home is temporary. Such an essentializing view of the teacher retains overtones of **Erikson's** views on women's identity. However contrary to these responses, two teachers believed that there should not be any gender based seating arrangement rather he believed that students should be equipped with the freedom to choose their seating partner as this freedom is the first step towards promoting gender equality in classrooms.

After analysing all the responses of the teachers it can be said that most teachers in the school favoured gender based seating arrangement in the classroom and other school gatherings. They do not view children as children but as 'gendered beings'. The teachers have different expectation of boys and girls and thus as children grow they assimilate these gendered stereotypes **(Delemont, 1968)**. Such gendered practices of the teachers are bound to perpetuate the already existing gender inequality in classrooms.

- **Teacher's Perceptions on Co-Curricular Activities for Boy and Girls**

In the school children are not only introduced to formal processes of learning but also to co-curricular activities like dance, music, debating sports etc. These co-curricular activities play an important role in the all round development of the personality of students, however it is seen that usually boys and girls get to access different co-curricular spaces.

The data collected from the interviews of the teachers reveals that seven teachers were of the opinion that girls preferred activities like dance, music and knitting over other co-curricular activities, while boys preferred activities like sports and debating etc.

The response of a teacher reveals that according to her these differences in the interest of children are natural and a result of a biological endowment. Hence according to her it is the 'nature' or an individual's innate capacities that play an important role in the development of these different interests among girls and boys.

On being asked about student participation in co-curricular activities, the response of two teachers clearly reflect that they view boys and girls as having different interests. While they view the boys as vociferous and strong thus preferring outdoor activities, they view girls as weak and creatively inclined thus preferring music and dance over other activities. Moreover they view these differences as biological and not as a social construct.

After analyzing the perceptions of the teachers it can be stated that they believe that the difference in the interest patterns of the children (boys and girls) are a result of the differences of their biological sex and hence human intervention of any kind has no role to play in it.

However what needs to be analysed here is that the first response (T1) was that of a female teacher but the latter two (T2, T3) are of male teachers. But despite their gender differences their perceptions on student's abilities, interests and participation in co-curricular activities is found to be similar. All these teachers place greater importance to the role of 'nature' over 'nurture', hence essentializing the **Freudian** notion that **'anatomy** is **destiny'**

The response of the teacher reveals that he accepts the fact that the differences in the interest patterns of boys and girls are not completely natural but also social. According to him parent's and teacher's constant disapproval for liking music and dance among boys has resulted in differences of interest patterns among boys and girls. Such constant disapproval by the 'significant others' has resulted in suppression of talents and liking for dance and music in boys.

However there are seven teachers who believe that interest patterns of children are biologically governed. Thus according to them since an individual's abilities are biologically determined therefore no amount of human intervention in the form of teaching can bring about a change in their abilities.

Such an essentializing view of teachers shall only promote the already existing gender inequality in classrooms. Here it needs to be understood that an essential component of identity is the perception of 'significant others'. Hence such

an essentializing perception of teachers about girls and boys shall shape and influence their gender identities and further the already existing gender inequality in classrooms

- **Teachers Allocation of Tasks to Boys and Girls**

The data collected from the interviews of the teachers reveals that seven teachers allotted tasks to students on the basis of their gender. The teachers believed that heavier tasks such as lifting furniture were suited to masculine bodies while lighter tasks such as carrying registers suited the feminine bodies. Seven teachers stated that they would choose girls for tasks such as carrying register, cleaning the class, practicing song etc, while they would choose boys for tasks such as lifting furniture, opening jammed drawers, monitoring the class, arrangement of furniture etc.

However contrary to these responses one teacher stated that he does not allocate tasks to students on the basis of their gender, rather he followed a system of education wherein each task would be done by all students on rotation basis. However still there were 7 teachers whose gender based expectations could be seen in their allocation of tasks to students.

- **Teachers Perception on Discipline for Boys and Girls**

In the name of discipline, punishment meted out to students ranges from hitting, pulling ears, making them sit outside the class or shouting at them. It is seen that 'gender codes' often become visible when teachers have to discipline children. Moreover teachers address students as 'girls' and 'boys' while invoking different standards of behaviour.

The data collected from the interviews of the teachers reveals that five teachers used gender to facilitate control in their classrooms. While girls were let off with lighter punishments like change of seat, the boys were usually given harder ones like pulling of ears etc.

The response of the teacher reveals that she considers the child's past record before deciding the punishment. However she stated that she avoids physical punishment and that she makes no distinction between boys and girls. However, another teacher on being asked it the punishment strategies he uses are same for both boys and girls. The response of the teacher clearly reveals that he uses gender as a tool to facilitate control in the class. It appears that the teacher through his approach is promoting gender inequality among his students. The practice of girls slapping boys is symbolic of the fact that the teacher himself views girls as inferior to boys and thus an inferior human being hitting a human superior being should be perceived as a matter of shame and guilt. Since the teacher himself views this hierarchy between boys and girls, so it is very likely that his student too would imbibe it and may begin to evaluate their self worth and self esteem through this standard of 'gender'. Such a gendered view of the teacher reflects his perceptions on gender relations in a classroom.

Though most teachers believed that there should be different punishments for boys girls and that lighter punishments be given to girls, there was one teacher whose opinion differed, he stated, instead of punishing the child it is essential to first understand the child and then talk to the child. Hence according to him, understanding the child's psyche is the first essential task for a teacher. It can be analyzed that under such an environment learning is likely to be threat free and enjoyable.

- **Teachers Perceptions on Importance of Education for Boys and Girls**

The data from the interviews of the teachers reveals that according to five teachers education is equally important

for both boys and girls as it leads to employment and it is imperative for both to be financially independent. However there were three teachers who viewed education for boys to be more important than girls. According to them as girls had to eventually get married and live with their husband, so it was more important for boys to get educated. Such responses of the teachers reveal their views on a woman's identity as being incomplete without marriage.

- **Students Preferences in Peer Interaction**

Peer relations are an important dimension of schooling. They contribute to the process of learning significantly as children grow in each other's company. However Inter-gender peer interaction does not seem to be on friendly terms as children prefer same sex interaction over mixed sex interaction.

The data collected from the interviews of the students reveals that all the students preferred same sex interaction over cross sex interaction. On being asked about the choice of seat partner, the response of a Class III student clearly reveals that he perceives a divide between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine'. He associates qualities like strength, bravery with his male friends, moreover he also associates them with popular icons like HE-MAN. At the same time he ascribes qualities like gullibility, weakness and emotions with his female classmates. He ascribes a superior position and status to boys over girls. The response of the student of student of class IV, who was sitting with his friend reveals about the identity status and gender roles that he has ascribed to girls. On analyzing his views it can be said that according to him there exists a public private divide, i.e. there exists a dichotomy under which girls (women) are relegated to the private sphere (home, domestic chores) and boys (men) represent the family in the public sphere or the outside world.

Hence according to the student there exists a difference in the interests of boys and girls and due to this difference of interests, she prefers sitting with her same sex peers. All the responses of the students thus reveal that these students prefer to sit with same sex peers as they perceive a clear distinction between the qualities of males and females.

However responses of some of the students also reveals that they perceive a hierarchy between boys and girls, while boys place qualities ascribed to males as superior, girls on the other hand place feminine qualities as superior to masculine ones. On being asked what all household tasks they perform at home, boys stated that they do not work at home as it is not their work, while girls stated that they work and assist their mothers in the household (domestic) chores.

The response of a class VI girl reveals that she has begun to question the practice of gendered division of labour at home. However her mother's response to her objection has in some way suppressed her curiosity and objection. According to her mother since the social atmosphere is unsafe for women hence they are easily vulnerable to violence by men so they should stay at home as a safety precaution.

It needs to be seen that the response of the mother appears as preventive measure. Certainly the city is becoming unsafe for women, but what is problematic is the defence mechanism adopted against the violence faced by women. Disallowing women to venture outside the four walls of their home under the name of safety is actually a means of restricting their mobility. Such a restriction on their mobility has a damaging impact on their identity formation. They tend to perceive this socially constructed dichotomy of life as a 'natural given' and thus May not challenge it. Since this defence mechanism comes from the seat of authority, their parents, the 'significant others' therefore in most cases it may be obeyed without any opposition. Moreover this perception of parents, teachers and other elders gets trickled down to children and thus may begin to influence their interaction with their peers, particularly those belonging to different sex.

When the students were given hypothetical situations about children who performed roles opposed to their expected gender roles their responses revealed that they had clear defined notions on gender preferences in peer relations Moreover the students were able to identify with the situations narrated as they had seen such examples in their surroundings however they did not approve of them.

Most boys stated, 'This girl does all those works which boys do. She should have been a boy'.

While the girls stated, "his friends will all be boys who would be doing naughty things like him."

On analyzing these responses of students it can be stated that most children perceive a divide between the qualities ascribed to males and females. Moreover conformity to these ascribed qualities is so rigid that they disapprove of any deviance from these expected gender norms and qualities.

Hence it can be stated that these categories of 'Masculine' and 'feminine' norms are so rigid in the minds of the children that they start influencing their ideas on gender preferences in peer relations and interaction and in this our socialization patterns at home and school offer a major contribution.

Need of the Hour: A Change in Approach

Socialization of gender and the use of a gender biased curriculum leads to an inequitable education for both boys- girls. Hence the researcher suggests a few changes in the existing classroom practices to create a more equitable learning environment for all children.

First the teachers need to be made aware of their gender biased tendencies. Next, they need to be provided with strategies for altering their behaviour. Finally, efforts need to be made to combat gender bias in educational materials. Once teachers have recognized their gender biased behaviour they need to be provided with resources to help them evolve their teaching strategies.

It is hence suggested that teachers can be provided with a self directed module aimed at reducing gender bias in the classroom. The module can contain specific activities aimed at reducing stereotypical thinking among students and self evaluation worksheets for teachers. Moreover apart from changing their own teaching strategies teachers need to be aware of the gender bias embedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take appropriate steps to combat this bias.

"We need to look at the stories we are telling our students and children. Far too many of our classroom examples, storybooks and texts describe a world in which boys are shown as bright, curious, brave, powerful and inventive but girls are shown as silent, passive and invisible "(Mc Cormick, 1995)

CONCLUSIONS

Both men and women play an important role in the smooth functioning of the society and this role needs to be understood and respected. The society needs to change to promote gender equality so that men and women can respect each other and co Exist peacefully. A significant change can be brought about by education. The gender stereotypes that have been existing in the society need to change. School practices and teachers can play a significant role in achieving this. Teachers should narrate anecdotes where the roles have been well played by people against the societal norms. Inspiring stories of Madam Curie becoming a scientist, Picasso and M.F. Hussain becoming well known artists, well known chefs in

the hospitality industry should be highlighted. Gender as a form of classification in the class should be avoided and activities should be so planned that both the genders work together. Teachers need to be open in their outlook and promote cross gender roles in the class. Any deviation from the stereotypical roles should be encouraged rather than looked down upon.

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