

Construction of Gender Stereotypes during Classroom Discourse: A Theoretical Perspective

Deepika Kaku

MPhil Research Scholar

Dr. Arshad Ikram Ahmad

Assistant Professor,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Abstract

It is always thought that a school must be a place where all the students, irrespective of their sex, class, caste, ethnicity, etc., feel secure, equal and are, in fact, respected for their diversity. This would truly be termed as an enabling learning environment. Unfortunately, such an environment does not prevail in common Indian societies let alone in educational setups. Marginalized and disadvantaged groups such as SCs, STs, and women are denied equal access to various social structures, one of them being educational institutions. Researches on school processes suggest that identities of children continue to influence their treatment within schools, thereby denying them meaningful and equal opportunities to learn. It is noticed that students are influenced through their interactions with peer groups, teachers, family, and community members and accordingly make perceptions of opposite gender. In this light, the present paper tries to highlight how gender stereotypes are constructed in a classroom setting. The paper takes note of interaction between students and a teacher as well as amongst students themselves. In conclusion, certain measures are suggested to overcome gender stereotyping and how all the stakeholders of education system can be made aware of and sensitized to gender issues.

Introduction

Opining on the steps of constructionist philosophy, NCF 2005 states that schools, being public spaces, should be the hallmark of the “values of equality, social justice and respect for diversity, and of the dignity and rights of children as well”. An enabling learning environment of the school is one where students feel secure, where there is no fear, and is also governed by relationships of equality and equity. To materialise this, teaching and non-teaching staff of schools do not require any special effort except from being just and to practice equality, they must ensure no discrimination is made on part of them to the students on the basis of their sex, class, caste, ethnicity, etc. Indeed, a classroom is a place where students engage themselves in a dialogue with their peer groups and teachers, ask questions freely and reflect

critically on the issues directly or indirectly that concern them thus giving way to an enabling learning environment. Adversely, in a traditional classroom setting, strict rules of silence and discipline prevail where students' remain passive and are not allowed to speak their heart out.

NCF 2005 suggests that teachers should encourage children to talk freely on the matters being discussed so that the classroom is more of a lively place and that "teaching is not predictable and boring, but rather an adventure of interacting minds". An environment like this will definitely facilitate the self-confidence and self-esteem of learners across their age; it will also go a long way in improving the quality of learning itself.

The social interactions that take place in an educational set up are informed by the economic, social, cultural, political status of the students as well as teachers. In turn, these interactions help in forming a person's perception of others who are part of her/his surroundings. The various experiences of schooling impart implicit messages on social, cultural, and economic hierarchies through interpersonal relations, teacher attitudes, norms, and values of the culture of the school that form the huge part of hidden curriculum. These experiences reinforces one's notion of purity and pollution, higher and lower, upper and middle, sophisticated and gross, masculinity and femininity, desirable and repulsive in relation to social hierarchies. The children are subtly informed about who has the privilege in certain ways of living, mainly that of the urban middle class, while rendering all others invisible.

Gender, being one of the most pervasive forms of inequality, operates across all communities, castes, classes, and ethnicities. This inequality can be seen in Indian education system in general and through analysis of curricula, syllabi, textbooks, classroom interactions, pedagogical practices in particular. In past couple of decades, various commissions and policies have been formed to address the issues of gender but they all lacked implemental spirit. If we look at the numbers, the dropout rates of girls belonging to the marginalized sections and the rural areas is very high—9 out of every 10 girls ever enrolled in school do not complete schooling, and only 1 out of every 100 girls enrolled in Class I reaches Class XII in rural areas in India (NCF 2005).

Textbooks reflect the social realities as they happen and in turn, enable one in perceiving the social realities according to how they are depicted in those books. Recent analysis of old NCERT books shows how women were depicted in stereotypical roles supporting the patriarchal and hierarchical system of Indian society. Similarly, a thorough observation and analysis of classroom discourse enable us to see how often girls being subjected to

stereotypical expectations of fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers in near future. Not only this, teachers always assume and expect girls to be more “disciplined” and composed as compared to their “rowdy” and undisciplined male counterparts. It is presumed that girls perform better in areas like arts, craft, language whereas boys have upper hand in subjects like mathematics, pure sciences, and computers.

Gender Discourse in a Classroom

Sadker (1994), in her study, asserts that “Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations... In fact, upon entering school, girls perform equal to or better than boys on nearly every measure of achievement, but by the time they graduate high school or college, they have fallen behind”. There are evidences which prove the change that girls are performing academically better than boys, however, the analysis of classroom discourse shows that girls and boys continue to be socialized in ways that work against gender equity. The interactions taking place inside the classroom between students and teachers or between students and non-teaching staff, or amongst students themselves reassure gender stereotypes that girls are unequal to boys. Several aspects of hidden curriculum such as how students are seated or lined up, tolerating ‘boys will be boys’ attitudes, ignoring an act of sexual harassment reaffirms the oppression and degradation of girls.

It is a very common sight to witness in Indian classroom that a teacher socializes girls towards a feminine ideal by asking them to be quiet, calm, neat and disciplined. On the other hand, boys, who are thought of as naughty and undisciplined by nature, are encouraged to think creatively, independently, be active and speak up. Bailey (1992) shows in his study that it is taught to girls in school that they are supposed to be popular which means more than their scholastic performance and abilities. To quote Bailey “Girls in grades six and seven rate being popular and well-liked as more important than being perceived as competent or independent. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to rank independence and competence as more important.” The study further demonstrates that the school’s negative attitude towards sexual harassment is another way in which it reinforces the socialization of girls as inferior. Bailey notices that, ‘when schools ignore sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent interactions between students, they are giving tacit approval to such behaviors’.

Diane Reay (2001) found out in her study that the socialization of girls begins earlier than the middle grades and that they begin to define their femininity in relation to boys. Her study conducted on third grade classroom examined four self-sorted groups of girls: the nice girls, the girlies, the spice girls and the tomboys. It was found that the term 'nice girls' was considered derogatory indicating, 'an absence of toughness and attitude.' While the girlies were a group of girls who spend their time on flirting with and writing love letters to boys, the tomboys were girls who played sports with the boys, and the spice girls espoused girl-power and played 'rate-the-boy' on the playground. The study depicts how each of the group defines their own femininities in relation to boys. The very study further shows that the socialization of girls occurs by being tolerant towards different behaviors of boys than of girls. Assertive behavior from girls is seen as negative and disruptive by adults.

It is often seen that boys are teased for throwing like a girl, or crying like a girl, which implicitly suggests that being a girl is worse than being a boy. According to the American Association of University Women Report, "the clear message to both boys and girls is that girls are not worthy of respect and that appropriate behavior for boys includes exerting power over girls - or over other, weaker boys".

Marshall (1977) points out that the gender socialization that occurs in school or an educational institution has a lifelong impact on both the sexes. He rightly says that "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". The gender bias that one encounters in educational set up is embedded in textbooks, lessons, and teacher interactions with students and every other aspect of classroom discourse. More importantly, gender bias is an important part of hidden curriculum which is implicitly taught to the students through the everyday functioning of the classroom.

Moreover, the construction of gender stereotypes also occurs implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. For example, using textbooks that omit contributions of women; tokenizing the experiences of women, and depicting stereotyped gender roles- all these further heightens gender discrimination in syllabi as well as curriculum. Klein (1985) in his study finds out that the "use of gender-equitable materials allows students to have more gender-balanced knowledge, to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and to imitate role behaviors contained in the materials. But unfortunately, most schools continue to use gender-biased textbooks."

Suggestive Measures

National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education points out that “Gender is not a women’s issue; it is a people’s issue. Femininity does not exist in isolation from Masculinity. The construction and power of one determines the construction and power of the other.” It is well known that gender relations are not ‘natural’; rather they are product of a social construction that makes these unequal relations look ‘natural’. These established social and moral norms of masculinity and femininity pressurize its citizens to behave in a certain manner and live up to them. On the one hand girls become target of social control, patriarchal domination, gender discrimination and oppression and on the other hand boys are taught to live according to the patriarchal culture that stereotypes their social roles. Boys are taught to be tough and carefree so that they can perform their role of breadwinners, protectors, and warriors in a better way and should simultaneously suppress their emotions and fears. These constructed unequal gender relations puts all the citizens of a community in shackles which does not let them to develop their human capacities to their fullest. Therefore it is in the interest of both men and women to liberate human beings from existing relations of gender. (NCERT, 2006)

In their research, Myra and David Sadker (1994) noted four types of teacher responses to students: teacher praises, providing positive feedback for a response; teacher remediates, encouraging a student to correct or expand their answer; teacher criticizes, explicitly stating that the answer is incorrect; teacher accepts, acknowledging that a student has responded. It was found that boys were far more likely to receive praise or remediation from a teacher than were girls. On the other hand, the girls received an acknowledgement response from their teacher. These findings were confirmed by a 1990 study conducted by Good and Brophy that noted “that teachers give boys greater opportunity to expand ideas and be animated than they do girls and that they reinforce boys more for general responses than they do for girls.” (Marshall, 1997)

Bailey (1992) also points out the case of special education programs where boys represent more than two-thirds of all students and consist of higher the proportion who receive diagnoses that are considered to be subjective. It is indicated in medical reports that learning disabilities occur in nearly equal numbers in boys and girls, but Bailey suggests that it may be the case that, ‘Rather than identifying learning problems, school personnel may be mislabeling behavioral problems. Girls who sit quietly are ignored; boys who act out are placed in special programs that may not meet their needs.’

The analysis of gender discourse that happens inside a classroom shows that the use of a gender-biased hidden curriculum and stereotypical socialization of gender roles lead to an inequitable education for both boys and girls. In order to make the educational setup more aware and gender sensitized, certain changes are to be made. Some of the prime requirements include those teachers to be made aware of their gender-biased tendencies and pedagogical practices. Also, they need to be provided with techniques and strategies for altering the stereotypical behavior. Furthermore, efforts need to be made on large scale to combat gender bias in syllabi and curriculum.

It is required from the schools to be conscious of and put their best in trying to create fair and equitable environment where both girls and boys are given equal opportunities to perform and are not denied quality education on the basis of their sex, caste, class, or ethnicity. This type of an environment helps in identifying students as learners and enhances their potential as the learning happen according to the child's need, interest and level.

National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education (2006) advises that "Work on gender sensitization and awareness building has acquired certain complacency, given that it circles around issues of enrolment, the relative absence of females figures or removal of gendered stereotypes in textbooks." Obviously, the steps taken so far have proved to be inadequate and there is a dire need address these concerns with greater depth. It is suggested that in order to move forward "serious inquiry into curricula, content, the gendered construction of knowledge, as well as a more critical and pro-active approach to issues of gender" is necessary. It is needed that gender has to be recognized as a cross-cutting issue and a critical marker of transformation; it must become an important organizing principle of the national and state curricular framework as well as every aspect of the actual and hidden curricula.

Gender bias in education is an insidious problem that causes very few people to stand up and take notice. The victims of this discrimination have been conditioned through years of schooling to be silent and passive, and are thus unwilling to stand up and make noise about the unfair treatment they are receiving. Sadker (1994) notices that "Over the course of years the uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, attention, and talent, with boys getting the lion's share, takes its toll on girls." Teachers are generally unaware of their own biased teaching behaviors because they are simply teaching how they were taught and the subtle gender inequities found in teaching materials are often overlooked. Girls and boys today are receiving separate and unequal educations due to the gender socialization that takes place in our schools and

due to the sexist hidden curriculum students are faced with every day. Unless teachers are made aware of the gender-role socialization and the biased messages they are unintentionally imparting to students every day, and until teachers are provided with the methods and resources necessary to eliminate gender-bias in their classrooms, girls will continue to receive an inequitable education.

Apart from the above, gender discrimination being a social construct, teachers import it from the social milieu they hail from and through their classroom discourse, they, consciously or unconsciously, keep spreading this venom which ultimately closes all the doors of openness. Moreover the gender discourse on media especially the portrayal of women-as-a-victim somehow or the other force us to adopt protective measures in order to avoid repetitions to this instead of evolving mechanisms that may put women on brave front demanding their rights, justice, to stand out along with their male counterparts. Hence, it is the need of hour that Government adopts a holistic approach to purge the society of seemingly philanthropic but biased attitude against women that is probably one of the reasons why we are still projecting them as soft species. The fact is it is the classroom interaction that finally sets the stage which later determines what role different actors have to play in the world outside and hence efforts should be made to clear all kinds of gender discriminations from the root so that whatever foils and foibles that we witness may be uprooted and the initiatives being taken at the periphery should not go awaste.

Amanda Chapman suggests that the departments of education should provide mandatory gender-equity resource modules to in-service as well as pre-service teachers, and gender discrimination needs to be addressed with all teacher educators. Educators need to be made aware of the discrimination they are reinforcing in their students through socialization messages, inequitable division of special education services, sexist texts and materials, and unbalanced time and types of attention spent on boys and girls in the classroom. Sadker (1994) rightly points out that "Until educational sexism is eradicated, more than half our children will be shortchanged and their gifts lost to society."

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