

Gender Issues in School and Classroom Practice: a Case Study of Pondicherry

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Abstract

Increasing concern has been expressed about the role of the formal education system in reproducing gender differences and inequalities. Research studies indicate that issues that impact girls' education include discrimination against girls in classrooms, interaction between boys and girls, effect of gender on education and other submerged hidden curriculum. The present paper focuses on gender issues prevailing in the school settings in Pondicherry (Puducherry). The analysis shows how classroom practices, teacher attitudes and classroom structure disaggregate boys and girls. It also put forward few suggestions for a gender sensitive education.

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Researchers (Longwe, 1998, Kimmel, 2000, Sadkar, 1994, etc.) suggest that schools reflect practices in societies, gender bias and problems are socially and culturally constructed. Cultural and societal practices affect

children in schools, especially the way they look at their peers of the opposite sex. Cultural beliefs and societal structures play major roles in how children are raised and how they differentiate between the powers given to men versus those allocated to women.

Increasing concern has been expressed about the role of the formal education system in reproducing gender differences and inequalities particularly since the early 1970s. The

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present paper focuses on gender issues prevailing in the school settings in Pondicherry (Puducherry).

The Union Territory of Pondicherry

The Union Territory of Pondicherry (Puducherry) comprises the former French establishment Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam, which lie scattered in South India with a total area of 479 sq km. Pondicherry, the capital of the territory, was once the original headquarters of the French in India. It was under the French rule for 138 years and merged with the Indian Union on 1 November 1954. It is bounded on the east by the Bay of Bengal and on the three sides by Tamil Nadu. About 150 kms south of Pondicherry on the East Coast lies Karaikal. Mahe is situated on the Malabar coast on the Western Ghats surrounded by Kerala.

Though trivial in terms of size, Pondicherry has proved its educational potential in the primary education sector. As in the case of 2007-08 in 2008-09 also the Union Territory of Pondicherry has retained its top rank in Educational Development Index (EDI) for primary and upper primary schools in the country (NUEPA, 2010).

The qualitative data on gender bias in institutional practices like gender segregation in classroom and playground, gender bias in teacher-student interactions, gender bias in student-student interactions were collected using focus group discussions with students and

teachers, observations inside and outside the classroom and interview with head teachers, teachers and students from six schools purposively selected for the study. The names of the schools are not mentioned on request.

Among the six schools selected, two were private schools and four were government schools. School A and B were urban private schools. School C was an urban government school. School D was a rural government school in a predominantly *dalit* (lower caste) area. School E was a rural Smart School, a government school equipped with modern infrastructure facilities including computer and internet facilities. School F was a rural government school.

Gender Bias in Institutional Practices

Gender bias is insidious because it can be almost invisible. But studies point out that the classroom setting reproduces gender inequality. From elementary school through higher education, girl students receive less active instruction, both in the quantity and in the quality of teacher time and attention (Kimmel, 2000). Teachers often discriminate against girls, unaware that they are doing so. Discrimination often arises out of ignorance and deeply ingrained way of thinking related to commonsense assumptions. Though it is difficult to identify the overt and covert forms of gender discrimination, the researcher tried to give extra care and effort to note

invisible and subtle forms of bias in institutional practices. A genuine attempt was made in the present study to analyse the gender bias in classroom practices, particularly teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions.

Gender Segregation in Schools

“During the early nineteenth century, many cities began establishing separate high schools for girls. Most communities built one high school, but designated separate entrances for the sexes. The classes were on separate floors in single-sex areas where girls were taught by women and boys by men”. Wrote Sherry Lyn Owens et al. in “Are girls victims of gender bias in our nation’s schools”, while examining the historical struggle fought by women to gain participation in America’s schools. Matters have not changed much in India even in the 21st century. In all the six schools selected for the study in Pondicherry, there were visible forms of gender segregation inside the classroom and school. In five of the schools boys sat on one side of the classroom and girls sat on the other side. In the remaining one school girls sit in the front row and boys in the back row. Similarly, during school assembly girls and boys are lined up separately. Students remained in the same-sex groups during the breaks and before and after school. Every time students are seated or lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently (Chapman, 2003). Though not covered

under the present study, the researcher found that there are schools in Pondicherry where separate staircases were assigned for boys and girls and schools where boys and girls are punished and fined for ‘speaking’ to each other. Sex segregation both during play and in the classroom polarises the sexes and contributes to female invisibility. Well meaning teachers often think they protect girls by this separation when, in fact, they encourage stereotypical pattern of passivity in girls and aggression in boys (Wellesely College Center for Research on Women 1992; Sadkar and Sadkar, 1984, 1994). Nonetheless, by separating girls from boys we have to question how they are going to deal with each other when they leave the school. The solution may be to change teaching methodologies, encouraging better involvement of both girls and boys, rather than segregating them. (Teixeira, 2008).

Healthy inter-gender socialisation based on mutual understanding are a crucial aspect in gender equality. Teachers and administrators in schools should ensure that girls and boys are comfortable in each other’s company.

Gender Bias in School Practices

Classroom interaction between teachers and students put males in the spot light, and relegate females to the sidelines or to invisibility (Sadkar, 1994). In 1992, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found the females receive less

attention from teachers than males, and this attention is often negative or critical, resulting increased self-doubt about their abilities. Dale Spender (1982) believes that sexism is a bias that is practically impossible to eliminate because it is the foundation of education in our male-dominated society. Alice Christie states that even in a classroom firmly grounded in feminist pedagogy, gender bias was almost impossible to eliminate.

The researcher along with two fellow scholars spent a minimum of three hours for observation in each school where the study was conducted. Along with this, the researcher had conducted purposeful visits and informal interactions with teachers and students in schools which are not included in the study, which contributed further in strengthening the quality of data.

The researcher observed whether boys and girls talk to one another during and after the class hours and also who dominates the physical space of classroom, conversations and discussions during class time and beyond the class hours. Verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the teachers were studied for example whom does the teacher call out more in the class and whether he/she moves around, makes contacts by proximity (to boys or girls) more in the classroom were also observed.

Studies reveal that in the early years of their education, girls are equal to or ahead of their male counterparts on standardised and psychological

assessments. However upon graduation from high school, girls have often fallen behind their male counterparts. In *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, which has become a classic work in the field of gender and education, Sadkar and Sadkar (1994) stated that the self-esteem of elementary girls remained high even though they received less time, less help and fewer challenges from the teachers. However, the constant reinforcement for passivity results in a decline in their independence and self-esteem. Sadkar and Sadkar concluded, as victims of benign neglect, girls are penalised for doing what they should and lose ground as they go through school (Owens, 2003).

Research has shown that in many developing countries, the onset of puberty results in significant changes in school participation for girls (Bayene, 1989, Herz, 1991). Menarche, which is the onset of menstruation and the most dramatic sign of puberty in girls, affects socialisation by girls with family and community and may have a significant impact on their education (Chung, et. al. 2001). Once a girl has attained puberty she has immediately 'acquired' the capacity to reproduce. So her entire life changes – abruptly, her mobility restricted, she is scolded for jumping or running, she becomes periodically 'impure' and 'untouchable' and many other sex role stereotypes snatch away the few privileges she enjoyed as a child. Since the students included in the study are

of pre-puberty age group, it can be concluded that there is no conscious effort to 'protect', 'domesticate', or 'moral police' girls by their parents or teachers.

During interview most of the teachers denied instances of gender discrimination in the classroom. Most of them stated that they did not differentiate between boys and girls in the classroom. They treated both sexes equally and saw them all as students. This approach minimised the researcher's chances for further enquiry. Teachers need to be made aware of their gender-biased tendencies, and the biased messages they unintentionally impart to students every day. Unless teachers are made aware of the gender-role socialisation and of the methods and resources necessary to eliminate gender-bias in their classrooms, girls will continue to receive an inequitable education.

In the course of the observation the researcher found that both boys and girls talk equally loudly during class time in all the schools selected. Since the classroom is segregated, conversations and interactions often happened between same sex. Inter-gender interactions were minimal both during class time and after class hours. Change in space made no difference, same was inside the classroom and outside the classroom. Even the sharing for pencil and erasers occurred in the same sex group. In a classroom, when a boy didn't have a pencil, the teacher asked other boys to

lend one, and when none of them had an extra to lend the teacher enquired the girls and got one for him. In another classroom when a boy was in need of an eraser, he asked other boys around him and when he was not able to get one, he asked the girl sitting in the other row, who had kept her eraser in the desk. These instances show that getting the help of the other sex is the 'last resort' and not the norm.

It is interesting to note that boys dominated the physical space of classroom and playground. As soon as the bell rang all the boys rushed out to the door and ran to the playground and started playing with a rubber ball. The play group was large. Many girls never even moved from the bench when the bell rang. Some of them just sat in the classroom. Some went out in small groups and played in the verandah with stones or simply ran near the classroom, not to the playground. It was also found during play many boys fell down, but resumed playing as if nothing had happened. It is very much visible that boys are active and aggressive during play time, reflecting socialisation patterns that demands aggressiveness from boys. On the other hand girls are socialised towards a feminine ideal. Girls are praised for being neat, quiet and calm, whereas boys are encouraged to be active. The behaviour of boys and girls in the school show the different socialisation models in their upbringing. Moreover, schools accept and also validate ideas about 'boys nature' (masculine identity) and 'girls nature' (feminine

identity), 'positioning' boys and girls in different social spaces. Nevertheless, the acceptance of male indiscipline as 'boy nature' and 'good behaviour' as 'girls nature' has been responsible for unequal schooling, social conditions and opportunities for both sexes, limiting their full achievements during their lives (Teixeira, 2008:388).

Equality in teaching challenges educators to treat all students equally and to recognise and accommodate different learning styles. Consequently, today's teachers must be sensitised about the damage gender inequity can cause not only to students but also to society as a whole. Qualified educators should be able to recognise and correct the patterns of gender inequity. Schools must strive to assist female, as well as male students by providing a broad and thorough education that is gender sensitive. While educators cannot magically erase all gender inequalities or resolve all of the problems created as traditional gender roles disintegrate, they can achieve significant results by making a conscious and concerted effort to not only avoid gender inequities in the classroom, but also by actively encouraging the reverse of such inequities (Davidson, 2002).

While discussing about institutional practices, it have to be emphasised that Pondicherry have many positive factors and indicators that are friendly towards girls' education such as presence of more women teachers, separate toilet facilities for girls, boundary walls for

schools and travelling facilities. In Pondicherry 64.78 per cent of teachers are women. Pondicherry is one among the few states where the percentages of women teachers are above 50 per cent of the total strength of teachers. 88.58 per cent schools of Pondicherry have separate toilet facilities for girls, while the national average is 53.60. Perimeter walls have been found to increase girls' sense of safety and security. 84.25 per cent of schools in Pondicherry have boundary walls while the national average is 51.02. (Source: DISE, 2008-09 Flash Statistics NUEPA, 2010.). Transporting girls to school and back safely, especially where schools are far away from their homes, is a critical policy measure that has received scant attention. "Students Special Buses" of Pondicherry is one among the best practices in this regard. These statistics are encouraging, since the stage is already set for gender sensitive and qualified educators to recognise and correct the patterns of gender inequality through conscious efforts.

These are few suggestions that may be considered for a gender sensitive education.

Gender Sensitisation Training for Teachers

Emphasis must be placed on sensitising people in the education system to the importance of gender issues and on the fact that it is a long and painful process requiring not only learning of new perspectives but also the unlearning of old ones. Teachers

and administrators need to undergo gender sensitive courses in classroom behaviour and interaction with students. Teachers should empower students with critical thinking by considering their attitudes and school textbooks from multiple perspectives and alternative dimensions. For this purpose both female and male teachers have to be trained on these lines.

Eliminating Gender Bias from Textbook and Learning Materials

Studies reveal that reduction in the intensity of gender bias in textbooks would be considered as a useful indicator of gender equity in society, and in order to attain that, textbooks should present positive role models for both men and women which present men and women participating in a variety of roles and activities, including women in leadership and other positive roles with which they are not traditionally identified. Textbooks should portray fair sharing of domestic work among family members regardless of sex. Textbooks should depict realistic portrayal of life where women and men share the same responsibilities. Non-sexist textbook should depict professional and technical equity among men and women. Along with this it is imperative that while preparing gender sensitive material for school textbooks, inputs from gender experts and those who have struggled to bring women's voices and worldview into the academic mainstream to be included.

Impact Study of Gender Bias in Students

It is time to move beyond studies that describe gender bias in school textbooks and gender stereotypical attitude of students and teachers to research that evaluates the level and type of impact of such bias on girls and boys. It is also time to institutionalise the problem by addressing it by paid educators and women's studies professionals rather than activist volunteers and research scholars.

Promoting Common Sports and Physical Education in Schools for both Boys and Girls

Physical education, sports and games have a major role in developing not only sound health but also create a healthy spirit of competition and cooperation and qualities of endurance, hard work and sporting spirit to win and lose with grace. Participation in games and other recreational activities as equals would go a long way in developing a positive self-image among girls. It may be pointed out that there are not any remarkable differences in physical abilities or competencies in children of both sexes. As far as possible, boys and girls should be made to participate in all games and physical exercises together.

A Common Curriculum including Gender, Sexuality, Human Rights and Life Skills Education

A common curriculum for topics that directly affect students' life including

gender, sexuality, human rights, and life skills education which uses participatory teaching approaches should be included from the primary school level itself. Such a curriculum which is region specific and cultural specific should empower both girls and boys with unique tools for making informed decisions across several areas of living such as career and vocational choices, marriage, health, nutrition safety and leadership.

Day Care Centre Attached to Schools

Day care community centres for children under six can relieve girls from looking after their siblings, thereby allowing them to go to school. Along with this, all children, girls and boys in the school can be given training in child care in the centre – so that the stereotyping that children must be cared for only by the females in the family, would go.

Providing Safe Transport Facilities for Students

Lack of safe transport facilities to school continues to be a deciding factor

for girls' education. Transporting girls to school and back safely, especially where schools are far away from their homes, is a critical policy measure that has received scant attention. "Students Special Buses" of Pondicherry is one among the best practices in this regard. Smaller vehicles should also be arranged for children who live in interior residential areas where bus services are not available. Measures also should be taken to prevent bullying and sexual harassment in school buses.

Training in Self Defence for Girls

Boys and girls are often susceptible to psychological and physical violence in different ways and adolescents in particular can find themselves especially vulnerable to violations of their safety. Along with making sure that children are secure inside and outside schools, self defence taught from an early stage for all children particularly girls will build confidence in them.

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