

# Engendering Gender in School Curriculum

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to study the nature of hidden curriculum with specific reference to gender-related issues in primary schools. It also talks about the consequences of all the implicit messages and values embedded in school culture on students' understanding of gender. The data in this regard have been collected using participant and non-participant observation of the activities assigned to students. For this purpose the students were observed in classrooms and the playground. It was found that girls were more focussed towards household chores and liked to play in all-girl groups only, whereas the boys were inclined towards the tasks that demands physical strength and valued individuality. It was also found that the teacher's cultural expectations also influence such gendered behaviour of students in schools.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many of the educational thinkers and philosophers believe that school is an extension of the society. Just as there are a number of factors affecting and controlling the functioning of the society, similarly there may be a number of hidden factors which influence the pedagogic practices in schools. So, it would be interesting

to know how the teachers, school practices and curricula influence gendered behaviour and stereotype among students.

The concept of curriculum is as dynamic as the changes that occur in the society. It can be taken as the course of study in an educational set-up that is composed of the organisational methods along with pedagogic skills for communicating

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the course content to the students. A curriculum is not merely a listing of the subjects to be taught, rather it reflects the overall learning experiences of students in the educational process. Dewey (1902) stated that educational process is nothing but 'reconstruction and reorganization of experience'.

The educational system of every society is not unconcerned with implicit and explicit transfer of norms and its various approaches towards the learner. While explaining hidden curriculum Jackson (1968), stated that 'classrooms are special places... The things that make schools different from other places are not only the paraphernalia of learning and teaching and the educational content of the dialogues that take place there... There are other features, much less obvious though equally omnipresent, that help to make up "the facts of life" as it were, to which students must adapt'. Students spend the most influential period of their life in schools. The experiences they get inside the school premises affects their life and the effectiveness of these experiences is much more than the direct educational endeavour. Often referred to as 'by product of schooling' (Apple 1995), this hidden curriculum consists of all those implicit messages in the social environment which are unformulated, but are felt by everybody. Students learn many unintended messages deeply rooted in the school culture. The teacher is a role model for most

of them. So, they learn from their teacher's behaviour also.

Clarricoates (1978), talked about the hidden curriculum in primary schools on the basis of sex discrimination. The article (Dinosaurs in the Classroom) discussed the difference in the behaviour between boys and girls inside classrooms, with male students requiring more constant disciplinary censure from the teachers than female students, who are easy to keep under control. It further states that student's sex is an important variable in determining the teacher's behaviour towards them. Even if a girl student is excellent in studies and other co-curricular activities, she will be always considered as 'soft' and 'fragile' as compared to her opposite sex.

Gender socialisation is a process of learning where pupils are told to behave and articulate gender-specific norms. The teacher encouraged girls to remain quiet while boys were encouraged to be outspoken.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

A sample size of 80 students was taken—40 students each from Classes IV and V. The sample was selected by using purposive sampling technique. The students' class teachers were also interviewed. The students were observed in classrooms and the playground while doing routine activities along with the activities assigned by the researcher. The collected data was analysed by using thematic analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected was analysed qualitatively. Some major findings are classified as follows.

### In the Classroom

The sitting arrangement in the classroom being observed was not shared between boys and girls. The teacher made them sit on separate benches, and in separate rows. On several occasions, punishment was given to those who did not follow this arrangement. According to the teacher, this was the only way to keep boys and girls under 'control'. Many a times the girls were praised for being calm and quiet while the boys were encouraged to act or behave as per their choice.

One of the commonly found practices inside the classrooms was that the teacher always asked the girls to clean the classroom on those days when the regular sweeper was not on duty. During one of the observations, the teacher instructed three-four girls of the class to sweep the room as it was very dirty. When the researcher asked her why every time the girls were called for this work, she replied. '*Ghar sametne ka kaam to ladkiyan hi theek se kar sakti hain, aur vaise bhi aage ja kar inhe yahi to karna hai. Chahe kitna bhi padh likh le, ya naukri karen, ghar to sambhalna hi padega*'. (Only girls/females can do the household chores efficiently. No matter how much education they take or get employed, ultimately they will have

to manage the chores at home). On the other hand, when the researcher asked why the boys were always sent outside the school building to bring things, the teacher replied, '*Ladkiyon ko to baahar samaan lane bhej nahi sakte. Agar kahin gir gayi ya kuch aur ho gaya to mushkil ho jayegi, ye to ladko ka kaam hai, ye hi theek se kar sakte hain*'. (We cannot send the girls outside school. If some unpleasant incidents happen, then it would be problematic for us. Otherwise also, boys can do this kind of work effortlessly). The researcher observed that while sitting in the same classroom and reading the same textbook, with a teacher who was common to both the students (boys and girls), they received totally different education. The researcher also observed such differentiation between boys and girls while collecting data in a primary school.

### In the Playground

It was also observed that both the boys and girls had their own separate groups in playgrounds too—while the boys played cricket or *gilli-danda*, the girls were busy talking to each other in a corner. After sometime, they started playing *stapu* among themselves. When the researcher questioned them, the girls said that their class teacher had strictly told them not to play or make any group with the boys as they could hurt or push them while playing. Moreover, clear instructions were given to the boys and girls that they

should play their 'own' games only. The teachers' cultural expectations guided the behaviour of the students. It could be visibly observed that gender socialisation had affected the personality of children in such a manner that they started to think it was not 'wise' and 'acceptable' to form groups with the opposite sex.

### **Outside the Classroom**

Such phenomena are not limited to the classroom alone, as gendered behaviour was also observed when the teacher instructed her class to make separate rows at the water taps. The boys were strictly instructed not to push the girls and let them fill their water bottles first. The incharge of the school justified this situation by saying that '*ladkiyon ko water bottle pehle bharna dete hain, kyonki itni tez dhoop mein agar inhe chakker aa gaya to problem ho jayegi, vaise bhi ye itni kamzor si to hoti hi hain. Ladko ka kya hai, inhe to poora din dhoop mein khade rakho, sah lenge, yeh to hote hi majboot hain*'. (We send the girls to fill the water bottles before boys. Since girls are very delicate so they may faint in the scorching heat and it may create a problem. On the other hand, as boys are physically strong, they can stand under the sun also.) So, the task and responsibility being assigned to boys cast them as physically strong and tough whereas girls are always seen as soft or '*naazuk*'. The social myths prevailing in the society do influence the teachers' belief about what girls and boys are like.

### **Influence of the Family and Peers**

In one of the interactions with the students, the researcher asked them to close their eyes and think of any role and then, they would have to enact the same. Most of the girls enacted a teacher, mother or elder sister, whereas the boys preferred the role of a father, elder brother or doctor. Enactment of these roles is a part of their socialisation process and its continuity can be seen in the peers, family and school as well. Students perceive what they observe and what they are being taught. During a discussion, one of the girls said that cooking food or washing clothes and utensils is a 'girlie job' as she has never seen her father, brother or any male relative do 'this'. This stereotype got reinforced when the class teacher did the same by asking her to wash the tea cups. In a way, knowingly or unknowingly the school practices played a crucial role in making a strong impact on the young minds.

So, girls generally have a mindset that they are meant for doing household chores only; on the other hand, boys considered themselves to be strong and well-built. Another activity was done with students in which they were asked to think what would happen if one day they woke up and found themselves to have turned into an opposite gender? To this, one girl immediately replied, '*Agar mai ladka hoti to ghar jaate hi sabse pahle khelne chali jaati kyonki ladko ko koi kisi bhi time khelne se nahi rokta. Abhi*

*to ghar jaate hi mujhe mummy ki help karni hoti hai*'. (If I were a boy, I would have gone to play immediately after reaching home, as nobody stops the boys to play any time of the day. But, as a girl, I have to help my mother in the household chores). So visibly some tasks are still aimed at specific gender group. During the discussion, one boy said *"Agar mail adki hota to apni friends se bahut saari btein karta aur make up bhi lagata."* (If I were a girl, I would have talked a lot with my friends and applied make up also). This boy might have heard that girls are talkative and they use makeup to look good. Moreover, in school premises, whenever the teacher found boys talking to each other, she always pointed them out and shouted, *'Kya ladkiyon ki tarah saara din bolte rehte ho, tumhe bhi ladkiyon ki aadat pad gayi hai'*. (You talk like girls the whole day, this is girlish behaviour). This kind of a statement made the students think that talking with friends is girlish behaviour and boys should not talk endlessly among themselves. To be 'girl-like' is not an accepted norm for boys in the society, and the school communicated these messages to students, covertly.

### **CONCLUSION**

The school, as an institution reinforces larger cultural messages and sometimes, such messages are so covertly transmitted in the classrooms that student accept that in one particular direction only.

Since the curriculum is a sum total of all the experiences the child gains in school, he/she not only learns the prescribed text but also learns certain values, beliefs, norms, along with various hidden messages. Many a times, the teacher conveys these messages in the class in an overt or covert form. Somewhere, it becomes an unstated agenda that decides the nature of discipline, the notion of authority and whose order has to be followed in the school. Students observe and internalise these notions as they perceive them. So, teachers need to be more sensitive while dealing with issues like gender socialisation. The organisation of the school also influences the learning of the student. So, the whole functioning of the institution should be in a democratic manner and there should be no differentiation on the basis of gender among boys and girls, as it may affect their interaction with other people from the society as well. The teacher must adopt those classroom practices that can give both boys and girls an equal platform for exploring their potential. Through these practices, a sense of self-confidence should be built among learners. Gender is an important element of curriculum so there should be no gender discrimination in an overt or covert form as it may leave a lasting impression on the learners. Moreover, teachers need to be cautious about the pedagogical practices being used in classrooms and its impact on students.

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