

Emancipatory Pedagogy Teaching of Gender in an Elementary Teacher Education Programme

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Abstract

This article focuses on the transaction of Gender and Schooling course to final year graduate students of B.El.Ed programme of University of Delhi in achieving knowledge goals—self-awareness, actualisation and change agency by these student-teachers. NCF 2005 and National Education Policy 2020 emphasise the need to address gender-related issues in our schools and in the society at large. Gender relations are a lens to study inequity between women and men in the society. These are essentially relations of power in which women have far less substantive power in relation to men. These relations manifest in explicit and implicit ways. The student-teachers study the Gender and Schooling course in their final year for theoretical understanding as well as critical examination and application during their school internship in the same year, operationalising what NCFTE calls the linking of book-view to field-view. The gender course in the B.El.Ed. programme acts as a discursive field of knowledge, empowerment and action.

INTRODUCTION

Gender relations are a lens to study gender inequality in society. These are essentially relations of power which manifest in explicit and implicit ways. Statistical indicators like sex ratio, health and nutrition measures, crimes against women, ownership

of property, occupancy in jobs, employment, authority positions, political positions, etc., explicitly reveal the unmistakable nature of gender inequality in society. Implicit measures are entrenched in power relations and hierarchies which are complex to quantify, being situated

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in the realms of custom, religion, culture, household dimensions, etc. Such inequalities in turn reinforce unequal power relations, unequal decision-making and unequal control over resources, resulting in lower status of women. These indicators also serve as tools for government policy to identify inequalities and redress them towards the goal of equality and equity.

Issues of gender being central to our lives, also need to be examined within the spaces of learning. The National Curriculum Framework Position Paper on ‘Gender Issues in Education’ states that “knowledge, teaching and learning should be linked with the objective of allowing gendered inquiry and not only ‘fixing it’ in conventional designs. It needs to provide avenues to educate students to think analytically, contest with relations of power, and envisage versions of an inclusive world open to dialogue and dissent” (2006:38). In the same vein, the recent National Education Policy, 2020 emphasises the critical role of education in attaining social justice and equality (2020:24). Thus, gender discourse is now gaining attention in academic discourses as well as professional programmes. Teachers are change-makers and their engagement with such issues creates a positive impact on the lives of future generations, also liberating them in this process to think discursively and critically about their own situations in society as conscientious citizens.

Significantly, the National Curriculum Framework of Teacher Education (NCFTE) 2009 also states that engagement with gender need not be limited to the book view focusing on theories but need to get extended to the field view dealing with practical social realities.

In this backdrop, this paper seeks to build an analytical narrative about the change-experiences of the student-teachers through a course that acts as a ‘discourse’ on gender in helping them understand their life-situations better and gain agency to create possibilities of change. Intensive dialogue on student-teachers’ perceptions, beliefs and ideas can pave the way for connecting gender theories to their personal experiences.

‘GENDER AND SCHOOLING’ IN B.EL.ED. PROGRAMME

The Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) is a four-year professional graduate programme of teacher education introduced by University of Delhi in the year 1994, now offered in eight women’s colleges. In the B.El. Ed. programme, the first year social science papers — like Contemporary India and Core Social Sciences also have space to discuss and debate gender issues. However, in the final year, a compulsory paper of ‘Gender and Schooling’ is offered to students with the objective of firstly “critically examining gender inequities in society through feminist theoretical frameworks”, and secondly “to

observe and analyse manifestation of gender inequities in the schooling process besides developing strategies for intervention". The present paper examines the significance of the 'Gender and Schooling' course in the teacher education programme in enabling the teacher trainees to become empowered in order to act as such agents of change. In this paper, the students of this programme are henceforth referred to as 'student-teachers' to recognise their conscious self-orientation as teachers in the making. This paper draws from the author's experience and engagement over several years with the student-teachers while teaching the 'Gender and Schooling' course to them.

METHODOLOGY

Action Research

Action research, referred to as 'practice changing practice', is a mechanism for change and progress that alters the 'practitioner's practice, their comprehension of that practice and the situation in which they practice'. It is both a 'democratic and democratising process' (Cohen, Manqion and Morrison, 2018: 440–41). It can be used in any situation where a problem concerned with people, tasks and procedures needs to be addressed and immediate remedies sought. Thus, a problem is posed and a solution arrived at. This method has the potential to germinate new ideas, empower

individuals as well as groups and also motivate people towards reflective practice. In fact, Carr and Kemmis (1986) term it as 'self-reflective inquiry' which is pursued to improve people's understanding of situations and ensure enhanced 'social justice for them'. Similarly, Grundy states that action research seeks to improve the 'social conditions of existence'. It is geared to modify both individuals and institutions, societies and cultures to which they belong. Action research includes components of diagnosis, action as well as reflection where the researcher attempts to conduct research on herself basically (Ibid: 442).

This paper uses action research methodology on a study sample comprising 42 final year students (all women) of 2019–20 batch of B.El.Ed. programme who are participants in this course. It is pertinent to mention that this research idea has taken shape while transacting the course with their previous batches by means of observation and discussions held. The instant paper, however, for the purpose of specificity, contains the qualitative data obtained from the study sample of 42 student-teachers through observation and discussion methods using action research methodology. Although the author's experiences with previous batches of student-teachers are similar, this present paper would discuss the responses of the aforementioned sample. The names of the

student-teachers have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.

Research Questions

In a way, the elements of action research are embedded in the curriculum and pedagogy of the ‘Gender and Schooling’ course itself. However, employing action research, the data has been collected through classroom-based intervention strategies to address certain questions: How to enable students to become critical thinkers and emerge as instruments of empowerment and emancipation? What role can a course like ‘Gender and Schooling’ play in turning this aspect into reality? What measures can we adopt to respond to this system? According to Bell Hooks, schools are important in reinforcing certain feminist values. This vision can become a possibility only when society gets intertwined with theory, and teaching with learning thus contributing to essentially “response-able” forms of knowledge and its practices (Revelles-Benavente and Ramos, 2017).

In this perspective, this paper attempts to explore novel feminist approaches thereby advancing a horizontal perspective on teaching where both students and teachers are partners in creation of knowledge and operate in a decentralised environment. The central questions therefore are: How to conceive of gender pedagogy? In what way can feminist philosophy of ‘teaching with responsibility’ emerge? As co-

learners in knowledge production and dissemination, how do we probe systems of knowledge that are both racial and gendered in nature (Revelles-Benavente and Ramos, 2017:2–3). How far can gender and women be discussed by focusing on pedagogical, theoretical and political aspects of teaching and learning? As teacher educators, how do we enable gender pedagogies to question gender biases, stereotypes and prejudices prevailing in our society is an objective of exploration for this paper.

Finally, the data gathered in this study are put to critical analysis to figure out how emancipatory pedagogies can emerge, thereby creating liberating systems of educational practice. It is to indicate to what extent feminist classrooms are possible especially where conflict is used as a means to learn, unlearn and relearn. It is also to see how spaces can be created to question experiences. Epistemologies that reinforce gendered notions need questioning and this can happen when students realise such politics of hegemony that functions to create hierarchies in our society.

THE BOOK VIEW

Academic Theories and Lived Experiences

Although girlhood is a subset of childhood, yet it gets designed in a way to counter the free and emancipated spirit that childhood embodies. The family and the community both socialise a girl in expected ways

of emphasised femininity. Next, education through the school system structure her personality to create an educated citizen, without countering such socialisation into a subordinate gender identity. All these gendered dimensions reflect in the growing up of girls and finally attaining womanhood. Kumar, in his book *Choori Bazar Mein Ladki* (meaning A Girl in the Bangle Market) which is a significant contribution to the field of women's studies, uses the trope of a bangle market to underscore this transition to a gendered identity. He shows the bangle shop as suggestive of the hegemonic masculine world that controls and manipulates a girl's life at different stages. A girl entering a bangle shop learns to conduct and present herself according to the needs of the market and society, dressing herself in a manner which conforms to societal ideals of beauty, and gains admiration, thereby creating or reinforcing the feminine ideal (2013:73).

However, in the educational realm, the concepts of gender and sexuality are not dwelt upon and pushed away in order to avoid 'embarrassment'. A closer look at the student-teachers' life experiences as observed during this present study suggests that the way they think about gender is integral to forming an understanding of relations of power as exist in our society.

In teacher education programmes, discussion on gender issues can be crucial in order to develop sensitivity

and empathy amongst learners. The B.El.Ed. programme offers 'Gender and Schooling' as a compulsory half paper to the final year student-teachers while they also undergo internship training in select teaching schools. These student-teachers have already read about gender in various papers in the previous years and the focus in the final year is to start with an in-depth analysis of one's situation *vis-a-vis* the wider world outside.

At the beginning of this course, student-teachers are helped to decode what they think or mean by 'sex', 'gender', 'masculinity', 'sexuality', and 'feminism', etc., how they interpret these and what inferences they draw from their own lives. Moving ahead, the purpose is to enable them to relate their personal experiences with theories they have studied. The move is clearly to make a shift from the personal to the academic realms. These ideas and concepts need to be revisited as part of an academic practice and dimension of daily lives.

Through Focused Group Discussions, critical reflection of personal and social realities, fact and interpretation method and media deconstruction method, the course 'Gender and Schooling' tries to comprehend students' localised knowledge and its situatedness in the wider global milieu. How do learners interpret concepts of 'sex', 'gender', 'sexuality', 'masculinity', 'patriarchy', 'feminism', to name a few, and identify with them. Also, it

aims to examine how wonder-tale narratives focus on particular gender roles and expectations. The role of media in extrapolating these ideas in culturally-specific terms is also examined.

It is observed that feminism in general is read quite differently by the student-teachers. The initial discussion on feminism brought out their reluctance in identifying themselves as ‘feminists’ since they thought it pulled them away from men altogether. A student-teacher, Reema, stated that she was “wary of using the label ‘feminist’ because they are considered to be anti-men” while Anu observed that “such women are isolated by society”. Thus, they were cautious of this term and its usage. However, gradual acquaintance with the concept and the follow-up discussions helped them understand that feminism is a ‘way of life’ rather than being just a concept. After discussing various strains of feminisms like liberal, radical and socialist, among others, students started exploring as to which feminist theory should be adopted, with what strategy, and why. They then shared their understanding of coeducational and single-sex girls’ schools and reasons for their preference for one of those. Liberal feminism appealed to most of the students. They found its strategies were much possible. Some others preferred radical feminism since it challenged the patriarchal system and ideology. This turned out to be the beginning of the debate

as to which feminism can actually alter or modify the current situation of subordination and exclusion of women. It was observed that personal situation and experiences had a big role to play in their choice of the academic strand.

The student-teachers also undertook content analysis of textbooks that they were teaching as part of the school internship programme. Now, they began to be able to critically look at the textbooks using a gender lens. They were able to add these subtle cues to the existing schemas to challenge gender stereotyping that largely prevailed.

PERSONAL REALMS

Negotiating Restrictions

Control over sexuality seemed quite obvious to the student-teachers and they realised what was expected from them was compliance and subservience. A student-teacher Gauri remarked how her parents have always tried to be protective and in the process denied her any outings to her friends’ places. She was not even allowed to go to her own terrace for the fear of being ‘seen by boys’. However, she said she had now been able to negotiate outings to places outside Delhi with friends (Classroom Discussions). Many student-teachers shared that their mobility remained restricted by and large and they had started gradually negotiating with their families to allow them access to spaces of their choice.

A student-teacher Meera shared a similar experience that her younger brother was seen as her guardian or custodian (*"I was seen as a 'liability' and my younger brother would escort me whenever I travelled from one place to another."*) Her parents were keen to get her married and also kept a close vigil on her to check any 'transgressions'. She was, however, keen to gain higher education and worked very hard to secure highest marks so that her parents could not cite low marks as an excuse to deny her further education (Focused Group Discussions). This is just one indication of the struggles and pressures a girl has to deal with within the household.

Visibility and Invisibility

A student-teacher Saroj who belonged to Haryana shared that her *parda* (veil) was an *"everyday reality and women of the household are expected to abide by such customary practices"*. A remarkable finding came out in her narration that earlier in her family, photographs of women were taken with *parda* over their faces, thus making it difficult to distinguish the identities of the persons (Classroom Discussions). Visibility allots power while invisibility makes women powerless and vulnerable. Every student-teacher seemed to agree that power vests in men who take the major decisions of the family. Girls felt that as they grew up they were gradually pushed to less-visible or invisible spaces while the boys

started occupying the more-visible or visible spaces. Between the parents, the mother is relegated to the realm of less-visibility, reducing her power and decision-making capabilities. The girls felt empathetic towards their mothers who were assigned household chores (Focused Group Discussions).

Striving for Economic Agency

In their struggle to study, gain education and become financially independent, the student-teachers have sought to carve out a space for themselves. A student-teacher, Hema, described that after finishing school she tried to be self-dependent by giving tuitions to fund her own education as well as to contribute to family finances. She was happy that she was able to buy a costly mobile phone of her choice from her own savings which also upscaled her status within her family. However, the burden of expectations on her started increasing and her family wanted her to buy a laptop for her brother. She found herself under pressure and sometimes clueless as to how to deal with such situations. Yet, girls did realise their potential and were also eager to fulfil their responsibilities towards their families. A student-teacher, Beena, shared that her father was dependent on his elder brother (her *Tau*), a situation not to their liking and that she was their only hope to be able to earn and support the family finances. She said, *"I want to support my parents and look after them after graduating*

in B.El.Ed. and getting a teaching job and thus wanted to be the ‘son of the house’ (Classroom Discussions).

Most student-teachers are trying to carve out some space for themselves within their families while trying to understand patriarchal systems and operation of gender inequities in society. A student-teacher, Deepa, whose parents had gone ahead to have three daughters in their wish to beget a son narrated that “*she and her sisters were initially looked upon as liabilities by their extended family*”. The absence of a son is always questioned by society and the family is seen as incomplete. Her parents wondered how they would live after their daughters were married off. She, however, assured them that she was keen to be with them somehow and extend them all possible support.

THE FIELD VIEW: INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

Dealing with Stereotypes and Prejudices

During the school internship programme, student-teachers could assess how the approaches adopted by male teachers differed from those of female teachers. As teacher-interns their status remains ill-defined and inconsistent and they were not assigned due status either by the students or by regular teachers. In some schools, the boys of senior classes would try to enter their classes or pass comments which they disliked and tried to keep a check upon. In a particular case, a student-

teacher was referred to as ‘*Cheh kamre wali*’ (occupant of the room number six) because she was teaching the sixth class. She expressed her discomfort to the headmistress of the school and also to the male class teacher. Still this practice continued much to her discomfort until she sternly asserted her authority. Although it may be said that their temporariness as teacher-interns also has to do with such lack of status, one wonders if male teacher-interns would also have to face such demeaning behaviour. Through such situations, student-teachers have learnt to identify demeaning, sexualised comments and gestures and have started questioning those because of the learning that gender equality needs to be emphasised in all spheres.

A common question that each batch of student-teachers raise is why the B.El.Ed. programme is limited only to girls’ colleges. Perhaps co-educational spaces also can be useful in socialising boys to become conscientious of gender issues. They feel that issues central to ‘masculinity’ need more effective addressing in spaces where male socialisation process could be brought under close scrutiny.

Another challenge which the student-teachers faced is with regard to the usage of abusive terms and expressions by students, both girls and boys. Girls told them that they use it upon seeing the boys use it, meaning thereby that these were perceived to be masculine and

powerful. The student-teachers kept checking their students and reinforce the practice of discarding such phrases.

In an internship school, a regular teacher wanted to ascertain the community background of a student-teacher who belonged to a scheduled tribe. She felt distressed and teacher educators had to intervene with the school to address this matter. It was then learnt that the regular teacher wanted to recommend her to somebody she knew for a matrimonial alliance. The outlook of educated persons towards women at professional work is also coloured by patriarchal lens.

In a particular incident, when some students of a school were taken out on a picnic to a nearby park, a student-teacher Reema also joined. While she was lying down feeling unwell, a male teacher asked her to get up and be active. Reema replied that she was 'down' and feeling quite unwell. Feeling embarrassed, the male teacher left. However, later on, he was heard stating that he also had mother, wife and sisters at home and was well aware of the trials and tribulations of women, however "*women should not talk about their menstruation issues uninhibitedly*". This matter was elaborately discussed in the 'Gender and Schooling' class and viewpoints were shared as to how does one draw boundaries between personal and professional spheres and also create her own special space

to manage life-situations which are exclusive to women.

Confronting Deviant Male Behaviour

Mobile phones and internet have become a part of everyone's life now. Some student-teachers narrated that they came to know that certain students in their classes watched pornographic contents on their phones. This became obvious when some students were found showing their phones to one another. Pornographic images, films and pictures are part of a discourse which has its own signs and meanings wherein it is visually and contextually suggested that women are to be 'dominated'. It is like a strategy of domination and violence which is used to degrade and humiliate women and is surely a 'crime against humanity'. The second aspect is that it is used as a 'warning' to create fear— as a result of which women are expected to stay in tandem with the system (Wittig, 1978: 344). Mackinnon similarly states that media now-a-days is a medium through which sexuality is socially constructed—women get objectified as 'things' for sexual use. Those who consume it then create a desire for women to not only possess them but also dehumanise them (Mackinnon, 1989). For student-teachers, it came as a big challenge to deal with such incidents due to their own identities of being women. They narrated that they experienced anxiety and humiliation internally

while trying to discipline the deviant male students without possessing the requisite 'male' authority.

Student-teachers as Change Agents

What is projected in this paper is a miniscule slice of experiences shared by the student-teachers. While they acted as change agents for themselves, within personal spheres, and in the work sphere too, they began acting as change agents for their students too, as described in the instances in aforesaid sections. They acted sensitively towards their students and tried to cater to girl students particularly. They motivated them to be vocal in expressing their ideas and opinions.

The student-teachers tried to encourage children to participate in cross-gender interaction and learn about different perspectives not usually available. They made small groups to facilitate discussion on disciplinary themes. When girls in their classes appeared reticent and shy, and not so keen to share their observation in classroom transactions, they made special efforts to involve them in teaching-learning practices. They assigned leadership roles to girls in games and activities to enhance their self-confidence. In certain situations, when they saw girls absenting themselves from school processes, they ensured their attendance that led to not only their access but also success, to an extent. They also attempted to sensitise the

boys to not bully girls and treat them as equals.

Besides such initiatives, at times, the student-teachers felt desperate to introduce many changes which the school system was mostly reluctant to introduce. However, many such efforts continue both officially and unofficially to address concerns of gender equity. In their limited time and roles, the student-teachers still showed the way towards more egalitarian school and society. Many issues of gender and sexuality surfaced on the school premises but these got pushed aside or ignored in various ways in those settings. This caused discomfort to student-teachers who tried to deal with these issues within their own capacities and also brought these along to the 'Gender and Schooling' class for discussion and deliberation.

CONCLUSION

Towards an Emancipatory Pedagogy

A course like 'Gender and Schooling' goes a long way in nurturing the possibility of understanding differences and bring about change through self-consciousness and informed action. It ensures a secure space for expression, voicing and resolution of conflicts to strive for achieving gender equality. Education system should make room for emancipatory pedagogy that brings in liberating experiences in a process of self-reflective enquiry. It is only

through such education that change can occur, and therefore, it must allow space for reflection, deliberation and action to address issues central to the lives of women. As the ancient Indian puranic *shloka* (*Shri Vishnu Purana*, 1-19-41, ancient Indian philosophical text) states, the goal of education and acquirement of knowledge is emancipation of the self and liberation of the soul.

तत्कर्म यन्नबन्धाय सा विद्या या विमुक्तये ।
आयासायापरं कर्म विद्यञ्ज्या शिल्पनैपुणम् ॥

—श्री विष्णुपुराण ॥१-१९-४१॥

Tatkarma yanna bandhāya
sā vidyā yā vimuktaye |
āyāsāyāparam karma vidya'nyā
śilpanaipunam ||

—*Shri Viśnu Purāna* || 1-19-41 ||

{That is action which does not lead to bondage; That is knowledge which liberates.

All other action is mere effort; Any other knowledge is merely another skill in craft.}

The course 'Gender and Schooling' embodies this spirit in theory and action to make the student-teachers conscious selves who as change-agents act to bring about change in their immediate environments and also in their encountered worlds. The student-teachers who were of the opinion that often they tended to naturalise the patriarchal system, state that through the 'Gender and Schooling' course they get a window to think, reflect and act.

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