

Rethinking Teaching-Learning Process¹ : Classroom as a Platform for Gender Sensitization

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Paper No. : 105

Received : 17 June, 2014

Accepted : 16 August, 2014

Abstract

The paper is based upon rethinking the teaching learning process in Indian Classrooms and attempts mainstreaming gender concerns not only within the classroom learning but also beyond such boundaries. The collaborative efforts at primary, secondary and higher level education may help in achieving the desired understanding of the power play that exerts pressure on a subject to perform gender as per conventions in a patriarchal setup. The paper reflects upon the various practices prevalent in schools and urges upon rethinking the existing teaching-learning process so as to be inclusive through such creative activities and practices which will not only sensitize students and teachers but will also open up a unique platform for re-socialisation of the parents and thereby mediate the bridging up of generation gap as well.

Keywords: Mainstream, classroom, higher education.

School is a significant agency of socialization for children after family and teachers play a crucial role in their lives. School children see them as their role models and at times follow them blindly. However the structure places teachers in an authoritative position with the power to punish/award low marks to the students. Under the prevailing conditions getting good marks is unfortunately the only motive behind sitting quietly (and speaking only when the teacher desires) in the class and thus there prevails a culture of silence in schools.

The ability to enforce discipline often becomes the marker of a teacher's image in schools. This creates a situation where stereotypical ideas and practices like gender based discrimination and patriarchal ideology are not challenged and are even reinforced. This can be countered only if teaching/ learning process is altered to move beyond the aim of merely 'transfer of knowledge' and becomes committed towards developing a critical consciousness of learners i.e. both students and teachers.

1. The paper was originally developed in a write-up form as an Expert/ Resource Person for the planning meeting for workshop on "Gender Sensitization of Elementary School Teachers" at DEP-SSA, IGNOU, New Delhi.

Classrooms as a site of dialogue between teacher and students

The classroom should be a platform for students to open up freely and share their experiences with their teachers and peers rather than being a site which fills them with fear. It is the sole responsibility of the teachers to make their students feel at ease in the classrooms by encouraging and motivating them. The teaching –learning process is a two way process with both the teacher and the student being the crucial links. Communication is always reciprocal in nature. Classroom should not be a place where all activity is dictated by the teachers rather the teachers should also learn from their students. Discussion based and interactive classes should be introduced by using creative methods for example: discussing newspapers articles, audio-visual material, advertisements etc. Instead of only focusing on completing the syllabus, teachers must emphasize on qualitative learning of students. This includes questioning the prevalent biases in society regarding gender roles, caste and other forms of discrimination.

Sensitizing oneself first and then students

Learning should always begin with one's own self first rather than expecting it from the students. Before sensitizing students, teachers should critically reflect upon their own practices not only in the classrooms but also when they are at home. One's prejudices are reflected in small practices which are as much visible at other places as in the classroom. Willona Sloan in her work 'Gender in the Classrooms' cites Brittany Anderson at Florida State University, who videotaped her own classes in school so as to critically reflect upon her own biases which got manifested in the classrooms unconsciously. It not only helped her in analyzing teaching methodology but also decoded other aspects related to nonverbal actions, gestures, attitude, bullying, socialisation and the classroom environment.

Thus the students should be sensitized towards respecting each other in the classrooms by making them work in groups by giving them group presentations, tutorials etc. Apart from that, parents should also be motivated to be actively engaged in the activities for example: fathers could be asked to participate in a cooking competition or the mothers may be asked to participate in sports competition, breaking the conventional and stereotypical trends of cooking tasks being associated with mothers and sports activities with fathers.

Teachers should also ensure the equal participation of the students in every activity and discussion in the classes. The discriminatory patterns of boys being assigned the tough tasks and the girls the easier ones should be broken by engaging them in similar assignments, projects and presentations.

Apart from ensuring the equal and active participation of students in the classroom, students should also be encouraged to actively participate in all the kinds of cultural activities of the school including music, dance, debate and theatre etc. The teachers and staff should be conscious of the kind of roles and tasks are assigned to students during the organization of such activities, for example: girls should not be told to serve refreshments to the guests as it casts them in a stereotypical image.

Towards becoming a critical and reflective educator

Connecting classroom activity with the lived experience of students and enabling them to develop critical thinking habits is perhaps the most important and significant challenge before the teachers. The classroom must be a democratic place for inculcating such habits. At the same time the type of assignments given must be such which encourage the students to question the dominant ideologies and practices. The students can be given such assignments where their task is to ask questions rather than just looking for answers to a pre-given set of questions. The teacher must act like a collaborator in learning rather than being someone who provides answers to the students. Eliminating fear from the minds of students and encouraging them to voice their opinions is central in achieving this objective. For example, the students may be asked to reflect upon the significant contributions of a housewife towards economy and to think about using the term 'house manager' in place of it. Through this the students can be sensitized how such roles need to be seen in gender-neutral terms. Similarly at times as an assignment the students may be asked to conduct classes and take the teacher's role. This would be significant in creating a bonding between teachers and students.

An associated idea with encouraging a spirit of inquiry in students is of developing '**ownership of learning**'. For example a geography teacher might ask the students to select themselves a particular region in map and prepare a presentation about its culture and unique attributes. If the students have a certain degree of autonomy and choice in

designing their learning, it certainly engages them with what they learn to a higher level as compared to a task which is a purely dictated one.

Creating a gender sensitive environment in the Class

The teachers should be very conscious while addressing the students in the classes. She/ he should consider them as students rather than boys, girls or neuter. Students should not be addressed by their gender, last names or by any other name. As the students would also address their classmates in the same manner as their teacher does. Another important thing to remember is that gender sensitivity is a value which finds its match in humanism. It is about inculcating respect for the ‘other’, recognizing the value of tolerance, developing a consciousness to transcend the dualistic and binary modes of thinking, fighting our tendency as teachers to categorize or label students as ‘bright’ or ‘dull’, ‘tough’ or ‘soft’, ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ etc. Never ever must a teacher categorize a particular behaviour of the students as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. We must also as educators sensitize our students that reality has multiple aspects which cannot be captured in equations or any formulae.

Another important factor in creating a gender sensitive classroom is to develop an ability to design ways of assessment which do not penalise ‘silence’ and take into account the fact that at times it is a result of gender socialisation of girls in our society and has nothing to do with their inherent capabilities. Developing an ability to encourage students in expressing themselves differently and comfortably is crucial for a teacher. All students need to be listened to and equal time needs to be given to each of the students. Assessment techniques and modes (including informal ones such as showering praises) should be such which do not generate any complexes in students. School culture needs to be student-centric rather than being market-centric or exam-centric.

Thus the teacher should make an effort to create a classroom which transcends the barriers of gender, caste and class by encouraging all students to ‘express their agency’. The classrooms should not perpetuate the ‘culture of silences’ amongst students rather it should provide them a platform for making the voyage towards their dreams and where the sky should not be the limit.

Fostering creativity: Moving beyond the walls of school and classrooms

Rather than limiting the learning process within the four walls of classroom and school, teacher should take an initiative to introduce new methods of learning for the students. Students need to be brought out of the repetitive arrangements of classroom based learning which can help in bringing a new perspective in making learning holistic. Having a discussion in natural settings in itself generates new responses. Trips to museums, art galleries and painting exhibitions, historical places, markets different kinds of rural-urban dwellings and theatre may be excellent ways of helping students develop new sensitivities. For example, after a visit the students may be given an assignment to identify and write about gender-insensitive advertisements and sign boards at a marketplace or shopping centre. Moving beyond the concept of a Parent-Teacher meeting which is usually about discussing the performance of a student the teachers may also visit the homes of students (with a group of students) and interact with their family members. Being familiarised with each other’s family environment will generate a spirit of co-operation amongst the students as well as reduce biases and prejudice.

Finally it needs to be stressed that teaching-learning process is not just about classroom and curriculum. It involves a whole range of activities and the school environment forms the core of it. A non-discriminatory and positive school culture is essential for developing sensibilities and sensitivities of students which make them humanistic. Schools and teachers need to see themselves as catalysts of social change responsible for nurturing citizens who will in turn work for creating a gender-just and inclusive society.

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