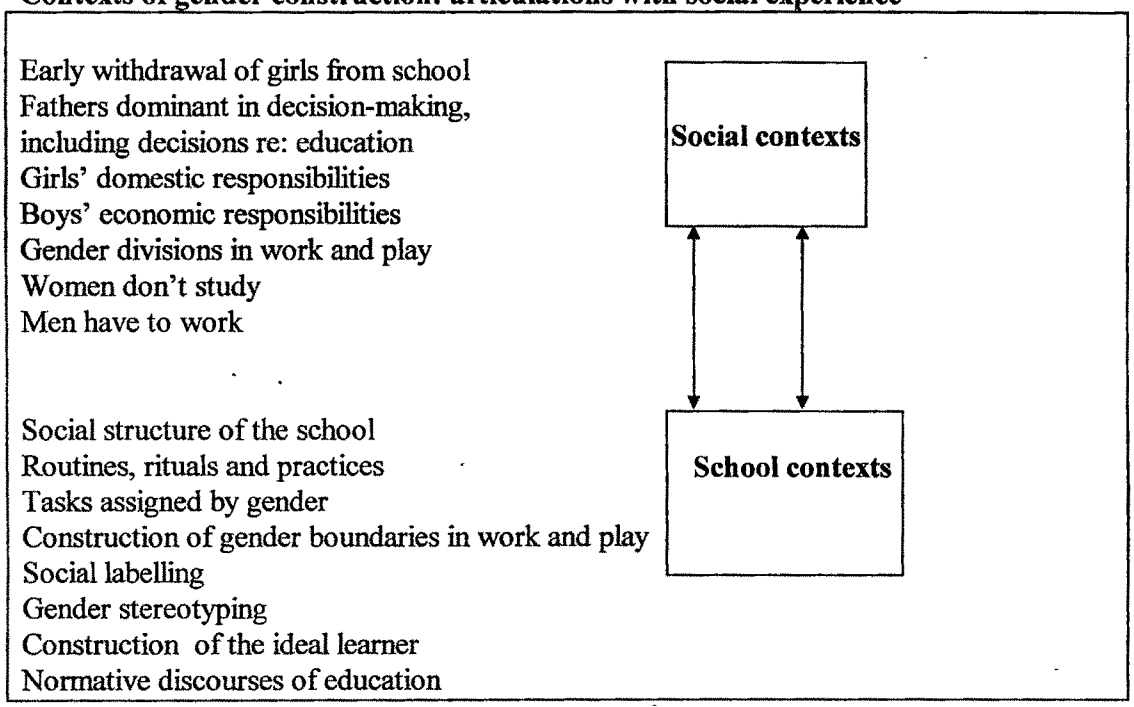
chapter 6 Towards interpreting the hidden curriculum of gender

Learning gender in the home and the school

In Chapters 4 and 5, the contexts of gender construction and the 'meanings' given to these contexts by participants in the classroom situation were discussed. Figure 6.1 presents a schematic representation of the interrelationship between social contexts of gender construction and those experienced in school.

Figure 6.1
Contexts of gender construction: articulations with social experience



6.1 Constructions of gender through the hidden curriculum

As the analysis of data presented in Chapters 4 and 5 indicates, children's social experiences of gender outside and within the school were marked by considerable continuity and convergence in terms of expectations of 'ideal' behaviour. However

contexts of gender construction within the school assume significance because they are based on different foundations of socialisation, partly subsumed under the rubric of what has been referred to here as the 'normative discourse' in education.

There are continuities between primary socialisation into gender roles and practices in the school which influence conceptions of the child's gender identity. An important feature of the relationship between these two contexts is the manner in which children's social knowledge within the institutionalised setting of the school re-configures their knowledge about their place in the larger social world. Although the child enters school with a well-defined sense of gender identity gained from her/his interactions within the contexts of family/community, there is an implicit understanding that the school setting *is* a different, more formal space than home and community. This distinction is continuously highlighted, by, for example, statements made by teachers like 'sit properly, this is not your house.' While exhibiting close parallels, the roles which children are expected to adhere to within the sites of primary socialisation are not strictly homologous to their expected roles in school; rather, normative discourses position these roles differently because of the constructed nature of the curriculum itself.

Two strands of inquiry mark the interpretation of the findings of the present study. Firstly, the actual situated practices within the particular school setting are examined for the ways they position children in terms of gender. Secondly, an examination of the 'deep structure' of curriculum, which precisely underlines its 'hiddenness', necessarily views the specific findings of the present study with respect to the operation of 'official' gender ideologies within both educational discourse and within the patriarchal structures of Indian society.

Gender as ritual performance

As the discussions in Chapters 4 and 5 indicate, notions of femininity and masculinity were constructed through everyday contexts of interaction. School contexts like gender divisions and separation in organisational arrangements (seating, roll-call, etc.) and different tasks for girls and boys reinforced notions of 'difference' among children. In all these everyday practices, children responded on 'cue', rather than being forced to *comply* with rules.

School practices operated within a ritualistic framework, where children participated in an 'enactment' of gender. Children 'learned' their gender positions through participation in these practices, from which they either derived, or lost, relative power and privilege. Their responses to the ritualistic dimension of gender 'rules' in everyday school life – through organisational arrangements, differential task assignation, teachers' expectations of discipline – appeared to be through an internalisation of cues which elicited reactions which were non-verbal, collective and participatory. In this manner, children 'appropriated' these practices in self-presentation (Goffman:1977; McLaren: 1996). Butler (1990) terms such forms of enactment of ideological rules 'performativity'; Thorne (1993) calls this phenomenon the 'choreography of gender' in school. Much like participation in social and cultural rituals, children had a shared understanding of the behaviour expected of them by adults (and peers) in the school setting, and responded in accordance with these expectations. What is important to note is that within the school, gender is 'learned' within a different discourse of power, in a far more ritualistic and formalised manner, than within the home and community.

While acknowledging the nature of learning of group norms, that is, the acceptance and enactment of gender rules by all members of each category, it is also evident from the analysis that individual children responded in their own distinctive ways to the gender 'code' of the school.

Docile femininity and aggressive masculinity

Individualised perceptions appeared to arise because of the nature of the child's social experience outside the school and her/his relative visibility and power in the classroom. These subjective interpretations were turned into objective 'factities'-- such as the collective knowledge that girls are better at studies, or boys are better at Mathematics – through discourse in the classroom around ideals. These ideals come to be 'genderised', taken as 'reality', a process of 'normalisation' of categories through shared experiences of participants in the setting. Subjective interpretations of both children and teachers of ideal norms of gender behaviour defined the field within which gender was normalised. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, analysis was directed precisely towards unravelling the complexities involved in not one, but multiple 'realities' involving the position of children

around their gender. Understanding these processes is, indeed, a key issue in social constructions (Berger and Luckmann:1966). Resistance to the dominant gender code was more apparent in the case of girls, as I have discussed in Chapter 5. This is perhaps because of the harsher regimes of gendering they are subject to.

Analysis of the hidden curriculum shows that gender is 'learned' by children in the school setting in relational ways. Processes of labelling, stereotyping and evaluation continually set up gender in an oppositional manner. Examination of contexts in the school showed that gender and social stereotypes were constructed through the everyday processes signified by children's and teachers' patterns of labelling. There was the gender stereotype of girls as 'talkers', and boys as disruptive. Gendered behaviour was reinforced through differential task assignation, which stressed values of domesticity for girls and 'outside' work for boys. Practices like 'shaming', by making boys sit with girls, to subdue them into silence, heightened the sense of oppositional identity.

Two contradictions in these forms of re-contextualisation are significant. The first of these relates to the construction of girls as 'ideal learners', and the second to the construction of boys as disruptive and violent, but who, nonetheless, would stand to benefit from formal schooling.

Ideal learners

There was a shared understanding that girls –as a category - were 'ideal' learners, because they were good at writing, reading and teaching, and seen as more 'pliable' to teacher's authority. Examination of curricular contexts (Chapter 4, Section 4.7.2) showed that the participation of girls was indeed higher in most pedagogic interactions. I would argue on the basis of analysis of both observation of school contexts and children's narratives that this re-contextualisation of gender within the school setting acted in contradictory ways. These were girls who, if their social experience 'destined' it, would leave schools early and very likely not use the skills learned in school. While in all other aspects, constructions of docile femininity would tend to reinforce gender divisions in roles and responsibilities and therefore perpetuate patriarchal social relations, *the image of the 'ideal learner' bestowed a sense of relative power among girls.* Although functional literacy and numeracy was by

and large all that parents expected from schooling daughters, the experience in school as 'ideal students' would nonetheless remain a strong part of their childhood experience. Studies in various 'third world' societies have shown that women with even a few years of schooling show a marked self-confidence and ability for articulation of needs.[1] The way in which normative discourse positions girls as good learners may provide a partial explanation of these findings.

The normalising of 'feminine' docility and 'masculine' aggression in the classroom was constituted out of a complex interplay of primary socialisation practices and behavioural expectations from girls and boys, as well as the contexts of school interactions, particularly those relating to *dhamaal*, in which these categories were turned into 'objective facts'. The 'expressive order' of the school, through which modes of conduct, character and manner were sought to be transmitted to children was distinctly geared towards an ideology of domestication. This was clear from several statements made by the teachers and principal, in the school as well as classroom setting, as well as their systems of labelling. Girls fitted this image more closely than boys, and this is probably why they were viewed as ideal learners. Given the construction of girls as 'ideal' learners, it is instructive that they were not perceived as central to teacher-initiated, examination-related interactions in the classroom. Teachers' engagement with boys on examination-related themes is significant in this context. The discussion in Chapter 4, Section 4.7.3 on the concept of 'work', and boys' socialisation patterns into shouldering of economic responsibility (Chapter 5, Sections 5.1.2.1, 5.1.2.2) reflects the continuities in 'official' and 'hidden' knowledge about the gendered terrain of economic work. Although this pattern of interaction has been observed in many contexts, it merits greater investigation. In the case of this school, however, it formed a significant aspect of the hidden curriculum and closely mirrored the lived realities of boys.

Social class and gender

Dhamaal as a category/concept/context is unique to the school situation. While *dhamaal* comprised a range of behaviours, and was associated with a set of principal actors like

[1] For a critical analysis of the relationship between women's education and fertility, see Jefferey and Basu (1996).

monitors (both girls and boys), most boys, and a few girls, interactional contexts in the classroom constructed a gender dichotomy in behaviour. This dichotomy closely paralleled experiential knowledge of gender outside the school. Although this continuity of experience undeniably existed, this does not imply that differences in behaviour of girls and boy are 'natural'. Indeed, as shown in Chapter 5, children's own positions reflected social practices within the home and community. Expectations of adherence to norms in these 'sites' were not, except in a few cases, accepted without questioning. This was particularly seen for girls, for whom restrictions are particularly severe and conformity to norms is a far more critical issue. Even so, several girls told me how they like school because they could do '*masti*'.

The construction of boys as violent and aggressive was related to the class differential between the teachers and the children. Patterns of social labelling in the classroom clearly showed that teachers found the boys socially menacing. Mrs Gandhi, the 4a teacher, who managed to keep her class 'in control' through a militaristic regime of punishments, told me at the end of the study that she expected them to go back to 'their ways' the following year when she would no longer be their class teacher. From a completely different perspective on discipline, Mrs Vankar felt that the boys did not find school appealing because they worked and were only sent to school by parents to stay out of trouble at home.

In both classes, discourses about social class, gender and formal education were interwoven, and linked to teachers' belief structures and perceptions of their own roles as educators. These perceptions were coloured by both their social class and gender: observations of classroom interactions in all contexts showed this clearly. The gendered nature of curricular transactions in the classroom was in keeping with, and indicative of, the particular discourses surrounding the teaching of the poor (Avalos: 1986). It is important to note also that the teachers in the present study, being women, themselves had distinctive perceptions on account of their gender. Women teachers are likely to have less visibility and power within decision-making structures in their own educational arena, and whether and how this colours their self-perception as educators, and their role in gender construction in the classroom, needs greater examination.

For children, participation in these discourses both provided a lens to understand their gender identity as well as legitimated their existing frameworks of understanding. The 'naturalisation' of docility/aggression as feminine/masculine traits was heightened by the discursive practices of teachers in the classroom. The construction of aggressive masculinity – which was clearly related to the difference in social class between teachers and children – had consequences for the ways in which gender separation was rationalised in everyday life.

Curricular knowledge

Following Macdonald's conceptualisation, knowledge that children 'learn' from their social worlds outside the school can be seen to be de-contextualised through participation in the formal, institutionalised patterns of schooling practices and re-contextualised within the school setting. Both these processes occur through assumptions of social norms which guide everyday practices in school. These assumptions follow the logic of normative discourses about education and their inscription in both, the 'official knowledge' of textbooks, as well as the less overt messages of the hidden curriculum. This 're-articulation' of social knowledge within institutionalised patterns of interactions appears to lie at the centre of formation of gender identity in school.

The processes of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation are linked to normative discourse in formal education.[1] Within this discourse, curricular 'knowledge' is directed towards an 'imagined community' of learners, assumed to be socially homogeneous. The undifferentiated delivery of knowledge in schools irons over differences in class, caste and gender. Specific cultures as defined by region, religion and ethnicity are not reflected in such a representation of reality, either in curriculum design or transaction in the classroom. This makes the task of selection of knowledge a problematic area for educators (Kumar:1991b).Curriculum in Indian schools is marked by 'strong classification' of knowledge, demarcating what is 'legitimate' knowledge from what is not (Bernstein:1977). The social knowledge that children bring to school is negated in the construction of curricular knowledge. With respect to learning of gender, there is a 'naturalisation' of

[1] The feminist educational philosopher Jane Martin argues that educational discourses are centred on the image of the male learner (Martin: 1987).

dichotomies, discounting what children may have experienced, seen or heard about non-gendered ways of being. Interviews with children showed that this indeed was the case, partly because of exposure to television and equally due to the urban location. The attendant conflict – in both cognitive and affective respects – which could be a point of departure for meaningful discussion and reflection within the classroom was not possible because the curriculum does not make space for critical dialogue. The resulting 'erasure' of conflict in school knowledge leads to a situation where children are not empowered to critically reflect on their social realities (Apple:1979; Kumar: 1996). This has important consequences for the way children 'learn' gender in school.

The category of work and the construction of gender

As discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4.7.3, the category of 'work' ties together the problematic relationship between children, gender, social class and formal education within the Indian context. Working children do not 'fit' into dominant educational discourse in India. That poor children *do* need to work, within both domestic as well as public spheres, is a reality that formal education does not 'officially' acknowledge. Particularly within an urban setting, in formal schools, children are not expected to be engaged in economic work. Gandhi's scheme of basic education had visualised a component of work in school curricula, which he insisted was necessary to maintain the linkage between formal education and the village artisan economy. The subject SUPW in school curricula is a tokenistic acceptance of this philosophy (Kurrien:1984). In the particular context of the school in this study, SUPW was positioned as a distinctly 'feminine' subject. Curricular knowledge about work was placed within middle-class contexts of aspirations which were in reality unattainable for the majority of children. These contexts were also highly gendered, which appeared to pattern children's responses.

The category of 'work' represented a major area of conflict between normative discourses of education and the hidden curriculum of gender in the specific context of this school. The fact that children worked, as in the case of girls, within the home, and for many boys, outside, was dissonant to dominant educational discourse. It tended, in the classroom, to position all children, but especially boys, as disinterested learners. Through patterns of stereotyping and labelling, it heightened gender dichotomies related to 'studies'.

6.2 Gender relations and school curriculum

There are certain decisive points at which patterns of gender separation and differentiation as encountered in this study meet systems of *discrimination* and disadvantage. While this study deals with an ethnographic 'particular' in which narratives of children have been given primary analytical space, interpretation of the hidden curriculum, and the nature of 'hiddenness' itself, calls for grounding these narratives within a larger critique of gender relations in Indian society and the ways in which educational discourses have sought to intervene to change the existing patterns of gender relations in Indian society.

Hiddenness of the hidden curriculum

The overlapping of the personal with the social, and the cultural with the political are heard in the children's narratives in this study. Underlying these narratives is a discourse which centres on the ' value' of schooling, the differential social meanings in being schooled as a girl and as a boy of a particular social class and caste in Indian society, and differential accessibility to codes of power through formal schooling. This discourse mediates schooling processes and the structures of knowledge by which the child attempts to understand her/his position in society.

Children's social experiences in the home and community highlight aspects of this discourse. Early withdrawal from school, marriage at an early age and circumscribing of physical and cultural space were some features of girls' experiences of 'femininity'. Likewise, with boys, there was an understanding that 'masculinity' connoted a sense of responsibility, including economic responsibility, working hard at school to get a good '*naukri*', and a larger horizon of mobility. Distinctions of gender such as these are typical of a society which is characterised by patrilineal and patrilocal membership, or what Kandiyoti (1988) calls 'classical patriarchy'. Patriarchal relations are not only structurally defined, but also culturally signified through practices. It is in the context of maintenance of patriarchal relations that the situated practices of gender distinctions within the school assume interpretational significance.

It is also important to note that the normative discourse in the school, which stressed the 'value of education', while positioning girls as 'ideal learners', can be seen to be ideologically contradictory to normative discourses around gender in Indian society. Girls

in school, through a paradoxical inversion of their domestic 'nature', fulfil a managerial role which provides a certain sense of power and self-esteem. Unlike their domestic 'management' roles, these roles in school are 'sanctified' through overt, official assignation, rather than the automatic assumption of the 'natural duties' of girls in the home. Secondly, these roles in school also bestow a certain visibility and precedence over peers which is not associated with domestic chores.

Going beyond the specific context of the school studied here, it may also explain why girls are seen to perform better when their ability to negotiate the opportunity structure actually increases because of their class position. Moreover, teachers' verbal statements in the 'you can also..' genre ('Girls can also work', for example) perhaps helped these girls to expand their horizons of imagination, if not action. Girls' declaration of enjoying school because they earn severe reprimand at home for fouling up housework, and their questioning—however partial or incipient—of parental and community expectations could perhaps be seen in this context. Nonetheless, the education of girls is still to be seen within the context of maintenance of patriarchal relations. As Bardhan (1993) notes, in rural areas, prosperous farmer's daughters are being increasingly schooled, but the motivation, as against their sons' education, is to seek upwardly mobile marriage to educated salary earners.

It would appear from the analysis of the hidden curriculum that normative discourse was guided by a strong 'civilising' ideology. Adherence to discipline, including good manners, good handwriting, clean appearances, as well as the pedagogic aspects of providing the right answers, good handwriting, 'proper' reading, 'proper' teaching – encompassed in the credo *sabhyata, vinay, vivek* – provided a landscape of (decidedly middle-class) aspirations for children which was removed from their lived realities outside the school. Analysis of the gender sub-texts of these classroom discourses reveal the motif of domestication underpinning teachers' interactions with children. 'Realities' which impinged on school contexts from social experiences outside the home, such as the reality of early withdrawal of girls, the separation of spheres of work, the reality that the children *had* to work itself, influenced both 'instrumental' and 'expressive' orders of the school. [2] Within the particular

[2] Bernstein (1977) distinguishes between two as follows: while the instrumental order consists of the specific skills the school wishes to transmit to students, the expressive order relates to the moral conduct and character it seeks to instil in them.

social context of the school studied, the contradiction between these aspects of school 'culture' highlights the gap between the rhetoric of equal opportunity through education (often referred to by teachers) and the nature of social relations, including gender relations, in Indian society. Social realities imposed contradictions in school socialisation which expressed themselves in explicit and subtle ways. Although these processes were grounded in the material conditions of this particular school, they have conceptual relevance to similar processes in other schools, and possibly in other institutional settings as well.

6.3 Policy initiatives and the hidden curriculum

Right from independence, the rhetoric of equal opportunity through education is one that has pervaded policy. Gender disparities in education have been the focus of policy attention since independence. Successive plan documents have reiterated the need to lower these disparities. A guiding rationale for these formulations have been that investment in girls' education has the highest social returns in all societies. Inadequacies pointed to have been the persistent lack of female teachers, particularly in rural areas, inconveniently located schools if they exist at all, lack of facilities, and irrelevant curricula. The last point is particularly relevant Perhaps every strategy and approach has been covered in educational policy for increasing enrolment and retention.[3] The NPE (1986) was hailed as a path-breaking document as it emphasised the re-orientation of the national education system to playing a 'positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women...[and] the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators...[as] an act of faith and social engineering.'(para 4.2).

Can policy intervene in breaking the gendered nature of curriculum? Given the pervasiveness of gender disparities and the entrenchment of official gender ideologies, a tentative – and pessimistic – answer would be no. Analysis of post-NPE textbooks in the state of Gujarat showed that revisions were very few, piece-meal and utterly cosmetic (Shah et al:1988). In policy documents, terms like gender equity and equality sit uncomfortably with instrumentalist notions of education for girls and an unanalytical approach to educational –and particularly curricular – processes. The NPE Review

[3] See Ramachandran (1988) for a comprehensive review.

Committee pointed out that although the NPE (1986) gave prominent space to education for gender equality, there is no reference to gender in the entire chapter on the 'content and process of school education', except for a mention that 'equality of the sexes'is to be one of the ten core curriculum areas (NPE: 1986:para 6; (NPERC:1990: 44). Indeed, the NPERC recommended that a gender perspective be explicitly built into the entire curriculum, including the hidden curriculum (pp.44-45).

As this study has attempted to demonstrate, gender inequalities embedded in social structures and practices find expression in curricular contexts within the school setting. Schooling thus appears to maintain and legitimate existing patterns of gender relations in society; in this sense, as social institutions they do act to reproduce gender inequalities. However, as the analysis of data shows, the idea of equality does pervade official ideology, and this is occasionally reflected in children's interactions with adults, i.e. teachers, in the school setting. This 'notional equality' does not find reflection in actual practices in the classroom because of the structures that maintain gender inequality in the larger social world of children and teachers. The former includes educational structures, primarily the strongly class-divided systems of schooling, which accentuate difference and engender social labelling by teachers. Further, the inherently conflictual nature of gender as a social construction is antithetical to the idea of school knowledge as a neutral body of facts, consensually strung together on the basis of scientific principles.

It follows from the preceding discussion, as well as analysis and interpretation of gender construction in this study, that there are problems in bringing gender into mainstream curriculum discourse. This is not to imply that a critical and contradictory consciousness cannot be engendered through schools through re-designed curricula. Certain pre-conditions for this are, however, essential, and these need to be informed by a critical gender perspective. Some of these are: critically reviewing the nature of learners and their relationship to the schooling process; reconceptualising the meaning of curriculum as a selection of knowledge; privileging the knowledge of learners and allowing for dialogue in the classroom; producing socially (and gender) sensitive curricular materials; and re-orienting the primary school system away from its present examination-oriented focus.