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LEARNING ONE'S GENDER IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL
A STUDY OF CURRICULUM

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SUMMARY

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Little beyond biographical and anecdotal material exists to help us understand how children 'learn' gender in Indian schools. Textbooks have been the focus of some research attention, primarily directed at uncovering the invisibility of girls and women and gender bias and discrimination. However, it is important to note that there are values and norms diffused through schools in addition to those of textbooks. The 'hidden' curriculum of schooling encompasses, not only messages embodied in textbooks, but also institutional regularities, rituals and routines, and curricular interactions, all 'situated practices' which make up school knowledge (Apple:1979; King:1986). The concept of the 'hidden' curriculum sensitises us to the fact that these 'unintended practices' also contribute to the child's understanding of the world, and of gender as a dimension of social relations and social organisation in that world.

The patterns of practices within the school which construct femininity and masculinity in everyday school life is the backdrop to the hidden curriculum of gender. These patterns constitute a gender 'code' (Macdonald: 1980), which provides the cues for 'gender-appropriate' behaviour within the school. Children 'learn' gender-appropriate behaviour through active engagement with the gender code of the school. For the school child, 'clueing in' to the gender code involves reading gender into the contexts of social interaction within the school. The child perceives her/his own gender identity in the institutional 'sub-world' of the school through the 'gender lens' constructed by the commonsense practices, routines and rituals of everyday school life.

Research questions

The present study represents an attempt to understand the hidden curriculum of gender in primary school. An attempt is made to examine, in a holistic and contextualised manner, how gender is constructed in primary school through interactions arising out of curricular and other social contexts in everyday school life, as well as children's subjective interpretations of these constructions.

The research questions which guided the study are: *What are the processes underlying the construction of gender in primary schools? How do children 'read' these processes in relation to their understandings of gender through social experiences outside the school?*

Specifically, the study examines the contexts within which gender is constructed through everyday interactional processes in one municipal primary school of Baroda city. The study uses ethnographic methods to collect and analyse data. The data consists of classroom observations carried out in two sections of Class 4 in this school over a period of one academic year. Interviews of 112 children of these classes were carried out over the last three months of the study. Apart from observations and interviews, interactions with children and teachers—in particular the two teachers of these classes—form the basis for analysis. Analysis was directed at uncovering recurrent patterns and emergent themes in the data.

A guiding principle of social anthropology is to 'make the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (Rosaldo: 1989). This study has attempted to address taken-for-granted gender divisions and understand the generation of knowledge related to gender identity in primary school. The study was characterised by three features which distinguish it from others in the 'genre'. One is that unlike most research in the area of gender studies in India, this study looks at gender construction among *children*. Although most studies at the international level have examined gender construction among adolescents and adults, the few studies of primary school children show gender to be a significant element of control in everyday life (Apple and King:1979; Short: 1993). Secondly, the study deviates from the more established tradition of curriculum research by not focussing exclusively on textbooks, but examining contexts engendered through school and classroom-based practices. The hidden curriculum has been contextualised within the experiential framework of children as social participants in knowledge generation. Finally, children's narratives are used to understand the 'learning' of gender in school.

In this study, the hidden curriculum is analysed within the specific cultural context of the selected school. Social interactional contexts which engender pedagogic discourse in the classroom (Bernstein:1985; Jones:1997) have been examined, through analysis of ethnographic observation and narratives of children. Attention has particularly focussed on the contextual nature of symbolic constructions involving gender, and how these constructions are characterised.

Findings

The larger contexts of formal education and normative assumptions about the characteristics of the learner were considerably reconfigured in this school, which catered to children from lower 'socio-economic' groups—in other words, poor children. Understandably, this reality asserted a constant 'presence' in interactions within the school, and formed a significant aspect of identity construction. Within this specific context, the study examines the manner in which normative discourses about education and learning influence the construction of gender through differential positioning of girls and boys in everyday practices.

The discursive practices of teachers in the classroom are accommodated to by children to appear as competent members of their own gender category. In doing this they interpret and 'read' the messages of the hidden curriculum through the lens of their social worlds outside the school. The study examines areas of contradiction and convergence in these two different sets of social experiences to understand children's interpretations of the hidden curriculum of gender.

The hidden curriculum was found to be 'composed' of a range of everyday school practices, routines and rituals which underlined gender *separation* and *differentiation*.

- Strict *boundaries* established in all classroom routines, like making lines, names on registers, seating arrangements, and on the playground.
- These boundaries set up a relation between *physical space and gender*, in the classroom, playground and other social spaces which children occupied.

- *Differential task assignment* to girls and boys, based on normative notions of areas of 'work' for boys and girls. Girls were given tasks imbued with notions of feminine domesticity, such as cleaning, carrying and fetching for the teacher, etc. within the school premises; boys were given tasks which involved going out of the school. Both girls and boys were asked to mind (their respective 'sides'), but only girls were permitted to teach.
- The practices of teachers in the classrooms such as social labelling, normative and evaluative statements, which set up stereotypes of behaviour. Social labelling was directed towards the boys more than the girls, with negative statements, name-calling, etc. Examination-related interactions were also primarily directed at boys.
- The underlying rationale (ideological good sense) underlying gender separation and differentiation was framed in the context of *dhamaal*, or indiscipline, primarily associated with the boys. Pedagogic interactions were embedded within this context.
- Ideals of good handwriting, reading, knowing answers, etc. were associated with girls, although certification and its effects on future employment was more directed towards boys.
- Curricular contexts reinforced gender divisions both through transaction of gender-biased materials as well as modes of interaction in the different subjects.
- There was, through these contexts and interactions therein, a system of signifying of aggressive masculinity associated with boys from this social class background who were constructed as deviant, with no interest in studies, and coming from backgrounds not conducive to formal education. Femininity was chiefly associated with virtues of domesticity, rather than pedagogic attributes, although girls were positioned as ideal learners.
- In both cases these were the general trends, and a few exceptions did exist; however, children's narratives indicate that there was identification with their own gender category in these constructions.

Children interpreted the hidden curriculum chiefly through their experiences of gender in the home and community. The proximity of children's neighbourhoods made interactions

within the school and home fluid rather than sealed off. Patterns of socialisation within the community 'rationalised' the following school practices:

- Gender separation seen as necessary for physical security.
- Taboos associated with cross-sex interaction.
- Association of 'inside/outside' in categories of work.

Children participated in the construction of gender in school through modes of self-presentation and 'enactment'. There was a constant construction of 'otherness' as a result of school-based contexts of separation and differentiation.

Conclusions

This study represents an attempt to understand the meanings children give to the interactional contexts arising out of everyday school experiences in terms of gender. These interpretations appear to highlight the continuities between socialisation into gender roles within the family/community, and gender socialisation through schooling. An important caveat to be kept in mind is that the specificity of relationships within this school, given its particular class culture, defines patterns of gender socialisation which may not be found in other 'types' of schools. It may not be too far-fetched, however, to imagine, and the literature does appear to suggest (Parthasarathi: 1988) that many girls and boys in Indian coeducational schools would be able to identify - in varying degrees - with some of the narratives in this study. By looking at an 'ethnographic particular', nonetheless, one can attempt to understand the complex ways in which gender is constructed and interpreted in social institutions like schools. Apart from alerting us to the pervasive presence of gender in the richly textured social experiences of children at school, the voices heard in this study also point to the difficulties in generating theories which can inform progressive interventions towards more gender-equitable curricula, one that has emancipatory potential for both girls *and* boys.

What would such a curriculum 'look' like? The question of 'relevance' is problematic in this context. If curricula are to be based on children's experiences, then given the dominance of patriarchal gender relations, school knowledge is likely to legitimate social ways of understanding gender. The critical issue to my mind is designing curricula which are gender-inclusive, based on children's social reality, but which are also *gender-sensitive*. A gender-sensitive curriculum would attend to issues of visibility/invisibility and power/powerlessness; recognise the multiplicity of experience of girls and boys in Indian society and privilege voice over silence.

A gender-sensitive school curriculum would open up possibilities for discussion and debate in which social realities are critically questioned. Such approaches to curricular knowledge demands a radical shift in pedagogic discourse and the positioning of the child in this discourse. On the basis of this study, I would argue that the concept of gender as it is dealt with in school curricula is a part of the larger picture of 'flattening' out social reality in curricular knowledge, which inhibits alternate ways of seeing, learning, being and becoming. In this situation, it is clear that tokenistic attempts at changing curriculum in schools in the direction of gender equality are not likely to have much impact. It is necessary to re-examine school curriculum from the perspective of the learner, which demands critical reflection on what is 'worth' teaching, in this case, about gender. Teachers, in particular, need to be a part of discussions on curricular change, rather than be cast forever as 'meek dictators' within the classroom (Kumar:1990).

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