

## Exploring the Contribution of Teaching and Learning Processes in the Construction of Students' Gender Identity in Early Year Classrooms

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### Abstract

*The present study explores how gender identity construction takes place in a single gender classroom in early years. Qualitative research guided the study design which was conducted in two public sector single gender schools. The data were collected through observations of the teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, focused group discussion, and semi-structured interviews. The study found that teaching and learning is gendered in single sex settings as gender messages are passed on to the students, who play an important role in the gender identity construction of these children. The study also indicated that the teachers' personal experiences greatly affect their perceptions regarding gender identities. There was also evidence of teachers having different expectations for girls and boys. Schools were hence found promoting stereotypes regarding gender roles and responsibilities in a social context.*

**Keywords:** gender, social theory, classroom interaction, single sex

### Introduction

Gender socialization is probably one of the basic aspects of the general socialization process. It is generally believed that children under normal circumstances acquire their gender identities and recognize gender constancy before the age of seven, which is the end of key stage one of education (Gorard, 2002; Measor & Sikes, 1992). Different theoretical

perspectives have been used to conceptualize and describe gender. Essentialist constructs believe gender as a natural, biological characteristic manifested by an individual. The perception of genders as ‘just naturally different’ can be found across disciplines, even within the field of feminism (Skelton, Francis & Smulyn, 2006). According to relational (feminists and poststructuralists) theory, gender is considered as a socially constructed behavior. Essentially, gender is a complex, dynamic set of ideas, actions and feelings about what it means to be a boy or a girl in a specific place, culture and time (Archer, 2003). The social learning theory suggests that children develop sex-typed behaviors because other people reinforce behaviors that conform to expectations for their sex group and do not reinforce nonconforming behaviors (Bank, 2007). This approach suggests that within the family, parents as agents of socialization interact with boys and girls in ways that reinforce gender types (Hetherington & Parke, 1999). Social places, homes, and schools provide young children spaces to imitate the behaviors they are observing.

The purpose of this research was to determine if the nature of classroom interactions between students and teachers are biased or fair when teachers of different genders teach single gender classes. The study also helped to find how gender differences influence behavior of male and female students. There are non-structured evidences of biased treatment towards girls and boys in our society and this study explored the existence of gender discrimination in schools and its effects on students by identifying their perceptions and point of view. This paper explores the following questions:

1. What are teachers perceptions related to expectations from girls and boys?
2. To what extent are boys and girls treated with fairness and equality in classrooms?
3. How do teachers perceive their interactions with male and female students?

## Literature Review

In the classrooms, children create and recreate meanings about gender through their conversations and actions (Blaise, 2005). Many researchers have noted that teachers and peers play an important role in a student's gender socialization. Feminists have argued that biology creates gender differences, while femininity is culturally constructed (Bandura, 1997; Davies, 1989). More recently, masculinity is similarly described as socially and discursively constructed (MacanGhail, 1994). One of the powerful and subtle ways in which teachers shape students' gender identity is through teacher-student interactions within the classroom culture (Liu, 2006). Student-student interactions and teacher-student interactions taking place within the classroom are the mirror reflection of the societal gender stereotypes. Literature on gender in the classroom reveals that teachers go to their classrooms with some stereotypical assumptions and expectations that largely affect the children in the construction of gender characteristics (Myhill & Jones, 2006).

The language used to interact categorizes views about gender within the socially constructed roles, relations and distinctions between men and women or the biological differences that define humans as male and female. This plays an important role in shaping children's ideas in the construction of one's identity (Leach, 2003). Children cannot be simply divided into girls and boys categories; rather, they take an active part in constructing what it means to be a girl and a boy at a particular time and place (Blaise, 2005) and they locate themselves within and through these social categories (Ivinson & Murphy, 2007).

Many educationists (Pardhan, 2011; Taj, 2008; Zainulabidin, 2007) have explored the role of classroom environment in constructing gender identities of the students. However, the researcher was not able to find any study that explored gender identity construction of the students in a single sex setting. Thus, this study is expected to be a significant contribution to the literature in filling the gap regarding identity construction of the children in a single sex classroom setting. Keeping in view the context of Pakistan and looking at different debates regarding gender theories as discussed earlier, the social theory of learning paradigm has been used to

analyse teaching and learning processes in a Pakistani classroom. Social learning theory helped to analyse how reinforcement of social norms takes place through verbal and non-verbal interactions within the classroom.

## **Methodology**

### ***Design***

The study design was guided by the qualitative method and case study approach was used to explore the phenomenon. The classroom as a real context was used to explore the phenomenon with a focus on teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction as a major unit of analysis within the single sex classroom environment.

### ***Participants***

Male and female Grade II teachers from two different schools were selected to participate in this research. They were given pseudonyms to abide by the confidentiality agreement. For student participants, a group of five was selected from both the schools.

### ***Instrumentation and Data Collection***

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and focused group discussion with the children. In addition, text books were also reviewed. All ethical considerations were fulfilled before collecting the data.

### ***Procedure***

Following the focus of the study, Mariam Khan, a female teacher and Asad Ali, a male teacher were requested to participate in the study. The teachers were selected based on the criteria that they should be class teachers of Grade II. Also, a group of five students from both schools were selected on the basis of their regularity, active participation in class, and confidence while answering the questions in school.



## Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analysis and results revealed the importance of verbal and non-verbal interactions of single gender classrooms in constructing gender identity of the students. According to the study, the way teachers and students perceive their identities have an impact on gender identity construction of the children. These perceptions become obvious in what the teachers and students do and say in the classroom. Furthermore, the study also explains how students (focus group) perceive their responsibilities and identities as two different binary dichotomies as girls and boys, based on their experiences and practices at home and school, as their sites of socialization.

The findings of the study focused mainly on verbal and non-verbal interactions in the classroom. The data analysis showed that both Mariam and students' perceptions about what children in her class should do was situated within the division of labor as approved by the wider society. The social basis of gender roles is considered as a gender belief system, ideas regarding masculinity and femininity that are held to be valid in society (Lorber, 1994). For Mariam, boys being the providers of the family were very much a part of the masculine image of male offspring in the society. Not having a son was, therefore, a great concern for her. She sees the continuation of her family through a son.

*“I feel a lot that I should have a boy, I have three daughters and three daughters are enough. A son is a supporter for his parents in old age. Girls will get married, they cannot stay with parents, so a son should be there to bring a daughter-in-law and set the home again.”*

This quote reflects the way Mariam understands the gendered relationship as two distinct spheres of work and responsibilities for woman and man to undertake. The tasks carried out within these gender roles are often categorized as productive and reproductive (Leach, 2003). She was observed asking girls (her students) to wash the cups after she and other teachers had had tea.

This reaction of the teacher was apparently an act of reminding the girls and reinforcing the familial responsibilities assigned by the society. The role approved for girls by the society at large is that of care giving. The data further revealed that Mariam felt that boys need to explore the world and can go for higher studies because they are to ultimately play the role of the family provider. She gave an example of her widowed aunt who supported her son in his childhood, who was now supporting his mother. For Mariam, male off-springs are the bread winner, so one has to invest in his education and not in female off-springs' education, who do not need that kind of investment because they have different roles to play.

The data of the participants indicated that teachers' perception about assigning the tasks to the girls and boys is based on their own beliefs about girls and boys particular roles and responsibilities in the future. Ashraf (2004) also pointed out that teachers usually transferred their own gender perceptions to the students through a variety of ways. This was quite in line with the teachers' conduct in the present study, as they communicated these gendered messages through their talk and actions. These conversation acts and actions by the teachers seemed to reinforce gender-related views held by students; hence, these beliefs contributed substantially in the construction of their gender identity.

Furthermore, the study revealed the importance of exploration of behavioral expectations from the students in the single gender setting and its role in developing gender identity. MacanGhail (1994) describes schools as "active makers of a range of femininities and masculinities" (p.9). Girls are constructed as a good student; whereas, boys are viewed as interesting persons (Kruse, 1992). The female teacher perceived that there was a difference in the behavior of girls and boys. While sharing her experiences of teaching to both boys and girls during the past 20 years, the teacher said:

*"Like here in girls' school, if I give any task to the girls, they will come the next day after memorizing their lesson, but in boys' school, it so happens that if I assign any task to them, even after reprimanding, they never turn up with their work done. I become tired of telling them to do their homework."*

The analysis also revealed that the teacher had certain behavioral expectations from the girls. She believed that girls remained quiet and less active. Their physical movements were restricted and the students had less freedom over using the spaces in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. This was quite aligned with the findings of Zainulabidin (2007) who found in her study that students get lesser freedom in using the physical spaces within the classroom. The expectation of the teacher that girls are passive and boys are active is in line with the larger societal expectations of two binary divisions of gender.

While exploring the perceptions and practices regarding gender identity construction within a single gender classroom, an interesting vignette of data was also explored about gender division of labor. Data showed that participants felt that boys were important members of the family, as they could do those tasks that females could not perform with ease. The male teacher shared his experience of being the only son in his family and was overburdened with responsibilities, as his sisters were unable to do those tasks which could be carried out by him. He stated:

*“Girls are blessings of the Almighty but we cannot deny about the importance of a son. There are lots of household chores which girls cannot do: only boys can do that. Take my own example, as I am the only son in my family, I have to run around the whole day to manage the work, as my sister cannot do outside work. I always feel the need of a brother to help me out.”*

Boys believe that females are responsible for the work at home and are responsible for the domestic chores. Aligned with the teachers’ perceptions, the students also believed that as boys, it is their duty to help their families do all the work outside the home. In the focus group discussion, students had an agreement on the matter of their mothers and sisters’ responsibility should be limited to household chores.

The data analysis showed that the boys, while explaining their responsibilities of taking care of tasks outside their homes, had an explicit view about their female sibling duties inside homes. Their teacher extended

this discussion to public and private domains into the aspect of gender division of labor. He shared that girls study just for their intrinsic interest, but boys have to take care of their families and earn their livelihood. According to him, earning a living is the sole responsibility of the male members of the family. Giving the example of his sisters, he said:

*“I will feel bad if my sister goes out for earning due to any compulsion in my presence. But if she wants to do it because of her interest, I will not say anything.”*

The data also showed that the perceptions of the participants about what a boy and girl can do was aligned with division of labor as perceived by the wider society. In addition to this, the study identified the importance of exploring the perceptions of the students studying in single gender settings. The study revealed the importance of challenging the concepts of students of the single gender settings as having less confidence when mingling with the other gender. This was identified through the views of the boys as they expressed that they did not want to study with girls. They said:

*“If there will be girls in our school then we will not sit with them, we will not talk to them. Miss, we will make our own group and sit in a separate row.”*

One participant, Ayan said:

*“Miss, if we talk to them (girls) and appreciate their skills and knowledge and work with them as our colleagues, they will take advantage and become friendly and come after me and my parents will be very upset.”*

The data showed that boys considered girls and boys as two controversially distinct beings. According to the participants, studying with girls is not considered a good practice. They can study only with their cousins and sisters, and even play with them. However, they avoid sitting with other girls like their class fellows. They said that they will make their separate rows in the class, so that they do not mingle with them. They also believed that if they talk to the girls, they will develop friendship with

them and their families might admonish them. They seemed apprehensive of the fact that what their parents would say if they found their son with a girl.

## **Results and Discussion**

The data analysis provided evidence of participants' consensus of believing in the gender stereotypes which are accepted and practiced by society at large. In both the cases, girls and boys were being called upon by the teachers through their gender identity instead of being called out by their names. This deliberated or undeliberated act of the teachers made the students even more conscious about their gender. Teachers' perceptions regarding responsibilities of girls and boys in assigning different roles and responsibilities was aligned with the beliefs of the society about the perceived roles and responsibilities. Participants believed that the girls play a passive role in society as caregivers, and are confined to domestic chores. The teacher was found to be encouraging the girls to take interest in feminine tasks like beautification, decoration and other things related to the aesthetic sense.

In both the schools, gender differentiation was perceived as a socially inherited practice, which indicated that perceptions about gender are part of the social process. Consciously or unconsciously the teachers were found to be practicing and transmitting the society's beliefs to the students. The teachers' persistent reinforcement of their responsibility became evident in the observation data. Mariam believed that boys need to get higher education in order to take up the role of bread-winner. Her perceptions were a guiding factor in her upbringing of her three daughters in making them follow her and learn the household work as she had suffered after getting married. Now, she wanted her daughters to learn the housework in order to avoid similar challenges.

Similarly, the male teacher, Asad was also of the view that girls cannot perform certain tasks. He shared his own experience that being the only son in his family, it becomes difficult for him to manage his time between study and work. He also believed that a son has the responsibility of earning and taking care of his family. According to him, it would be a

matter of shame if his sister worked to support her family in his presence. This shows that all the participants had a consensus in believing that gender roles are often categorized as productive and reproductive based on gender differentiation (Leach, 2003).

The study also revealed that participants had different behavioral expectations from girls and boys, and were therefore treated accordingly. In a girls' school, the teacher felt that girls were passive, less active, and obedient and less effort was required for controlling the class. This showed the contributive element among the teachers towards promoting a good girl image and a bad boy image through their differential treatment. Francis (2000) and Krise (1992) have also argued that teachers need to be aware about the implications of such expectations and projecting a good girl image, which girls develop in the classroom as it affects their demeanor and increases their invisibility in the classroom. The teacher believed that girls were very sensitive and they felt bad if a teacher was harsh, but upon realizing their mistake, they never repeated the mistake. This perception was supported by the observation data. Similarly, the male teacher was also of the view that boys and girls behave differently and in order to maintain class discipline and the teacher had to manage the class accordingly. The teacher's perception was aligned with Sadker and Sadker's (1994) findings that boys were found to be more active, talkative, and dominating in the classroom than girls.

Furthermore, girls categorized tasks according to gender because they felt gender discrimination in society. They perceived their roles parallel to the roles approved by the society (Bassow, 1986). The interviews showed that they believed that only certain games and activities are for girls, thus, during the recess girls were lesser engaged in physical activities and mostly sat on the stairs talking to each other or strolling down the corridor. Inside the classroom, their voices and movements were controlled by the teacher, expecting them to be respectful and less reactive. However, the boys viewed themselves as active and free to use the physical spaces provided to them. This showed that boys were perceived to be active and reactive and their dominance and freedom were also accepted by the teacher. This belief portrays the societal beliefs of gender roles and discrimination. The beliefs and perceptions of the teachers and their



expectations from both the genders were affected by their own learned experiences as social processes. Their approaches and attitude reflected their beliefs and expectations from the students regarding girls' and boys' roles and the responsibilities they have to take up in the future. Their conscious or unconscious uneven treatment in both the cases was a constant reminder for girls and boys as two distinct dichotomies of society, with different energies, compatibilities and responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

In single gender classrooms the boys and girls receive unequal and discriminatory treatment. Aligned with literature, Leach (2003) says, "Many schools are gender-unaware places, where neither teacher nor students perceive gender as being an issue that needs to be addressed" (p.22). The study revealed the difference in expectation of teachers from girls and boys. These expectations are guided by their experiences of socialization as males and females. The analyses lead to the conclusion that teachers need awareness about creating an environment that can provide different experiences of gender discourse to the students. This would provide students ample opportunities to express themselves and plan their choices of studies, careers, and roles according to their capabilities, rather than accepting and following the stereotype roles as defined by the larger society. The preset beliefs which are being practiced and are passed on to the students are limiting the students' abilities to express themselves. Children received gendered messages through the interactions taking place in both the cases (girls' and boys' school). They strengthened gender stereotypes by giving gender discriminative explanations.

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