Gender equality in the classroom

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It is typical for a teacher to say, “Abhishek looks so confident, and he will make a good leader while Nazneen is so caring and she will be able to handle children well”. What is wrong with these observations? Well, nothing is inherently wrong but it leaves an impression on the children that can be extremely damaging. Do we ever say that a boy is so caring that he will be good with children? Gender stereotypes are perpetuated in every social institution and schools are no exceptions. I think that it is important for teachers to consciously treat their boy and girl students alike and not make remarks or use gender stereotypical illustrations.

From the time of fairy tales, it is always the handsome and brave prince coming to the rescue of the forlorn princess from the demons or witches. To counter such examples, teachers need to pick stories and fables that do not perpetuate hierarchies that will eventually get transmitted from one generation to another. The first thing that teachers need to consciously understand is that sex is a biological fact and gender is a social construct. Boys and girls do not have any natural psychological or social differences, but it is society that makes them learn gender roles. Therefore, as teachers we must not ask boys to solve the sums because they are “naturally” good at math or the girls to help with the cleaning up of the classroom as they are expected to be more inclined to do housework.

Gender socialization is the process of learning where little children are told to behave and articulate gender specific norms. For example, girls are encouraged to be soft spoken and home bound playing with dolls and kitchen toys while boys are encouraged to be aggressive by playing outside with cars and guns. Typically, schools continue to reinforce such gender stereotypes by offering home science to girls and sports to boys. There are ways in which teachers can consciously develop gender neutral teaching material and encourage girls and boys to be high achievers.

The first step for teachers is to develop gender neutral language. I know teachers with the best of intentions continuing to use “he” and “him” to describe an individual. It is appalling that in a school full of female teachers, one can hardly hear them use her or she when they are teaching. Teachers must consciously use he or she, her or him, and alternate between male and female examples. Gender stereotypes can be perpetuated and strengthened both by men and women. One cannot think that as women we are all practicing gender equality. All learning material has to be scrutinized in a way that supports gender neutral language.

It is also important to use the new books that have been conceptualized by the NCERT and other publishers using positive examples for men and women. Both textbook and audio-visual material must be checked gender check to see that stereotypes of male doctors and
female nurses are not reproduced. We do not want children to ask whether women can indeed drive buses; we have to create a normal atmosphere that does not build on those stereotypes that we have ourselves grown up with. Teachers should not call only the mother of the child for discussions on the children. They must make efforts to involve both fathers and mothers and not request to speak to the mother alone.

In the classroom an effort must be made to integrate boys and girls and not separate them in the seating arrangements. Studies in classroom behavior have shown that boys are far more active in the classroom than girls and they usually have no hesitation in initiating a discussion. Girls on the other hand, are more shy and hesitant. Teachers may have to call on the girls consciously to participate and take leadership roles in classroom discussions. In the organization of group discussions, there must be a mix of the genders rather than segregating them. One interesting group discussion topic can be about domestic chores and how children help their parents in certain tasks. Any hint of gender stereotyping may be replaced. For instance, on a Friday a teacher can give the students a task of doing household chores, the boys should be asked to help with the cooking and the girls with the household accounting or gardening. They should be asked to come back with a written one page report about their experiences. Another way is to show short films on gender identity or stereotyping. Paromita Vohra’s Q2P will talk about the lack of public toilets for women and teachers should raise a discussion on how it is socially unacceptable to see boys and men peeing in public. Girls of course have to be told about the recent move of many city administrators to institute public toilets for women, a concept which was non-existent in the past. Similarly, for SUPW, teachers must shatter gender stereotypes by asking boys to sew and knit and girls to dig mud for planting. Also, sports teachers may need to put equal pressure on girls as well as boys on the sports field.

As the children grow into the pubescent age, teachers must make a conscious effort to impart sex education to both boys and girls. Sexual harassment of girls begins extremely early and any attempt to blame the girls for being harassed must be curtailed. Severe punishments for harassment which cannot be written off as “eve-teasing” (which itself is a sexist concept) must be instituted very early. Girls should have the courage to complain and teachers must have the sense to intervene early enough and create an atmosphere which is sensitive to the needs of both growing boys and girls. While doing anatomy and biology, it is always useful to treat the human body clinically and remove any embarrassment for either sex by using relevant and humorous illustrations.

Both boys and girls need encouragement equally in all sports and extra curricular activities. Girls must not be told that they should not swim or exercise when they have their periods. They should not be asked to eat less than the boys or go home early because the roads are unsafe. Instead, they should be taught how to take care of themselves and develop confidence.

The most influential role models are teachers and it is imperative for teachers to give examples of role models that are not gender stereotypes. For example, a girl who expresses an interest in becoming a pilot must be encouraged with stories of those who have been successful. Similarly, if a boy shows inclination toward craft he should not be labeled a sissy either by his teachers or peers. Peer pressure can be both good and bad and it is the teachers who can try to nurture that influence in a positive direction.

Career counselling begins in schools, and teachers often do not realize that the confidence they instill in children shapes future leaders. Girls are often taught to excel alongside boys but ultimately they are told that family must take precedence over career. Girls are always told that they must become good wives and mothers but boys are almost never told to be good husbands and fathers. All children must be told to be good partners and parents in the future. It is the responsibility of teachers to show how achieving success in one’s career is as important as taking care of the family for both boys and girls.

It is crucial to realize that we are not trying to merely reverse stereotypes and further perpetrate patriarchy in another form. Boys are completely forced to be strong and sometimes they are quite happy to be playing and stiching inside the house. Therefore there is a continuum of masculinity and femininity and one cannot expect to change traditional gender stereotypes overnight. However, in the classroom a teacher needs to be there for both boys and girls to evolve as good thinking and feeling individuals.

Institutionalization of patriarchy in the various agencies of socialization such as family, school, media, religious, legal, and political institutions allow individuals to become transmitters of gender biases. The school is one place where such institutionalization takes place in a very subtle way. Only teachers can confront patriarchy by consciously helping children to become good citizens of the world. The first step is to make an equal world in the classroom.

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