

TEACHERS' PRACTICES OF GENDER EQUALITY

Laxmi Shrestha

Nepal

Abstract

Achieving gender equality in education has been one of the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action, Education for All, and of the Millennium Development Goals. Teachers and their pedagogy are instrumental in achieving this goal. The purpose of this research was to seek teachers' understanding on the concept of gender equality and explore their perceptions and practices in schools. Review of related literature and documents, in-depth interviews and observation using qualitative methods constituted the main research approach..

In this paper , I depicted the teachers' perceptions on gender equality in education.I proceed with the process of analyzing the data on teachers' current practices on gender equality. To seek the answer to my research question 'how has gender equality been practiced by teachers in schools?' the data were derived through in-depth interview, and observations. To explore the teachers' practices and to solicit more in- depth ideas on their conceptualizations and practices of teaching for gender equality, interviews were conducted. Likewise, to understand what the teachers really do in practice in and outside the classroom in relation to gender equality, observations were made. From the gathered data three themes: teacher's interaction, use of teaching materials, and school environment were derived to answer my research question. An account of each is given below.

Teachers' Interaction in the Classroom

"Putting gender equality in place in the classroom is a key to connecting schooling with human rights (Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation" [SADE], 2010). Teachers' interaction is a means to materialize gender equality in the classroom. Through interactions, students not only increase knowledge, skills and practice, but develop boys' and girls' sense of equality, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self confidence, and competence. Development of these qualities in boys and girls depends on the quantity and quality of the interactions, and the nature of the interactions teachers have with them.

All my research participants acknowledged the importance of a teacher's interaction in developing these qualities in students. Dibya opined that whether students feel equal or unequal also depends on how the teachers behave with the students. Teachers who are aware of the issue will help in promoting equality, while those who are unaware repeat the same practices which are prevailing in the society. In regard to equal interaction, almost all teachers I interviewed said that they interact with boys and girls equally in the class and they treat them equally. They do not discriminate on the basis of gender. They even said, "Gender is irrelevant while teaching, but we give more opportunity consciously to girls as we know girls lag behind". However, while I observed the teachers in their classrooms, I found teachers' concentration more on boys than on girls, as boys were drawing teachers' attention by showing mischievous (chakchakey) behaviors, not showing proper interest, and diverting their attention to something else. Teachers in some classes even scolded them using expressions like jati bujhayapani nabujne, slapped them, and handed them books roughly (la padha), while girls kept quiet and were engaged in reading and writing as teachers asked. This sort of reduced attention to girls and increased attention to boys and vice –versa cultivates the sense of inequality amongst students which affects their sense of self-esteem and confidence.

Nevertheless, I found teachers made conscious efforts in asking questions turn by turn to both girls and boys while teaching their subjects. Teachers had enough time to ask questions to each

student, as the number of students in the classes I observed in all three schools was quite low (6-12 students). However, when I observed the classes from the perspective of forming gender equality concept, I found them perpetuating the stereotypes which are embedded in the textbooks, as they were unaware of gender as a factor in the teaching and learning processes. The subtle gender inequities and biases imbedded in the textbooks were transmitted by the teachers as well. The following are some examples.

I observed a Nepali subject teacher teaching in grade four. The topic of that day was children's rights (balbalikako adhikar). The teacher asked a student to read the book, and then the teacher described rights mostly referring to a 'boy child,' as written in the textbook. The topic begins with a sentence 'I am a boy' (ma balak hun), while the title of the topic is 'children's rights' (balbalikako adhikar). The teacher did not make any attempt to make students understand that the rights mentioned in the textbook are for both boys and girls. A similar observation was made in the English subject teaching in grade three. The teacher taught a rhyme about riding bicycles, 'Ride It Ride It,' excellently, following the English language teaching methodology which employs four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. She sought students' participation very well by asking them to chant while acting at the same time. However, in this class also, the teacher did not convey the message that boys and girls both can ride bicycles. In the textbook, pictures show only boys riding cycles.

I also observed Nepali subject teaching in grade five. The teacher taught a lesson entitled 'Mero Sathilaa chithi'. The teacher asked students to read Bhakta Bahadur Pariyar's letter, in which he writes about discrimination against Dalits and how happy he was when he was first in the class. He also writes that when he stood first in the class, attitudes towards him also changed. In this lesson, the teacher followed the proper methodology but missed the gender aspect. As there were boys and girls in the class, he could have discussed gender discrimination within caste discrimination. He could also have asked boys and girls to write a letter to their dear friends in their own words about discrimination they have felt or seen.

One of the other classes I observed was of accounting. The topic was 'the bank cash book'. The teacher asked one of the boys to come forward and draw the cash book format on the white board. He drew it very well. Then the teacher asked questions and students swiftly answered. The teacher went on recording on the board. He did ask questions to girls and boys both. Boys were faster and louder when answering, and girls were quiet, responding only when asked or when the teacher pointed at them. In this way, out of fifteen questions asked, ten were answered by boys and five by girls.

All four teachers taught their subjects well by following the textbooks, though none were conscious of its impact in forming the concepts of gender in children's minds. A matter of more concern to me is that the teachers who are using these textbooks are not aware of the flaws in these textbooks. This shows how girls and boys receive biased messages even today. Besides, teachers are also not aware of gender specific needs emerging from family and societal socialization. The brief description given above of the accounting class indicates unawareness of gendered behaviour in the teacher, though he is an excellent instructor in terms of subject matter and pedagogy. The teacher was not aware that girls, socialized not to speak but to be submissive, require teaching methodologies that continuously encourage them to speak up. I did not find such attempts in teachers of either gender. Instead, they stated, "We treat boys and girls equally, we do not discriminate (Barabar garchau, bived gardainau)," when I enquired about girls raising their voices in the class to be audible. I observed that the teachers of Computer Science, Math, and Social Studies have followed the same methodology, unconscious of gender.

Another area of concern to me is that although the teachers said they treat both boys and girls equally, they tended to reinforce the belief that girls are emotional, soft spoken and peaceful while boys are strong, vocal and assertive. I noticed the reinforcement of such notions during interviews and in class observations. When I asked the teachers to share their understanding

about the differences between boys and girls, almost all teachers said that boys are sporty, strong, louder and frank, while girls are diligent, swifter, serious and quiet. One of the teachers even narrated what they tell to their students when they complain: When girls and boys complain, we do tell them that boy and girl are different and the way they approach things is also different. Boys are boys: they are strong and short-tempered while girls are girls, they are weak and burdened with household work. Boys and girls have to understand that they are different.

In one of the classes I observed, the teacher gave the message that boys are aggressive when a boy asked the reasons for fights while news was shared by a girl in the news sharing session. The news sharing was a practice introduced in Srikhandapur Primary School to encourage interaction between students and to build confidence; indeed it was a very good practice. However, due to gender unawareness, I found the teacher perpetuating stereotypes. A brief scenario of what I observed is as follows:

A girl student shared the news “I saw a motor cycle accident on the way to my house. I also saw a crowd and two men fighting (ekle arko laai kuteko). Other people were trying to calm the fight and take apart these two men. I was so scared and I ran away”. The teacher asked the students, “Do you have questions?” A boy student asked, “Why did they fight?” The girl student did not respond. She kept quiet. Then the boy asked the teacher, “Sir, why did they fight?” The teacher responded, “Boys’ nature is aggressive (ketaharuko sobhav jhagadalu hunchha).” No further interaction occurred afterwards. This shows how teachers communicate their preconceived notions. In this case, the teacher communicated that boys are aggressive by nature to the students.

I found another teacher perpetuating the stereotype of a woman’s role of cleaning and caring. Srikhandapur Primary School has a good practice of checking students’ hands and feet to teach and maintain the health and hygiene of students during assembly. The teacher checked and saw some boys’ hands and dresses were dirty. She asked, “Why did you come with dirty dress and dirty hands? Ask your mother and sister to clean and come with clean dress”. This also shows how the teacher unintentionally perpetuated gender stereotypes. The teacher could have asked boys to clean up rather than telling the boys to ask their mothers and sisters at home.

Classroom Sitting Arrangement

I observed sex-segregation system in all three schools. When I asked about desegregation for the development of equality, most teachers responded that they have not enforced sitting separately. However, I saw teachers asking students of the same class to stand in two different rows (one of girls and another of boys) during assembly in all three schools.

In the classroom, girls and boys were seated separately on different sides and different rows in all the classes, though variations in the setting (sitting on the floor with a separate table) were found in grades four and five of the Srikhandapur Primary School. In my observation, segregated sitting arrangements have not constrained teachers’ interactions with students (and vice-versa) for learning, as students are few in all three schools. Teachers could even pay enough individual attention to students if they wish to do so. However, this practice reinforces societal sex segregation, and has consequences on the formation of gender equality concept in young students’ minds. This sex segregation system nurtures the existing hierarchy and alienating concept of ‘opposite sex’, rather than equal human being. It also affects the interactions between girls and boys in the classroom. If girls and boys are mixed together in the classroom, there could be more interactions between them (CERID, 2009).

These data show that though teachers are good at teaching their subjects and were making conscious efforts to encourage girls, they still reinforced gender stereotyping and biases prevalent in their society unconsciously by not challenging the embedded status quo in the textbooks, and by giving equal (same) treatment to both boys and girls who are in different social standing. They are not aware of the effect of gender biases and stereotyping. They are also not aware that ‘same’ treatment is not equal treatment, and that does not produce equality.

In order to produce equality in results or outcomes (ref. previous chapter), different treatment is required without discriminating as girls and boys are not the same, they are different but not unequal.

Use of Language in the Classroom

During class observations, I paid attention to the use of language in classroom.

I did not find teachers using sexist language, language that excludes either men or women when discussing a topic that is applicable to both sexes, except in one class. In one of the classes, I noticed the teacher using sexist language while he wrote a question on the white board. He then asked (facing the students) the students that ‘boys tell its answer (ketaharu la vana yasako jabaf)’. I also noticed the same language (‘boys’) this is all for today (kataharu aja laai yeati nai) while he was leaving the class when the bell rang. This indicates that for him ‘boys’ means students.

Outside the class observation, I paid attention to use of language by teachers as well. I noticed teachers using the honorific term ‘sir’ (indicating teachers) but not ‘madam’ to female teachers. One of the male teachers even failed to use the honorific term to female teachers in the teachers’ meeting, and said, “You (pointing at female teachers) do not speak while you have an opportunity and ‘talk at the back’ (bolna payako belama boldaina ani pachhadi Kura garchha).” To my surprise, the female teachers kept quiet when he said this. The use of female-exclusive terms such as headmaster instead of head teacher, chairman instead of chairperson, sirs (instead of sirs and madams), boys instead of boys and girls, was found to be very common in conversation.

During interviews also, I have noted and noticed the unintentional use of sexist language. I have even found teachers failing to teach honorific words for both genders; rather, they use pejorative language for girls and women (particularly for ‘wife,’ such as the less-formal thou or you (tan, timi). All the male teachers I interviewed, except three, have used non-honorific words to refer to their spouses, while all female teachers used honorific. The three male teachers who spoke about their spouses using honorific are teaching staff too. This gives an impression that the female who works is honoured while others are not honoured linguistically. Language does not merely reflect the way we think: it also shapes our thinking. If words and expressions that imply that women are inferior to men are constantly used, they are implanted in students’ minds. Female teachers who have been socialized to believe in the inferiority of women also reinforce these attitudes in schools just as much as their male colleagues by using sexist language, being unaware of its implications in the formation of gender hierarchy. Post-structural feminists argue that gender differences dwell in language (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005).

Use of sexist language in school perpetuates sexism - discrimination against people on the basis of sex. Discrimination against, and prejudicial stereotyping of women contributes to inequality in education. Acknowledging the effect of sexist language in achieving the global goal of gender equality, the representatives of Canada and the Nordic countries raised the issue of sexist language for the first time in 1987 in the UNESCO’s general conference and a call was made for the avoidance of gender-specific language in UNESCO. Thus, the General Conferences went on to take a firm stance on the issue (UNESCO, 1999) and published “Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language”, which is widely used in the UN system. Use of non-sexist and non-pejorative language in teaching and teaching materials is imperative for developing the concept of equality.

Use of Teaching and Learning Materials

In all the three schools I observed, textbooks were the major means of learning for students and the means for teaching. No other teaching materials were used in classes. However, there was a well-equipped library in each school. All children, regardless of class and gender, have access to the library and a period is scheduled for library study every week. Some of the books

(stories, poems) in the library also perpetuate gender stereotypes and gender biases as the writers of the books were also the product of the same society and are not gender sensitive enough. The CERID study (2007) had made recommendations for textbooks and materials development to enhance gender equality and mutual understanding between men and women.

Like some of the books in the libraries, textbooks are not free from gender biases and sex stereotyping. There are several examples to cite. The health, population, and environment textbook is an example. The class nine textbook depicts a picture of father teaching and mother giving a bath to a child (p.17). Such a depiction is also found on page 52. Various researches show that the use of gender-equitable materials allows students to have more gender-balanced knowledge, to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and to imitate role behaviors contained in the materials. Gender audit (2002) also had recommended the presentation of gender sensitive role- models without gender stereotypes in educational materials. Representation of Female Teachers in School Management School is one of the sites where children spend most of their time. It is the place where their gender identities are constructed, reconstructed, negotiated, and officially sanctioned. The overall environment in school offers influential messages about gender. Students also learn about each other's gender formally as well as informally in the school environment. Therefore, I gathered some information about school management.

All the three schools of my study are headed by male teachers. In the primary school, with the exception of the head teacher, all teachers are female. Though there are more female teachers who are more qualified and experienced than the current head teacher, the school is still headed by a male teacher. In the SHSS too, the school is headed by a male teacher. There is no secondary level female teacher. In GSA management, is in the hands of three stakeholders: the principal, director and stakeholders' representative. There is no regular full-time secondary level female teacher. The complete absence of female teacher representation at the secondary level and in management leaves decision-making mostly in the hands of men. This makes the management unable to address gender specific needs of female students. While, on the other hand, girls have not been able to report and discuss their problems openly to the school management (CERID, 2009).

One such case was revealed when, in person and privately, I asked the computer science teacher about female students and teachers' problems in school. She shared that she being the only female teacher teaching in the secondary level (though she is not a secondary level teacher); many girls come to her when they have problems, especially for asking time-off from the school while they are having their monthly period. Suku said,

I have given off many handkerchiefs as girls came here (separate computer lab) to share their problems when they menstruate. In the beginning, they came and asked that I asked for permission for them to quit classes on their behalf as they were reluctant to go to male teachers. I did it for them. Now I stopped doing it for them as the numbers of girls coming to me is increasing. I told them to ask by themselves.

When I asked how the teachers support girls who miss class every month, she said that there is no specific plan/ activity to address these students. They manage on their own. I asked again whether she thinks about the possibility of having a session or two in imparting skills in managing the menstruation period for those who could not afford to buy sanitary wear. She just nodded. Many girls in Nepal do miss classes due to lack of proper materials (sanitary wear, water and soap), the uncomfortable environment (teasing, harassment after leaks, being looked down on if experiencing cramps or aches) and lack of specific skills to manage menstruation. Adolescent girls' problems are compounded further where there are no female teachers in higher grades teaching. Most often, girls disappear from the classes without notifying teachers and become victims of punishment as they do not have the courage to tell the truth to the male teachers in the class before the boys. This situation inhibits a girl's performance and causes the formation of negative perceptions of self. Not having enough water in the female toilet, lack of

space for changing sanitary towel, eve-teasing, and sexual harassment are some of the issues never raised and discussed in the management.

Lack of female teachers in school management not only disables management from addressing gender specific needs of girls and boys, but also impedes timely disciplinary action to provide a safe and secure environment for female students and teachers. One such case was revealed by a female teacher when asked about problems faced by females. One boy student attempted to attack a female teacher on the way to school. The boy student happened to be the son of a School Management Committee member. He also used abusive words towards the female accountant when she asked him to pay his school fees in time. Female teachers said that the management did not take action in a timely manner. Another female teacher told her tale about a recently retired head teacher. She said that the outgoing head teacher's attitude towards female teachers (*mahilahu dheri bida linchhan*) was very negative and harsh in behaviour. He had negative stereotypes about female teachers, labelling them as gossipers, less competent, and prone to taking more leave than male teachers. That was one of the major reasons for not having female secondary level teachers in the school for so long. Finding such problems, CERID (1997) had made recommendation to identify and remove the barriers to women being trained, recruited, and accepted.

Lack of female teachers' participation in management reinforces sex stereotypes and attitudes in school management and in teachers as well. One of the female teachers in SHSS says, "As we female teachers are of the primary level and we are few in number, we have limited access to information and decision making. We get only what is shared in the staff meetings." One of the teachers sadly shared that the school examination committee had meetings and lunch together, but women were not invited, so they did not know when the results would be out. They had to tell students that they did not know when asked about exam results. This is how even students undermine female teachers. Female teachers are neither considered for

leadership positions nor do they aspire to occupy such positions. Often women deselect themselves from serious consideration for appointments in leadership roles, either by not actively seeking positions or by turning down positions when offered. For the most part, resistance, prejudiced attitudes and/or stereotypical beliefs about women block the consideration of women for such positions (Bista, 2006). The need to changing teachers' mind-sets, attitudes and behaviour was generally seen. Teacher training institutions ought to have an important role to play in educating teachers (Swedish International Development Assistance [SIDA], 2010).

Female teachers want to be accepted as team members. Many also expect to be involved in all aspects of school management. Support for professional growth, equal opportunity for career advancement, frequent communication and interaction, the use of decent language, etc. are also desired by them. Above all, they expect to be treated with respect and dignity by their male colleagues (Bista, 2007). Thus, encouraging and supporting more female teachers to be in management is one way of improving gender equality in schools. Equally important is ensuring that male teachers and pupils behave in non-discriminatory and non-threatening ways. However, the SSRP gender audit found female teachers being excluded from consultations on school improvement planning (SIPs). The male domination of the SMCs plays a part in these forms of discrimination against serving women teachers (Terry & Thapa, 2012).

All the above data reveal that though almost all the teachers do think students should be treated equally without considering their genders, in practice they do treat them unequally and perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases against girls unintentionally and unconsciously. It is because firstly, the school system allows little time for reflection on institutionalized inequalities. Teachers are required to pursue the course book, to teach and to undertake the examination. This is not only required by school authorities, but also expected by parents and

societies and does not predispose teachers to be agents of change: quite simply, gender equality is not part of the school test to which teachers are teaching. Teachers, as they are expected to teach the course book, preserve the gender stereotypes and bias against girls embedded in the curriculum by perpetuating the patriarchal sexist value which are the cultural capital (in Bourdieu's words) of the most teachers. Secondly, teachers were not made aware of and trained to developing a new cultural capital, in this case gender equality culture, through education on gender and pedagogy. Change in practice required a change in habitus of teachers (character, thoughts and activities of individuals) and in the field (schools), because, practice is also the result of interaction between habitus and field. I found in my study sites that neither the teachers' habitus nor the field is free from stereotype and biases as teachers are also the product of this society and are not exposed to new knowledge and skills for transformation.

Conclusion :

I have expounded on teachers' practices. All teachers do agree that they should treat boys and girls equally and said that they treated them equally. As teachers were not aware of stereotyping and biases, they were perpetuating gender biases unintentionally and covertly. I have linked the findings with Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction. Though teachers know about equality, they reproduced inequalities as gender equality is not part of the school teaching and testing.

I proceed to the next chapter where I continue the process of analysis to show the challenges that hinder practicing gender equality and the positive practices that help in promoting gender equality in education.

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