

MAINTAINING GENDER-NEUTRAL CLASSROOMS: A GLIMPSE TO THE DESIRED TRACHER COMPETENCIES

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Abstract

Gender neutrality is the term which connotes to the policies and concerns associated with the practice of considering individuals in socio- cultural milieux, by avoiding their gender or sex in distinguishing their identity and fixing their roles. The learners, irrespective of their futuristic viewpoints, always cherish a cordial relationship with the teacher as the teacher is not only a role model but a companion in their journey to perfection. Perfection cannot always be attributed to the achievements and success in life. Being worthy and humane also means being perfect. In this regard, it is the teacher who substitutes to the process towards perfection. As the name indicates, teacher competencies means a group of skills required for the teachers to handle the learning environment with utmost dexterity. These competencies are the indicators of teacher competence. These skills are essential in every learning scenario so that it carry out the smooth transaction of curriculum. These competencies mainly contribute to the personal as well as creative expression of every individual teacher. It affects the value perspectives, teaching behaviour, teacher behaviour, interpersonal communication and above all, professional development of the teachers. In the present education scenario, which is more or less gender sensitive, every teacher is accountable to possess the essential teacher competencies so as to make the teaching-learning environment gender-neutral. In this paper, the author identifies the major teacher competencies essential for the 21st century learning scenario, so as to make the classroom interaction, gender-neutral. Here the author summarises the major competencies such as knowledge of gender laws, use of gender-neutral language, knowledge of gender responsive and gender neutral pedagogical practices, and setting up of gender-neutral collaborative and creative spaces in classrooms. This paper throws light into the major concepts associated with the aforesaid competencies.

Keywords: Teacher Competencies, Gender- neutrality, Gender-neutral language, Gender responsiveness.

Introduction

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to

participate in the transformation of their world.”

— Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The above quote reveals the functionality of education and the role it plays in the lives of generation next. The combined and creative effort of men and women caters to

the transformation of their worlds. How can it be actualised? When this question is posed, the primary concern will definitely be fixed upon the process of education. What might be the nature of education then? Who shall be benefitted from it? Does it stand for the creamy layer only? Or do the 'means and ends' are for everyone, irrespective of the constraints that demarcate people from people? A humanistic approach to education is the need of the hour as it practically believes the worth of an individual who is irreducible that nothing can deteriorate the integrity of the individual to parts. A humanistic teacher never addresses a learner from a reductionist perspective; rather, they are considered a holistic entity.

Gender, one of the major constructs, delimits an individual's metamorphosis to perfection. Gender disparity seen in all walks of life hinders the progress of mankind. As education is for drawing out the best in individuals, it is the responsibility of teachers to make the teaching-learning environment gender-neutral. Gender roles vary from society to society. At present, it is mainly the women's issues shaped by power politics of the patriarchal societies. The analysis of gender discourses highlights the role of gender politics in knowledge construction. Education, undoubtedly, has the capacity to initiate changes in the society.

It would be advisable to make the learning environment inclusive. A lot of efforts should be made from the part of the teacher to integrate gender concerns in education. The need of democratizing education is the primary concern. How to make the educational process gender inclusive is a matter of concern. An ordinary teacher can never make a learning environment gender inclusive and gender neutral. A lot of competencies are inevitable to handle gender sensitive classrooms. Competencies can be defined as the skills and knowledge possessed by a teacher to be successful. In order to maximise student learning teachers must have expertise in a number of competencies. It is known that a classroom is a place where hundreds of critical decisions are required each day (Jackson, 1990). Gender neutrality is the term which connotes to the policies and concerns

associated with the practice of considering individuals in socio-cultural milieu, by avoiding their gender or sex in distinguishing their identity and fixing their roles. 'Gender Neutrality' is used as an adjective that can be applicable to, or common to both male and female. It describes the idea that policies, language and other social institutions should avoid distinguishing roles according to people's gender and emphasizes on equal legal provisions given to men and women with no discrimination (Waylen et.al, 2013). The learners, irrespective of their futuristic viewpoints, always cherish a cordial relationship with the teacher as the teacher is not only a role model but a companion in their journey to perfection. Perfection cannot always be attributed to the achievements and success in life. Being worthy and humane also means being perfect. In this regard, it is the teacher who substitutes to the process towards perfection.

The major competencies required by a teacher to make the classrooms gender-neutral are knowledge of gender laws, use of gender-neutral language, need of creating gender-neutral collaborative learning spaces, knowledge of gender responsive and gender-neutral pedagogical practices, and setting up of gender-neutral creative spaces in classrooms. The present paper attempts to summarise the above-mentioned competencies one by one.

1. Knowledge of Gender-Neutral Laws

Gender-neutrality doesn't mean anti-feminism. There can be atrocities against men. This thought would enable a female teacher to treat both girls and boys alike. So also a male teacher can do the same. A thorough introspection of laws in India reveals that majority of the laws are gender-biased. But part III of Indian Constitution ensures the equal rights to all citizens of India, irrespective of their gender. Article 14 states that everyone is equal before law regardless of their gender. Article 15 prohibits any kind of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. In India, sexual violence has been considered women-centric. Here men are considered the only perpetrators in all situations. The IPC section 375 (on rape) clarifies it and treats woman as the victim. IPC

Section 354, states that whoever assaults or uses criminal force or to outrage the modesty of a woman shall be punished with two year imprisonment or fine or both. Here also only a woman is treated as the victim. A teacher on the other hand should be able to sensitise the problems of boys in the classroom too. It is clear that like women and girls, men and boys are also subject to sexual assaults than we are conscious of. It is a common belief that male sexual harassment is not a significant problem, mainly because of lack of reported cases. The reason for this lack of reported incidents is mainly because of the lack of laws under which such incidents can be reported. Rumney (2007) criticises the attitude of feminist critics of gender for ignoring male victimization and stated that the effects of rape on male victims go unnoticed.

Article 21 ensures Right to Life and therefore right to health of an individual can also be considered a fundamental right guaranteed to every citizen of India. Health is an umbrella term which covers the physical, mental and emotional health of the individual. It aims at the wellbeing of the individuals. A teacher in a classroom should be able to nourish the wellbeing of his/her children even though there are not enough suitable laws to support the wellbeing of the individuals. People's Union for Civil Liberties (2003) found that there are widespread human rights violations against the transgender community and proper laws to protect them are urgently required.

2. Use of Gender-Neutral Language

Another major competency a teacher should possess in a gender-neutral is the knowledge and use of gender-neutral language. How can a language be gender-neutral? The choice of gender-neutral terms, adjectives and the way a teacher addresses the child in a learning environment all contributes to the conditions for making the language gender-neutral.

Language expresses our thoughts and beliefs, so it should be used carefully. Inappropriate use of language conveys negative messages and it will hinder the progress in learning. A teacher is not supposed to use derogatory words to the students which may make the learners think they are not fit for the learning situation and it tend to make their academic

performance worse. Gender neutral language not only means addressing the learners in a gender-neutral manner but it also means avoiding abusive and harsh language in the classroom.

The inappropriate use of language in a classroom worsens gender differences and it causes gender inequalities in the classroom. It may lead to male dominance and demote girls to a lower position. A teacher who is capable of using inclusive language in the classroom can improve the performance and confidence of the learners. The use of gender-neutral and gender-responsive language in the classroom treats both boys and girls alike and provides a conducive learning environment for both. Some teachers, who are not willing to re-examine the kind of language they use in the classrooms creates a learning environment where either the girls are forced to think they are not able to perform well as boys, or the boys tend to think that they are not capable to be outperformed by girls. It is the teacher's words which influence the learners most. The teacher should be very conscious when he or she makes statements related to the interests, behaviour, personality and choices of the learners. For example, a teacher should not discriminate boys and girls in the selection of subjects they wish to study, or should not make derogatory comments on the girls who is assertive.

In order to create a gender inclusive or gender-neutral classroom, a teacher should be well aware of the use of gender specific pronouns so that none is excluded. A teacher can avoid use of adjectives like beautiful, pretty, obedient, submissive for girls and brave, courageous, strong, handsome for boys. Teacher should be able to understand the conditions of loners in the class and need to find out the reasons for their disinterestedness. In order to make the classroom environment gender-neutral, a teacher should provide positive reinforcing words like excellent, good, well done etc. for both boys and girls. Communication doesn't need to be verbal always. In a classroom, non-verbal communication also matters. A teacher may use his or her eye contact for all children in the class. The teacher should always try to avoid offensive non-verbal communications such as frowning,

touching, brushing, grabbing etc. A teacher should move in the class in a most appropriate manner and encourage the learners to share their viewpoints related to the classroom activities and try to involve all students in all the activities. In some classes, we can find some girls are not willing to participate in peer group activities. In those situations it is the responsibility of the teacher to find out the reasons for lack of participations.

3. Knowledge of Gender Responsive and Gender-Neutral Pedagogical Practices

A scrutiny of present classroom practices reveals that teaching and learning is gender biased in such a way that neither the girls nor the boys get equal opportunities to participate in classroom interaction procedure. Practicing gender responsive pedagogy is the need of the hour. Pedagogy, an umbrella term connotes to all processes associated with teaching and learning. In its specific context, it means the content to be taught, the nature of teaching and the expected learning outcomes. Gender Responsive Pedagogy can be defined as the classroom the practice in which the “learning needs of male and female learners are addressed in teaching and learning processes (inside and outside of the classroom) where teaching staff are gender-aware and gender-responsive in their planning and facilitation of courses, and continuously reflecting and adapting.” (Jennifer Chapin, Verity Warne, 2020). Gender responsive and gender-neutral pedagogy doesn’t discriminate girls and boys in attaining specific learning outcomes. A teacher who is aware of gender responsiveness and gender-neutrality takes an all-encompassing gender approach in lesson planning, teaching, classroom management and performance evaluation. Many innovative pedagogical approaches are available and in use, including role plays, group discussions, case studies, skits, demonstrations and study tours are not necessarily gender responsive (Mlama et.al, 2005).

We all are aware of the role of text books in an educational context. A teacher should analyse the text book thoroughly before going to transact the content. A few areas are to be analysed in association with the classroom

interaction procedure. Let me list out the major areas to be analysed.

1. How are Gender relations conceptualised in the content, visuals and activities?
2. Do the textual materials provide scope for equity and equality for both genders?
3. Whether the textual content includes contributions of both men and women in a justifiable way. ?
4. Do the textbooks reflect the identities in a gender-inclusive manner?
5. Do the textbooks bridge the social, cultural, ethnical and religious gap between men and women in the society?
6. Whether the text books try to develop attitude in both girls and boys?
7. Whether the text books address different issues faced by both men and women in society?
8. Whether the text books follow the principles of critical pedagogy in sensitising the negatives practices and policies exist in societies which are unfavourable to both men and women?
9. Whether the textual contents are gender-neutral and gender-inclusive?

When it comes to lesson transaction, a teacher should always try to follow gender-inclusive strategies. All activities should be able to break gender related barriers. The choice of teaching aids should be gender-friendly in the sense that neither the boys nor the girls feel that they are superior or inferior in handling the aids. The teacher can make the interaction procedure dialogical and, may encourage team. Use of multimedia such as dramatization, social media, films, songs etc., helps better understanding of the concepts.

Another major concern is in the process of assessment and evaluation. We can notice physical, intellectual, social, emotional and linguistic variations in the learners. Every teacher should consider this diversity and need to formulate inclusive assessment strategies which are free from all biases. The assessment should help the learners to analyse their roles in the society in a gender-neutral way. The strategies should not mar the self-esteem and self-confidence of the students. They should be provided with multiple assessment strategies which should be helpful in determining their individuality in a gender-neutral way. It will

definitely help them to understand the meaning of equality, equity, diversity and differences operating in different contexts related to family, school, work places and society at large. The gender-inclusive assessment methods help students construct their own concepts on man-woman relationship, the need of gender-neutrality and the importance of their combined effort in nation building. The positive portrayal of boys and girls can be adopted by teachers as examples for assessment. Group assessment exercises can be given to all children for promoting human values, maintaining harmony and to sustain a gender-responsive society. The assessment questions should be free from all biases and stereotypes. Hence teachers should be trained and formulate their own parameters on assessment procedures to make it inclusive for all.

4. Setting up of Gender-Neutral Collaborative and Creative Spaces in Classrooms.

In Indian context, the nature and size of classrooms vary. It is a known fact that appropriate classroom environment facilitates learning mechanism and it helps in removing gender bias. It just requires sensitivity and positive intent. How can a teacher provide gender-friendly learning spaces? A teacher who is well aware of the potentialities of both boys and girls should consider a few things.

1. Act as a facilitator when dealing with classroom interaction procedure where it should be ensured that physical and social environment of the classroom promotes healthy relationships between boys and girls.
2. We can find drawbacks in seating arrangements in the classrooms. In most of the educational institutions, separate seats are arranged for both boys and girls. It normally hinders the process of socialisation. It doesn't permit both genders to participate in the learning process. Hence a teacher should make it gender-friendly.
3. Teacher should allocate classroom duties in a most gender neutral manner and ensure equal participation of both genders.
4. In the teaching learning process, emphasis should be given to both men and women achievers who have contributed to different fields. Every activity in classroom should be able to create an insight of gender inclusion and parity.
5. Teachers should not discriminate boys and girls in the selection of subjects they wish to study. To illustrate this point, let us go through some normal situations exist in our present educational context. Majority of the teachers consider practical and hands-on experiences will be more suitable for boys. Girls are denied provisions to technical education due to this thought. They are always exempted from attending some sessions which are conceptualised as 'dangerous.' In effect, the girls will always be hesitant to take part in challenging tasks. In such a situation boys tend to dominate learning processes to maintain their superiority in the presence of girls
6. Teacher should make necessary steps to make the classroom interactions between boys and girls reflect mutual respect. The classroom ethos should be made open and supportive, so that both boys and girls feel free to share their personal experiences without apprehensions. – The concept of equality of sexes may be explained by elaborating on the intelligence and capabilities of girls and women. The teacher must also ensure equal participation of boys and girls in their creative expressions such as participation in drawing, painting, music, dance, speech, drama etc.

Conclusion

Gender concerns in education need to be addressed with caution as it has direct effect upon the lives of people from all strata of society. In the context of gender, women and girls are considered inferior to men in the society, neglecting their efforts in nation building. So in a classroom, it is the responsibility of the teacher to create positive self-image of both the genders.

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