Is school really a change institution?

Gender analysis of schooling processes in secondary schools

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Education is considered a main tool of transformation: of ideas, social and gender relations, societies and economies. Time and again it has been referred to as one of the most important processes that facilitated social transformation. For a critical age group of children and adolescents, school is the main institution that imparts 'education' and acts as the main platform for receiving and engaging with information and ideas, the formation of knowledge and for socialisation with peers. The question that we are trying to address here is whether school is really an institution that facilitates change – change in ideas, in positions and in relations – especially in the context of gender and gender-related notions and practices. The question is important from many perspectives. Education is often loaded with the responsibility of facilitating women's empowerment, reducing gender disparities in all spheres of life and making a more just, caring and compassionate society. Also, within education, there is often talk of attaining gender parity and equality in most national and international targets and goals, be it Education for All (EFA) objectives or Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or national policy statements. And if education has to fulfil these responsibilities and achieve these goals, it is important that school acts as a change institution.

But the question is whether it does just that, and the answer is 'No'. The answer is 'No' if we go by the findings of a research study carried out by the education section of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which looked at the classrooms and other aspects of schooling processes in some thirty schools across seven Commonwealth countries. This article presents a brief summary of the findings emerging from this research. The countries in question

are India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Samoa, Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tobago. The choice of countries was guided by various reasons. One was the need to obtain a diverse picture from various economic, geographical, social and cultural contexts, so as to allow a comparative analysis of similarities and differences. Another reason was to choose the countries where disparities are clearly defined – either against girls or against boys – and to see whether schooling processes explain those. India, Pakistan and Malaysia are three high-population, low-income countries with high gender disparity in favour of boys. Samoa, Seychelles, and Trinidad and Tobago are middle-income countries with low population, and have achieved near gender parity in primary level but are facing some disparities in favour of girls at secondary. Malaysia comes closer to the second set of countries in terms of income level and boys' under-achievement (see Table 1).

The main objective of the study is to analyse the classroom and outside-classroom processes in a few secondary schools from a gender perspective in order to understand (1) whether classroom and school processes question or reinforce the dominant unequal gendered notions and stereotypes; (2) how they question or reinforce the existing notions and stereotypes; and (3) what are the likely solutions if schooling processes are found to be reinforcing the dominant gender notions and stereotypes.

The nature of the study was essentially qualitative, where four to five schools were closely studied in each of the selected countries for their approach to gender in the classroom and other teaching–learning processes. The very objective demanded a qualitative approach. It was a deliberate decision to keep the number of schools low and to go in-depth when analysing the

Table 1	Selected Development Indicators for Seven Countries						
	India	*Malaysia*	*Nigeria*	*Pakistan*	*Samoa*	*Seychelles*	*Trinidad and Tobago*
Income category 2005	LIC	UMC	LIC	LIC	LMC	UMC	LMC
Population (millions)	1,134.4	25.7	141.4	158.1	0.1	0.1	1.3
Per Capita GDP (US dollars)	3,452	10,882	1,128	2,370	8,677	16,106	14,603
Human Development Index (HDI) 2005	128	63	158	136	77	50	59
Gender Development Index (GDI) 2005	113	58	139	125	72	N/A	56

Sources: Income category from the World Development Report (2008/2007), The World Bank; all remaining from the Human Development Report (2007/2008), UNDP.

Notes: UMC, Upper-Middle income Country; LMC, Lower-Middle income Country; LIC, Low-Income Country; N/A, not applicable. HDI is a composite index based on life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, combined enrolment ratio for primary, secondary and tertiary education, and per-capita GDP. GDI is based on life expectancy, education index and income index.

processes that happen inside those schools. This raises the question whether the findings can be generalised. Strictly speaking, the answer is 'No'. The answer is 'No' even for Seychelles, where four schools mean nearly 40% coverage, as the country has only ten secondary schools, and indeed in India where four or five is a miniscule number when compared to more than 100,000 schools in the country, or even to the 8,500 secondary schools in Rajasthan, the state where the study was conducted.

The answer is 'No' everywhere because the actual teaching and learning process is unique to each particular teacher and learner, and no two classes are ever conducted in the same way. How a particular process manifests itself depends on a number of factors and, therefore, cannot be generalised in a strict sense. However, qualitative studies are meant to reflect the kinds of practices that are most common and, if they show dominance of a particular kind of practice, that can be taken as indicative of a trend. The number has limited significance also in cases where the similarities are likely to be significant. The analogy of cooking rice where one grain of rice is a good indicator of whether the whole pot is cooked or not is a common one to claim that one case can be an effective sample size in situations where the differences are the minimum and the chosen grain is not an extraordinary one. Gender-related practices in most societies somewhat fall in this category. The depth of the study matters more in the quest for understanding processes.

The study followed the same research design and basic set of tools developed by the team of country researchers, in consultation with the Education Section of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The aspects of the enquiry were limited to the domain of the school. The schools were chosen from rural and urban areas. They were single sex as well as co-educational, and though largely state run, some private schools were also included. The techniques used included:

1. Classroom observations.
2. Interviews with teachers.
3. Focus group discussions with girls/boys.
4. Interviews with principals.
5. Focus group discussions with teachers.
6. Focus group discussions with administrative staff.
7. Focus group discussions with school inspectors/support officials.
8. Interviews with senior education managers in the district.

The aspects of the enquiry included a focus on:

1. Classroom transactions.
2. Teacher-student relationships.
3. Non-classroom school activities.
4. School management practices.
5. Levels of teacher training.

The study was based on the conceptual premise that if education processes and opportunities within education are not geared to question unequal gender relations and established notions of femininity and masculinity, then inequalities will continue to exist. Therefore, gender analysis of classroom and schooling processes is valid and relevant in all kinds of situations. The concepts of equity and empowerment are critical in the context of gender equality in classroom and schooling processes. Quantitative measures alone are not adequate to capture progress towards gender equality in education. Empowerment has been defined as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where

this ability was previously denied to them. Also important to note is the fact that empowerment entails a process of change. People who exercise a great deal of power may be very powerful but not necessarily empowered, as they were not disempowered before.

Inequality needs to be separated from difference, and research has shown that we have to disentangle differentials that reflect differences in preferences and priorities from those embodying a denial of choice. The denial of choice demands affirmative action to help mitigate unequal positioning; this may include measures to address gender stereotypes and create differentiated opportunities and treatments in order to impact the traditional gender relations and roles. Also crucial is acknowledging that gender inequality is often embedded in other forms of inequalities, e.g., caste, class, race, religion or location. Furthermore, the impact of gender-differentiated norms and practices are often sharper and more complex for groups that also face other forms of marginalisation and vulnerability. It is of critical importance, therefore, to understand this phenomenon, and appreciate the linkages and implications in the context of education.

The findings in brief

As revealed earlier, the findings of the study overwhelmingly showed that schools do not act as change institutions; they merely reinforce the existing gender ideology, stereotypes, norms and expectations. And this message came from the schools included in all the seven countries located in the different regions of the Commonwealth: Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific. The prevalent gender ideology, stereotypes, norms and expectations are not the same everywhere, but, with a few exceptions, are very similar in most of the countries. The highlights of the findings are presented against five major classifications:

1. Teachers' perceptions and expectations

Almost all teachers in these schools viewed girls as being more responsible and hard working compared to boys, who were perceived as indifferent, irresponsible and aggressive. However, this does not lead to girls getting more leadership roles. Despite the common belief that girls are more responsible, teachers prefer to assign most leadership roles in classroom and school exercises to boys in all the co-educational schools in the study. A slight change in this trend was visible in Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago.

The observations regarding teachers' expectations from students in terms of academic performance are interesting. Although teachers may prefer to assign leadership roles to boys, they do not expect them to perform very well academically, this being especially true for Samoa, Trinidad and Tobago, Seychelles and Malaysia. This is significant, as these are the countries where boys have been under-performing, and where the issue has long engaged many researchers and policy-makers alike. Teachers relate academic performance to hard work and expect girls to do better than boys. However, this was not so clearly differentiated in the remaining three countries: India, Nigeria and Pakistan. It should be noted that the trends regarding performance are also not as clearly defined in these three countries. Although boys far outnumber girls in terms of enrolment and participation, girls in many locations outperform boys in public examination results. However, the trends are still mixed and boys' under-performance is not a common trend.

Another important observation regarding teachers' perception is that their expectations regarding academic achievement has nothing to do with their expectations from girls being necessarily engaged in 'care' work. Almost all teachers expressed the view that it is 'natural' for girls to be contributing to 'care' work in school and at home. They viewed this role as 'just' and 'unavoidable' and did not see any need for questioning this. This observation clearly reflects how school naturalises societal stereotypes without any questioning and therefore reinforces the prevalent gender roles, leading to internalisation of these notions among children as well.

2. Subject choices

Subject choices continue to be gendered in most cases; boys tend to be concentrated in subjects that are considered to be 'masculine' (e.g., mathematics) and girls in those that are viewed as more 'feminine' (e.g., languages). However, some change is visible in some areas, especially in the case of science, which is no longer a male-dominated subject in most countries. But then that also signifies a shift by boys towards newer subjects such as Information Technology and girls towards traditional and pure sciences.

3. Classroom processes

Classrooms in most cases studied remained teacher-centric and controlled, and there was little opportunity for students to participate in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Samoa. In Malaysia, Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago, though teachers controlled the activities completely, students were still given more opportunities to participate. One of the most important observations regarding classroom processes in India, Pakistan and Nigeria – three countries where girls are lagging behind boys in access and participation – is that boys clearly receive greater attention from teachers. Greater attention here refers to getting more opportunities to respond and participate in classroom discussions. The same was not so clearly differentiated in the remaining four countries, where boys clearly under-perform compared to girls. Girls were observed to be shy and timid in India and Pakistan and it was noted that no effort was made by the teachers to help them overcome their timidity so that they could participate more freely in classroom activities. This also reflects the prevalent socialisation of girls in South Asia, where girls are encouraged to be shy and quiet and boys are encouraged to be open and expressive.

Girls and boys sit separately almost everywhere. Even if it is not the rule, there is an unspoken rule that is followed unquestioningly. Boys and girls rarely interact, even in co-educational schools in Pakistan, whereas the level of interactions between boys and girls varies elsewhere, being high in Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago, and low in India and Samoa. Barring Seychelles, teachers were found to use gender-stereotyped language. Boys receive more harsh reprimands for minor offences everywhere, whereas girls get away with greater offences. Corporal punishment, wherever practised, is also more common for boys.

The choice of sports by girls and boys is also gendered – as the Samoa report put it, boys play football and girls baseball. Seychelles emerged as an exception, with some girls choosing traditionally masculine sports such as football. Many schools only provided 'feminine' sports for girls; similarly, there was very little option for boys to choose a sport perceived as 'feminine'.

4. Textbooks

The visibility of women in textbooks is very low compared to men, particularly in Pakistan. The report from the Pakistan case-schools suggested that women and men are identified with stereotypical attributes found in the textbooks: the male is portrayed as brave, heroic, honest and strong, and the female as caring, self-sacrificing, loving and kind. Most of the textbook authors and members of the textbook-review committees are also almost all men. India and Malaysia provided some examples of recent efforts to depict women in non-traditional roles and to portray them as capable of making choices, but these are mere token shifts. Seychelles again emerged as an exception as most of the textbooks in use are recently published and appear to be gender friendly.

5. Students' aspirations and perceptions

It is also important to understand students' own aspirations and perceptions in order to see if the school is acting as a change institution or not. Although school is not the only institution and schooling processes not the only processes impacting on children's aspirations and perceptions, it is one of the important ones. Most male students in these case-schools believe they would be the main breadwinner and see girls as 'weaker' and in need of protection. Girls, however, are less stereotypical in their career aspirations, though in some cases, their expressed aspirations did not match with the subject choices; some girls pursuing humanities at secondary level expressed their desire to become doctors and appeared to be unaware of the fact that they were not even eligible to pursue a course in medicine.

An important observation emerging from most schools in all these countries was that girls also seek protection: even when they speak of being 'independent', they believe in being protected. Also that parents reinforce gender stereotypes, and, in some cases, gendered differences is very obvious in parental support, e.g., arranging private tuition classes to support school education for boys but not for girls, and trying to facilitate study time at home for boys but not for girls.

Peer perceptions are very important to adolescents. They also play a crucial role in shaping a young person's perception of him/herself. And in this case, also, it was found that both boys and girls have strong notions about 'masculine' and 'feminine' and they made efforts to stick to those norms. For instance, interest in academics was seen as 'feminine' by peers, especially male students, and hence adolescent boys tried to assert that they were not really interested. This notion was very strong and visible in Trinidad and Tobago, but varied elsewhere. The Pakistan report showed how girls viewed themselves as the family's honour and boys viewed themselves as the main pillar of strength.

Conclusion

This study clearly establishes that these schools are largely not change institutions; they tend merely to reinforce societal norms and practices without much questioning. And if that is the case with average schools in most places, school cannot fulfil the responsibility of making gender relations more equal and just. This research has established that much more work needs to be done on school processes if the objectives of EFA and the gender-related MDGs are to become a reality.