

# Nature of Schooling: Construction of Gendered Identities in a Secondary School

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## Abstract

*Schooling bears the potentiality to nurture and construct an individuals' behavioral pattern, roles and responsibilities in terms of societal norms. To develop a nuanced understanding of the processes of schooling through a gender perspective, this paper concentrates on how daily practices within the school context shape gender identities. Gender role and relation is thus taken as the analytical frame of this study to explore the nature of schooling through interaction among the existing heterogeneous groups of teachers and students in a school setting. This ethnographic study, conducted in a period of six months, was framed within a feminist standpoint theory. Data revealed how physical spaces, subject interests, leadership positions, nature of discipline, and division of labor created gender boundaries through routine work methods and practices in a secondary coeducational school setting. The conclusions of the study have a bearing on training and orientation of teachers and concepts about curriculum and learning objectives for promoting a gender neutral experience for adolescents in their socialization process.*

**Keywords:** Gendered identities, coeducation, schooling, secondary school

## 1. Introduction: framing the research issue

Although Bangladesh is one of the least developed countries, it has achieved notable progress towards numerical gender equality in access to schooling at both primary and secondary levels. The gender gap favoring boys in school enrollment, visible in the past, has been largely eliminated (BANBEIS, 2013). The prevailing paradox is that despite achieving statistical equality, differences persist in political and economic power of men and women. This situation suggests the importance of adopting a broad perspective on socialization including how schools nurture individuals' inner possibilities – beyond just academic achievement of students. Schooling has the potentiality to nurture and construct an individuals' behavioral pattern, roles and sense of responsibilities in terms of societal norms (Stromquist, 2007). The tendency to polarize the gender categories and behavioral norms within the school context is common (Butler, 1990; Dunne, 2007). The consequences are the persistent discrimination in professional life, leadership in society, double burden of home and work for women, and the political and social dynamics that support the status quo

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as noted and analyzed in several research studies in the Bangladesh context (Mim, 2015; Kabeer, 2000).

The focus of this paper is thus to explore the ways in which a school both produce and regulate gender identities. The paper argues that school itself constructs gender identities while practicing the daily routine. The idea of conducting this study is inspired by the argument of Dunne (2007:26) when she said, “to be a girl/boy is to act in specific feminine/masculine ways to assert that gender identity. These gender performances are a persistent feature of daily life in schools which the organizational structures frame appropriate gender behavior; and where these structures are also regulated by teachers and peers.” To develop the nuanced understanding of the processes of schooling through a gender perspective I concentrate on how the daily practice within the school context contributes to constructing gender identities.

In the context of a patriarchal society as Bangladesh, an understanding of gender identity-formation is likely to create the space for the educationist, teachers and school managing committee (SMC) to develop awareness of a gender neutral schooling and learning environment. The context of a school is a collective and complex phenomenon which varies from one to another (Nath&Mahbub,2008). This paper, focusing on a single school, allows me to probe deeply the nuanced and gendered nature of the schooling process, though caution has to be exercised in drawing any broad generalization.

## **2. The conceptual frame**

Gender role and relations provide the analytical frame for this study and allow me to explore the nature of schooling from the interaction of existing heterogeneous groups of teachers and students within the school setting. According to Scott (2010:9), gender refers to:

...how and under what conditions different roles and functions have been defined for each sex; how the very meanings of the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ varied according to time, context, and place; how regulatory norms of sexual department were created and enforced; how issues of power and rights played into definitions of masculinity and femininity; how symbolic structures affected the lives and practices of ordinary people; how sexual identities were forged within and against social prescriptions.

Looking at schools as key sites for the construction of masculinities and femininities has required close attention to everyday practices, conscious or unconscious (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Reay (2001:153) revealed that, “gendered power relations are more complicated than any simplistic binary discourse of the girls versus boys.” Thus, this study highlights the multiplicity of competing gender discourses that formed within the school where the adolescents socialize.

Talking about gender debate, it is also important to consider the hegemonic masculinity which is referred as “the configuration of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or it’s taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”

(Connell, 1995:77). Here my ideas and approach to conceptualizing schools are consistent with Ozkazanc&Sayilon (2008:1), where they refer school as “hegemonic site where gender is reconstructed within the context of a particular gender regime.”The aforementioned concepts in discussing gendered nature of schooling will allow an understanding of the dynamics of social roles, responsibilities and attitude in a patriarchal context.

### **3. Methodology**

The research framework led me methodologically to design a case study according to the maxims of critical ethnography (Lee, 1990). Lee (1990) defined critical ethnography as an approach which “involves keeping alert to structural factors while probing meanings and asks how these meanings relate to wider cultural and ideological forms” (cited in Ozkanac & Sayilan, 2008:3). Here I tried to explore the academic and management structure of the school framed by a feminist perspective which allowed me to look into the subjectivities existing in the gender and power relations within the school in a patriarchal social context (Wickramasinghe, 2010).

I was an intern teacher in a coeducational secondary school in central Dhaka, Bangladesh where the field work of this study took place for six months. The content of this paper is based on interview (teachers and students) and observation data drawn from this school context. This school is characterised by common features of non-government secondary schools, most numerous of secondary schools in Bangladesh (BANBEIS, 2008). As a secondary coeducational school, it allowed me to tap rich data source on gendered nature of schooling from the adolescents’ perspective (Tapan, 2010).

### **4. Construction of gendered identities: results and discussion**

Several themes on gendered identities emerged from the collected data within the coeducational school setting. The following thematic analysis of the findings attempts to present the nuanced ways of creating and exercising the gendered boundaries in school.

#### **4.1. Segregation of physical spaces**

Gender segregation was evident through management and arrangement regarding space in the school premises. A strong and persistent way of segregating gender was to use the physical spaces allocating indoors for girls and outdoors for boys. This segregation results in differentiated use of and dominance over space. From daily observation data, it was found that every morning the girls cleaned the classrooms and the boys the playground. Apart from gender roles or duties related to physical spaces, clear gender discrimination was observed in terms of playing sports; boys played outdoor games like, cricket and football and girls played indoor games like, ludo.

During assembly, girls were found to gather in periphery being minorities and boys in larger central part of the school playground. Such segregated arrangement was also common inside the classroom where girls found sitting together in front benches and boys at the back. Brenner (1998) found that, in Liberia students mostly sit in separate parts of the classroom by

avoiding interaction with the opposite sex. Besides the instruction coming from the school authority on gender segregated space arrangements, the students themselves were willing to create the single-sex friendship group and were comfortable in communicating within that cohort. Some of the students said their parents put restrictions in communicating with the opposite sex. The students also became accustomed to segregated space arrangements by following their seniors in the school. Dunne noted an interesting finding regarding students' gendered pattern of sitting arrangement. As she put it, "the teachers used this as a discipline strategy in which a misbehaving boy would be made to sit among the girls" (2007:27).

The adolescent's socialization is strongly influenced by the nature of schooling (Nath&Mahbub, 2008). Stromquist and other researchers emphasized the ways in which school setting "offers influential messages about gender" (Stromquist, 2007:20; Francis& Skelton, 2001). Their ideas on constructing femininities and masculinities in the school is illustrated by the above mentioned data on how the gender roles and socialization in a patriarchal context lead adolescents to establish control over specific physical spaces deliberately. Thus physical spaces were used to separate the single-sex friendship groups which strengthened the gender boundaries and led to control over those spaces which had been segregated in a "natural" process.

#### **4.2. Gendering academic subjects**

In spite of having daily routines of each grade, the school often started late and ended early. On investigation, it was found that some of the teachers had their own ideas about maintaining the daily routine and took classes on the basis of their ideas on "important" or "non-important" subjects. As a result, late start and early end of school led to lowering contact time and neglecting some subjects which were considered as less "valuable" and "feminine" subjects. According to Dunne (2007), such feminine subjects are religious education, home economics and languages.

Data revealed persistent gender stereotyping of subjects, which also showed boys outperforming girls in "technical" subjects like science and mathematics and girls performing better in languages and social studies. Leder, Forgasz & Jackson (2014) found that there are people, including teachers, students and parents, who believe that boys are more capable in technical subjects whereas girls capable in "humanities." Such traditional gender stereotyping negatively influenced learners who may have the potentials to do well in any subject area (Mim, 2015). Such stereotyping also affected teachers; male teachers were over-represented in technical subjects and females in languages and social sciences.

Kelly (1985) showed how subjects are gendered because of their perceived masculine and feminine traits. She explained that technical subjects were "associated with factors such as difficulty, hard rather than soft, things rather than people, and thinking rather than feeling, all of which are part of the cultural stereotype of masculinity," The opposite patterns could be observed in respect of social sciences and languages which belonged to the feminine stereotypes in a patriarchal context (1985:135). This argument is in line with Connell's (1995) distinct category of masculinity and femininity and reflected the normative ways of

looking into the school subjects. Societal practice and stereotyped views thus led to and reinforced gender stereotyping of school subjects.

#### **4.3. School leadership: the dominance of masculinity**

The existing gendered power relations within the school premises were revealed in the way it positions men and their masculinity to leadership roles in the schooling process. During my six month's observation in the school, I found during the first two months a male head teacher who performed independently and confidently as the school head. On his retirement a women head teacher was appointed, but despite her formal position, she was subjected to control by the SMC (consisting of a majority of male members), unlike the practice in the past. The woman head teacher was often found dominated by the senior male teachers in taking several important decisions on school management. Looking at the situation through the feminist lens (Wickramasinghe, 2010), it appears to illustrate how the gender hierarchies and its underlying masculinities affect women's performance even if they formally hold the "leading" position.

The gendered view regarding the leading position has also been observed among students which showed that the appointed class representative or the class captain is always a boy. Being the captain, the senior grade boys had more authority in the school; for example, they were responsible for leading assembly and ringing bells in absence of the assigned teacher. While I asked senior girls about their feelings on always being led by male captains, one of them replied:

I never think to be a class captain. I do not think my other fellow girl-mates think that either, because from our primary grades we are used to see male captains in our school. I think it is a tough job where the teachers depend a lot on the boys; may be they are more capable than us to serve in this position.

The opinion of this girl along with the overall environment depicts how the legitimacy of patriarchy is well entrenched and accepted in schooling for years. Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how the societal structure guarantees the dominant positions of masculinity.

#### **4.4. Discipline: exercising gender biased attitude by teachers**

The authority relations between teacher and student, where the teachers are allowed to discipline, motivate and punish students, as a part of the core structure of schooling also reveal gender role and behavior. The teachers were found to punish both boys and girls but the ways were different. The boys were found to be punished through beating with a stick and pulling of ears by the male teachers mainly. The girls were not seen to be punished in the same way by the male teachers; girls were generally subjected to scolding. On the other hand, the majority of the female teachers of the school were found to threaten by showing sticks mainly to the boys and sometimes pinching the girls as punishment. Dunne found, "female teachers asserted their authority in disciplinary strategies that often included less demonstrative forms of physical violence" (2007:28). Drawing on Connell's (1995) concept on gender, it can be argued that such gender specific nature of punishment affirms the femininity and masculinity of female and male teachers respectively.

Both teachers and students believe that punishment is a good way to keep them on the “right” track. In line with this, by highlighting “punishment as a means of teaching-learning” Nath & Mahbub cited teachers’ opinion that, “owing to fear of punishment the learners become well behaved and attentive” (2008:79). However, a majority of the teachers was of the view that excessive punishment would lead to decreasing its effect and it might not work in the long run. The nature of punishment can possess inner gendered meanings in a heteronormative context. According to Dunne, Humphreys and Leach,

Girls were found being beaten with stick in Tanzania which ‘was rationalized by a few of the girls and women interviewed as being part of their socialization into becoming respectful and obedient wives and mothers. Conversely, the harsh beating of male students by male teachers could be viewed both as performance of domination by an adult male in authority over a juvenile male in an inferior position, and as a juvenile male’s initiation into adulthood (2003:7).

Scott’s (2010) concept of gender emphasized how the meanings and behavioral expectations arising from attitude towards boys and girls can vary depending on context. The nature of punishment, a means of discipline, control and regulation, revealed the ways in which existing symbolic structures in schooling can affect learner’s upbringing by creating the gender identities.

#### **4.5. Gender division of labor inside school**

The division of labor on the basis of gender represented an important marker of gender identity. Both students and teachers were found to play the stereotyped gendered roles that are expected by society. Whereas girls were responsible to clean the classrooms; boys were assigned to do heavier duties like tree cutting. Some of the teachers were also seen ordering boys to bring snacks from outside whereas they sometimes ask girls to wash their cups and glasses. Different school research on gender socialization process has also showed how the very expected societal roles are practiced in schools (Stromquist, 2007). Dunne (2007:27) found that, “in some duties the girls helped boys, for example by raking and bagging weeds for them to carry to the dump, but the boys did not reciprocate.” This situation can be seen through the feminist lens as an example of how schooling helps establish the “dominant position of men and subordination of women” (Connell, 1995:77). In patriarchal societies like Bangladesh, the gender stereotyped division of labor is nourished both in family and school which may influence the adolescents to take the practice as accepted societal norm. Other researchers such as Reay (2001) argue that the gender power relations are much more complicated than the binary discourses between girls and boys. This complexity may in fact offer the possibilities for change and promoting modification of the norms through schooling.

In organizing cultural programs, i.e. pohelaboishakh (Bengali new year), independence day etc. the teachers were also found to be cast into gender roles that they were used to through socialization from very early ages. Whereas male teachers were responsible to perform duties that required physical exertion and technical managements like organising sports and buying supplies, women were assigned to welcoming guests, offering them seats, and decorating the stage etc. By drawing on Scott’s (2010) argument on how different roles can

define each sex, it was clear from their assigned socially prescribed tasks and responsibilities, that the teachers were active in playing out their own gendered identities in the heteronormative context.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis and discussion above revealed the ways in which gender boundaries are formed through the routine works and daily practices in the school. As a consequence, gender specific roles, responsibilities, behavior and societal practice contribute to produce the forms of femininity and masculinity in the schooling process (Dunne, 2007). The paper showed how as a social arena school is marked by asymmetric gender power relations and ended up reproducing and promoting in school the traditional gender hierarchical power structures of society.

A deep-rooted association of heteropatriarchal and heteronormative beliefs and practices inside the classroom influence the adolescents' socialization and lead them to view and reinforce the traditional gender perspective in defining their own gender roles. The daily practice of the school revealed that the gendered behavior by students and teachers was taken for granted and accepted as something intrinsic and "natural". If the school is seen as a social institution that should be free from gender bias, (Nath&Mahbub, 2008; Francis & Skelton, 2001), there is much to be done in constructing gender values, attitudes, norms and behavior in a coeducational school. This is necessary to counteract the unconscious reinforcement of traditional gender-stereotyping. Training and orientation of teachers, both pre-service and in-service, organization and management of school, looking critically at the curriculum objectives and outcomes, pedagogy in the classroom, and social interaction among students and between students and teachers need to be looked at and assessed through a gender neutral lens. How schooling can present a gender neutral experience to adolescents in their socialization process has remained a neglected concern that demands serious attention from policy-makers and educationists alike.

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<b>Primary Education</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)							
Total	98.5	99.7	99.3	97.6	101.2	104.5	114.2
Female	101	102.7	103.1	100.8	103.9	108	117.8
Male	96.2	96.8	95.7	94.5	98.6	101.1	110.8
Net enrolment ratio (%)							
Total	91.8	92.9	–	90.8	91.8	91.5	–
Female	94.6	96.2	–	92.1	96.1	93.3	–
Male	89.1	89.7	–	89.5	87.8	89.8	–

<b>Secondary Education</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>
Gross enrolment ratio (%)							
Total	45	45.6	46.4	44.5	48.2	49.9	50.8
Female	46.6	46.9	47.6	47.2	50.1	52.9	54.5
Male	43.5	44.3	45.1	41.9	46.3	47	47.2
Net enrolment ratio (%)							
Total	42.1	42.8	43.6	–	44.6	46	45.8
Female	43.6	44.1	44.8	–	46.5	48.8	49.3
Male	40.7	41.5	42.4	–	42.8	43.4	42.5

(UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2014)

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