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TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ABOUT CHILDREN'S ARTICULATION OF THEIR IDENTITY IN EARLY YEARS OF LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF ECE 1-4 OF PRIVATE SCHOOL IN KARACHI

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the perceptions of early years' teachers about children articulation of their gender identity as a case study method. The Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development model was used as a theoretical framework for research study. Four female teachers from lower nursery to grade II, one co-educational, private, English medium school in the urban city of Karachi participated in the research. Multiple data collection tools were used such as interviews with teachers, classroom observations, focus group discussions with children and document analysis. The study findings' reveal that the family and school are critical microsystems that have shaped young children understanding of gender identity in terms of preferred behaviours and certain gender roles reflected the broader hierarchal and patriarchal macrosystem. One of the emerging theme captured in teachers' narratives was influences, segregation and gender stereotyped messages transmitted throughout their lives across the chronosystem unconsciously thus children received same level of indoctrination. This study is significant in bring forward teacher's perceptions being qualified and experienced teachers with unexamined gender biases, enter in education and perpetuate same canons in young minds.

Key words: Gender identity, articulation, stereotyped, indoctrination, teachers' perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Articulating self-identity is the primary right of each individual although various factors influence to express identity particularly gender identity in early ages; where young children are considered weak and less competent to express themselves fully. Thus sometimes members of family and/or society both dominant them through various ways to indoctrinate different stereotyped in children and that resulted in them different negative behaviours that emerges from very beginning.

Children's early years from conception to eight years are considered as a formative age (UNICEF, 2001) in their holistic development that impact their whole life, therefore, it is important to nurture in them the appropriate behaviours and skills that layout the foundation of strong identity in them. Along with these lines, the concept of gender identity is also born and develops in the early years. At the age of two, children get to know about their gender and ethnic identity (AAP, 2015; Balwin & Moses, 1996; Gender Spectrum, 2012; Zosuls et al., 2009). Caregivers, Parents, and teachers also observe children start knowing and talking about their gender identity between three to five years of age (LobBe, 2016). Children express their gender identity by using various social markers such as age, sex, ethnicity, family, friends, school, classmates, neighbours, career aspiration. Moreover, societal environment plays an important role in constructing children's gender identity. Young children learn about gender identity and gender roles at various places such as family, classrooms, play time, during instructional activities, inside and outside classrooms etc.

In School, teachers' identity, perceptions, beliefs, and attitude towards teaching and learning also affect their classroom teaching especially while interacting with children inside and outside the classrooms. Although, gender is a socially constructed phenomena (Surtees, 2008 &Connell, 2009) however classroom atmosphere is the place where children construct their gender identity during interactions with teacher and their peers (Liu, 2006 & Renold 2006).

According to Sadker &Sadker (2009) study, the context of Pakistan witnesses a deep-rooted socio-cultural gender inequality on the treatment of girls and boys in the classrooms, which especially disadvantages to girls in general. Along with teacher's perception and belief system, the body movement tone, voice and language contribute in

shaping of children's gender identity therefore, teacher's interaction with classroom material, interaction with boys and girls, using symbols, teachers' thinking etc. manifest their attitudes towards creating gender identity in children. Early Childhood Education prepares young children to initiate the best possible in their early life (Murtaza, 2011) therefore, ECE focuses on helping young children identify themselves as 'being' (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Uprichard, 2008). It is also mentioned in Sustainable Developmental Goals(SDG) in which Pakistan is also signatory to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development and care and pre-primary education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the educational theories, there are various factors, which affect and contribute on children's articulation of the concept of gender identity in their early ages. Behaviourists are of the opinion that children learn about gender through social norms that have been inculcated in them through reinforcement these insecurities from the lenses of gender equity as this is transmitted from the teacher's interest and preference, which might lead towards certain consequences. Similarly, proponent of social learning theory observes that children at young age learn about their gender role by watching others. Children learn and develop sex related behaviours as they observed adult reinforces behaviours that conform the expectations to other sex group and do not reinforce non-conforming behaviours (Bank, 2007)

Followers of constructivist theory view children's role are being shaped by his/ her own experiences. Moreover, children develop their sex roles based on the combination of their interactions related to their biology, thinking capabilities and socialization. In the Psychodynamic theory, Freud (1923) discussed the notion of emotions in learning that affect 'thinking life' and 'feeling life' in personality development therefore early years are critical in the formation of personality development thus biological needs to be fulfilled at each stage. Societal role is significant in shaping identity of a child thus for the development of child's emotional life, a trustful, independent and able to reach out aspects are the key indicators (Erikson, 1963).

Aforementioned reviews endorsed various ways that help young children to learn about their gender identity. School environment and teachers also determine and reinforce gender specific roles to the children at school implicitly and explicitly both. Similarly, teacher's role is equally critical to create a meaningful impact on the lives of young children (Sales, E. Spjeldnes, S., &Koeshe, G. 2010). Therefore, it is essential that school system should manifest a gender sensitive, healthy, and safe learning environment for boys and girls by using gender sensitive resources and learning material in fostering positive gender identity (UNICEF, 2002). Thomas (2007) considers teachers as primary orchestrators of classroom environment as they create a healthy learning atmosphere for students' interaction. Moreover, classroom atmosphere provides children an opportunity to create and recreate meaning about gender through their talks and actions (Blaise, 2005). Thus teacher students' interactions are considered the most powerful way in the early year classrooms that facilitates in shaping children gender identity (Liu, 2006)

3. METHODOLOGY

i. Research Design

This study was designed using qualitative research method that served as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity and a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009. p. 46). A case study approach was used to analyze and explore children's gender articulation in the classroom as a case. The underlying aim of the case study was to understand how people's interpretation brings meanings driven from their own personal experiences that are constructed by the world around them (Merriam, 2009). Classroom milieu is the place where children interaction with their class-fellows and teachers therefore teachers' instructional demonstrations were studied as a major analysis of research study in a coeducational setting of the school atmosphere.

In addition, data was collected using various research tools includes document analysis, field notes observations, semi structure interviews and focus group discussions with 8-10 children from each class. The focus group discussions and semi-structure interviews were conducted from teachers in a private school. During research study, various research tools were used for triangulation the data that provides comprehensive understanding of complex human behaviours and numerous perspectives (Denscombe, 1998).

ii. Research Context

The research was carried out in one of the private school of Karachi in an urban setting. The school was primarily a community-based school having two shifts from morning and afternoon. The research was conducted in the afternoon shift to acquire the data from both the sex i.e. girls and boys. In addition, four teachers from lower nursery to class II were approached for semi-structure interviews and class observations.

To validate the authenticity of the data, multiple sources were used to collect the data as multiple sources provide comprehensive perspectives (Denzin, 2010). Semi structure interviews were used as primary method to collect the data. Four teachers from lower nursery to class II participated in this research study. During interviews, probing strategy was asked to understand and learn their perspectives. Through semi structure interviews, researchers learn and understand the meanings and the context of people behaviours (Seidman, 2006).The interviews were tape-recorded prior with participants' permission and later used for analysis.

Four classroom observations were done that last for 45 minutes. Observations allow the researcher in drawing inferences about teachers' actions, practices, perceptions, and feelings, which were hard to relying only on interviews (Silverman, 2006). The primary purpose of classroom observation was to get the contextual familiarity and how children interact with their fellow colleagues and teachers during their interaction. More over, to learn and see children's responses during interaction that could be built upon during focus group discussion with each class.

Soon after the classroom observations, four focus-group discussion sessions with 8 to 10 children were conducted where children's responses were recorded. Though selection of children was done primarily by their class teachers however gender balance ratio of boys and girls were ensured. The main objective of the focus group discussion was to see how these young children articulate their gender identity and gender role during discussion. The focus group discussion helped to make sense of these children's thinking about gender identity.

The focus group was carried out in Urdu language, later it was recorded and transcribed and translated in English although the accuracy preserved was difficult and again and again the original source was used and referred to get the originality of the data thus it was a delimitation of the study.

4. FINDINGS

i. Teachers' perceptions about boys' and girls' societal behaviours

The findings of the study revealed that teachers' approach of preferred social behaviours for their children ruled out in the formation of their gender identity. It was observed that teachers hold unconscious gender belief because of their environmental influences. Their beliefs derived from their responses of the terminologies used for girls and boys during and after classroom practices. During interviews, teachers also mentioned ascribed vocabularies and terminologies for boys and girls in terms of attribute. For instance, for girls "responsible, sensitive, soft, conscious, cook food, do domestic chores" were used, whereas for boys vocabularies such as "strong, careless, intelligent, can go outside" were mentioned.

Interestingly, the labels given by the teachers are similar to the common pattern of society thus it is proven that teachers' mindsets are predominately represent the influenced societal norms and children received similar treatment in the school. It is therefore evident that children perceptions are align with whatever has been transmitted to them in their classrooms and in their school.

ii. Teachers' perceptions about children's expressions of gender identity

During interviews, it was noticed that the concept of gender identity was new for teachers and they have interacted with this term for the first time; henceforth their understanding of this concept was very much similar to what they learnt from their surroundings and society in general. Two teachers responded during the interviews about children understanding of gender identity that "children are small and have not yet developed this sense of being male and female" and "they are not conscious about their gender identity as they are small" (interview with teacher 4, dated October 9th 2017).

Both statements are making a clear contradiction when they were later asked how children express their gender identity in the classroom. Their remarks were "girls are very conscious; they do not want to sit with the boys"

(interview with teacher 2, dated October 6th 2017) and another teacher responded “being teacher as well as parent, I am preparing my girl for further challenges what she has to face in coming life”. Research data (AAP, 2015; Balwin & Moses, 1996; Gender Spectrum, 2012; Zosuls et al., 2009) is evident that at the age of two, children know about themselves as boys and girls.

The above conversations indicated that teachers’ self- concept of gender was unclear and they were encountering contradictions and tensions during interview time. Their perceptions are also the reflection of the socio-cultural attitude they received implicitly from their immediate surrounding which lacks gender sensitization.

Besides field notes from the classroom observations also informed about the important key findings that teachers preferred boys to share their responses during classroom participation and activity tasks multiple times. Girls were given very less opportunities to come at the forefront and express their thoughts during activity time. Teachers’ perception of gender differences affects their pupil in which they interact and communicate (Francis, 2000).

iii. Children's perception about their identity and their gender roles

Children learn gender related messages and vocabularies from various sources. The findings of focus group discussion with children highlighted those children express strong messages about gender stereotyped learn from their peer and immediate environment that are rooted in old stereotypical patterns. In one of the scenarios, a boy associated the making of tea was only girl’s chores. In another situation, girls forced boys not to play with dolls as it was confined to the girls’ zone. Both scenarios inform children’s perceptions are in line with home practices about their gender role and society do promote gendered specific tasks and behaviours that influence children’s thinking and language too.

iv. Gender and classroom interactions

Research studies on classroom interaction inform that teachers enter in the classroom with stereotypical expectations that influence on children’s understanding of their gender role in particular and gender development in general (Mayhill & Jones, 2006). The following situation is another revelation of teacher’s perception and teacher’s action in determining gender role.

During interview a teacher mentioned that “in one of my class where boys didn’t cut their hair so I just went to them and touched their hair and gave them final warning that if it will not be cut by tomorrow then I will tie with ponytail. The boys felt shame as the whole class will make fun of them so they started crying and requested for two more days to be given to them.” Teacher further added that “Although I didn’t bind their hair but they felt ashamed to look like girls.” (Teacher 3, interviewed on October 9th, 2017).

The situation stated above illustrates a great cause of frustration for all those children who received a strong, negative and stereotypical messages conveyed to them in the class. Young children between age of 4-6 years are also in the process of unlearning and relearning of various concepts. In the process of identity formation, boy’s identity was suppressed by using the word ‘ponytail’, which generally is associated with girls. Children consider such comments as shame or sometimes as a threat and could have created a negative attitude towards girls from onwards as a result of distortion of their own identity formation. Teachers are responsible to help children in knowing and appreciating their gender identity and gender role thus they need to avoid sex related symbols and stereotypical labelling in the classrooms.

v. Instructional patterns for children in the classroom

School is a small unit representing the big society and it has a strong influence on the construction of gender identity among children (Baig, 2015). Classroom environment plays important role in children’s construction of their gender identity as male and female (Qureshi, 2007). The classroom practices and teacher students’ interaction depicts the similar patriarchal and influence segregation between boys and girls. During instruction, girls received same kind of remarks from their female teachers such as *sit properly, put your shirt down, close your legs* etc. It was observed that being a female teacher, they are not only conscious about themselves but also towards their girls’ students too. During interview, one teacher explained that “she drilled children particularly girls to follow the instruction because as per her remarks, “girls need to sit in manners” (interview with teacher 1, dated October 6th, 2017). Although teacher

used these words with soft tone but the indoctrination of ideology has largely influence by the society. It is surprising that girls received these gender related instructions by their teacher more to follow the etiquettes of social norms as compared to instructions on their academics.

5. DISCUSSION

The study made an attempt in exploring teachers' perceptions about how children express their gender identity. The study informs that classrooms and school are the key places where children learn and form their gender identity and teachers are the key players who contribute in the construction of gender identity. The study clearly revealed that teachers consciously or unconsciously hold strong stereotypical notions about gender identity and exhibit the same during the teaching learning process, mostly through indoctrinating their children. Home affect in the same way in perpetuating these segregated notions therefore children get no significant opportunity in school and classroom and also at home of gender socialization in expressing their gender identity.

Teachers no doubt are the agents of socialization; they promote, influence, and portray dominant patriarchal norms of society in determining gender identity of young children. The conversations and remarks made by teachers witnessed that adult influences their children in many ways. Their own perceptions, choice of teaching learning material, interactions with children, and their language play major role in the construction of gender identity in the early years' children. In fact, teachers' self-concept of their own gender identity has narrow influences by their adult and same notion is being perpetuated to young kids while teaching.

6. CONCLUSION

The connection between classroom environment (microsystems) and society (mesosystems) is seen very strong in terms of patriarchal norms and beliefs that are being operate, process and transmit within ecosystem influenced the society where children get affected in the microsystems of the classrooms and changes in the course of teachers and children's lives(chronosystems) (Bronfenbrenner 1974). The discourse provided a revelation to see that how various agencies of patriarchy being global or local, affect society, family, and school in creating gender biasness and gender stereotyped while experiencing at home or in school. However, unknowingly, teachers conveyed similar vocabularies in the classroom and strong messages of patriarchal influences have been disseminate through various ways.

The data suggest the in spite in the co-education system; children strongly convey gender segregation and stereotyped behaviours learn from various sources. Therefore, it is necessary to make teachers aware of the gender issues that prevail in the system so they not only highlight those but also try to challenge them in their day-to-day teaching and provide children a fresh outlook towards gender related discourses. It is also important for school to organize programs and event related to gender socialization to help children to see the underpinning of this concept. The findings of the study revealed that teacher interact with children differently. This need to rethink in terms of teachers own preset belief and perceptions. Teacher education programs and on-going professional development learning opportunities for teachers to learn about new knowledge and become reflective and critical learners by challenging their own preset notions related to teaching and learning.

Early Childhood Education is a national commitment hence it is also responsibility of all the stakeholders particularly school management to ensure the classroom dynamics in terms of allocation of equitable teaching learning resources, class size, children talk time, discussion time where each child enjoys early years with fullest.

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