

Contextual Factors in Gender Socialization And Role of Schools in Promoting Gender Sensitivity

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Abstract

Families and schools have long played a significant role in gender socialization process from early childhood. Gender norms and expectations are internalized by a child from their immediate environment through daily interactions, messages and course corrections on what is deemed appropriate or not. Such interactions in both conscious and less conscious ways contribute to shaping of gender typical attitudes and behaviours influencing how children perceive themselves and others. In the contemporary contexts, the landscape of gender socialization has expanded beyond family, schools to include peers, media and socio-cultural influences thereby playing a significant role in shaping gender-typical attitudes. The current paper explores the various contextual factors that contribute to gender socialization and persistence of gender stereotypes. Further it highlights the transformative role educational spaces can play in building inclusive environment that supports critical inquiry, challenge traditional gender norms and empower teachers and students to explore opportunities beyond gendered expectations.

Keywords: Socialization, Gender, Schools, Gender Stereotypes, Education

Definitions

Gender socialization is process by which individuals internalize and learn to 'be' as per gender norms and conform to gender roles as they interact with agents of socialization-family, schools, and social institutions (Hoominfar, 2019).

Gender Stereotype is a generalized view or preconception about attributes, characteristics or roles that are ought to be performed or possessed by men and women (OHCHR, 1996).

Gender sensitisation is about changing behaviour and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and the other sex. It helps people in examining their personal attitudes and beliefs and questioning the 'realities' they thought they knew (Barodia, 2015).

Introduction

Socialization is a lifelong process. Specially made intense during early and middle childhood, these are the formative years when appropriate mannerisms and expectations are nurtured in children (Smetana et al. 2014; Arnett 2014) through agents of socialization to learn gender roles and their place within social world. From decades researches, theorists and subject matter experts have been trying to answer the enduring question of whether individuals are created by nature or society? The theory of essentialism rooted in biological determinism, defines that a group's biological or genetic make-up shapes its social, political and economic destiny which are largely consistent across culture and historical periods (Subramaniam, 2014). The theory of social constructionism which has been widely talked about in context of gender identity argues that biological immutable characteristics - gender, race, ability and sexuality are shaped by social, historical and cultural interpretations (Subramaniam, 2010). It aims to critically examine the processes through which these categories are socially produced and sustained, with the objective of uncovering underlying power relations that shape and reinforce such differentiations. For example girls are encouraged to be nurturing, passive and appearance focused while boys are taught to be independent, assertive and physically strong. As a result, individuals grow up to identifying themselves to these social perceptions and aligning themselves to socially acceptable expectations. What is critical to recognize in this process are the stereotypes and gender roles that have an influence on the child's life and their

choices. Especially, researches have shown its impact on educational choices, career paths and thereby future implications on leadership opportunities.

Purpose of the study

With the aim to address the issue of gender stereotypes and its influence on student self-perception and choices, this paper focuses on exploring the 1) factors that are significant in the socialization process and contribute to gender stereotypes and 2) suggestions on how educational spaces like schools can encourage critical enquiry in such matters to deconstruct gender-typical attitudes and behaviours among students to promote equitable learning environment and broader educational choices.

Contextual Factors of Gender Socialization

1.1 Familial Context

Before a child is able to understand their sense of self as an individual, the socialization process begins by associating gender-typical colours, toys, activities, choices, mannerisms and messages that parents or families tend to make pertaining to “how boys are and how girls different from them” (Emolu, 2014). Scholars have shown that girls and boys tend to take feminine and masculine identities based on how parents treat them differently (Leaper and Farkas, 2014; Blakemore and Hill, 2008). Adults knowingly or not tend to handle girls softly with more emphasis upon the features as softer, attentive, quieter than boys where they refer them as rough, and stronger, even before they develop the cognitive awareness of gender appropriate behaviour (Denmark, 2004). Social learning theory explains the development of gender roles and gender-typed preferences from early childhood where children learn gender appropriate behaviour through observation. Further, parents vicarious reinforcement of gender consistent or inconsistent behaviours result in, boys and girls learning different values, attitudes and patterns that shape gendered behaviour. Not only this, studies have also discussed on how gender is linked with parents belief in their child’s abilities thereby affecting the child’s performance and perceptions of their competence (Eccles et al, 2012) for example parent’s views of their child’s abilities in Maths and English had an impact on child’s self-perception (Eccles, 1990). Therefore, families are the first source of gender socialization where parents’ beliefs and attitudes tend to influence child’s self-concept (Hoominar, 2019; Colaner & Rittenour, 2015).

1.2 School Context

School is considered a second home for children and plays a significant role in gender socialization. They convey social norms and behaviour characteristics of what is expected in the society through relational and instructional exchange between the teacher and the student that shapes a student’s identity development based on the prevailing cultural norms and values such as gender roles and attitudes (Taraszow, 2023). Studies on gender equity in classrooms have shown that teacher’s behaviour and attitude have revealed differential treatment towards boys and girls in the same classroom by the same teacher using the same curriculum (Lockheed, 1984, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1982, 1994, Brophy, 1981; Klein, 1985, AAUW, 1992). Observational studies by educational researches of both formal classroom and informal school environment has documented these disparities through teacher-student interactions, revealing consistent patterns of gendered communication when viewed from the gender-sensitive lens (Koch, 2003). In educational settings, societal norms often manifest stereotypical notions of boys and girls via classroom interactions, instructional methods and textbook content which can often detrimental effects on a students’ academic and social self-concepts (Ertl et al., 2017). For example, stereotypes related to STEM subjects where boys are considered to be inherently more capable in these areas compared to girls. Although girls are expected to be naturally more disciplined and compliant (Beilock et al, 2010). As a result girls and boys encounter distinct educational experiences within the classroom, shaped by socially constructed expectations not individual abilities. In addition to teachers, textbooks contain contents that depict stereotypical representation of femininity and masculinity that students learn for girls and boys around the world. (Kereszty, 2009). Learning about gender roles and stereotypes continues to be part of the school setting often associating them with traditional roles and gender stereotypes in the society (Kaur, 2018).

1.3. Peer Context

Peers have a significant influence on gender self-concepts (Leaper and Friedman 2007; Witt 2000). The initial foundations of gender socialization are laid down by parents, families and schools who serve a primary agents of

socialization. From an early age, children begin to imitate gender role behaviours during their play activities which is a representation of social cues and norms in the environment. As they grow older, peer groups tend to emerge as spaces where gender identities get played out and reinforced. Girls and boys gravitate towards gender-segregated games and activities which both reflects and perpetuate gender roles and stereotypes (Hoominfar, 2021; Leaper & Farkas, 2014; Witt 2000). According to Witt (2000), *“friendship is organized in our culture in order to teach children some of what they need to know in order to fit into a society. In agreement with Cooley’s idea of the “looking glass self”- making a determination of who you are based on your perception of how others think of you (Gittler, 1957).*

1.4 Media Context

With an increasing influence of technology, media is a crucial agent of socialization reinforcing society’s gender roles. Children are exposed to gender stereotypical notions showed in films, fairy tales, cartoons of female characters being submissive and fearful in comparison to male characters who act bold, assertive and athletic (Witt, 2000). As a result children often tend to internalize such portrayals as socially acceptable behaviours that are highly gendered. Media plays a significant role in transmitting gender roles and stereotypes across different age and social. Underrepresentation of women has been analysed over varied forms of media content (Wood, 1994) and are mostly offered scripts that align with traditional roles like doing household jobs, in a vulnerable or powerless situation needing help (Collins 2011). Portrayal in adherence to such stereotypical gender roles can negatively impact children both during childhood and beyond. Such stereotypes can influence a child’s self-perception, restrict their educational and career aspirations, emotional expressions and shape social development in a constrained manner (Halpern, 2016). Although in recent years media has witnessed a shift in trends, where women portrayals are challenging traditional gender roles in films and televisions, yet the underlying construct continues to reflect gendered content expressed through language, narratives and storylines (Glascok, 2001) particularly in ways that women are victimized or showcased in a manner that undermines their sense of agency thereby displaying biased gender representation (Tanwar & Ali, 2024). On the other hand, recent researches on adolescent social media self- representation often reflects stereotypical gender roles portrayed through their online images, posts, pictures and use of language (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Manago et al., 2008). Given adolescent is a critical period of transition into adulthood, social validation received in response to such self-representations can influence their identity (Harter & Leahy, 2001). Therefore media is a significant factor in shaping gender-typical attitudes and behaviours that reflect traditional gender norms.

Gender Equity In Educational Context

Gender equity in education refers to the process of being fair and equal to boys and girls, men and women with respect to opportunities, outcomes, results in all educational aspects (Kuteesa, 2024; UNICEF, 2017). Sustainable Development Goal 5 which focuses on gender equality, equity in education is one of the fundamental catalysts for social progress. However, despite significant efforts to do so globally, disparities continue to hinder social empowerment (Kuteesa, 2024). Therefore, measures need to be consistently evaluated to deal with the challenges in ensuring equity for all. Not only does equity in education lead to greater economic prosperity, it also promotes social inclusion, enabling individuals to contribute to the society as per their potential (Leal Filho, et al., 2023; Pathania, 2017; Lwamba, et al., 2022). What goes against the goal of gender equity are gender stereotypes and gender based discriminations, cultural norms and expectations that govern gender roles of boys and girls in traditional ways restricting their educational growth and opportunities (Dost, 2024; Baki, 2004). This is where the role of educational spaces in promoting gender equity becomes critical as education can be utilized as a powerful tool to promote gender sensitization among parents, teachers and students. It also holds the potential to drive institutional changes where some of the deeply embedded factors can be challenged, dismantled and redefined.

Role of Schools in Addressing Gender Stereotypes

It is well established that gender socialization initiates early and continues throughout lifespan. It shapes individuals’ perceptions and roles both in subtle and explicit ways. Children tend to internalize gender norms through interactions with families, peers and media. School, as crucial agent of socialization, play a crucial role in reinforcing and challenging these stereotypes. The scope of this paper is focused towards highlighting ways in which schools can take measures to address implicit biases, attitudes and stereotypes within the formal and informal set-up.

- Professional development training programs for teachers and staff that are designed to identify implicit gender biases. Such programs should include content that encourages them to reflect on real-life challenges and internalized stereotypes that may unconsciously influence their teaching practices and limits both their personal and professional growth. Because gender-conformed practices become normalized in everyday life, they frequently go unnoticed and remain unchallenged. A teacher training model REFLECT (Kollmayer, et al 2020) emphasizes the importance of acquiring procedural, declarative, contextual and metacognitive knowledge, to enhance awareness of their own implicit assumptions.
- Trainings teachers in using gender sensitive language, by helping them identify how language and communication perpetuates differential treatment towards students based on gendered expectations.
- Self-measures to assess how enhanced understanding and awareness about implicit gender biases can be implemented in classroom setting to promote motivation and achievement of all students.
- Identification of gender stereotyped content in textbooks and curriculum and facilitating discussions with students in the classroom setting to critically examine and challenge such representations.
- Promoting positive gender norms within school policies and framework to create holistic gender equitable environment (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). For example, opportunities for participation in sports and extra-curriculars, leadership roles and creating mechanisms for student representations in decision making that are equitable for all.
- Focus on life skills programs that focus on building a culture of empathy and critically deconstruct media and gender stereotypes to promote gender sensitivity.
- Initiatives that engage boys and girls to challenge norms of masculinity and femininity and seeks to transform ways in which they express.
- Sensitization programs for parents that challenges their notions of traditional gender roles and its impact on the child's educational growth while focusing on value-based nurturing that focuses on raising empathetic, compassionate and equitable individuals who explore interests and build attitudes beyond gendered expectations.
- Engagement with wider community to encourage conversations around equity and equality through led initiatives.

Conclusion

Gender socialization is deeply embedded in our society. Various contextual factors collectively contribute and shape gender norms and stereotypes that impacts a child's self-perceptions, educational choices and broader life trajectories. While schools have been seen as passive agents historically, they can play an active role in transformative changes in creating gender equitable environment. This paper highlights the critical role of educational spaces in recognizing and deconstructing ingrained gender biases within their classrooms and beyond. This can be achieved through gender sensitive curriculum, teacher training and equitable policy frameworks. By encouraging students to have a participatory voice in these framework through discussions and dialogues where they engage in critical enquiry, inclusive environments can be cultivated. Promoting gender equity in education is not merely about equal access but about building a space where all students thrive by expressing freely and exploring full potential. This paper is limited in scope as it does not focus on many other social, economic and infrastructural factors that hinders gender equality and equity in education. However, it highlights the need for concerted effort in creating educational spaces that are rooted in fairness and gender sensitivity.

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