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## **Exploring the Contribution of Teaching and Learning Processes: Constructing Students' Gender Identity in an Early Years Classroom of a Government Girls Primary School in Pakistan**

By Amina Bibi Baig<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The construction of gender identity is a complex process which begins at a very early formative age. In these formative years, children begin making sense of how men and women are positioned in society. Schools as important institutions play a significant role in this process particularly with reference to students' understanding of the gender relationships around them. This article reports on a study which explored how gender identity construction takes place in a single sex (girls) classroom for early years. The study investigated the teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions in the real environment of the classroom. Qualitative research guided the study design which was conducted in a public sector school in Karachi, Pakistan. The data was collected through observations, focus group discussions with children, and semi-structured interviews with the female teacher. The study found that teaching and learning is gendered in single sex settings of the school as gender messages are passed on to the girls, playing an important role in their gender identity construction. The study indicated that the teacher's personal experiences greatly influenced her perceptions regarding gender identities. There was also evidence that the teacher acquired insights from girls. Additionally, children brought certain perceptions from home which contributed to the gender discourse in the context of a school. Schools were, hence, found to promote those stereotypes regarding gender roles and responsibilities in a social context. All the participants were found to have views and practices around gender positioning which was approved by the larger society.

*Key Words:* Gender Identity Construction, Gender Perceptions, Gender Discourses, Gender Stereotypes, Gender Positioning, Gender in Early Years, Schooling for Girls, Pakistan

### **Introduction and Background**

Gender is a complex phenomenon comprised of a dynamic set of ideas, actions and feelings about what it means to be a boy or a girl in a specific place, culture and time (MacNaughton, 2001). At a very early age, children do not know how the particular culture expects them to behave as a boy or as a girl. Therefore, they merely do whatever they are experiencing and told through the messages around them (Yelland, 1998). These gender

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identities develop at schools as a result of socially nurturing spaces which prepare students to behave in a specific, socially acceptable manner. Hence, schools play an important role in this process particularly with reference to students' understanding of gender relationship around them. Particular gendered messages are thus conveyed within a particular classroom environment through verbal and non-verbal teacher-student and student-student interactions taking place within classrooms.

Gender bias as explained by Datnow and Hubbard (2002) is seen as affecting both girls and boys because neither group is protected to societal pressures and expectations. The classroom environment that children are exposed to is critical in forming their personalities and preparing them for future gender related roles. The socialization at schools, home and peer relationships lead children to determine, to a large extent, to take up the gender roles as a boy or as a girl. According to Blaise (2005) in the multicultural societies of the developed world, the involvement in ideas about the complex processes involved in young children's gender identity development through their schooling experiences is obvious in the growing body of work.

The Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs and initiatives in developing countries can enhance the efforts of gender sensitization and can contribute to minimizing gender inequalities. The investment in early childhood education and gender in Pakistan are key policy initiatives; however, global monitoring reports highlight slow and uneven progress (UNESCO, 2009). In Pakistan, most of the population is living in such areas where early years' development programs have not yet reached and children are exposed to the same traditional environment. Teachers are less aware of problems that emerge with gender stereotypes. According to the statistical data provided by the UNESCO (2007), there are 64,309 schools in total for boys and 46,270 schools in total for girls in Pakistan and 36,112 mixed schools, which show that the majority of the schools are single sex schools.

Park, Behrman & Choi (2012) argue that single-sex schools enhance girls' academic achievement escalating their confidence in academic learning by reducing the influence and competition with the other sex. Jackson (2009) argues that: "In the absence of the opposite sex, the gendered nature of subjects is no longer salient therefore removing the stigma associated with particular subjects". Experimental evidence shows that girls from single-sex schools are more likely to enter competitions than coeducational girls even when they are allocated to mixed-classes (Booth & Nolen, 2011). However, Halpern et al. (2011) go further and argue that there currently exist no well-designed studies showing that single-sex education improves students' academic performance, but that there is evidence showing that sex segregation may increase gender stereotyping. In Pakistani context few studies (for example, Taj, 2008; Pardhan, 2011) have been conducted on the exploration of the role of teacher-student interaction contributing in gender identity development in early years. However, during my search for literature I could not find a research study in Pakistan specifically focused on how gender identity development takes place in single sex schools in the early years. Therefore, as a pioneering study in Pakistan, this research is focused on gender identity construction in single sex schools in early year's girls' classroom of a public school in the context of Karachi, Pakistan.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Different theoretical perspectives have been used to conceptualize and describe gender. Social learning theory suggests that "children develop sex-typed behaviors because other people reinforce behaviors that conform to expectations for their sex group and do not reinforce non-

conforming behaviors” (Bank, 2007). This approach suggests that within the family, parents, as agents of socialization, interact with boys and girls in ways that reinforce sex-typed behaviors. Within education, the theory suggests that teachers differentially treatment reinforce sex-typed behaviors of children. Therefore, the subsequent section of the literature highlights the role of the school environment and the society in the formation of gender roles, and gender identity among the children at their earlier ages.

### **Schools as Sites of Practicing Social Norms**

Schools have a strong influence on the formation of students’ gender roles. Research shows that “young boys and girls come to school with a sense of their own identity (whether they are a boy or a girl) but that they do not have the same sense of gendered identity (what characteristics are associated with being a boy or a girl)” (David & Cohen, 2009). More close to the context of the study, Qureshi, (2007) assert that classrooms are the sites where children learn to become men and women. The experiences afforded to girls and boys within schools are known to affect gender differentiation both directly and indirectly by providing differential skill practice and reinforcement within social places (Leaper & Bigler, 2011). Gender specific messages are more explicitly conveyed in single sex classroom setting, preparing girls for care giving behavior and boys as a symbol of strength and masculinity. “Single sex schools believed that the sexes are different by nature, and that those differences can be honored and nurtured only in single sex schools,” (Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009: 256).

Classrooms that do not include males are believed to be more supportive of girls’ academic achievements in counter stereotypic domains (Shapka & Keating, 2003). The single-sex education proponents argue that boys and girls do better when they receive instruction that is targeted toward differences that they believe exist between boys and girls (Sax, 2005). These single sex schools are considered as places providing an environment that enhances learning and achievement for girls, free from the disruption and harassment of boys (Hutchison & Mikulski, 2012). Therefore, it is believed that single sex classrooms are providing an environment to children, preparing them to take up certain roles in the future. However, boys-only schools, boys, unlike girls, are expected to take interest in sports, therefore, representing access to 'hegemonic masculine identity' (Lynch & Lodge, 2002).

Because such gender dichotomies exist in educational systems, Mac Naughton (2000) suggests that we need to challenge discourses that emphasize gender as well as race/ethnic divisions. Within the classrooms even very competent teachers are often unaware of the gendered messages they are sending through teaching and learning (De Groot & Kim, 2011). Moreover, within the school as social spaces, teachers’ present curricular materials that contains gender stereotypic attitudes and behavior. Young children internalize gender stereotypic messages and preconceptions, guiding their own preferences and behaviors based on such exhibitions and often reinforcing wider cultural patterns (Blakemore, Berenbaum & Liben, 2009).

Davies (2003) maintains that the only way that gender norms can be undermined is by allowing children to take part in different kinds of gender discourses. This suggests that teachers’ must make the effort to ensure availability of multiple gender discourses for children within classrooms.

## **Gender and Classroom Interactions**

In the classroom, children are creating and recreating meanings about gender through their talks and actions (Blaise, 2005). For the early years' students, one of the most powerful and subtle ways in which teachers shape students' gender identity is through teacher-student interactions within the classroom culture (Liu, 2006). The student-student interactions and teacher-student interaction taking place within the classroom are frequently the mirror reflection of societal gender stereotypes. Teachers are the primary orchestrators of the classroom environment because they play a pivotal role in the construction of the learning atmosphere and the conditions for student interaction (Thomas, 2007). Literature on gender and the classroom reveals that teachers go to their classrooms with some stereotypical assumptions and expectations which have a great influence on the children's construction of gender characteristics (Myhill & Jones, 2006). Stereotypes provide not only descriptions of how people think about women and men but also define what women and men should be according to the societal beliefs, which means that gender stereotyping places limits on what traits and behaviors are allowed and acceptable in a certain place and culture (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Gender messages received through interactions and classroom environment mold and construct children's gender identities. A UNICEF report (2002) also highlights the importance of manifesting a gender-sensitive, healthy and safe learning environment in school, including gender sensitive resources and learning material for both boys and girls for constructing a positive gender identity.

## **Gender and Society in the Early Years**

The spaces and play materials created for children to interact with each other, both within families and at school, play a key role in developing and reinforcing the perceptions regarding gender roles accepted by the larger society. In addition to the gendered messages children received from parents at home, that they observe their peers at schools, television, movies, books, and illustrations convey the same messages regarding their gender roles and traits (Gosselin, 2007). From a very early age children attempt to categorize the world around them. One of the most obvious ways that they are able to categorize people is by gender. Aina and Cameron, (2011) found that children develop their gender identity and begin to understand what it means to be male or female between the ages of 3 and 5. Similarly, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet indicate that "[w]ith differential treatment, boys and girls eventually learn to be different" (2003, 18). "Children absorb gender stereotyping by the time they are two years old because the clothing and toys a baby is given are chosen by adults 'with an eye toward gender'" (Flatter, as cited in Hinitz & Hewes 2011: 25–26). It is clear that multiple studies indicate that children's participation in curricular and co-curricular activities and their interaction with their peers and teachers socialize them into gender roles which are socially approved and applicable behaviors associated with each gender role (Liu, 2006). Moreover, Estola, (2011) recommends that it is important to not divide play domains into separate boys or girls games as it limits children's choices to develop their full potential. Hence, teachers need to reflect carefully on their teaching and learning, examining how they unconsciously promote gender stereotypes (Jacobson, 2011).

Several studies have proved differences in quality and quantity of interactions of teachers with boys and girls in classrooms (Drudy & Chathan, 2002). Language use in classroom interactions play an important role in developing the gender identity of children as well: language used for interaction shapes young children's capacity to categorize gender as socially

constructed roles, relations and distinctions (Alfaro, 2000; Leach, 2003). Through their interactions children are not simply proving themselves as girls and boys; rather, they are taking an active part in constructing their identities, what it means to be a girl and boy at a particular time and place (Blaise, 2005). Children locate themselves within and through these social categories (Iverson & Murphy, 2007). Therefore within the paradigm of social theory, the following study focuses on gender identity construction in single sex schools in an early years girls' classroom of a public school in Karachi, Pakistan.

### **Study Design**

The study design was guided by a qualitative methodology, as qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meanings people have constructed in making sense of the world and experiences they have (Merriam, 2009: p. 13). A case study approach was used to explore gender identity construction within the bounds of a classroom as a case. Classroom as a real context was used to explore the teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions as a major unit of analysis within the single sex (girls) classroom environment. Here, the case study is taken as a methodology where the researcher constructed a bounded system, a 'case', from the natural social situations. The reason was to make an in-depth study of the situation rather than a sweeping statistical analysis. This methodology is particularly useful when the researcher is aiming to discover a link between phenomena rather than seeking the confirmation (Merriam, 1998), as is the situation in this research, which seeks to explore the gender identity construction in a single sex classroom situation, but is not intended to prove the validity or appropriateness of these identities.

Hence, the unit of analysis was the interactions during teaching and learning processes taking place in a classroom. One female teacher Mariam Khan (pseudonym) and the focus group of five students were selected as participants using purposive sampling. Denzin and Lincoln (2005: p. 27) suggests that purposive sampling is an appropriate strategy for selecting the participants thoughtfully so that they can provide the best information.

### **Data Collection**

To validate the authenticity of data, multiple sources of information were used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective (Denzin, 2010).

#### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the female teacher of the school to "allow depth to be achieved by providing opportunities on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the responses"(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).This helped to confirm the information received from observations and it also helped to explore participants' perceptions about gender identity development in early years. The semi-structured interview enabled me to obtain description of the life experiences of the participants, with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).These interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participant and later used for analysis.

### *Observations*

The study focus was to explore students' gender identity construction within a single sex (girls) classroom. The research focus was to explore teaching and learning strategies and the verbal and non-verbal interactions taking place within classroom. Therefore, the major data collection method was observations. Furthermore, observation helped in drawing inferences about the teachers' practices, feelings and perspectives which were not possible to obtain by relying exclusively on interviews (Silverman, 2006). Moreover, post observation informal discussions were conducted to clarify queries related to the classroom observation. This helped to gain insights into the classroom observations and to have a better understanding of the focus of the research.

### *Focus Group Discussions*

Focus group discussions were conducted with a group of five students of grade II. Focus group discussions were carried out in order to explore these young children's (7-8 years) perception about their gender identity construction inside the classroom. Organized and focused group discussions provide a context for participants to articulate the meaning of their experiences and elaborate on them in a collective sense. The focus group discussion helped to make sense of these young children's perceptions regarding their identity construction.

### *Field Notes*

Field notes were taken to record the observed events verbal and nonverbal interactions of both the teacher and students. These writings helped to record the events within the classroom related to the observed data. Moreover, it became helpful in data analysis, in the process of meaning making and extracting the themes.

However, it must be noted that the data is for reader awareness alone and it is not meant for quantitative analysis purposes. The data gathered from this small scale study is considered only a description of the particular participants' reality and, as such, does not represent the reality of others holding similar positions in other schools that have similar characteristics. The interviews were taken in Urdu language, recorded, later on transcribed and translated into English. A similar approach was used for the recording and presentations of the focused group discussions. The participants responded in Urdu which they preferred because of their facility with the language. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately preserve and represent the wholeness of the original message and the intent of the participants after translating them from one language to the other. Though we made a significant effort to proof read the data many times, frequently cross checking the data both in English and Urdu, nonetheless, translation represents one limitation of this study.

### *Classrooms as Dynamic Sites in Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes*

The study has highlighted the importance of verbal and non-verbal interactions of single sex classrooms in constructing the gender identity of the students. The way teachers and students perceive their identities, has an impact on the gender identity construction of the children. These perceptions become obvious in what the teachers and students do and say in the classroom. Furthermore, the study also explains how children (focus group students) perceive their responsibilities and identities as two different "binary dichotomies" as girls' and boys'. Based on their experience of practices, they are involved in at home and school as sites of socialization.



### *Gendered Division of Labor*

The teacher's (Mariam) and students' perception about how children in their class should behave was influenced by the division of labor as approved by the wider Pakistani cultural environment. The social basis of gender roles is considered to be part of a gender belief system; they are ideas regarding masculinity and femininity that are held to be validated by society. It is also linked with the ways in which socially constructed female and male roles, responsibilities and opportunities are reflected in educational environments (UNESCO, 2012). For Mariam, boys being the providers of the family, was very much part of the masculine role. Not having a son was, therefore, a great concern for her. She sees the continuation of her family through a son.

I feel a lot that I should have a boy, I have three daughters and three daughters are not enough. A son is a supporter for his parents in old age. Girls will get married, they cannot stay with parents, so a son should be there to bring a daughter in law and set the home again. (Interview, 18th, February 2012)

This quote reflects the way Mariam understands the gendered relationship as two distinct spheres of work and responsibilities for women and men. The tasks carried out within these gender roles have historically been categorized as part of the 'productive' and 'reproductive' spheres (Leach, 2003). Male members are considered as the producers and protectors of the family; meanwhile, women are considered to have supporting roles in the life of a family. The teacher's own perceptions regarding gender division of labor were exhibited in their practices. Mariam's act of allocating her students different responsibilities was guided by her perception of gender relationships in society. She was observed asking girls (her students) to wash the cups after she and other teachers had tea. I asked her if she would ask boys to do so. She replied, "No it is not the job of the boys to wash the dishes they will do what the males are expected to do". In one instance, a student resented this activity and she was then reminded by her teacher that they need to perform these activities. In one of the classroom observations, I noticed that a student complained to the teacher while washing the plates "I feel disgusted washing the dirty plates." The teacher mimicked her words and said, "Don't you wash dirty dishes at home, why you are showing such attitude here?" (Obs, 23<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2012).

This reaction of the teacher was apparently an act of reminding these girls and confirming the familial responsibilities approved by society. The role approved for girls by the society at large is that of caregiving. The data further reveals that Mariam felt that boys needed to explore the world and can go for higher studies because they are to ultimately play the role of the family's provider. She gave an example of her widowed aunt, who supported her son in his childhood, who was now a grown up and was supporting his mother. For Mariam, a male offspring is the bread winner, so one has to invest in their education and not in the female offsprings' education who do not need that kind of investment because they have different roles to play. Mariam's perception regarding gender roles also guided her way of treating her daughters at home in preparing them for caregivers in future; she shared with me,

Yes, I want my daughters to work with me in kitchen. If they will not show an interest, I will scold them. But if they will not listen to me, when they will go [to their] in laws they have to work there definitely. I also did less work in kitchen

before marriage, as I feel irritated in kitchen but when I came to [my] in laws' house, I had to do all these works there. (Interview, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2012).

The gendered division of tasks was clearly demonstrated in this case. Mariam's treatment of her daughters seems to be guided by her own experience of getting married without these household skills which created difficulties for her, as she had suffered hardship in learning the household work. Mariam perceives that girls' primary role and ambition is to be wives and mothers, which strongly influence her conversations and interactions with students. The preparedness of the girls for the future responsibilities confined them to the household activities merely; this was also expressed by the students, as household activities were being assigned to them from a very young age. They also expressed students showing their interest in activities such as sweeping, washing clothes and cooking food. These young girls termed these tasks as "girls" and "boys" work. They were convinced that boys could not perform household work, as these were girls' tasks. Sara said, "No my brother does not do household work; boys are responsible for the work outside the home" (FGD, 8th February 2012).

Girls considered that their brothers at home have the responsibility of bringing things from the market and help them in that way. Elsewhere, a division of roles and chores is observed that is boys are assigned maintenance chores or helping the father. Meanwhile, girls are given domestic roles, such as cooking and cleaning and laundry. Classes are intended to prepare boys and girls for different roles. For example, boys were taught agriculture or industrial arts while girls were taught home economics (Cuizon, 2008).

Observational data also showed the girls' engagement in certain tasks were generally associated with feminine traits like sewing, beautifying one self and other performing tasks related to the aesthetic sense. Participants were also found to be engaged in those specific activities during classroom observations.

Once during observation, Sidra (pseudonym), a student came to me show me the dish cover she had sewed at home. In another instance, a girl was observed showing a doll (Barbie) to her friend. The data of the participants shows that teachers' perception about assigning the tasks to the girls and boys is based on their beliefs about their particular responsibilities in the future. Ashraf (2004) also points out that teachers usually transferred their own gender perceptions to the students through a variety of ways. This is quite in line with teachers' conduct in the present study, as they communicate these gendered messages through their talk and actions. These acts and talks by the teacher seem to reinforce gender-related views held by students, hence, contributed to the construction of their gender identity.

### *Living Up to the 'Good Girl' Image*

The study reveals the importance of exploration of behavioral expectations from the students in the single sex setting and its role in developing gender identity. The experiences afforded to girls and boys within schools are known to affect gender differentiation both directly, by providing differential skill practice and reinforcement (Leaper and Bigler, 2011). The female teacher perceives that there is a difference in the behavior of girls and boys. While sharing her experience of teaching to both boys and girls during the past 20 years, the teacher said,

Like here in girls' school, if I will give any task to girls, they will come the next day after memorizing their lesson, but in boys' school, it so happens that if I assign any task to boys, even after punishing them for three to four days, they

never return after doing their work. I become tired of telling them to do their homework. (Interview, 23rd, February 2012)

The data analysis shows that Mariam was convinced about difference in the behavior of the girls and boys. According to her, girls follow teacher's instructions obediently. Contrary to this, even after punishing boys, it does not affect boys much. She considers that girls take their teacher and studies seriously.

During the classroom observations, I also noticed that the teacher had certain expectations from the girls for behaving in a certain manner. She was observed meting out physical punishment when girls were found talking with their peers. Most of the time, the teacher expected the girls to remain quiet and their physical movement was restricted to their benches. Teacher was found to be shouting at the students on leaving their places. In one more instance, this teacher shouted at a girl saying "[how dare you to move from your own place] (13th February 2012). The teacher's behavior in the class demanded the students to stay quiet mostly and to stay confined to their own places. These students were rarely found playing any games at the recess time, except for some young girls running after each other. They were found sitting on stairs, talking to their friends and sharing their snacks. Some were found to be just strolling around in the corridor. One of the participants shared her views regarding games. She felt that skipping rope is a girls' game, which they can play; however, she believes that the games which need more energy cannot be played by girls and they can rupture their veins. Moreover, the teacher was also found to be seated on her chair and using her voice to control the class.

Analysis reveals that the teacher had certain behavioral expectations from the girls. She believes that girls should remain quiet and less active. Their physical movements were restricted and the students had less freedom over using the spaces in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. This was quite aligned with the findings Zainuabidin (2007) who found in her study that students get less freedom over using the physical spaces within the classroom. The expectation of the teacher that girls are passive and boys are active is in line with the larger societal expectations of two binary divisions of gender.

### *Difference in the Subject Choices*

The study further highlighted the gendered specification of subjects. For instance, girls engaged in so called "soft" subjects such as languages whereas boys engaged in "hard" subjects such as mathematics and science. The teacher, Mariam strongly believed that girls should take interest in subjects like Urdu and English. Mariam said: "Girls mostly take interest in simple subjects Urdu, Islamiyat and English in the subject which they can memorize easily". Reflecting on her previous teaching experience, Mariam shared that her male students were good at mathematics. Halai (2001) has also reported the same perceptions of teachers regarding boys and their competency in Mathematics. The girls were expected to hide themselves from the difficult tasks and look for soft corners, as she implied that girls do not like risk-taking and do not like difficult lessons like Mathematics. Similar views were shared by girls who felt comfortable and interested in Urdu and English. They all agreed that mathematics is hard for them to undertake.

The data from the focus group students and classroom observations also provided confirmation of Halai's (2001) findings that girls' expressed difficulty in understanding Mathematics. Instances of all girls struggling with mathematical concepts were also observed. The whole class was punished in for not performing well in the Mathematics test. Data reveals that girls believe that Mathematics is hard for them to study. Mariam also feels that Urdu and

English are easy to memorize, and girls like such smooth subjects. Girls themselves assert that they do not like the subject which they believe needs more thinking. The examples from the study show that some subjects are constructed as masculine and feminine. This parallels Mendick's (2005) views that gender specifications of subjects lead to tensions for female students in selecting and performing well in "male" subjects.

### *Teacher's Verbal and Non-Verbal Interactions*

One of the most powerful and subtle ways in which teachers shape students' gender identity is through teacher-student interactions within the classroom culture (Liu, 2006). Mariam used to address the students not by their names but by their gender. She would generally call a student [you girl]. This conscious or unconscious act of teacher was a constant act of making students conscious of their specific gender responsibilities acceptable and expected by the wider society.

Teachers' perception of gender differences can affect the way they interact and communicate with pupils (Francis, 2000). The teacher was found to be reinforcing to the students the responsibilities of girls in the larger society. Mariam pointed out to a student and said: "Your trousers are torn, can't you take a needle and thread to sew it? How would you go home through the road? You are not ashamed of this?" (Observation, 21st February 2012). The teacher's emphasis on students to learn certain gendered skills was a kind of entrapment in gender roles, as approved by the larger society.

During my observations, I found that that Mariam used to discuss her personal matters with other teachers openly in front of her students in the class. Once while checking students' notebooks, Mariam was explaining her experience of conceiving just after a one year gap of her first delivery. She asked her co-teacher to pray for her as she wanted a boy this time. All the students overheard this conversation which must have added to their understanding of boys' value in the society. Such gender concerns were generally raised by Mariam while interacting with Seema. Once she shared with Seema that her sister is worried about her daughter who was young but was healthy. Her body type was a problem, as they did not have a suitable match for her in the family. According to her, all boys wanted to get married to younger (slimmer girls.)

Mariam might have assumed that the students did not overhear this discussion or that it didn't matter if they did; nonetheless it was revealing of her perceptions regarding gender differences (Francis, 2000). Whether consciously or not, Mariam communicated through these kinds of discussions, the societal perceptions about girls' physical appearances, which the girls overheard and it was a stark reminder for them regarding their place and position in the society.

### *Boys and Girls are Different*

Data shows that girls perceive gender as signs of physical differentiation between girls and boys. Girls perceive different tasks and activities associating them with girls or boys; for instance, students shared with me that cooking, sweeping, sewing, and other household tasks, are duties that girls undertake. They shared with me that boys could perform these tasks reserved for girls in the absence of their mothers or sisters or in case of the illness of these caregivers. One of the participants shared with me: "Miss, my brother works in the kitchen if my mother falls sick (18<sup>th</sup> Feb)." Moreover, data also reveals that students perceived their gender identity through the messages they received from the agents of socialization. Through such messages around them, children perceive their identities; they take an active part in constructing what it means to be a girl and boy at a particular time and place (Blaise, 2005). The teacher's perceptions were also

expressions of the societal view of gender in many respects; in addition to the data already shared, she also said that she does not like her daughters to wear pants and shirts and also said, “I do not want my daughters to study in co-education (18<sup>th</sup> Feb)”.

Furthermore, while sharing their views regarding co-education schooling, the students shared with me that they do not want to study with boys. They felt that boys are not well-behaved and it is not right to study with them. One of the student shared with me, “Miss, if I have to study with boys; I will change my school” (FGD, 8th February 2012). The literature also reinforces the idea that all-girl classes report feeling very intimidated in co-education environments (Medigan, 2003).

The data show that there was a consensus among all the participants in perceiving that boys and girls are different; hence, they cannot study with each other. Not only are their tasks different but they can also be recognized through the way they dress and behave. The perceptions of the participants are how the wider society expects and perceive gender: males and females are significantly different types of persons.

## **Findings**

This study made an attempt to explore how gender construction takes place in a single sex classroom. This study has examined the classroom practices as an important factor in developing the gender identity of students. This study revealed that teaching and learning is always gendered and that the sociocultural setting reinforces the classroom environment. The teacher-student interactions and student-student interactions play an important role in the gender identity construction of young children. Furthermore, the way teachers are being socialized has a great impact on the perceptions of the teacher regarding gender identity construction. The study also highlights that children bring certain perceptions regarding their identities from home. Therefore, the study recommends schools management (teachers’, teacher educators’) to work closely with children’s families in order to conceptualize differently the identity construction of children.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching and learning is always gendered because gender messages are passed on to the girls, which play an important role in their gender identity construction. The way the teachers’ are being socialized has a great impact on their perceptions of gender identities. Their perception guided their behavior and treatment in the classroom. The study also emphasized that girls bring specific gender stereotypes from their home and practice them in schools. Teachers, as agents of socialization, promote their own understanding of gender identities, approved and practiced by the larger society. So there is an important need to integrate more fluid concepts of gender into the curricula which can remove the psychological barriers rather than only physical boundaries.

The findings of the study showed that single sex classrooms are sites of gender stereotyping. As agents of socialization, teachers play important role in reinforcing the acceptable and proved gender stereotypes by the larger society within the classroom. This makes single sex classrooms active sites in practicing gender discrimination, as practiced by the society at large. Therefore, it is necessary to make the teachers aware of the gender issues they perpetuate in the classroom. There is also the need to challenge the perceptions of the students

through providing the students with opportunities of multiple gender discourses in order to explore their identities.

Secondly, teachers' preset perceptions guided their uneven behavior in their classroom practices. It has been observed that teachers treat the students differently. Teachers' actions are guided by their perceptions that girls and boys are different from each other and they should in fact be treated differently. This discourse need to be challenged by providing the teachers with an opportunity to examine their and the broader aspects of gender inequalities throughout the society.

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