

Absence of Transgender in Curriculum

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Abstract: During the 2011 Census, a column named 'others' were added to the gender category with the intention of enumerating transgender persons and 54,854 children in the age group of 0-6 identified as 'others' instead of male or female. Research has shown that majority of transgender children became aware about the mismatch between their gender identity and assigned identity at a very young age. This Awareness of gender identity of a non-conforming nature at the young age makes school a crucial institution in the lives of transgender children. Research literature examining the school experiences of transgender persons and representation of them in textbooks shows discrimination in both. The responses of transgender people about their school life reveal shared but isolated experiences of childhood and the common theme that binds these experiences is social exclusion. This significantly reduces their social integration and leads to marginalisation later in life. This study looks at the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and textbooks by NCERT and found that they fail even to mention the term transgender and rather tend to use reductionist egalitarian language. The Framework conflates the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity and is heteronormative in character suggesting only two possible identities i.e. male and female. The study also points out that the New Education Policy which is being formulated may continue the neglect of transgender children.

Key Words: Transgender, LGBTQ, Gender Non-conforming, School, Education, Social Exclusion, Heteronormativity

1. INTRODUCTION:

Transgender community in India is now receiving widespread and constant attention from the mainstream of society. Rajya Sabha (2015), in a rare move, passed a private members' Bill named Rights of Transgender Persons Bill 2014 on April 24, 2015 guaranteeing reservation for transgender community in education and jobs, financial aid and social inclusion¹. One year ago, in April 2014, The NALSA judgment of the Supreme Court accorded 'third gender' status to transgender persons and directed the government to consider the community as socially and economically backward class for affirmative action (National Legal Services Authority Vs Union of India, 2014). It was a definitive step towards social inclusion of the community, at least symbolically². Earlier, during the Census 2011, a column named 'others' were added to the gender category with the intention of enumerating transgender persons and 4, 87,803 persons identified themselves as 'others' instead of male or female (Registrar General and Census Commissioner, n.d.). Though activists estimate the real number of transgender persons as much higher, almost half a million persons identifying themselves outside the gender binary is remarkable in itself (Nagarajan, 2014). The census document also notes that transgender persons might have identified themselves either male or female depending on their choice. More importantly, out of these 4, 87,803 persons, 54,854 belong to the age group of 0-6 which requires significant attention. A hitherto invisible community, transgender children, who were facing double discrimination in a heteronormative society, possibly multiple discrimination if one counts categories like caste, class and religion also, is coming to the fore. This can also be seen as the beginning of an attitudinal change towards transgender community as parents are recognising the gender non-conforming nature of their children.

However, the legal and official recognitions aside, the exclusionary character of the transgender community in general has not seen much change yet. A media report from Tamil Nadu indicated that 'more than a few' transgender students were compelled to drop out of school because of bullying (Times News Network, 2014)³. The research literature on the school life of transgender youth and adults in various cultures which details the trauma they experienced, towards which we will turn later, is also consistent with this report. In this situation, it is imperative to take a serious look at how the school curriculum and textbooks treat the transgender community and the larger issue of heteronormativity in them. Schools are one of the main agents of socialisation and textbooks have a lasting impact on students. As DePalma (2013) notes, 'without questioning the gender categories and norms at a very basic level, including questioning what we think we already know about gender, reducing gender-based inequity and violence (both physical and symbolic) will be difficult'.

It would be in order here to define certain concepts which will help us to question received norms about gender. From a transgender perspective, most important among them is to understand how heteronormativity works in

various institutions of the society. Smith (2013) explains heteronormativity as a 'dominant cultural force that positions heterosexual⁴ and cisgender⁵ identities as normal, visible, and acceptable while positioning queer⁶ and transgender identities as abnormal, preferably invisible and unacceptable'. This in turn leads to heterosexist beliefs, attitudes, actions, and processes that marginalize, devalue, and discriminate against persons and groups who do not identify as fully heterosexual. Nelson (1999) illustrates the heteronormative point when she asks why terms like husband, wife, wedding ring, anniversaries, in-laws, boy/girl friend, all references to heterosexual identity, are not perceived as such. At the same time references to gay relationships, customs, or characters may be more likely to be seen as signifying sexual identity and even sexual behavior.

Theorists who take critical approaches to education have described how school reinforces and perpetuates the dominant norms in the society through legitimizing them as knowledge. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) famously asserted that 'all pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power.' They explained symbolic violence as the imposition of meanings upon groups or classes as legitimate and argue that every power does this by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force. Apple (2004) has shown that 'schools systematically distort the functions of social conflict in collectivities' and 'change, conflict, and men and women as creators as well as receivers of values and institutions are systematically neglected in the curriculum'. These results in presenting to students a view that serves to legitimate the existing social order. Examining the role and purpose of textbooks specifically, Crawford (2003) describes them as crucial organs in the process of constructing legitimated ideologies and beliefs and a reflection of the history, knowledge and values considered important by powerful groups in society. He contends that during the process of manufacture of textbooks authors and publishers inevitably find themselves including and excluding the expectations of competing interested parties concerning what constitutes legitimate curriculum knowledge. Friere (2005) proposes a pedagogy which develops *conscientização* or critical consciousness in students - learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, or critical reflection in his words, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.

2. CURRICULUM, TEACHERS AND PEERS:

Research literature examining the school experiences of transgender persons and representation of them in textbooks shows discrimination in both counts. Exclusion and shame are the common themes in the experiences of the transgender persons in school. Even supposedly inclusive initiatives, without proper training, may become counterproductive or ineffective. This is what Smith (2013) found in the study of American School Counselor Association's National Model which calls for professional school counselors to 'play a vital role in a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ)⁷ parents and students of same-sex parents.' He states that the Model is written in such a way that professional school counselors with a high degree of critical consciousness will be able to use it as a tool to challenge heteronormativity. However, counselors lacking in critical consciousness will be able to implement a school counseling program that is consistent with the ASCA National Model, while preserving heteronormativity. He contends that the use of reductionist egalitarian language, lack of specificity regarding systemic barriers and use of conditional language within the subsection for LGBTQ students may cause inaction on the part of counselors. He points out that within democratic societies, reductionist egalitarian language that promotes the needs of every person and all people often undermines the interruption of oppressive forces and suggests that language that is sufficiently pluralistic yet also accounts for the unequal playing field experienced by students from traditionally under-represented and historically marginalised groups should be used. He also proposes that naming and defining specific systemic barriers and providing non-conditional strategies and tools for disrupting oppressive forces like heteronormativity within schools.

Lester (2014) who examined 68 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) themed children's books, another attempt at inclusiveness, however concludes that they 'reinforce heteronormativity through the nearly exclusive celebration of homonormative, non-threatening LGBT characters that conform to expected gender roles'. Jennings and McGillivray's (2011) analysis of multicultural education textbooks in the United States found that sexual orientation and gender identity are conflated or incorrectly defined in many of these textbooks and only in one text, they found gender identity is explicitly linked with transgender identities and explained what it means to be transgender.

Payne and Smith's study (2014) on teachers reveals that fear and anxiety are the common response from them to the presence of a transgender child and the disruption of the gender binary. None of the participants in this study had heard any mention of transgender students in their professional training programs. Authors state that these emotions are limiting the possibilities for schools to affirm transgender identity. Case and Meier (2014), in a study based out of Texas, US, points out that current curriculum models for preparing school adult educators and counselors fail to properly address gender non-conforming youth and appropriate adult ally behavior to support them. They found that lack of training regarding transgender youth leaves 'educators unprepared to become allies to this disenfranchised community and attend to their needs'.

A review of 39 relevant studies published between 1995 and 2012 and conducted in 12 different countries found strong evidence that peer victimisation related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression is associated with a diminished sense of school belonging and higher levels of depressive symptoms. It is also found to be associated with disruptions in educational trajectories, traumatic stress, and alcohol and substance use (Collier, Beusekom, Bos, and Sandfort, 2013). Wallace and Russell (2013) argue, in the context of mental health aspects of the gender-nonconforming children due to peer victimisation, that ‘where shame emerges as a dominant and/or unrecognized dimension of experience, there are risks that it can become the organizer of identity and amplify later life vulnerability to shame proneness, a shame-based identity, and depression’. However, Jones (2013), after analyzing how different sexuality education research methodologies framed GLBTIQ students, sounds a note a caution by suggesting that representation of GLBTIQ students as at-risk victims, which constitute a dominant discourse in Western research, may be starting to impact on the experiences of students in the West because of their negativity. This warning may be applicable in the case of textbooks also as Jennings and McGillivray’s (2011) analysis found that, besides heteronormativity as mentioned earlier, the textbooks were deeply entrenched in the victim discourse.

3. TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL:

LGBTQ youth respondents of Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014) found school-based sexuality education in the United States as primarily exclusive with active or passive silencing of LGBTQ discourse, heterocentricity and pathologising. They pointed out that LGBTQ topics either never brought up in the classroom or questions about LBGTQ are ignored. The themes were centered on an assumed heterosexual behaviour and whenever LGBTQ issues are discussed, it was in the context of AIDS/STDs. A study on heterosexism in schools in Iceland also generated almost similar responses from LGBT youth. They reported institutionalized heterosexism in the structure and culture of the schools manifesting through ‘lack of understanding toward LGBT students, emphasis on heterosexual relations, unpleasant questions being asked about personal matters or sexuality, heterosexist discourse within the classroom’ (Kjaran and Jóhannesson 2013). A survey among the LGBT people in Europe has shown that LGBT youth experience most prejudice and/or discrimination in school environment with 61% of respondents reporting negative personal experiences at school related to their LGBT status. 42.9% of the respondents also found prejudice or discriminative elements in the school curriculum (Takács, 2006).

A study by Johnson, Singh and Gonzalez (2014) on transgender, queer and questioning (TQQ) youth is particularly curious where participants reported that they felt strongly about transgender youth being excluded, not only by the straight community but from gay and lesbian communities also who were not understanding or accepting of gender non-conforming identities and expressions. They described schools mostly as rigid gendered spaces where students learn there are only ‘two options’—girls or boys. Importantly, the TQQ youth shared that without feeling accepted in schools, it was difficult for them to succeed in their academic and personal lives, and in some cases youth would abandon school all together. The study’s findings on school experiences of the gender non-conforming are consistent with those of lesbian, gay and bisexual students. At the same time, it also shows the divergence with respect to the transgender from lesbian, gay and bisexual who have cisgender identities under the LGBT umbrella. The call for a transing curriculum by DePalma (2013) that ‘raises and holds questions about sex and gender and by extension about sexuality that we thought we had already answered’, as mentioned earlier, is particularly important in this context. She proposes that any work supporting sexualities equality must explore (trans) gender as a separate but crucial aspect of heteronormativity, an aspect, she contends, that has traditionally been eclipsed by gay and lesbian studies. She maintains that gender normativity and heteronormativity is linked through ‘the policing of sex and gender functions to construct gender anxiety and cissexual privilege (the assumption that the sex assigned at birth is somehow more natural and genuine), to propagate genderism (the pervasive and systemic belief in the naturalness and superiority of gender-normative) and to marginalize gender-variant and transgender people.’ She also states that early childhood is where the oppositional gender binary is constructed and begins to be actively policed by teachers and children alike.

It is not without reason this gender binary construction begins in primary school. Research has shown that majority of transgender children became aware about the mismatch between their gender identity and assigned identity at a very young age. In the personal narratives described in Nanda’s (1999) ethnographic study of Indian hijras, they state 4 or 5 as the age they became aware about their gender variant nature. Psychological studies are also consistent with this. Vanderburgh (2009) found 60.4% of male-affirmed clients of him knew that they were boys by usually about 4–6 years old as did 52.7% of female-affirmed⁸ clients while another clinical psychological study found that gender identity develops between ages two and five (Zucker, 2005 as cited in Case and Meier, 2014). Kennedy and Hellen (2010), citing their own earlier studies analysing an online artifact, report that transgender persons became aware about their identity at around 8 years old. They also point out that the average age these children acquire any vocabulary related to transgender is 15.4 years which means that there is an average delay of 7.5 years between becoming aware of one’s gender variant nature and learning any words with which to describe it. This is also an indirect comment about the heteronormative nature of curriculum since these years are mostly spent at school. They

also suggest there are two categories of transgender children, apparent and non-apparent, with the vast majority being non-apparent. Given the exclusionary and marginal nature of transgender community, it can safely be assumed that more than fifty thousand children under the age of 6 belonging to the gender category of 'others' in the 2011 Census of India are the 'apparent transgender' children. Above all, this census data is another empirical evidence to prove that transgender children became aware about their identity at an early age.

This awareness of gender identity of a non-conforming nature at the young age is what makes the school a crucial institution in the lives of transgender children. As Brill and Pepper (2008) notes, a child's experience at school can significantly enhance or undermine their sense of self and a welcoming and supportive school where bullying and teasing is not permitted and children are actively taught to respect and celebrate difference is the ideal environment for all children. They add that this is especially true for gender variant and transgender children, who frequently are the targets of teasing and bullying. The responses of transgender people about their school life reveal shared but isolated experiences of childhood and the common theme that binds these experiences is social exclusion. This significantly reduces their social integration and leads to marginalisation later in life. An example can be seen for this in the 2011 Census data of work force participation of transgender persons in which out of nearly half a million population belong to the gender category 'others', 66% are non-workers and another 12% are marginal workers. At the same time, the research also shows that an inclusive curriculum and sensitive teachers can make an impact among students against heteronormativity and help transgender children navigate the hostile environment inside and outside the school (DePalma, 2013; Nelson, 1999; Takács, 2006).

4. NEGLECT IN CURRICULUM:

National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and textbooks prepared pursuant to this by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) received considerable public attention and caused a major debate by professing a shift from rote methods of information accumulation to knowledge construction by students connecting to life outside school. It follows the 86th Constitution Amendment Act, 2002 which guarantees free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years and took upon itself the duty of 'ensuring health, nutrition and an inclusive school environment empowering all children in their learning, across differences of caste, religion, gender, disability'. In the social sciences, it proposed a study from the perspective of marginalised groups, describing it as a paradigm shift (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2005). However, studies have pointed out how dominant values and ideologies are retained through the textbooks and how certain exclusions hinder the stated aims of NCF. Haydock (2015) demonstrates that NCERT textbooks facilitate students' conformation and integration into the present social system by the use and absence of terms and concepts, citing the absence of capitalism as a term and concept in social science textbooks. The term transgender fares no better. In the 159 pages of NCF 2005, neither there is a mention to this term or the term LGBT nor is the concept explained in a specific way. The mention to marginalised sections of the society is used in a reductionist egalitarian language, as Smith (2013) observed of ASCA National Model. However, document is specific to mention the problems faced by disabled children when it discusses marginalised sections showing an understanding that problems need to be specifically stated in order to tackle them. It rightly points out the sense of helplessness, inferiority and stigmatization created by labeling someone as learning disabled but fails to extend this approach of inclusion to other groups who are at risk of marginalisation like transgender.

NCF comes close to a possible indirect discussion of transgender children when it deals with the development of self-identity in children. But, it conflates, as seen in Jennings and McGillivray's (2011) analysis of the US textbooks, the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity. Contrary to what we have seen about development of gender identity at a very young age among transgender children, the document describes adolescence as the critical period for the development of self-identity. The discussion, though addresses the constraints faced by girls⁹, is heteronormative in character suggesting only two possible identities i.e. male and female. At the end of the passage, it verges on to covert heterosexism by pathologising LGBT sexualities when it suggests the ramifications of the physiological changes during adolescence. It states that 'most adolescents deal with these changes without full knowledge and understanding, which could make them vulnerable to risky situations like sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS and drug and substance abuse.' This passage together with exclusion of the term and concept of transgender sufficiently explains an unstated aim of the NCF, which is, preserving the dominant heteronormativity in the society.

Analysis of syllabus and textbooks further brings forth this exclusion through absence of transgender people and LGBT community in general. Since the syllabus and textbooks are prepared on the basis of curriculum, the term transgender continues its absence to the classroom. Unit III of Sociology Syllabus prescribes topics such as caste prejudice, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, marginalisation of tribal communities, women's equality, protection of religious minorities and caring for differently abled under the head of social inequality and exclusion (NCERT, 2006) and chapters 5 and 6 of the Class XII textbook Indian Society covers these topics (NCERT, 2007a). The other Class XII textbook Social Change and Development in India, when discussing social movements states that

'India has experienced a whole array of social movements involving women, peasants, Dalits, Adivasis, and others' (NCERT, 2007b) The word 'others' in instances like these doesn't convey any meaning and effectively excludes all except mentioned before that. But, at the same time, it provides an inclusionary garb with its open to interpretation nature. It requires a teacher with critical consciousness to devise classroom activities on her own to incorporate the issue of social inequality and exclusion faced by transgender community into the discussion. Studies analyzing the syllabus and textbooks from a feminist perspective have also noted the heterosexism in them which has implications for lesbians, gays and bisexuals as well as transgender persons. Roy (2011) in her study of Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) Teachers Manual for Class IX, found 'sexuality and patriarchy are conspicuous by their absence' and Raveendran and Chunawala (2015) in their analysis of NCERT Class XII Biology textbook, pointed out that textbook is 'completely silent on matters related to different types of sexuality.' They also examined how the textbook's use of the term 'normal' excludes people of sexes other than the socially accepted male and female sexes and appear to pathologise people with different gender identities or sexual preferences.

5. CONCLUSION:

Creating a safe and sensitive atmosphere for transgender children is necessary to fulfill the fundamental right of equality enshrined in the Constitution of India. Furthermore, The Right to Education Act 2009 enjoins upon the government to ensure that children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing elementary education on any grounds (Government of India, 2009). For this to happen, with respect to the transgender children, recognizing that there are more than two options related to gender in the curriculum and, developing and adopting education strategies accordingly by schools are basic requirements. However, the New Education Policy being formulated by the current government may continue the neglect of transgender children. The themes listed for discussions in the initial documents fail to mention the term transgender and tend to use reductionist language when referring to 'deprived classes', 'disadvantaged groups' or 'marginalised group' at various points. At the same time, following the pattern in NCF, it poses particular questions about the issues faced by children belonging to SC, ST and minority groups to ensure full participation marginalised groups or measures needed to make educational institutions inclusive facilitating the participation of differently abled children with special needs (MHRD, n.d.). The policy will be formulated after wide multilevel consultations at Gram Panchayat, Block, District and State levels with a Task Force at national level monitoring the process and submitting its report.

The neglect of the transgender in the curriculum and textbooks has to be understood in the context of increasing activism for transgender rights during the formulation of NCF. While the struggle for politico-legal rights is important, the LGBT movement and transgender activists need to actively engage with social institutions. It is time transgender rights activism turn their focus to schools and curriculum more vigorously and this consultation on NEP may provide an ideal opportunity to exert influence for an inclusive education which respects gender variances. This is also important in the long term as without a curriculum which does not acknowledge transgender identities, a favourable change in society will be a difficult proposition.

Notes

- This is the first time in 45 years that a private members' Bill, not endorsed by the government, has been passed by the upper House of the Parliament. The Bill has to be passed in the Lok Sabha to become an Act and the government has announced that it would bring a fresh Bill 'after removing the impractical clauses' (Gandhi and Ramachandran, 2015).
- However, critical analysis of the judgment has pointed out the contrary tendencies in judgment and warns that actual interpretations and implementation of the judgment will be uneven and varied. See Dutta, 2014
- It may be noted here that Tamil Nadu is considered to be a tolerant state towards transgender community, with the state government officially recognizing them as third gender in 2008, a first in India and introducing various welfare measures including a Welfare Board, another first.
- Sexual orientation towards persons of opposite sex
- Individuals' experiences of their own gender agreeing with the sex assigned at birth
- Smith uses this term to denote those who are part of the sexual orientation continuum other than heterosexual, namely homo- and bi-sexual persons. However the term is also used in a wider sense to describe that which troubles or the process of consciously engaging in the troubling of hetero/gender normativity (DePalma, 2013).
- Q in LGBTQ also stands for Queer. Some authors add I to denote Intersexed persons to LGBT which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender. The acronyms used by the respective authors are retained as such in this segment.

- Terms female-affirmed and male-affirmed are used to replace the terms male-to-female and female-to-male respectively, in an attempt to create self-referential language that is non-pathologising and recognizing that ‘these children have never identified as the gender assigned them at birth and are therefore not moving from one gender to another, but into an affirmation of the gender they have always known themselves to be’ (Vanderburgh, 2009).
- The way the curriculum and textbooks approach the gender question is also critiqued as textbooks and teaching manuals based on the curriculum are found endorsing patriarchal values and reinforcing status quo (Raveendran and Chunawala, 2015; Roy, 2011).

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