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STRENGTHENING THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS IN INDIA

Teachers becoming action-researchers: Developing a Teacher-Training Module for Increasing Girls’ Participation in Primary Schools

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The Project

A participatory action research project was launched in July 1996 and operationalised a year later in July 1997 in district RaeBareilly in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The guiding objective of the project is to strengthen the education of girls in India, by increasing their participation in primary education. This involves broadly an increase in enrollment, attendance, retention and achievement of girls in primary schools, i.e., classes 1 - 5. While there is a clear understanding and acceptance of the fact that there are several societal reasons for unequal participation of boys and girls in primary education, all over India and in Uttar Pradesh specifically, this project has chosen the school as its site of action, guided by previous research which highlights the fact that our classrooms are not very girl-friendly sites and are in some measure responsible for keeping girls out of school and failing to retain those who are enrolled for very long. This project attempts to work in participation with teachers to find ways of making our classrooms more attractive and empowering spaces for girls.

Research Design

A pilot block was selected in RaeBareilly district for the first phase of the project. Maharajganj is the pilot block, selected because of the strong prior support of the teachers union in this and a neighboring block. It is also one of the more interior and backward blocks.

There are 65 primary schools in Maharajganj, in which 12826 children are enrolled. 7274 of these are boys and 5552 are girls. 80.4% of all girls between 6 and 11 years of age in the block are in school, while 93% of all boys of the same age are enrolled in schools. There are approximately 155 teachers in the block, only 21 of whom are women. The student-teacher ratio is 1: 82.7 students. There are several schools where teachers are compelled to resort to multi-grade teaching.

A core group of 21 teachers was selected from this block after a series of preliminary workshops and meetings with a larger number of teachers. This core-group was trained in participatory methods of research in a 10 day training workshop held in July 1997. They then participated in an action research phase, a brief analytical description of which forms the bulk of this report.

This phase was followed by another 10 day workshop during which 10 teachers were selected from the core-group. Along with consultants and experts, this core-group of teachers developed a training module and a draft of a gender-handbook in January-February 1998. A group of 50 teachers was trained in March 1998 in the use of the handbook which shall be field tested for the remaining months of this academic year in 20 schools. On the basis of the response of the teachers and the students, the draft shall be revised in June 1998 and implemented in the remaining 45 schools of the block for a further field test. At the end of the academic session

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1998-1999, it shall be further revised and then implemented in the entire district. At the end of
the year 2000, an implementation plan for the entire state shall be developed and presented to
the state, on the basis of the evaluation report of the success of the training module and gender
handbook in the district. This presentation focuses on the Action-Research Phase and
describes and analyses its findings.

The Action Research Phase

Objective

The chief objective of this phase was to enable the core-group of teacher-researchers to get an
in-depth understanding of the situation of girls in their classrooms as it exists, to observe, self-
reflect and problematise their own practices closely; to identify the key relevant issues and then
to collectively arrive at some possible ways in which the situation might be dealt with, with the
aim of making their own practices in the classroom more girl-friendly; to experiment with
innovative ideas in their own classrooms and to emerge with ideas for the development of a
proposed training module and gender handbook. The guiding objective of the training module
and gender handbook was the strengthening of girls education in primary schools, firstly by
increasing enrolment, attendance and achievement, and more importantly by transacting the
curriculum such that girls were empowered to perceive themselves as equal persons and active
participants in the socio-political world they inhabited.

Participants:
21 primary school teacher-researchers.
Monitoring, guiding and support team:
   - Project Director
   - Field Officer
   - 2 Lecturers from the District Institute of Educational Training, RaeBareilly

Site: 17 Primary Schools in Maharajganj and 3 Primary Schools in Harchandpur

Duration: The Action Research Phase lasted for 11 weeks. It began on September 9, 1997 and
closed on November 24, 1997. It was divided into 2 main phases:

The Observation Phase: Classroom Observations by the teacher researchers in neighboring
schools. The classroom observations started on September 9 and were over on September 19,
1997. 4 observations were done on September 9, 12, 16 and 19, 1997.

The Participation Phase: Which consisted of experimental work in their own classrooms. This
phase began on September 22, 1997 and continued until November 24, 1997.

Methodology: Ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing were used.
There were frequent support and sharing meetings during the entire action research phase.
For monitoring and support purposes, we divided the 21 schools into 4 sectors, which were
monitored by the 4 members of the Monitoring and Support team, who made field visits
regularly to each of the schools in their sectors.
Day-long report sharing and support meetings were conducted every 2 weeks at a central place in Maharajganj. The participants shared their field notes and the events in their classroom, in small groups facilitated by the Monitoring team. Many suggestions were given to them and short-term tasks assigned for experimenting within their classrooms.

Findings and Analysis

Observation Phase

There were 2 weekly support meetings during this phase at which time teachers shared their field notes and their experiences in conducting classroom observations. Several of them reported that, due to a shortage of teachers in some schools, they ended up doing the teaching instead of observing, for part of the time. This is a common predicament and we had to allow that, though they were urged to divide their time between observing and teaching, both.

Field notes written by the teachers during their visits were shared in small groups and then reported in the whole group. Given below is an example of field notes written by one of the teacher-researchers - Krishna Devi

Example field notes of a class observation visit

*The children were being made to exercise in the school courtyard after prayers. The children were lined up according to height order. The small boys and girls were lined up together. The older girls were lined up separately in 2 lines. The teachers were making the children exercise to the count. After exercises the children went to their classes. After that I introduced myself to the Principal, told him about our program and explained the purpose of my visit to him.*

*There is a total of 3 male teachers, no female teacher. The Principal teaches class 5, Shri Sitaramji teaches class 2 and 4, and Shri Ramlakhanji teaches Class 3.*

*The condition of the building: There are only 2 rooms in the school. There is no verandah. There is a handpump for drinking water. There is no boundary wall. There is an open ground in front of the school where there are a couple of tress and plants. The surroundings are quite pretty. There are fruit gardens behind the school and fields on either side of the school. There is no toilet in the school. Classes 1 and 5 are conducted together, in the same room. Classes 2 and 4 are conducted together in the same room. Class 3 is conducted under a tree.*

*Observation of Class 3:*

10.15 am: The class was conducted under the peepul tree. The teacher was taking attendance.

Number of kids enrolled: 54
Number present: 45
Number of girls enrolled: 22
Number present: 16
Number of boys enrolled: 32
Number present: 29

Only 9 children found absent in the class.
Seating arrangement:

There was discrimination in the seating arrangement. The girls and boys were seated separately, in lines. The long jute matting was laid out in rows on the dirt floor. The rows were very straight. The girls were talking to each other and the boys were also talking only amongst themselves. The class was very disciplined. After this the teacher asked the children to turn in their writing/transcription books. All the children came one by one, turned in their books to the teacher and went back to their place to be seated. The children kept looking back at me to see what I was doing. The girls are talking to each other and wondering when I will start teaching them.

10.45: After correcting their books, the teacher asked the children to take out their Arithmetic books. He taught them a lesson in addition. The children were to add 10 successively 3 times over: 536 - [546], [556],[566]

While working on the blackboard, the teacher was interested only in his own work and was paying almost no attention to the children. Some of the boys were talking to each other and looking at each other's copies and not at the black board. In between, he even asked the children some questions like - what is 36 plus 10? A boy called Dwand Kumar replied and gave the right answer - 46. In this way he asked questions from many children. Only the boys gave correct answers to the questions in Arithmetic. The girls were asked no questions at all.

11.30 am: After this a pundit came and told the teacher to remove the children from under the peepul tree, because he wanted to conduct a prayer there. The teacher complied immediately, removing the children to another tree in the field. The tree was covered with weeds and there was only a small patch of clear ground. He seated the children in a patch of wet soil. The pundit seemed not to care about the children at all. After his prayer he left his prayer things under the tree, so that the children had to continue sitting on the wet soil. After the change of place, the teacher corrected the copies on which the children had tried to solve the problems he had put on the board for them. He had put the sums and their answers on the board, which is why the sums were all correct. The children's writing was satisfactory. After this the children had a break.

As soon as the bell rang, the children put their things in their bags, collected their lunch boxes and went out of the class. Since the village is close to the school, some of the kids go home for lunch. The boys ate their lunch in a separate group and the girls in a separate one. Similarly the boys played kabaddi together and the girls played geetas together. Then I asked the girls why they didn't ever play with the boys. A child called Renu said: "My grandmother says I should not play with boys." Gradually most of the girls came close to me and sat around me. I chatted to them for quite a while. They all told me their names and class. When I asked them why they did not play kabaddi with the boys - they told me that at home their parents forbade them from doing so and in school, the master forbade them from this. He said they could play kabaddi, but not with the boys.

After lunch, the teacher came into the class and asked the kids to take out their Hindi text books. He asked them to open the lesson "Raakhi ki Laaj." All the children in the class had text books. The word meanings of difficult words had already been given. Now the difficult words were repeated out loud, in order to improve their pronunciation. The girls were concentrating less on
their books and more on me. The teacher said “I taught you the lesson yesterday. Now I’m going to ask you questions.”

Ques.1. “In which month is Rakhi celebrated?” He asked this question to a girl called Renu. Answer: “Rakhi is celebrated in the full month of the Sawan.”

Ques 2. “Members of which community/caste celebrate Rakhi?”
No child in the class could give the answer to this question. Then the teacher gave the answer, saying that Rakhi is a festival celebrated by the Hindus. And then he told them about the national festivals of India. He made the distinction between Hindu and Muslim festivals. After this each child was asked to read from the text book. Most of the children could read the text book. The meanings of difficult words were also told to them.

Because the class was in the fields, the children kept looking at the comings and goings around them. A dictation of the same lesson was taken after this. The children were looking into each other’s copies. After taking dictation all the girls came and stood next to me and began asking me to check their copies. After I checked some of the girls’ copies, some boys also came up to me. Then I checked most of the copies and found that some of the children had misspelled some of the words. The teacher did not mind my checking the copies. After this he gave them some general information like - name of the state, the district, why we go to the post-office, where the market is held, what we get there, etc.

At this time the class 1 kids came out into the field. The principal lined them up in 2 rows and taught them counting in tens and ones up to 100. He also asked them to recite their tables - 2-5. There was no gender-discrimination, as the girls and boys in class 1 were lined up together. Some of the boys were pulling the girls’ plaits lightly. The girls did not complain to the teacher. The teacher kept walking up and down and yet managed to keep an eye on the kids and to teach them. The children from classes 2, 4 and 5 were sitting inside. Directed by the Principal, the class 5 kids rang the bell. Children from all the classes came out and lined up. After “attention”, “at ease”, “Jai Hind” and “dismiss,” the children all wished the teachers good day and then ran off in the direction of their respective homes.

Conclusions:
1. The discipline in the school is good.
2. They need more rooms.
3. They need more seating mats
4. There is a shortage of teaching aids
5. There should be at least one female teacher.

Note: Upon chatting with the girls during my observation visit, I felt that the girls really wanted to get close to me and chat for as long as they could. Even when I went out into the field, a class 4 child, Sunita, followed me out with her math text book. She said “Didi you should come to my school every day.” I told her that I would come for 4 days certainly. At this another child Pawan Kumari from class 3 said “Bring another didi with you, then she can teach us. We all wish there was a bahenji in our school.”

Even the Principal felt that we should certainly have a female teacher in the school. The girls will feel very encouraged. By the time girls reach class 5, the girls become big, they are unable
to tell their innermost concerns to male teachers. If there is a female teacher, then they can talk openly to them.

Summary of Findings of the Classroom Observations and Discussions during the Support Meetings

- Severe shortage of seating space
- Too much paper work for the teachers
- A severe shortage of teachers - this was emphasized time and again by all the teachers.
- Teacher absenteeism: In Chandpur there are 6 teachers and 465 children. On the day of the classroom visit, only 2 teachers were present, 2 had gone to get their salary and 2 were sick.
- Much disturbance due to lack of seating space - in some cases classrooms were shared with the administrative staff and that resulted in much disturbance.
- Parents resisted mixed seating.
- Almost all teachers had to resort to multigrade teaching and use of monitors. As a result of this teachers find it difficult to teach even when they want to and much of their work is wiped out.
- Teachers seem to have no relationship with their children - they hardly spend any time in one class. Often all they do is to write work on the board in one class and then move to the next to do the same and then back to do the checking.
- There were few gender specific comments or observations. The classrooms seemed to be sites of gender neutral benign neglect.
- The depressing and dilapidated condition of the classrooms was commented upon. In one case the teacher-researcher said it was really too hot to sit in the classroom to observe so he chose another classroom.
- Teachers commented that where there was a strong principal, there was more discipline among the students and staff both - and Halor and Chiloli are good examples of that.
- The teachers were not punctual and often came late.
- Attendance of children was recorded at a healthy 80%, though the same could not be said for the staff. They were often absent for reasons like - collecting of salary; administrative work and personal work.
- Teaching methods described emphasized rote-learning and copying from the text book on the blackboard. In many cases - very little teaching-learning was accomplished during the entire day - often just 4 sums on the board, or copying from the text book and copying the letters from the blackboard.
- Every one commented upon the heartening fact, that the teachers had reported honestly, on their peers.
- It was a good exercise in self-reflection for all of them. They said that it gave them an insight into their own practices.

Planning for the Participation Phase

A concerted attempt was made to move the discussion away from a focus on the structural and organizational problems. Examples where efforts were being made despite the problems were cited. For example in Hasanpur, where there were only 2 teachers and 300 children, the classrooms were far better organized than at Jamuliya where there were 60 children and 2 teachers. So the point was made that there are no blanket problems or blanket solutions. The
teachers commented regretfully upon their own lack of punctuality, poor attendance and general apathy.

It was unanimously decided that before focusing on gender specifically during the participation phase of the research, we would focus on just improving the teaching in our schools. All the teachers felt the need to do that and every one made a few resolutions on the specific changes they were planning in their classrooms - for example:

- Handling the problem of shortage of space by using Panchayat ghars or trees outside the school area
- Using small group teaching in order to deal with the large numbers
- Improving the physical face of their classrooms (this was inspired by the cheery appearance of one of the schools in the Harchandpur block)
- Focusing on teaching the children, rather than completing the course.
- Improving the discipline amongst the staff - more punctuality, better attendance, better organization in the schools
- Improving the quality of their teaching.
- Meeting with the parents.

The support meetings occurred fortnightly and were day-long meetings, at which our agenda was as follows:

1. Reporting of achievements and happenings in a large group - followed by discussion
2. Detailed reporting in small groups - facilitated by the Monitoring and support team
3. Whole group sharing of small group reports
4. Planning for next week - assignment of specific tasks

An example of the proceedings of these meetings

During the meeting on September 27, 1997, the teachers reported in the large group for the first couple of hours. After this, the whole group discussed the reports and made suggestions. We gave out the interview sheets prepared by the group during the July training workshop and discussed once again the salient points of interviewing.

Teachers were asked to interview the principals in their schools and some of the members of the community that week. It was decided that gender-specific activities could now be introduced in the classroom. After lunch, I presented a book on gender sensitive and girl-friendly education and read out parts with special reference to curriculum transaction, as a way of providing examples of transacting the curriculum in girl-friendly ways. The group broke into 3 groups and each group discussed the sections of one subject - Maths, Social Science and Language. The teachers participated enthusiastically and made notes. There were requests for the book, which was provided to each participant subsequently. They were asked to try out similar curricular innovations in their own classrooms during the next week. I suggested that the monitor system, which was already in place in several schools, due to the shortage of teachers, be adopted by all and made more equitable by appointing 2 monitors - a girl and a boy and doing so in rotation. I also suggested that prayers be led by girls as well as boys. Games should be played by both together. Girls should be attended to particularly in classrooms.
Gender issues were discussed at each meeting as the rationale for each of the activities was discussed. Some of the male teachers needed much convincing.

**Teachers Report of Changes in Themselves and Their Classroom after 3 Weeks of the Participation Phase**

During the meeting on October 14, 1997 the teachers reported that there was much change in them. The following changes were reported in their classrooms and school:

- Attendance of children more regular
- Better organization in the classroom
- Children more punctual
- Teaching focus shifted from course to knowledge gained by the children
- Much better relationship with children
- More interaction between boys and girls
- More active teaching methods and more active participation by the children.
- Girls have started opening up more
- The monitor system has worked and has given girls more confidence
- Teaching has become more interesting for the children and staff both

**Reasons Cited for the Change**

- Regular inspection (by our team)
- Regular sharing meetings
- Specific short term tasks
- Sharing and reporting - therefore increased accountability
- More self-reflection - because of the writing
- Inspiring discussions during the meetings
- Increased sense of responsibility
- Enjoying the program
- They see this participation as “training”

**The Community’s Perspective**

Teachers shared and discussed their interview reports of parents. The following emerged as some of the main reasons for poor participation of girls in primary education:

- Parental apathy towards the education of their daughters
- Poverty
- Younger siblings at home needing care
- No value of education amongst the lower castes and uneducated parents.
- Dowry
- Marriage only goal for girls
- Patrilocality -Viewing girls as belonging to another family after marriage
- Lack of faith in the value of education for girls.
- Unavailability of schools in the village
Some Sample Interview Reports

Kanchan reported one mother as saying “If we send girls to school, who is going to take care of the younger children at home? And then, we are field laborers, if we spend our money on these girls’ education, then what will we do for food?”

Gyanendra Tewari interviewed several parents and asked them why girls did not come to school. He reports: There are several social traditions like the dowry-system which are hindrances in girls continuing education - “If we educate our daughters too much then we need boys with a higher education too and then they want too high a groom-price. So it’s better not to educate our girls too much.” The unavailability of a high school in the vicinity is also another reason why girls education is discontinued, as parents do not consider it safe to send their girls to another village or to co-educational schools after puberty.

The Principal of Maun Primary School said that mothers are the chief culprits as they are the ones who prevent their daughters from going to school and favor their sons more than their daughters.

Krishna Devi reports that in one of the families she interviewed, all the members were educated. Their perspective was that it was very important to educate girls in modern times and the government should make provisions for higher education for girls in each village so that girls could avail of it, as it was dangerous to send girls too far. They also expressed their concern regarding high dowries for girls with higher education.

Ram Das, a lower caste laborer from Mardaniya, said that “Everyone in our village is lower caste and uneducated, therefore they have no value for education. But given the need of the day, I am in favor of sending girls to school. If educated people can help to make the uneducated villagers aware of the importance and benefits of education, especially for girls, then there can be some progress. These people just do not understand.”

Raj Rani, a Pasi(lower caste) woman from Pure Badal Khan, said that, if poverty could be alleviated, then there was hope for the girls.

Chandrani Devi, a 60 year old lower caste woman from Hazipur, said that poverty is the main reason why girls aren’t sent to school. Large families are another reason - “With 10-10 children who can you educate and who will you leave out? Obviously the girls get left out. They have to be married off, after all! Why do they need an education?” Kamla, another woman from the same village, said that “we can’t send our daughters to a co-ed school even if it is close. There will be a social scandal if we do that. If there is a single sex school then we will send our daughters to school after class 5.”

Vijay Pratap Singh from Daudpur, who has a Masters Degree and whose wife has passed the Intermediate level, says that she would educate her daughter till the Bachelors level definitely. “We are all educated in our family and so we will definitely educate our daughters.”

The teachers all concluded that community mobilization should be an important part of their agenda. They all decided to hold parent-teacher meetings very soon in their schools, to raise the issues that had emerged from their interviews.
During the next few weeks we focused completely on gender. The types of assignments I gave to the teachers were as follows: - Gender scanning of the text books; Writing stories or poems with girls as central characters and using them in the classroom; Change one lesson from the text and teach it innovatively with gender as a focus; Teaching dialogically and interactively; Holding parent teacher meetings - preparing a context for it, like a story or a play and using it to discuss issues like child-marriage etc.

Teachers Report of the Gender Scan of Text Books

The gender scan of text books involved an examination of the subject matter, the pictorial presentation and the language for gender discrimination, along with the kinds of representation of men and women. The teachers had divided the text books amongst them according to their interest, some of them taking Maths books, some Language and some the Environmental Science and General Science books. They chose the books used in the class they were teaching. Almost all of them reported that girls had a lesser presence in the text books than boys, in the subject matter and the illustrations both.

The scan of the Maths books revealed that, in the class 4 and 5 Maths text books, there was only one picture of a girl and most of the practice problems featured only boys. The class 3 Maths text book revealed a similar picture. The Class 1 and 2 books dealt only with objects and in that sense were gender neutral.

Kanchan Singh’s gender-scan report of the 1st grade language text book: After a detailed lesson-wise analysis of the pictures, she summarized her analysis in the following analytical note -

Various professions like - Carpenter, Mason, Lawyer, Tailor, Rider, Baker, Teacher etc have all been represented by men in the pictures in the book, even though women are all members of these professions too. Only the boys have been shown doing exercise. The farmers too have been represented only by men. Boys are shown eating fruit, drinking milk etc and again only boys are shown helping in the building of homes etc. This is a false and sexist representation of reality, because it is generally true that working class women work in the fields as laborers and at building sites too, where women and girls are the ones who carry bricks, sand etc. Women work at home, in the fields and at other laborious tasks, but in the text only men are shown as doing all this work. Though the new text books reveal some difference, yet there is a long way to go. In order to alter the mentality and attitudes of people the text books will have to undergo much more transformation. Wouldn’t it be much nicer if both men and women were shown as lawyers, doctors, carpenters, teachers etc? If the text books will try to give an equal place to both boys and girls then people’s perceptions will also change to more equitable ones where boys and girls both have equal importance.

Sunita Devi’s gender-scan report of the 2nd grade language text book:

Contents: Upon scanning the list of contents in this book, it is evident that where virtues like courage have been the central theme, the lesson is a male-centered one. Further more, where qualities like compassion, fear and helplessness have been central, the lesson features women. For e.g.:

Lesson 6: Respect for Rakhi (woman)
Lesson 12: Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel (Freedom fighter and National Hero) (Man)
Lesson 14: Mother's Compassion (Woman)
Lesson 17: Honest Victory (Man)
Lesson 20: Arjun's target (Man)

Not only is the number of male-centered lessons more than female-centered ones, women have been presented as these weak, helpless creatures and men as brave, strong, industrious and competent persons. Does this mean that women are not brave, industrious and competent? Shouldn't they present both men and women as having these qualities?

Pictures: There are 62 pictures of men and only 16 pictures of girls. Shouldn't there be some equality in the numbers?

Adi Shakti's gender-scan report of the 2nd grade language text book:

Contents: A close study of the contents of the 2nd grade language text book reveals that the number of male-centered lessons is much more than female-centered lessons. Furthermore, Men have been shown as brave, honest, industrious, responsible and patriotic. There is not even one lesson which shows women as heroines. In one of the lessons, there is some information about Rani Laxmi Bai but even that lesson really has a male hero. Do we not have any heroines or patriotic brave women in our country? It would certainly seem like it, to look at the text book! There is not even one female-centered lesson in the whole book!

Pictures: There are many more pictures of men than of women. Men have been shown in leadership roles and women in the roles of follower and subordinate. For e.g.: Men are shown carrying the flags and leading the group in which some women are also members. In lesson 20, the teacher is a man and even the students are only boys. Only boys have been shown playing while the girl is shown studying alone.

In the first lesson “RamKrishna Gautam ki Dharti” - only men are portrayed as being capable of making decisions of justice. No learned woman ever makes an appearance. In the second lesson, the boys are playing with a top, the father is sitting and the girls and mother are cooking. A girl is sitting at the door reading a story about sacrifice and worship. She is shown learning about compassion, sacrifice and obedience. In Lesson 4 - “Chidiyon ki Chinta” (The anxiety of the birds)- when the bird gets injured, the decision to take her to the doctor is taken by Sonu, who is a boy. And Niloo (the girl) is frightened. The Doctor is also represented by a man. In Lesson 7, the role of giving presents to the children is played by the father, and not by the mother. Lesson 9 - “Prassanata ke aansoo” (Tears of happiness”) is the story of an honest boy, not girl. Once again it is a male-centered story.

This is to ignore the fact that girls too are doctors, they too are honest and hardworking, brave etc. Similarly most of the lessons are about great MEN - like - Pyare Bapu, Vir Sapoot, Daud Khan. Are there no great WOMEN to write about? There is not one lesson about a great WOMAN. What is the message we are giving to girls, through texts like this?

The teachers claimed that this exercise had made them more gender-sensitive to their own text books and they were beginning to detect underlying biases against girls, which had escaped their notice before this.
Beginning to Produce Supplementary Materials

The teachers all wrote stories and poems and reported that they enjoyed writing them. (See Annexure for examples) The stories all had girls as the main characters, but were cast quite heavily in the traditional, patriarchal mold. Marriage for the girls figured often in all the stories and the message sent was that education makes for more intelligent motherhood. The discussion centered around patriarchy and marriage as central to the lives of women. We pointed out that if the stories were meant to empower women then they must do more than merely include girls as central characters. While marriage was very important in the lives of girls, it was also one of the chief areas of oppression. It would help if the stories problematised the issue and raised important questions for discussion. The stories also had a very adult tone and often it was not clear who the audience was. It was pointed out that the stories must be child-appropriate.

Rakesh raised the question about History - “How shall we change History lessons? That would be factually incorrect.” Fortunately, Sunita had an answer in the story she had selected for her classroom. She had made the effort to find a historical story of a brave woman. We pointed out that the effort would be to bring in the forgotten stories and to make the effort to show girls that they had a place in history, even though it had been forgotten. There was much discussion about the “genderizing” of the curriculum in terms of making it more girl-friendly. We focused on changing traditional gender role-perceptions and showing women in more untraditional roles.

When teachers shared how they had used their stories and poems in their classrooms, it emerged that the stories had been read, to be learnt and reproduced. The learning elicited was passive and the teaching was not interactive or dialogic. We then discussed and demonstrated interactive, dialogic teaching and the value and nature of critical dialogues in the classroom. The teachers said that they would like training in better teaching methods, apart from their work on gender-focused teaching. The teachers had used girl characters in all their stories and playlets and had made a special effort to show girls in non-traditional roles. Premlata had asked all the children to give their mother’s names and found that many of them did not know what these were. She asked them to find out and report on the following day. Most of the teachers had made name cards for all their kids and had begun using them. They reported that the children loved this show of interest and intimacy. They sported their name cards very proudly.

Efforts to Reach Out to the Community: Parent-Teacher Meetings

On the issue of parent-teacher meetings, almost all the teachers reported only very limited success. The turn out had been poor, in some cases only 3 parents showed up. Mamta had a turn out of 15 parents, Vimla had about 30, the others reported much smaller numbers. The issue of parent-attendance was discussed at length and it was decided that perhaps written notes through the children would make the invitation more official. It was also pointed out that the teachers had to be sensitive to the daily schedule of the parents while setting the time and date of their meetings. The mother turn out was almost negligible, in most cases.

Some of the teachers had used the issue of child-marriage for discussion. Mamta and Vimla had organized their children to give a small performance (they are both part of the Harchandpur project and have had prior exposure to such activities) and reported that the parents were very pleased with this. The other teachers immediately decided to adopt the same method.
Rakesh expressed his failure to call a meeting because of his poor rapport with the community. Satendra said he couldn’t call a meeting because of the tension amongst the staff in his school, which had led to a strained relationship with the parent body as well.

We discussed the importance of having a good relationship with the parent community and both Rakesh and Satendra resolved to try and repair their relationship and to try once again.

Shivprasad said that though only 6 parents attended his meeting, the discussion was good. He said that parents wanted to know if a good education would guarantee employment for their children. Shiv Prasad said he had no answer to this and wanted help from the group on this issue. We discussed the issue of education and employment at length, emphasizing the point that education was related to development certainly even when it did not directly and immediately result in employment. It led to an enlightened populace who could make demands and could think of imaginative ways of self-help.

The Gender - Handbook - Developing an Outline

The teachers were all very insistent that it be kept simple, direct and SLIM! The following outline emerged almost unanimously:

Chapter 1: This should lay down the ideological principles upon which the whole program was constructed. It should include a discussion of women’s status in general and some of the problems facing girls education. It should spell out the program’s commitment to equality for women.

Chapter 2: This should lay down the general principles of classroom organization that should govern a girl-friendly classroom.

Chapter 3 and 4: Should help teachers with ideas on how to transact the different subject areas of the curriculum in girl-friendly ways, by giving model lessons, supplementary material by way of stories, poems, plays etc.

Chapter 5: Should deal with the issue of Community Mobilization and should deal with ways of relating to the Community and gaining their support and involvement.

Self-Evaluations of Teachers

The teachers made an oral and written report of the changes that had occurred in themselves, their classrooms, their school and their co-teachers as a result of their participation in this program so far.

Sample Summaries of the Self-Evaluations

Geeta Yadav

My attitude has changed. I notice girls more now. I have begun mixed seating in my classroom and mixed participation in games. In my teaching, the focus has shifted from the curriculum to the children. I now focus more on what they are learning rather than upon finishing or “doing” the course.
I’ve added storying, poetry and improvised drama to my teaching. I pay more attention to girls and they have become less hesitant as a result of this. There is more talk and chatting with the children in my classroom as a result of which the children are less afraid and have come closer to me. There is an improvement in attendance, though these days because it is the harvest season, the children too are away at work in their fields.

Kanchan

My teaching has become much more child-centered and responsive to children’s developmental needs than before. It used to be very curriculum-centered. I would focus on completing my course. Children love their name cards. I’ve started focusing much more on girls and have tried to encourage my colleagues to do so too. My children seem to be much more interested in their lessons. I want my girls to do as well as the boys and I make special efforts to ensure this. I’ve started using stories, drama and song a lot and the children love it. The parents are still very apathetic. No dent there, I’m afraid.

Rakesh

We now have a cleaner, more organized school. Children love the stories I tell them. We’ve opened the library books and have started using them. The books are now given to the children. We have small cultural programs every Saturday and even the girls participate. We devote more time to play and the children seem to like coming to school now. I have tried to speak more to the girls now.

Shivprasad

The children now sit and play together. The punctuality level in the school has risen in both teachers and students. Rotating of monitorship has helped the children gain a lot of confidence and interest. We change the monitors weekly and have one girl and one boy. The wall-painting has made the classrooms more attractive to the teachers, students and parents. I’ve opened out the library books and have strung them up in the classrooms. The children have been made responsible for them. We also have critical dialogues. The children did a play on anti-dowry and they talked to their parents about it. The girls said they also spoke to their parents. Children’s attendance has stepped up, because we make have started asking them to provide reasons why they have not attended. This keeps them on their toes. The boys and girls attend equally well or poorly. No special difference found. All our children lead the prayer in turn. We are paying special attention to cleanliness, because we know that anyone can come at any time to see us. The girls are talking more now.

Shiv Pratap Singh

I’ve become more conscious of and feel more responsible towards the girls in my classroom. I’ve started mixed seating and am making conscious efforts to have the participation of all the children in my lessons - especially the girls. I insist that they speak and call them up to the black board frequently. I am enjoying my teaching more and so are the children. My co-teachers also feel more inspired and have begun to change. I’ve begun to communicate with the
community more. We have a cultural program every Saturday, which is great fun for the children.

Mamta Srivastava

I have found several echoes in the spirit of this program and it is wonderful to find an opportunity to have discussions about gender issues. I now have a heightened awareness and feel that change, though difficult is certainly possible.

My school is better organized. We also have introduced mixed seating. The regular attendance of children is a matter of focus in all the classes in our school. We pay more attention to girls. There is generally more child-responsive teaching and a greater inclusion of girls in the transaction of the curriculum. Other teachers have also begun to see teaching as their moral responsibility. They’ve become more gender-sensitive and have started organizing themselves more.

Though all the children seem more interested, there is a special change in the girls. An increased attendance and they are certainly more confident now.

The parents are feeling more respected, as they their children being more attended to.

General Observations

The teachers found the exercise valuable and perceived it as a form of “training”, which is how they referred to it. They expected much guidance, demanded it and valued it. They kept expressing their need for training in more modern pedagogical methods. Despite our repeated efforts to shape their perception of themselves as “teacher-researchers”, they continued to view themselves as “trainees”. They valued the opportunities to share with other teachers and with us. They found themselves working harder in their classrooms, because they knew they were being monitored. The written reporting procedure seemed to help them focus more on the task in their classrooms. The teachers fulfilled all the written requirements without complaint. They contributed less, in terms of ideas for the handbook, but engaged in much self-reflection and were greatly motivated to make real changes in their classrooms. It was interesting to see how successfully many of them managed to improve the conditions of their classroom without any additional financial or infra-structural support. More interestingly, after sometime the focus shifted from the lack of infra-structural resources (except the shortage of teachers) to the possibilities in the classroom, the teachers and the children. The sharing of problems collectively and the attempt to find solutions together proved to be very helpful. The women responded with more interest than did the men.

After this phase was over we identified 10 teachers to participate in the 10 day workshop to produce the gender-handbook and the training module. We were able to select only 3 men from the entire group for this exercise. Several issues related to the classroom, the community and the curriculum emerged, as we kept trying to maintain the focus on gender. This emphasizes the complex web in which all these issues are enmeshed. Most of the teachers did not express any hesitation to engage more intensively with the community. Here again the women teachers were more willing and also more successful in their efforts.
In summary, the main finding of this phase has been to show the kinds of support teachers require to be able to become more effective, better motivated and involved teachers. They need to feel valued as intellectuals and respected as people doing important work. They need to be attended to, responded to and heard. They need a community of teachers and educators, in which to share their ideas and work. They need to have demands made upon them and close supportive monitoring as they try to meet these. Whereas the focus of this action-research is on strengthening girls education, the finding of this phase was that teachers need much strengthening and empowering themselves. As this happened, during this phase, the teachers engaged with the problem much more creatively and actively.

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