

Preventing Segregation in Classrooms

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Throughout my sixteen years of education, from class I to my undergraduate degree, I barely talked to the girls in my classroom. Though some boys would talk to girls without hesitation, I had some psychological barriers to interacting with them. Moreover, I also led a group in my class that did not talk to girls. Now, after all these years, I wonder what stopped me from talking to girls. Why did I stop my friends from doing so? Did it have something to do with my parents or my teachers? Was it the effect films had on me? In this article, I share some experiences that affected me as a student, and which may still be affecting other children today. The article also highlights the impact of gender segregation on the class in general and on the holistic learning of students in particular. Finally, it also suggests ways of bridging these segregations within the classroom.

School provides us with the first socialising space beyond the family. There was a separation in the seating arrangements of boys and girls in my school. I did not talk to girls, or even boys, outside my group. I believed girls to be intellectually inferior compared to boys and did not feel any respect for them, though I saw my sister and some of my women teachers as exceptions to this. Being a part of an only-boys group, I had limited exposure, hence, limited learning. This segregation led to the formation of a self-view and choices that affected my behaviour till as late as completing my undergraduate degree.

A false self-image

I had developed a self-image of being an ideal person. The desire to maintain this self-image controlled all my actions. To me, being ideal was being a person of principles, one who did not give a chance for anyone to question my behaviour; a boy who did not talk to girls. I successfully built this presumably 'clean' image in the eyes of my friends' parents; they trusted me and would easily allow my friends to do anything I was involved in. The school administration had similar trust in me. They would consult me to take feedback on any new teacher, or to know the names of my classmates involved

in some mischief. To maintain this image, I would give them the names of my friends, even if it meant that we fought over it later. It used to be a very tough situation for me. I stopped myself and my friends from interacting with girls to maintain this self-image. I would pressure them by not talking to them if they talked to girls. I would pretend to be extremely rude to girls to maintain this image. We, as a group, would bully girls by commenting on them in class. The segregation inside the class was not only between the boys and the girls. The class was also segregated into two different groups of boys.

Neither the school administration nor my parents had deliberately encouraged such an attitude. But at the same time, it is a fact that neither family nor teachers ever addressed it. It was at the age of 21 that I joined an NGO and underwent gender training. That training made me aware of the biases that existed in me. It was then that I realised that all the while, as a student, my actions were driven by stereotypes and prejudices against women. I remembered an incident when, as an 11-year-old, I objected to my elder sister wearing jeans. I realised how insensitive I had been for so many years.

Preventing segregation

Teachers have a vital role in bringing change in the classroom. They can take steps to eliminate segregation inside the school and develop the classroom as a holistic learning space for everyone. I wonder what the teachers in my school could have done to minimise segregation in my classroom. The following are some of the actions which teachers can take to address segregation in classrooms.

Encouraging talking about emotions

Teachers can facilitate an emotional environment in the school, where children are encouraged and helped to talk about feelings, like love, hate, jealousy and fear. This will create a space where children can share their fear and anxiety and help each other overcome them.

Formation of mixed groups

Teachers can assign group work to small subgroups

formed by the children from different segregated groups. This would make children of different segregated groups interact with one another.

Assigning collaborative tasks

Teachers can promote interaction among students by deliberately assigning them collaborative tasks in which they learn to work together, set common goals and develop a sense of cohesion and respect for other students. Teachers can do this by forming groups so that individuals from two segregated groups get more time to interact and understand one another in working together.

Building a common understanding

Teachers can build a culture of hearing different voices in their classrooms by encouraging students to share their opinions, listen to different opinions and then build a common understanding.

Balancing power in the classroom

Teachers can easily sense the group dynamics of the class. They can use this to balance the power between the dominating and the dominated groups. Teachers can facilitate the participation of children from the dominated group by deliberately asking for their opinions and supporting their arguments.

Renowned psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, suggests the following be done in a classroom to build student cohesion among students:

Setting up common goals

Setting up a common goal towards which the entire class must work collaboratively will help children identify and work for the collective goals of the class.

Differentiating self from others

The teacher can build an understanding and acceptance amongst students that individuals are different on the basis of their social and psychological experiences. This would help in building a better understanding of the self and the other. This will also help in developing respect for

people with different opinions.

Becoming comfortable with others

Accepting people with different viewpoints is a difficult task as it requires the skill of questioning one's own opinion on an issue. Teachers can facilitate this process by helping students become comfortable with each other's views. The children then must be made aware of the value of the contribution of each classroom member.

Facing dissent

The teacher can help students develop the ability to face dissent from other members and cope with it. Students will learn to object to the ideas, not the person. This ability would equip them to think of an issue from multiple perspectives.

Facilitating feedback process

Craig Stevens, a school psychologist, recommends the concept of feedback. In this process, children are encouraged to express constructive ideas, feelings, and criticisms. Each child is given a chance to express himself/herself, but with the right to refuse. This helps children in asking questions in a non-combative way. As a result, the children become verbally expressive, feel more responsible for their words and actions and become more sensitive towards others.

Interacting with classmates from different gender and ideologies would enable every child to get a comprehensive picture of things rather than seeing them from a single point of view. Students will learn the value of differences and diversity of thoughts and preferences. Promoting a culture of interaction in school would develop the school into a place for holistic learning and growth where students learn from each other and collectively arrive at better alternatives. This will be possible once students become aware of and start practising specific values in classrooms, including the importance of respecting individuals and friendships and focusing on the larger goals of the self and the group.



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