

MUSINGS

X Y

Prema Narasimhan



The system that imparts education itself is divided in many ways.

Oh! I am not going to talk about algebra I rather not, with my faint memory of what little algebra I remember after 40+ years of learning or rather, memorizing.

This is a different equation. Probably, a life equation that each one of us is exposed to every day, as we talk about life, raise slogans, draw cartoons, laugh around etc. Yes, you got it. This is about you and me, man and woman; boy and girl. See, even a so called gender neutral person is habituated to write man and woman and boy and girl rather than woman and man etc. It should come as no surprise then that our whole society is wrongly sensitized to gender. Alright, I am not going to talk about 'gender' in general. But it may be worthwhile to share some of my experiences with 'gender' and the way it is taught and practiced in schools. The other day I visited a primary school in a remote corner of Andhra Pradesh. As I entered the 4th standard classroom, I found that girls and boys were seated separately. This is not a stray case. Most of us have seen this in many schools. When I enquired with the teacher as to why they were not seated together, the teacher said that the parents desired it that way. I went a step further and discussed the issue with a few parents including a senior leader in the village, and was told that they preferred the children to be seated separately (boys and girls) to 'avoid any wrong thing' in the class. Further, one mother told me that children are exposed to many things so much earlier in life through various media and may not be in a position to discriminate between what is "good" and what is "bad". So, why give a chance? Although, I really did not know if the mother was correct or not, I could vaguely decipher what she meant. I certainly feel that there *cannot* be any sort of discrimination in schools. The argument by the parent also made me think beyond. Can we ignore the emotions and opinions of the parents?

Another scene in a Karnataka school goes like this. I enter the 5th standard classroom. The boys were seated on the left side of the class and the girls on the right side. In addition there were some fifteen students seated in middle

(both boys and girls). I did not realize I was committing a mistake when I asked the teacher why some students were seated separately. The answer came like a rapid and emphatic rush of words in Kannada stating plainly that "they cannot learn". Not only was I shocked, but it was even more disturbing to see the expression in the eyes of those children. Are we creating a new caste system in the schools, by branding children as 'slow learners' or non-learners?

As we work towards creating a equitable and just society, such seemingly un-harmful practices like seating the boys and girls separately within classrooms, can create significant damage. While one of the goals of education is to create an equitable society, our schools themselves are creating new forms of inequity. Of course, it is true that these inequities have existed in our society for ages. However, bringing these inequities of gender, caste and learning ability into schools does more harm than good.

It is also important to note that while we have been thinking and discussing about an equitable society through education, the system that imparts education itself is divided in many ways. In many states there are as many or even more teacher associations as the political parties. We have also heard of many instances of isolating a particular teacher within a school due to caste / religion / gender / qualification / subject they deal with etc. If we could not bring the equity within the education system, how do we expect the equity in classroom?

There are simple things we can do within the classroom to reinforce our efforts in creating a equitable society. Allowing boys and girls to sit together is the first step. With the due support of the community, teachers, and the education department, this simple intervention can enable us to create a society where women are treated equally, and thus create a future where we can say confidently that $X=Y$.



Prema Narasimhan is Head, Content Deployment, Azim Premji Foundation.