

Opinion Article

Promoting safe spaces: Creating Inclusive Educational Environments for Transgender Students

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Abstract: The goal is to create a unified education system that values all children, regardless of their caste, class, gender, sexualities, race, community backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds and abilities. The movement towards integrating children with disabilities into the regular classrooms started in the second half of the twentieth century. However, transgender students still face discrimination due to their gender and sexual identities. The Right to Education Act, 2009 guarantees universal education for all, and the Constitution of India mandates an inclusive society for all, including transgender persons. In recent years, the perception of the society towards transgender persons has changed, and transgender persons can lead a better quality of life if they have equal opportunities and access to social development services. Inclusive classrooms are important for trans, non-binary and Two-Spirit students, as they foster essential learning outcomes such as critical thinking and effective group work skills. This article will throw light on the identification of transgender students in schools, students are managing conflict situations in the schools, ensuring safety and security of transgender students in schools and some suggestive practices for teachers and school administrators.

Keywords: inclusive education, discrimination, transgender, counseling, curriculum

1. Introduction

The concept of education affords it to all human beings, irrespective of gender, caste, religion, etc. It gives knowledge, develops skills, it makes students to lead a successful life. In these circumstances transgender persons face barriers in their education due to the reinforcement of gender binaries in school structures, such as uniforms, use of toilets, participation in sports and extra-curricular activities, bullying and harassment for simply choosing to express themselves as opposed to social norms. These behaviours and expressions are seen as “normal” and are treated as acceptable, but those who do not conform to these binary roles, expressions, behaviour, etc., are made to feel as “abnormal”. This can lead to bullying and/or harassment, which can lead to discontinuation of formal education or a drastic decline in academic performances. Transgender face multiple layers of trauma and challenges in schools, such as coming to terms with their own sexuality, internal challenges and confusions, emotional, behavioural, physical trauma, violence, use of washroom, uniforms, mocking, bullying and teasing, and choosing a character/role in school play, games or other activities. (Dange et al., 2022) There is a lack of a nationwide database on transgender children and adults in India, but various sources have shed light on the vulnerability of transgender children in schools. It is important to understand these challenges and be sensitive towards them to create an inclusive space for each person.

2. Identification of transgender students in schools

Algorithm for identification of transgender students in schools include the following characteristics:

- The indications could be sociological, psychological, physical or behavioural;
- Observe why the student is reserved/highly reactive;
- In the clothing practices of the student;

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- While choosing a role in school play and the engagement in various school activities;
- Issues while going to the designated toilets like repeated mocking, bullying and teasing by fellow students;
- Being uncomfortable with certain peer groups;
- Uncomfortable while addressed in gender binaries.

It should be noted that this list of indicators is not exhaustive. These indications might be due to various other issues faced by the student within and outside the school environment. It is suggested that the teachers and other stakeholders interact with the student with extreme sensitivity while trying to understand the reason behind such behaviours.

3. General recommendations how to manage the conflict situation in schools

Schools administrators and teachers must follow the particular recommendations to manage the conflict situations. They refer to the following:

- Creating safe washroom facilities.
- Safe and secure residential facilities be developed for transgender children as per the need.
- Access to appropriate restroom and locker room facilities. School, where a transgender student has been given admission will have to ensure that if the child doesn't feel comfortable in any of the toilets (Boys/Girls) in the school, a toilet may be assigned exclusively for transgender students as there are multiple toilets in schools. In case there is a toilet for normal students that can also be shared by transgender students, if they feel comfortable. School administration can also ensure that the locker provided to transgender students is in a well-lit and visible area. (Dange et al., 2022).
- Maintain official records.
- Implement anti-ragging policies for the protection of transgender students.
- Establish counselling centres for students including transgender students in every school.
- Plan the physical education classes, intra-group sports and all inter-school activities to ensure the participation of transgender students.
- Specific provisions should be made for health care of transgender students.
- There is a need to create awareness programs in the school with the help of students and teachers. Community/parents sensitisation should also be planned by the school leaders, counsellors, etc.

4. Some Suggestive Practices for Teachers, Councillors, and School Administrators

4.1. Role of School Heads and Administrators

- Supportive administrators can support this work by addressing families of the transgender students directly.
- They should be open to hearing their questions, and be careful to distinguish questions or concerns from negative pushback.
- Inviting families/parents to a panel or film screening to discuss initiatives of diversity has helped many schools to involve families into this work, to address questions directly, and to identify which families in the school community are allies in this work as well.

4.2. Role of the School Counsellors

- Counsellors should be appointed in every school or should be available at a school cluster level who could be approached should the need arise.
- Counsellors should take counselling sessions and group guidance of life skills, communication skills, gender identity, professional development, personality development, motivational and career guidance on regular bases throughout the academic year.

- Counsellors must organise workshops for increasing awareness among the school community. They should motivate students as well as teachers to approach them if the need arise.

4.3. Suggestions for School Administrators for a Gender-Inclusive School Environment

- Outreach programmes through parent–teacher meetings and meetings with community leaders where discussions could be around gender diversity.
- There should be no discrimination on the basis of gender while appointing various academic, non-academic and house-keeping staff.
- Transgender teachers and other school personnel could be hired without gender-based discrimination.
- Include transgender category in application forms and in all types of certificates for courses in the educational institutions.

5. Conclusions

In school teachers, counsellors and administrators have a unique role in the lives of their students. They can play a major role in imparting gender education and ensuring that schools are not perpetuating discrimination based on gender identities. In many guidance counsellors, mentors, school monitors and principals consciously or unconsciously can reinforce marginalisation of transgender students, for example, by using language or behaviours that students may find disrespectful. There are many other barriers, which hinder effective teaching about gender, sexuality or violence in schools like teacher's confidence, competing curriculum priorities, perceived and real assumptions of gender diversity, limited training and resource availability. In this situation the school curriculum, which encompasses visible as well as hidden schooling practices can offer a world view which may seem to be real or imagined, familiar or strange when modified with a transgender inclusive perspective. When incorporated, such curriculums can help create a more positive, healthy and a less violent school environment. It would further help in the creation of a healthy self-concept of all students. Inclusive curriculum supports students' ability to empathise, connect and collaborate with the diverse group with diverse skills that are of increasing significance in our multicultural global society. Curriculum should provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own identities, including gender identity and expression, family diversity including transgender headed families, and the types of relationships they may want to build.

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