

Handout 2.3

Experiences of Queer Students During Their School Life in India

Dear teacher,

Have you noticed that there are some students in your class who do not quite behave the way boys and girls are taught to behave? Have you ever taught any boys who perhaps have a shrill voice, like to hang out with the girls, use their hands to gesture while they talk or cross their legs while they sit? Have you ever taught any girls who perhaps have short hair, play cricket, wear shirts and pants and do not like to do “girly” things like painting their nails or talking about which boys they find cute?¹ Even if you haven’t taught them, have you seen them around on the school campus?

Have you ever wondered what their life must be like? The students mentioned above do not conform to the expectation from their gender. You can say that they are not behaving in the way that boys and girls are “expected” to behave. All of us do not behave as per our gender expectations all the time. For example, there may be some girls who play football or there may be some boys who like to cook. However, these students mentioned above deviate from gender expectations in ways which we find more shocking. Not all of these students are queer but some are. Of course, there are some queer students who do not deviate from these gender expectations at all—or do not show it.

What does it mean to be queer? To be queer means to be deviate from what is considered “normal.” It can relate to choices in dress, food, music and you may have read older English writings using this word in this fashion. However, queer also means to have a gender identity or a sexual desire that the society does not consider normal. The term queer includes girls who are sexually attracted to girls (lesbian), boys who are sexually attracted to boys (gay), boys and girls who are sexually attracted to both boys and girls (bisexual) and boys or girls whose internal identity is that of a girl or a boy respectively (transgender). The word queer also includes Hijra, Kothi, Kinnar, Giriya, Panthi, Khush, Jogappa, Jogta and other linguistic, religious, cultural or regional variations of the terms L.G.B.T. (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender).

Have you ever wondered about the experiences of queer students in your school? Of course, there is no sure way of knowing that a student is queer unless they tell you themselves but more often than not, students who do not conform to the expectation from their sex are treated differently from the rest and are assumed to be queer.

I wanted to find out what the experiences of these queer students were. However, both government and private schools in Delhi that I approached did not let me ask their students this question. What were they scared of? The Supreme Court of India had, in April 2014, declared that everyone has a fundamental right against discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity.² Should this not have prompted schools to ensure that there was no discrimination against any of their students on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity? Even if the Supreme Court had not passed the judgment, do you think that schools should be willing to find out if any of their students are being subjected to bullying or harassment or nasty remarks because their perceived gender identity or sexual

¹ Not all girls do this even those who do not have short hair or a boyish walk but have we not come to expect this from girls? Why?

²National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India and Others (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 400/2012) para 55, page 62. The judgment can be found here:<http://supremecourtfindia.nic.in/outtoday/wc40012.pdf>

orientation? Wouldn't you agree that it is only by finding out about their treatment that teachers and administrators can address this issue?

However, the long and short of the story is that I was not allowed to enter schools because the administrators were apprehensive about the topic. I asked college goers, all of whom identified as queer what their experiences were as school students. They had gone to school in different parts of the country. I tried to talk to college goers from different types of schools. I spoke to students who had attended elite private day schools, elite private boarding schools, government boarding schools, international school, government schools, single gender school and co-educational schools.

This is what the students told me. The boys told me that the slightest deviation from what is considered "manly" behaviour opened them up to ridicule. They were called names such as *chakka*, *Hijra*, *mithi*, *cheeni*. They were physically and sexually harassed. They were beaten up by other students, locked up in bathrooms, and sexually coloured remarks are passed against them; "come sit on my lap", some students would say while the others would ask for sex. Even their books and possessions were vandalized. Some of them were even sent to the school counsellor as they were thought to be mentally ill. The girls were also called names like *lezbo*, *lezzer* etc. They were teased to a lesser extent than the boys but only up to a certain point. It was considered cool for the girls to be a little boyish but when they exceeded their "boundary", they were subjected to bullying just like the boys. Others distanced themselves from these students or tried to set them up with members of the "opposite sex". Some also tried to teach these students how to walk and talk in the "right" way.

Sometimes teachers also participated in this. They would comment upon the handwriting of an effeminate male students saying that it was like that of a girl; they would make fun of boys for standing with girls. Many male students who were part of my study were most afraid of the physical education period as they felt that in this period, the gender norms were most fiercely enforced. The teacher would taunt the boys if they refused to play; the girls were asked to sit on the field and talk. The students were ostracized, excluded and ridiculed both by teachers and students. Many a time a teacher saw the student being bullied but did nothing. Even when the student approached a teacher and complained about the bully, the teacher asked them to "mend their ways" instead of speaking with the bully. Sometimes, they said they would take care of the problem but did nothing about it. Teachers are very important for students. Students often look up to teachers and that is why the teacher has the responsibility to set an example of appropriate behavior. Do you know, one of the students told me that when the teacher did not support the bullied students or made fun of them, the attitude of the entire class towards them changed?

Do you think that not acting in conformity with the expectations of one's sex is wrong, dear teacher? Do you think it is wrong that boys gesticulate while talking and that it's wrong for girls to have short hair? One student I interviewed suggested that teachers should focus on the activity instead of assessing whether the activity is in line with sex expectations. For example, if a female student is very good at cricket then the teacher should praise her for her skill instead of wondering how a girl could be good at cricket. Another suggestion was that instead of making fun of a male student with beautiful handwriting, the teacher could praise the handwriting. In short, a skill set should not be attached to gender or sex. So what is a girl is good at cricket or a boy writes beautifully or a girl likes to wear shirts and pants or a boy talks with a lot of hand gestures?

At the same time, I heard of some teachers who were extremely supportive of students who are queer. One student told me that when she came out as a transgender girl, the school allowed her to pick the uniform that she would like to wear. The school also allowed her to keep her hair

long. Another student told me that when some students were harassing him for being effeminate, the principal took notice of this and spoke to the bullies. It is important to understand that punishment is not always the best answer. Bullies need to be told why they are not right to make fun of someone because of their gender expression or sexual orientation. Another student told me that his teacher would let him sit in the staff room so that he could escape the nasty remarks of his classmates.

Another student suggested that all teachers, including the teachers in charge of extra-curricular activities should be taught about diversity; not just sexual and gender diversity but about diversity more generally – perhaps diversity of language, skin colour, accent, sports interests, cultural interests etc. so that they can in turn teach their students that diversity is okay and not something to be made fun of. This might also give confidence to the queer student to approach the teacher in case they want to talk about something. This was true for one student who recounted that the bullying behaviour abated in classes where the teacher was alert about these issues and stopped any discriminating behavior. Another student recounted how the negative comments of a teacher about a student's attributes changed the attitude of the class towards him. All the students I spoke to underscored the importance of having supportive teachers in school. The attitude of the teacher towards the queer student seemed to affect the attitude of the fellow students towards them.

Although many of the queer students I interviewed were at the top of their class and were very talented in other activities such as art or dancing or singing, they had a difficult time at school. Many students suffered immensely because of this differentiating behaviour in schools. They felt cut off from the rest of the class, their grades dropped, they lost interest in studies; some even bunked school. Some students also got very depressed because of this treatment and had to either change schools or take medication. They did not like school anymore. Some continue to face confidence issues to this day because of the bullying they faced in school. Would you want any student to feel this way?

Yours truly,

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Surabhi Shukla is a lawyer. She has conducted a Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Queer Students During their School Years in India aided by the IASSCS Emerging Scholars' International Research Fellowship (2014). More here: www.genderdiversityandschools.in