

Chapter 9

A Life Knowledge Approach to Life Skills: Empowering Boys with New Conceptions of Masculinity



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Abstract This chapter argues for a structural, human rights and social justice-based approach to life skills, contextualized in an urban setting in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. This approach takes a more socially and politically embedded view of life skills than most other life skills approaches, which take a more individualized, decontextualized, and apolitical approach. I argue that since our lives are framed and structured by the socio-political contexts in which they are lived, a deeper conceptual understanding of these contexts is essential in order to navigate this terrain skillfully and successfully. This chapter provides a descriptive analysis of a school program for girls and boys from marginalized backgrounds, which educates them to become active democratic citizens with gender-just perceptions and behaviors. The school, Prerna, was established and is run by Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF). Prerna focuses on life outcomes and learning outcomes, with the educational goal of educating its students to develop egalitarian and gender-just habits, and the intellectual, emotional, and behavioral skills that will enable them to live as equal persons, including respecting others' (girls') right to equality. This chapter focuses particularly on the school's program for boys, where they are empowered to develop an egalitarian conception of masculinity and of themselves in relationship to girls.

Keywords Life skills · Empowerment · Gender · Transformation · Masculinity · Critical feminist pedagogy · India

Introduction

I want to have a family where I earn enough and my wife works alongside, too, if she wants to, and I want an environment at home where no one is getting oppressed, or beaten and abused, everyone is equal and happy. (Rahul, student of Prerna Boys School)

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Rahul is a typical student of the Prerna Boys School.¹ A 16-year-old boy, he lives with his single mother and two sisters in his uncle's house. His parents are separated. His mother was pulled out of school after completing grade 5, because she was needed at home to take care of her younger siblings. She was married off at 15, and has been a victim of severe and repeated domestic violence. It was only after she was almost beaten to death by her drunk husband that her parents reacted and sent her brother to bring her back to their home. Rahul witnessed this abuse his entire life. His mother now works as a cleaning woman in a school. Rahul supplements their family income working at his uncle's shop. He joined Prerna in 2016 when he was 12. Initially a frightened little boy, he's now a confident lad with high aspirations for his life. He wants to become a successful businessman and make sure his mother has a good life when he grows up, and he wants everyone to be "equal and happy."

India is home to one-third of the world's 15 million child brides (more appropriately called girl slaves), like Rahul's mother (UNICEF, 2014). For most girls the world over, child marriage means the end of education and the beginning of child bearing, increased vulnerability to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and an abrupt end to options for a future of their choice (Girls Not Brides, 2019). India also ranks 112th on the global gender gap index (World Economic Forum, 2020), and recently, the Thompson Reuters Foundation (2018) declared India the most dangerous country in the world for girls and women.²

It is not difficult to see why. High rates of female feticide, (i.e. sex selective abortions of female fetuses) render them unsafe in the womb, while high rates of violence and rape render them unsafe on the streets. More than 32,500 cases of rape were registered with the police in 2017, about 90 a day, according to the most recent government data (Reuters, 2019). They are not safe at home, where they're at risk for child marriage, and are subject to both physical and emotional abuse by their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Why? Because they are girls, seen as burdens and objects, to be valued and used only for their reproductive, sexual, and domestic labor, with very little autonomy or agency in their lives. The unfair power structures that render girls so vulnerable are supported beliefs and practices sanctioned by deeply embedded patriarchal mindsets and social norms. Patriarchy has lethal consequences for girls and women. It also places an unfair burden on boys and men to be sole providers and decision makers for the family, which while giving them more power, also leaves them with enormous stress, often leading to violent behavior. While Rahul's mother bore the brunt of the violence at the hands of her drunken husband, it was her brother who had to take on the responsibility of taking care of

¹Prerna is run by the Study Hall Educational Foundation (SHEF), which was founded by the author in 1994. SHEF runs a network of 7 schools in and around Lucknow. Our schools reach out to all representative population groups, and all ages. We also have 4 outreach initiatives, which share our best practices across the state, the country and globally. These include teacher trainings, community-based education centres, campaigns, and online video lessons. Through all our initiatives, we have touched more than 7,000,000 lives.

²Incidentally, the U.S was ranked 10th.

her when she left her husband. Even now, he takes care of her and Rahul's family. One of Rahul's biggest goals is to be able to provide for his family, and to take care of his mother and sisters.

There is urgent need for change – change in belief, and change in practice. Schools can either reinforce the status quo, or play a critical role in changing toxic mindsets to make the world a safer, freer, more welcoming, and enabling place for girls and boys. Education is a very powerful personal and social transformative force, *provided it is transformed*. Societal and political power structures construct conceptual structures, which reinforce and maintain societal power structures. Education can play an important role in deconstructing conceptual structures, thereby disrupting unfair and discriminatory patriarchal systems and norms.

In this chapter, I describe the history and pedagogical approach of the Prerna School, and in particular how it works to promote critical life skills among its male students. I first explain the theoretical framework that underpins our work and how this framework is present in our curricular and pedagogical approach. This work includes the employment of critical dialogues, which I describe in detail as they are a key element of our work. I then explain how our work has made an impact on the boys and teachers with whom we work, through the analysis of focus group interviews conducted as part of a preliminary evaluation of our efforts. The key impacts that emerged from these focus groups included: improving boys' confidence and self-expression; increasing their gender awareness/sensitization; influencing their family dynamic and becoming advocates for their sisters; allowing them to develop non-dominant perceptions of masculinity and manhood; and making them more aware of other social inequalities.

In Order to Be Transformative, Education Must Be Transformed: The Prerna School

Believing in all girls' intrinsic right to an education, I established Prerna Girls School in 2003 with the goal of providing high-quality education to girls from low-income families. Most of the students belong to historically marginalized communities, and live in extreme poverty. Because of this, many girls work in the morning and the school runs in the afternoon. Also, most of the girls are first-generation learners who have either never been sent to school or have been pulled out to help at home, either to help care for their siblings or due to the illness or death of their mothers. Looking at the lives of our students, I quickly realized that a traditional, academic-focused education was not enough.

Like Boleslavsky (1949), I believe that the goal of education is not just to know, but to live. As we educated our students, we had to consider what kind of knowledge and education would help them navigate the difficult terrain of their lives. If you are at risk of being married at the age of 13, then learning addition, subtraction, or geography isn't necessarily the knowledge you need most. At SHEF, we believe that

education must enable you to answer the question, “Who am I and what is my relationship with the universe and others in it?” To do this, education must be relevant to your life. It must help you locate yourself in the universe, particularly the social and political universe, to know where in the power structure you stand. This knowledge enables you to understand your life and the power structures that enable or limit them. It is this structural understanding that enables students to challenge the structures that define their lives and to work towards changing them.

SHEF’s Life Knowledge Approach to Life Skills

SHEF’s approach to life skills is structural, holistic, and embedded in students’ social and political reality. We belong to the discourse community that identifies skills as an essential component of “quality education” (Murphy-Graham & Cohen, Chap. 2, this volume). We like to think more in terms of life “knowledge” rather than life “skills.” We treat life skills as emerging from one’s knowledge, and as such they are not given special focus as a separate agenda – they are integrated into our curriculum. Nonetheless, they are a central part of our officially-stated goal to help children learn who they are and how they are related, and should/can relate, to the universe and others in it. Our concept of quality education and its goals as implemented through the official curriculum includes knowledge that is relevant to life and enables students to *live life well* (Murphy-Graham & Cohen, Chap. 2, this volume). This knowledge is co-constructed by teachers and students through critical dialogue, which then facilitates development of the appropriate skills. The belief that education’s goal is not just to know, but to live, is reflected in our attitude and approach toward life skills as well. If life skills are those skills that allow us to effectively navigate our lives, or “to live life better” (Murphy-Graham, 2008) they are essentially woven into and embedded in our curriculum in the name of life knowledge. While our aim is to empower our students personally, and to help them become confident, articulate, and self-assured young persons, our focus is also to empower them socially and politically.

Inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, we adopt a capability approach in order to enable our children to achieve well-being, not only in economic terms, but also in their ability to take control of their lives and live a fully human life (Nussbaum, 2011; Sahni, 2017; Sen, 2000). We ask the important question: How can education enable our students to be who they want to be and to do what they want to do, while at the same time develop their capacities to aspire for more than they have come to expect for their lives?

At SHEF we promote “life knowledge” through a school and a curriculum. We focus on implementing elements of feminist curricular theory, designing interactive, engaging activities, and we work on teacher professional development. Since our work with boys has its origins in and emerged from our work with girls, I first briefly describe our work with girls before detailing the work with boys, showing

also how we empower both our boys and girls—albeit differently because of the social and political context of gender inequalities.

Prerna Girls' School: Classrooms as 'Radical Spaces of Possibility'

Our goals in Prerna are to help girls learn that they are equal persons who deserve respect and have the right to a life of their own choosing, and to equip them with the appropriate knowledge and skills to live a fully human life – respected, free, and equal! We structured Prerna's school culture, organizational structure, curriculum, and pedagogy around the goal of achieving not only empowering learning outcomes, but also, and more importantly, empowering life outcomes.

We came to define our overall *educational* goal as the following:

To empower our students, i.e. to raise their feminist consciousness, to help them emerge as emancipated women with a perception of themselves as equal persons having the right to equal participation in society, and to equip them with the appropriate social, emotional, conceptual, and academic knowledge and skills to live a life of their own choosing (Sahni, 2017).

In practical terms, the school must teach girls to recognize themselves as equal and autonomous persons. Many women in strong patriarchal societies like India do not believe that they are equal to men, causing them to accept discrimination as a given, natural part of life. Thus, we teach our girls to question discrimination, and help them gain a critical understanding of the social and political structures that frame their lives. Additionally, they develop a capacity to aspire, and gain the confidence and skills necessary to realize their aspirations. They develop a sense of voice and agency in their lives. Lastly, they successfully complete the government-mandated syllabus up to grade 12. To reiterate, these are our *educational* goals—not our extracurricular or after-school program goals—taught along with the government-mandated curriculum by their regular teachers, who are trained to teach lessons of equality along with lessons of math, science, and language.³

Along with bell hooks (1994), we believe that classrooms are radical spaces of possibility. In exploring and leveraging this possibility, I developed a critical feminist pedagogy, based on Freire's critical pedagogy. Freire (1970) said that we must read our world before we read our words. To help our girls do this, teachers conduct weekly critical dialogue classes to develop their feminist consciousness, i.e., so that they understand that what is happening to them is wrong. Girls become critically aware of their social and political reality and gain a structural understanding of patriarchy and how it shapes their lives. They learn that patriarchy is a social construct, not a natural one, which means that it can be changed. Finally, they learn to collectively imagine a new reality for themselves and collectively find a way to

³For greater detail of how we do this, see my book (Sahni, 2017).

make space for it despite the restrictive social norms. Parents are included in this “collective” as they are also engaged in regular dialogues both by the teachers and the students.

The learning and life outcomes at Perna Girls School have been extremely encouraging. Our retention rate is substantially higher than the national average, and 97.5% of the girls have transitioned to higher education. Additionally, the threat of child marriage for our students has become almost nonexistent. So, what has this education enabled our students to be and to do? Today, many of our students have earned master’s degrees, have successful careers, including law, teaching, business executives, entrepreneurs, earning a respectable middle-class salary. They say they are respected and valued more at home, with a voice in family decisions. Most importantly, our students are recognizing, resisting, and fighting sexist oppression at home and outside. They are making every effort to steer the course of their lives, exercising choice and agency.

What About Our Boys? Classrooms as Spaces of Radical Possibility and Care

With time, we started receiving increasing numbers of requests from parents to open a school for their sons, who meanwhile were out of school, roaming the streets, and getting involved in gangs, drugs, and street violence. Many of these boys had dropped out of school because of the violent behavior of teachers, or because they found the education there of poor quality and irrelevant to their lives. Poor and lower caste, they saw very few possibilities for their lives, and had no faith in the education that they had received in schools. While engaging with the community we also realized that if we want a better world for our girls, then their fathers, brothers, and future husbands need to be part of the solution. We were motivated by the belief that, in order to achieve a gender-just society, boys and girls both must receive an empowering education that teaches them to critically examine the construction of gender in patriarchal societies. Like their female colleagues, boys, too, must learn to fight, resist, and end sexist oppression. They must be enabled to deconstruct a patriarchal conception of masculinity and reconstruct an egalitarian one in its place.

With these motivations, Perna Boys School was founded in 2009 to provide boys with a quality education, an essential component of which is *the development of a strong critical feminist perspective*. We defined boys’ desired life-outcome as becoming autonomous persons who can take care of themselves and their families, beyond simply providing for them. They should come to perceive themselves not just as financial providers, but also as nurturers and caregivers of their families.

As of 2019, Perna Boys School had 150 students (90 primary level and 60 senior level), ages 4–19, cared for by nine teachers (three male and six female). Of these students, 39% are brothers of Perna girls. All are poor, with an average monthly family income of approximately Rs.9000 (\$135) and an average family size of 5.6

members. A full two-thirds (67%) belong to the most marginalized castes in India, officially classified as “Scheduled Castes” and “Other Backward Classes,” and 26% either work or have worked before. Forty-one percent of fathers and 62.8% of mothers are illiterate and have never attended school, and 12.3% of boys either live in a single-parent household or are orphans.

The school follows the same ethic of care that characterizes all SHEF schools, and is governed by the same holistic, locally contextualized pedagogy and philosophy as Prerna Girls School. It focuses on boys’ lives in a caring, responsive, and respectful environment, with the goal of achieving better life and learning outcomes. We aim for boys to gain academic knowledge and skills, and, more importantly, *to gain the knowledge and skills needed to live empowered lives as empathetic and egalitarian-minded persons.*

Consistent with the goals established for our girls, we adopted the following set of educational goals for Prerna Boys School.⁴ Our boys must:

- Develop a sense of agency and control over their lives, aspirations for a future, and the confidence and skills to realize it.
- Learn to recognize girls as equal persons with boys.
- Develop a critical understanding of patriarchal social and political structures that frame their lives and minds.
- Develop a critical feminist consciousness.
- Learn to read, write, and successfully complete the government-mandated syllabus up to class 12.

Developing a Critical Feminist Consciousness in Boys: Our Approach

Prerna Boys School also practices the critical feminist pedagogy developed through our work with girls. At the beginning of 2016, a year after opening the secondary school, teachers began engaging students in weekly critical dialogues on issues that impact their lives, their families, and others in their neighborhood. Our approach aimed to help boys understand that, though patriarchy is not their fault, it is extremely cruel to their mothers and sisters. It also grants them unfair power and privilege, along with an unfair share of the burden of providing for the family. Critical dialogues are part of the official Prerna Boys School curriculum, and are both taught separately once a week and also often embedded in language, math and science classes.

While dialogues are mostly conducted in parallel to those at Prerna Girls School, they are occasionally conducted together as well. The boys’ school is housed separately from the girls’ school in response to the parent community’s concern for their daughters’ safety. As many of our girls come from families who do not support their

⁴See Epilogue, Sahni (2017).

education, a co-ed space would act as a barrier to SHEF's commitment toward girls' education and empowerment. However, boys and girls meet regularly for critical dialogues, sports, drama, music, and other activities. This mixed-sex interaction is encouraged with the motive of helping boys and girls gain a better understanding of each other, become friends, and learn to negotiate relationships across gender in a safe, mediated setting.

In hierarchical, patriarchal societies like India, it is difficult to understand and conceptualize the idea of equality. It is particularly hard for boys, as they are raised with a sense of entitlement, superiority, and privilege. Regardless of their class, caste, or religion, boys enjoy preferred status over their female counterparts. Changing these conceptual frameworks involves a paradigm shift, almost Copernican in nature. Working with girls, and the oppressed in general, is in many ways easier, as they have everything to gain by resisting. Working with powerholders, on the other hand, becomes trickier as they often feel they have something to lose in granting equal status to others. Thus, as we worked with our boys, we sought to understand the best way to engage with boys and men on topics of gender inequality, help them develop an empathetic understanding of girls' lives, and enable them to envision how to be different kinds of boys and men.

With these questions in mind, we built a curriculum (Sahni et al., 2018) together with the boys. The curriculum emerged from our dialogues with the boys. Its goal was to develop an understanding of gender equality and reframe their notions of masculinity, manhood, and boyhood. Because the boys themselves are the experts on their lives, involving them in the process was critical in enabling our fuller understanding of their realities and thereby designing an effective curriculum. The final curriculum is based on our interactive sessions, and was built by incorporating their voices and their experiences. It also includes our observations of what was most effective and fruitful in developing an understanding and acceptance of gender equality in boys. All the boys are poor and lower caste, so we built on their existing perception of themselves as unequal and their desire for equality, in terms of caste and class

The curriculum includes critical dialogues on a wide range of topics, including facilitating boys' greater self- and socio-emotional awareness, topics of masculinity, violence against women at home and on the street, gender, and marriage. Alongside discussion and dialogue, poetry, art, and drama in particular are used extensively, guided by the belief that the arts provide a powerful medium for developing the expression and education of feelings. Encouraging boys to share their feelings and experiences is an essential part of dialogues, especially since, in most settings, boys constantly receive the contrary message. Educating feelings and developing self-awareness and empathy is critical in provoking a change, and is also more effective and impactful than solely rational dialogue.

We have sought to empower our boys and girls differently: while both boys and girls learn to recognize the unfair structure of patriarchy, and both learn to resist and fight sexist oppression, we focus more on developing voice and agency in girls because they face sexist oppression more directly. With boys our focus is on developing empathy for girls' lives and how to support girls in their struggle by

struggling alongside, while also learning that the world is unsafe and unfair to girls precisely *because* boys are raised to be dominating and violent, due to the differential norms of sexual behavior for boys and girls. Girls must ideally be meek, submissive, subservient, and chaste, while boys are expected to be strong, powerful, in control, aggressive, and assertive, and sexually free to express themselves as they desire. Our goal is to deconstruct these gendered perspectives and norms and to move both girls and boys towards an egalitarian perspective of femininity and masculinity. Understandably, working with boys has proven to be much harder than it has been with girls, because they feel they are losing power and privilege.

Given below are two sample lesson plans with excerpts of critical dialogues⁵ conducted with the boys:

Critical Dialogue 1: Girls' Lives

In this dialogue, the boys discuss their mothers' and sisters' responses to a short interview about their daily routine, their likes and dislikes, and their fears. As boys share these responses, the teacher continues to ask scaffolding questions, especially pointed at bringing out discriminatory differences.

- S: *My sister is older than me. She also goes to school. She gets up at 6 am, gets dressed, makes breakfast for me and herself. After coming back from school, she has lunch, then does housework, like cleaning the house, doing dishes, etc. Then she studies for a while. Then she cooks food, studies for a while, has dinner, and goes to sleep. She likes listening to music, dancing, travelling, reading comic books, and spending time with her friends.*
- T: *When does she play? It's not in the routine you have described.*
- S: *She plays sometimes at home.*
- T: *Doesn't she go out to play like you do? You said you go out to play cricket after school every day.*
- S: *No, at home only.*
- T: *Why can't she go out to play?*
- S: *She has to study and do the housework.*
- T: *And when does she spend time with her friends?*
- S: *In school and when she walks back with them after school.*
- T: *What about hanging out with them later, after school, in the evening?*
- S: *No, parents don't let them go out in the evening. And they have to cook and all.*
- T: *So, she doesn't get to go out a lot, but she likes to, right? Hm...So, I heard the daily routines of your sisters, your aunt, etc., and I'm thinking of your own routines, which you had shared earlier. What differences do you see?*
- S11: *We get to play, they don't.*
- S7: *They don't get to go out.*
- S5: *They can't go out without permission, we can.*
- S11: *They have to cook.*

⁵All dialogues were conducted in Hindi and translated to English for the purpose of this chapter.

- T1: Yes, they get up so early. Your sister gets up at 5am. What time do you get up?*
- S11: 8 or 8:30am.*
- T1: Exactly! So, they have to cook food. What other difference is there? Some of you also work outside, they also work outside but they come back and do household chores also; they have to study also in that time. So, neither do they get time to play, nor are they allowed to. Why aren't they allowed to play?*
- S11: Now they've grown up, parents say they have to work at home, and it's not an age to play.*
- T1: Why not? Let's think about it. Why do they say that it's not appropriate to play at this age?*
- S11: If they go out to play, then who will do the work at home?*
- T1: You all. Think about it. Just like you, they also like playing but they can't because they have to work at home. Is this fair? We never even thought about it. When I was little, my three brothers used to go out in the evening to play cricket. I was very rarely allowed to go because I had to work at home and take care of my younger cousins. I had to iron all the clothes at home. I didn't like that. Do you think they like it? No, right? They are also just like you...But their life is very different from yours. We haven't talked about their fears yet, we will. We need to think about it. We should think what must be going on in their heads. They get up before you, cook for everyone, serve food, then have it themselves, then get ready and go to school. Many of them work outside also. They come back and work at home also. How many of you are 16 years old? There isn't much difference between your ages. He is also 16 and she is also 16. So why can't she play at that age?*

As illustrated in Critical Dialogue #1, the teachers work to help boys see how different girls' lives are—more circumscribed, less free, and with more work, less leisure—and that their fears, too, are different. They're related to marriage, in-laws, and leaving their parents' home. By illustrating that girls are not so different from them, she/he encourages the boys to see the differential treatment of boys and girls at home in a personal way, empathize with girls, and question the fairness of this discriminatory treatment.

Importantly, teachers make a special effort to do so without making the boys feel guilty, explicitly stating that it is not their fault. They emphasize the fact that society is a socio-historical construct, which is not fixed but is constantly changing. It can and does change when social action is taken. They give examples from history, including how child marriage was a commonly accepted practice and legal, and now is not; how Sati (the custom of burning wives alive on their dead husband's *pyre*) was legal but was outlawed and now does not exist; how women had no share in parental property, but are now entitled by law to an equal share. And that these changes happened because of social action by both women and men. Thus, social gender norms can be changed if everyone – boys and girls – takes action.

This dialogue is often supported by a short drama activity, in which boys act out their lives, showing what they learned about their sisters'/girls' lives. The teacher helps boys understand that household tasks are not "women's work" as a result of any natural difference between men and women.

To help develop empathy, the teacher asks boys to prepare a short role reversal skit in which they imagine they are in a world where the conventional standards are reversed. Boys must now conform to the roles that girls are traditionally given: they cook, cannot go out, must take care of babies, must obey men at home, must be submissive, etc. Their plays should show a day in a boy's life in this new universe. After all the groups perform, the teacher does a reflective exercise with the boys to help them process the experience, asking questions such as:

- How did they feel? What were their lives like? Did they like their lives? Why not? Are these standards fair to girls?
- If differences aren't natural, then society need not have these standards. Aren't they a way of keeping men in power and perpetuating inequality?
- How might we work towards more equal standards?

The teacher also assigns homework, asking the boys to discuss at home what they learned about the differential treatment of boys and girls, and whether they think it is fair to girls, thus including families in the dialogues too. Additionally, she/he can subsequently discuss all the themes regarding working towards equality mentioned over three to four sessions with the students.

In another example critical dialogue, the teacher focuses on promoting non-dominant understandings of masculinity. The teacher illustrates how crying is seen as acceptable only for girls. She also discusses the "ego" issue raised by students, pointing out that there seems to be an implicit hierarchy in behaving like a girl or a boy, in which a boy acting like a girl is an inferior thing to do. She helps them question and challenge this proposition.

Critical Dialogue 2: Denaturalizing Conceptions of Boyhood and Manhood

S1: If we fall and get hurt, a girl will cry, a boy won't.

T: But I've seen boys cry.

S1: Little boys cry, not big ones.

S2: Boys are told not to cry like a girl from childhood, so they learn to control it.

T: So, it isn't natural, right? But tell me, what's the harm in crying when you're in pain?

S1: People will make fun of you if you do that.

S2: Boy's ego will get hurt if people say you're crying like a girl.

T: Why is that? It's quite normal to cry when you are in pain. And why does our ego get hurt when someone says we're doing something like a girl? Does a girl's ego get hurt when she's told she's behaving like a boy?

S1: No, not her ego, but she will feel it is not a compliment. It means she's not normal but strange.

T: Yes, but if both boys and girls sometimes behave like each other, then there's no "natural" way of behaving, right? It's all taught to us. Actually,

tell me, don't you feel like crying sometimes? I do. Let's see - when do we feel like crying, but don't because someone will laugh at us? Everyone share one such incident. I'll share mine first...

Throughout the critical dialogues, teachers try to emphasize how boys' own lives will improve as well through dismantling patriarchy, and they use examples of egalitarian men who cook, clean, are nurturing fathers, cry when they feel like it, and do not feel like they are inferior or weak men. Boys may laugh and feel uncomfortable at first. They should be allowed to find their comfort level with the teachers' help. The teacher should drive home the message that boys and men doing these things is not unnatural, demeaning, or unmanly; it can be fun and rewarding.

The School Culture: An Ethic of Responsive Care/Pedagogy of Care

At SHEF we believe that school culture forms an integral part of children's education. It teaches as much as the official curriculum; it is the "hidden" curriculum. In our schools, we aim to create a safe, caring, and nurturing learning environment for our students.

In our work with the Perna girls, we have learned that care itself is empowering, and the key ways in which care manifests itself are trust, respect, and attentiveness. Teachers must pay attention to the realities of boys' lives, earn their trust, listen to them, and respond respectfully. Teachers must also ensure that the boys believe that they care deeply about them, and that they will do everything they can to help the boys build better lives. This is grounded in my belief that it is only when we are cared for that we learn to care. Boys must experience a different way of being treated and perceived as boys if they are to learn to change their own perceptions of what it means to be a boy.

The school is based on an ethic of care so that boys develop caring, nurturing dispositions, and the pedagogy is contextualized in boys' lives. Teachers adopt a sympathetic, responsive listening stance, so that boys feel heard and understood. The teachers let the boys see that they understand the realities and compulsions of their lives, the ways in which they feel oppressed and burdened by poverty and the resulting child labor. Boys are given curricular space to discuss their fears, anxieties, dreams, and hopes. At the same time, they see that as hard as their lives are, their sisters' lives are still harder. Boys are encouraged to care about others in their world, develop an empathetic understanding of girls' and women's lives, and challenge the social structure and traditional gendered social norms and mindsets. While experiencing care, they also learn to care.

While boys cared immensely about their mothers' and sisters' well-being, their initial concept of care was limited to earning more, providing more goods, and protecting their mothers and sisters, which manifested itself in restricting their mobility and other protective limitations. Boys as young as 14 expressed concerns about future marriage expenses for their younger sister(s). For most, these were perceived as the singular ways in which a man can care for his family – as a distant patriarchal head of the family, exercising full control over their lives and executing the duty of providing for and "protecting" the family.

In order to illustrate a less gendered way /a non-sexist and non-patriarchal definition of caring, we helped them understand that fighting for their younger sister's education would allow her to become an independent person capable of making her own decisions about her life and marriage. We discussed how sharing the responsibility of domestic chores allowed her to go out and play, which is another way of caring for her.

Schools as Safe Spaces and Sanctuaries

Boys are frequently witnesses, victims, and perpetrators of violence from a very young age. Many of our boys had abusive fathers and saw their mothers verbally and physically abused by them. They narrated incidents of being brutally beaten in their previous schools, both by teachers and peers. Violence quickly becomes a way of life—in homes, in schools, on the streets—and boys learn to see violence as a way to gain respect and power.

In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love*, bell hooks (2004, p. 35) points toward a deeply rooted problem in patriarchy, that “boys are not seen as lovable.” Patriarchy values boys for their ability to earn and provide. Very early, boys learn that they will be respected only if they conform to hegemonic masculine norms. Soon after establishing Prerna Boys School, we realized that our boys needed to know that they are indeed lovable.

It was also important that we not replicate patriarchal school cultures, which hooks (2004) warns can harm boys by enforcing rigid sex roles. Thus, we recruited as many male teachers as possible, all of whom were gentle and caring, to show our boys that alternate forms of masculinity are possible. Additionally, we worked to help boys make a critical connection to their emotions.

Echoing our own understanding, hooks (2004, p. 54) says that,

to truly protect and honor the emotional lives of boys, we must challenge patriarchal culture...until that culture changes, we must create the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely, without being forced to conform to patriarchal masculine visions.

Schools can be these subcultures and sanctuaries, provided teachers and the school culture support boys in perceiving themselves as lovable. In addition to being safe and caring spaces, schools must help boys become emotionally self-aware, autonomous human beings who consider themselves worthy of love and respect, and define their self-worth as boys and men independently from their ability to dominate or to provide financially. This will help them imagine alternate conceptions of masculinity and ways of inhabiting the world as boys and men. It is only in such an environment that boys can be educated for gender justice (Sahni et al., 2018).

Training Teachers

To create this culture, teachers also learn to change their own gendered perceptions of themselves and of boys. Our teachers receive intensive workshops and participate in regular critical dialogues. As a result, the teachers have reported many changes in their own lives. Female teachers have learned to recognize the gendered nature of their own lives, as well as their right to equality. Male teachers shared that they have become more empathetic with the women in their lives and have gained a deeper understanding of gender issues. Like the boys, they too now help with household chores. Pratima, the principal, speaks of her own raised awareness:

When I came here, I did not question most things, like why women get food at the end...I'd accepted that after marriage only I had to wash my husband's clothes...Nobody cared if I had eaten or not, if I had a headache, if it was my birthday. I had no value as a person, especially as a daughter-in-law. And all of this didn't matter to me also...After 15 years of marriage I realized that I didn't really have to do that.

Alok, her male colleague, reports something similar, saying that "My understanding of these issues was very narrow. I knew these problems existed but I didn't know they were so deep. Through critical dialogues I understood their depth and width. The problems are much bigger than I thought." Alok and Ankur, both male teachers at Prerna, report that they have changed how they behave at home with their wives, and have begun to share household chores.

What Can Boys Do and Who Can They Be? Action Research About How Boys Develop Critical Life Knowledge and Skills at Prerna School

Methodology: Action Research for Organizational Improvement

To understand whether our approach was working, we employed an action research methodology (Coghlan, 2001), in which action research was

...defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry. (Shani & Pasmore, 1985, p. 439)

To assess the impact of critical dialogues on boys in terms of their thinking and behavior, we held focus group discussions with students, parents, and teachers.⁶ We

⁶Students and parents were informed that participation was voluntary at every stage, and consent was given by students and their parents at every stage of the process.

chose six focal students and their parents. The boys were part of the school program for at least 3 years. The boys ranged in ages 13–17 years old. We had engaged with these boys in critical dialogues in the course of developing the curriculum and so knew them from the inception of the program. We also included the teachers who had conducted critical dialogues and other classes with the boys, and were well acquainted with their behavior over three years. We asked all three focus groups the same questions (interview protocol in appendix), and all of the focus group discussions were audio-taped and transcribed. We then triangulated the boys' self-reports with teacher and parent reports. This analysis is part of an ongoing cycle of inquiry that we use to improve our practice at SHEF.

Findings

From the analysis of the transcripts of the focus groups, we found that the boys have experienced and displayed change in the following areas: (1) confidence and self-expression, (2) gender sensitization including more equitable perceptions of girls, (3) influence in their families in trying to advocate for their sisters, (4) development of non-dominant perceptions of masculinity and manhood, and trying to influence their peers in this regard, (5) increased awareness about other social inequalities, (6) development of new skills and abilities previously seen as “feminine.”

Confidence and Self-Expression

When asked how they had changed as a result of participating in critical dialogues, boys stated that their confidence had increased, their personality had developed, and that they now feel better able to articulate themselves. They no longer feel as shy about expressing themselves, nor are they afraid to speak out against behaviors they consider wrong. They also report that they now know how to talk differently to different people, and how to persuade them and negotiate with them. This was corroborated by their teachers. Ankur, a male teacher at Prerna Boys School said,

They have started sharing more; they speak their mind now. Before they were introverts. After learning about these issues through the dialogues and speaking in class, their confidence increased a lot; the manner in which they talk has changed. They have started expressing themselves confidently...And because of this their personality has developed a lot.

Aakansha, his female colleague further added,

They express themselves much more. Initially they never used to cry, they used to shout and try to solve every problem by fighting. Now they cry if they feel bad and try to solve problems through discussion, rather than violent fighting.

Increased Gender Sensitization

When asked to reflect on any changes in their attitudes and perceptions towards girls, the boys shared that they have learned to empathize with their sisters, to see them as persons with feelings, desires, and fears, and to recognize discrimination (change of perception). They now recognize that girls carry an unfair burden of household work and have begun to help them at home (behavior change resulting from changed perceptions). They also recognize the unfairness of girls' restricted mobility, and have begun advocating for their sisters. Lastly, they have begun advocating for their changed perception of masculinity with their peers and their parents outside school.

For example, Rahul shared, "We also understand girls now, that even they have feelings, they also want to go out, they also want to play." Beyond the critical thinking skills that boys developed in relation to how they think about gender and other social inequalities, they also explained a number of practical ways their actions and behaviors have changed, and the skills that they have learned. For example, when asked what new skills they believed they had acquired, boys stated that they had learned to cook, do many household chores, understand others' feelings, respect others, and behave appropriately with others. They also stated that it had given them the opportunity to get to know themselves and facilitated a greater sense of self-awareness. All of these are critical life skills (see Brush et al., Chap. 3, this volume).

Tarun explains that,

Initially we didn't know what was happening in our own homes. Sister and mother used to work all day outside and at home. We used to order them to make this and that for lunch, dinner, etc. Through critical dialogues I realized how much they work and the level of pressure my sister is under. We just roam around all day. Then I understood that we should also work at home, so now I cook and clean.

Rahul further expressed his understanding of his own role

I've understood my responsibilities. If the streets aren't safe then I should accompany my sister when she wants to go out. Before I felt that if she's cooking then that's good, because eventually, she will get married and cook at her in-laws' place. Now I feel that if girls don't progress then society won't either. They can become something after having an education.

Aakansha, their teacher, corroborates this

Initially the boys took it for granted that these are girls' duties and the boys have nothing to do with them... So we asked them to do a role reversal at home, just for one day. Slowly, the boys started helping at home and then they realized how physically and mentally draining it was for their sisters to study and cook and clean and do everything at home. Now, they share the housework, complete it quickly and go together to play outside. They even study together with their sisters. They even share their problems with their sisters and listen to their problems.

Pratima, the principal, explained that boys had begun to see that gender equality is not just a girls' issue, but theirs too:

Initially the boys used to get defensive and feel accused. They felt like we only talked about girls... But now they understand that these issues aren't only girls' issues but society's and

boys' also. This is a huge realization. All the boys who've been with us for two or three years, their minds have opened up.

Shivpoojan's sister (also his guardian since their mother's death) spoke of the change she has seen in her brother:

I've seen a lot of change in him since he joined Prerna Boys. Before he used to sit idle, and my sister...if they both were having dinner, he used to ask her for water. She would stop eating and get him water. Now...if she's doing something, then he does his work on his own. Now he understands her feelings...He helps us in the household work a lot. I have a three-year-old son and he cares for him and helps him to study. He tells me, "The environment we keep at home, this baby will become like that, so we should cooperate with each other and talk politely. The way we treat each other, he will treat others the same way."

Both Ambrendra's mother and Tarun's father commented on the change in their sons, adding that their sons often take their critical dialogues home:

[Ambrendra] has changed a lot, his behavior towards his sister and me also. He helps us with all the chores. I had an operation recently, so he and his sister do all the housework together. He talks a lot about gender issues.

Tarun's father added that,

Tarun's behavior is good, he's good at studies, and also talks about the dialogues that happen here. And he takes the lead in all the housework. In the morning, he makes tea for everyone. He tells his mother, "It's so cold, you don't get up, I'll make the tea"...He buys all the groceries and also helps make dinner.

During the discussion, we also asked boys how they thought other boys' perceptions of girls should change. They mentioned that their perceptions are now very different from those of friends who attend other schools, which they attribute to critical dialogues. For example, Ambrendra said, "[Boys] should realize that a girl is not an object to satisfy their physical needs." Rahul added, "She's a human being with feelings."

Their teacher, Aakansha, noted that, "Prerna boys used to see the Prerna girls as objects, like 'Wow, she's so hot! She's so beautiful!' But that, too, has changed. Now, they see them as people, just like the boys themselves." The comments of boys and their teachers during the focus groups indicate that they have become more sensitized to gender inequality, and now see girls as human beings, not as sexual objects.

Influencing Their Families and Advocating for Their Sisters

Boys also described how their parents' attitudes and treatment towards them and their sisters had changed. For example, Rahul reported that,

Before, when I used to ask my mother for food, she would tell my sisters to serve me. Now, if they're resting, then my mother tells me, "Take it yourself, you also have hands. Let them rest. And after eating take your dishes outside and wash them."

Another student, Ambrendra, said with some pride, “My sister wasn’t allowed to play more than an hour outside. Now she can play for two or three hours. If she washes dishes in the morning then it’s my turn in the evening.” Likewise, Shubham added, “Initially, when we were given homework in critical dialogues to interview our family members, mine used to say, ‘What kind of questions are you asking!’ Now they understand that I’m becoming more mature so they answer properly.”

Boys’ influence in their homes was corroborated by parents, who reported that their sons are trying to educate their mothers and have influenced their views on dowry and the treatment of their daughters. Pooja said, “Shivpoojan says, ‘Only after my sister is twenty plus and has become independent, you should think of her marriage, and only if she wants to. And if they ask for dowry, you should refuse immediately.’” Meena said that her son advocates against dowry and child marriage at home, too. “Ambrendra also says that we shouldn’t take or give dowry...that his sister is too small, that we shouldn’t marry her too soon.”

Change in their Perceptions of Manhood

Prior to the dialogues, the boys’ concept of manhood was defined by shouting, drinking, smoking, bullying, and refusing to cry or express pain. When asked whether they felt less masculine since the change in their behavior, they denied it vehemently. Rahul said, “Now we think we’ve become a real human being,” and Shubham echoed, “Now we’ve become real men.” Ambrendra went a step further, saying, “I think we’re better than [others’] version of a man.”

They also stated that while their friends might make fun of them or consider them sissies, it no longer bothers them. Ankur, their teacher, corroborated this by saying,

They used to take that burden of manhood upon themselves, imitating their fathers and uncles; they tried to show they’re “men”...to be dominating...in our critical dialogues they understood that because of this dominating nature, women are hurt, get left behind, and our society is losing a lot because of that. They understand that they must be different as men.

In addition to advocating for girls within their families, some boys reported trying to influence the way their peers thought about gender and what it meant to be “manly.” Ambrendra explained a harmful practice associated with being a “tough” man—cigarette smoking. He spoke of his own experience:

I have a friend who was addicted to cigarettes, he had to have at least one a day, no matter what. I slowly made him come down to one cigarette a week and now he smokes just one a month. Slowly, I’ll make him quit completely.

Cigarette smoking is taboo for girls, while seen as a manly thing to do for boys. Shubham also explained,

My friends used to abuse a lot verbally. Initially, I didn’t say anything...but after coming here I felt this was wrong. I told them these abuses are ultimately aimed at someone’s

mother or sister, who didn't do anything to them, and that they should stop saying all this. Now, whenever I'm with them, they don't use any bad words.

Arun, another student, explained that he has also successfully motivated two boys from his neighborhood who had dropped out of school to reenroll.

Understanding Social Inequalities More Comprehensively

Boys also described their greater understanding and changed attitudes toward other forms of inequality, including religious inequalities and caste-based discrimination. For example, Rahul explained, "When I first came here, I wouldn't talk much with lower caste boys or eat anything from their home. Now, we're all very friendly, talk to everyone, and share lunch with everyone." Shivpoojan made a similar remark:

My parents used to shout at me whenever I went to my friend's house because he's Muslim. Then, my sister also came to study here and started doing critical dialogues. Initially, I was the only one telling them that it was wrong to discriminate like this. But then my sister also started saying the same thing. Now, if there's a function at my house, like a birthday party, then everyone comes, and my parents also allow it.

Shubham added on to his classmate's comment, explaining:

My grandmother never liked us to mingle with people from lower castes. She told us never to drink water from their house. On my birthday, I would invite all my friends so she didn't like that. I used to talk to her about this, now she has changed somewhat.

Seeing these religious and caste-based inequalities are a key element in developing the critical thinking skills of the Perna students.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the descriptive analysis of our work with boys (and girls) in Perna, we think of education as educating for life, rendering our approach as more of a "life knowledge" approach than a life skills approach. We believe in a structural and ideological approach, grounded and contextualized in social and political reality, and undergirded by an ideology of democratic values. Our curricula and pedagogy are rooted in helping children gain a greater sense of self-awareness, recognizing themselves and others as equal persons, developing agency and voice, and critically examining societal norms and oppressive social structures.

Using a life skills approach as an addendum or an after-school program, though useful, implies that the traditional curriculum does not need changing, and is contrary to all the current thinking in education, which advocates for a more broad-based definition of school learning (Learning Metrics Task Force, 2014; United Nations, 2012). Similarly, teaching life skills in a social and politically decontextualized way implies that social structures need no changing, and that it is possible to

live successfully in an inequitably structured society and polity. We therefore integrate life skills throughout the curriculum, placing special emphasis on learning to think critically about gender and social inequalities so that students can work toward social transformation.

Our students do not live in a social and political vacuum, so taking an individualized, decontextualized view of knowledge or life skills is less effective and also, in my opinion, inadequate. Pedagogy and school culture are very important; these cannot be at odds with the content and are as instrumental in the development of knowledge, and the skills thereof, required to empower girls and boys to live life well. The knowledge that enables children to live a life of their own choosing must be incorporated into the formal curriculum, and the content of the classroom must be relevant to children's lives and the challenges they face. Teachers and schools must acknowledge children's realities, and be caring and responsive to their needs and context. For example, teaching girls to be confident and assertive without also teaching them that they have a right to be so, contrary to what they have been taught by tradition and social norms to believe, might leave them not only confused but also less convinced and in some cases more vulnerable. Similarly, teaching boys to distinguish between being assertive and dominating, to develop a new egalitarian conception of being a "strong man" involves enabling them to critically examine and disrupt their current socially learned definitions. Such education is not only personally empowering but also socially transformative.

Our critical pedagogy focuses on democratic values of gender, caste, and class equality, enabling our children to critically examine gender- and class-related power structures in their society and to locate and reposition themselves within these. We aim for our students to (1) develop a social and political consciousness in order to see all inequality (especially gender inequality) as undemocratic, discriminatory, and unjust, (2) to understand the underlying causes of such inequality, and (3) to collectively envision an egalitarian and democratic future. In other words, our goal is to empower them to disrupt and deconstruct unjust conceptual frameworks, which they have been socialized into by tradition, social norms, and patriarchal power structures, and help them reconstruct an egalitarian conceptual framework. We perceive this as a cognitive act and important life knowledge. Our critical pedagogy includes critical dialogues, drama, critical literacy, art, and dance, all of which help children develop the life skills necessary to live a life of their own choosing, present themselves as equal persons worthy of dignity and respect, and therefore act accordingly. Furthermore, they learn to view and respect others as equal persons, and to redefine gender roles and gender relations in more egalitarian terms. Taking a life knowledge approach to life skills, and making this an integral part of the official curriculum, with specially allocated time and curricular space for lessons in equality along with lessons of math, science, and language, has the additional, important effect of redefining the scope of education, deepening and widening it to make it more relevant to the lives of its students and the societies that they live in and can change in the future.

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