



MAKING JUNIOR COLLEGES GENDER-INCLUSIVE

Ivan Mathew John

Research Student, Smt. Kapila Khandvala College of Education, Mumbai.

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Abstract

Junior College is a stage in education that includes adolescent learners some of whom are learning to deal with their gender and sexual identities amidst an environment that is largely heterosexist and patriarchal. Such learners may not necessarily be open about their sex and gender identity and there exist very few avenues for them to seek clarification within educational institutions. The school environment has tremendous potential to become nurturing grounds for LGBT students to be their authentic selves but it would be necessary to first dispel ignorance and confusion among educators themselves. This article explores ways in which an educational institution can become sensitive to gender-based needs and build a school climate that promotes wellness, inclusion, equity, and diversity. The well-being of all learners in an inclusive school environment will help to promote unity and a healthy understanding of diversity.

Keywords: *Comprehensive sexuality education, Gender, Gender audit, Gender inclusion, Sex*

Introduction

The stage of education that corresponds to the two years in Junior Colleges is also a part of the stage of adolescence. The needs and challenges faced by adolescent/Junior College sexual and gender minorities specifically, can be addressed, in order to help them tackle the often hostile, unfriendly, and even unsupportive learning environments. This paper explores the need to dispel ignorance and misunderstanding among educators within the school system, of which 'Junior College' is the last stage.

The studies reviewed shed light on the relevance of gender sensitization programmes and need for a curriculum that includes gender concerns. The literature also highlights the challenges and mental health concerns of LGBTQ students. Some studies demonstrate how a

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supportive and inclusive school climate plays an enabling role and has a positive impact on the lives of sexual and gender minorities. The purpose of this paper is to showcase how institutions can change – to promote well-being of all learners, of the institution and of society at large.

Secondary Stage of education

The stage of education also called ‘Plus 2’ under the ‘10+2+3’ system of education and now a part of the ‘Secondary’ stage of education under the National Education Policy (2020), is a life changer for many students. Mumbai is a city where several “Degree (or Senior) Colleges” have Junior Colleges attached to them. However, the ‘Junior College’ (equivalent of Higher Secondary School) continues to be an integral part of the ‘12-year school system’ under the ‘10+2+3’ pattern as well as the ‘5+3+3+4’ formula envisaged under NEP (2020).

Adolescence – a period of challenges

In the Indian educational system, the “Higher Secondary” stage comprises learners who are mostly below the age of eighteen years. They comprise adolescent students in their prime, with hormones kicking in, bodily changes, engaging in exploratory and experiential learning about themselves and their sexual needs. The period of adolescence is characterised by questioning, doubt, turmoil, confusion, chaos, indecisiveness, lack of clarity, conflict...or in the words of eminent psychologist William James, as “a big booming, buzzing confusion.” Matters pertaining to sex, gender and sexuality are rarely discussed by parents, elders, and teachers, especially if they come from conservative backgrounds. Adolescence is a stage when many questions about sex, gender, sexuality, and relationships abound. In the absence of any form of inclusive Sex Education and Sexuality Education, Junior College students are left to themselves to explore and find out from their peers, the internet, and social media of communication. These are also channels of misinformation and not all students are able to discern the authenticity of sources.

The adolescent stage is one where individuals are likely to be influenced more by their peers or age mates than persons who are authority figures, especially parents, elders, religious leaders, and teachers. The typical adolescent is more likely to give in to pressures of their peers to fit in with their age-mates, or to be fashionably ‘in’ with their group. This may be with reference to their study habits, life-style, mannerisms, sexual behaviours, language, attire, attitude and so forth. The challenges that adolescents face are true for many Junior College students; they get even more enhanced for those who are sex and gender minorities,

such as Intersex persons, Transgender persons, Bisexual persons and Asexual persons. There are also students who find themselves ‘Questioning’ (that is, the ‘Q’ in LGBTQAI+ acronym), as regards their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI).

Impact of Junior College on sex and gender minorities

Formal schools very typically classify students within the ‘sex binary’ (that is, female and male) and ‘gender binary’ (that is, girl and boy). However, there may be students (learners) who identify as Intersex, Transgender, or Non-binary. The school system for the most part fails to make room for students who ‘do not fit’ within the sex binary and gender binary. Such students are almost always victims of unsavoury humour, teasing, humiliation, mocking, harassment, and in some cases – emotional abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, or even sexual abuse. Such exclusivist school environments become unsafe and unhealthy for sex and gender minorities. Wright (2010) emphasizes the need and importance of a “safe school environment” for staff and students. According to Wright, safe schools demonstrate a “close relationship with teacher efficacy as well as learner performance.” [2] A safe school is one which takes every effort to ensure that all members of the school – students and staff are in a safe and healthy environment where they can give off their best in terms of output, individually and through collaboration.

It is necessary to think about the highly individualized situation of say, Transgender students, who lack support systems not just at home, but also among their peer groups, and the school. The same is likely to be the case regarding students who identify within the LGBTQAI+ spectrum. Their lives can become extremely lonely, self-centred, frightful, and depressing. Not all individuals are able to find an alternative source to gain solace or strength, to tackle harsh realities that surround their lived experiences. Many from the LGBT community may not even be able to come to terms with their own identities, when they grow up in an environment that is patriarchal, toxic, heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic, biphobic, hostile, and autocratic. There are numerous ‘Coming Out’ stories that have ended badly, with parents, siblings, teachers, friends, religious leaders, and other adults ridiculing, labelling, abusing, and destroying the self-worth of very vulnerable LGBTQAI+ youth who struggle to grapple with their sex, gender, and sexuality identities. Life stories about Transgender students who “drop out” of school, join ‘Hijra’ communities, or those who take up sex work to make ends meet are not uncommon. Many Transgender persons do not complete formal

school education till Standard X and hence become ineligible for admission in Junior College.

Scope for institutional change

School environments do not have to be insensitive to the needs of gender and sexual minorities. They can still play a positive role and act as catalysts for change. Schools are meant to be inclusive and enabling spaces that can draw out the best from those under their care. This can be possible through various measures which are not difficult to implement but one can expect it to be a long-drawn process of gradual change. Schools can make the requisite efforts that include the following:

(i) Creating awareness and gender sensitization

It is necessary to create awareness about terms such as, ‘sex’ and ‘gender.’ Too many institutions and individuals use these terms interchangeably, as if they hold the same meaning. The term ‘sex’ only refers to the physical, biological, and physiological aspects of human beings, namely, the external and internal characteristics that differentiate females from males. There are individuals who are born with physical features that cannot be slotted into the boxes of either ‘female’ nor ‘male’ – and this is the only the challenge posed by ‘external’ genitalia. Such individuals identify as ‘Intersex’ persons who are usually, raised to behave and dress as girls (or boys), irrespective of the child’s own sense of gender identity that only emerges over time and not immediately at birth. Internal features such as one’s genetic predispositions, DNA, and chromosomes also play an important role and pose a new set of challenges too.

The term ‘gender’ on the other hand is a ‘social’ construct, in the sense that society influences and/or indoctrinates adults and they in turn directly or indirectly coerce individuals to identify as girl (or boy) and adopt stereotypical behaviours associated with identities which are rooted in the dominant culture. Gender stereotyping fits well with certain traditional values and cultural expectations. Today, the understandings of what constitutes ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ have also come in for questioning. Some students may identify as ‘Transgender’ – that is, persons who are born with a particular ‘sex’ identity but whose ‘gender’ identity is incongruent with the former. Today, an increasing number of adolescents, openly or otherwise, identify as Transgender, Non-binary, Agender, or Gender queer.

(ii) Promoting learner authenticity

This refers to the value of students being ‘authentic’ as individuals. Individuals who are forced to identify as a particular sex category or gender category cannot be true to themselves. The pretence, or internal conflict, will lead such students to live an identity that is unreal, pretentious and in the long term, damaging to themselves. This incongruency has the potential to trigger mental health and safety concerns especially in the case of LGBTQAI+ youth.

(iii) School climate

All school staff and their leaders can work collectively to create a learning environment where each individual feels valued, respected, and loved. An enabling environment has a higher probability of learners realising their optimum potential. Schools exist to build character, shape personalities, embrace diversity, respect all persons, develop citizenship, and prepare them for life, in addition to the core duty of building secure foundations for careers/vocations.

(iv) Formulation of Gender Policy

In order that the school can even make a start to be inclusive, it is imperative for School Managements, School Heads, Administrators and Staff to be sensitized about matters related to sex, gender and sexuality. Once there is sensitivity on the part of authorities, the institution needs to formulate a written ‘Gender Policy’ that upholds and supports an inclusive school environment for all types of learners irrespective of one’s sex identity, gender identity and sexuality. The School’s Gender Policy would need to be communicated to all the concerned stake-holders as a mark of its commitment to inclusive education and specifically, gender inclusion. For example, a Policy that makes room for the admission of Intersex and Transgender students. Day et al (2019) found that schools with a Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity-focussed policies were closely associated with more positive student experiences especially of LGB students. Such a policy would have its trickle-down effect on parents and elders in society, thereby creating a wider circle of awareness. Any change comes along with its riders and criticisms, challenges, and fears. A gender policy that has zero-tolerance for discrimination on *any* grounds – race, caste, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religious identity will foster a healthy learning environment within a school. Kolbert et al (2015) observed that teachers who were aware of their schools' anti-bullying

policies reported lower rates of physical bullying of LGBTQ students and their victimization as compared to teachers who were ignorant of the same.

(v) Equipping Staff

All staff, and especially 'Teaching' Staff can be sensitized to the nuances of gender and the value of inclusive education as a part of their professional 'Pre-service' Training. Several Teacher Training (B.Ed.) Colleges today have started specific Papers/Courses or Modules related to Sex, Gender and/or Sexuality. According to Coulter et al (2021), pre-service teachers may be better equipped to serve LGBT students if they have had LGBT-focussed service-training. For those teachers already in service, Continuous Professional Development (CDP) Programmes for Teachers could include gender sensitization modules, as there are plenty of myths, ignorance and confusion among educators and School Heads about gender-related concepts. Hence, a conceptual understanding about sex, gender and sexuality becomes invaluable. However, far more vital is, taking forward this understanding to the next logical level, that is, internalizing this understanding. Only then can one hope to see it translate into field experiences of actual support for gender and sexual minorities. This has the potential to build a network of LGBT persons and their allies with the hope of upholding diversity, equity, and inclusion beyond the boundaries of an institution.

(vi) Need for Training/Sensitization

Human beings are also sexual beings and adolescents universally have numerous questions about sex, gender, sexuality, love, relationships, etc. Thus, the understanding of sex and gender cannot be restricted to a heterosexual understanding of love and relationships and sexuality. The damaging effects of a one-sided sexuality education can well be imagined. Gender inclusion in schools must be sensitive and open to include the umbrella of sexualities. It would be necessary to transcend heterosexuality and challenge the deeply embedded patriarchal and heterosexist mindsets. In this context 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education' (CSE) that can be age-appropriate and relevant to changing needs in a changing world. Presently, there is no formal CSE programme among Junior Colleges (Standards XI and XII). Billie de Haas (2020) conducted a study among school teachers in Uganda and observed that support for teachers in taking up a comprehensive approach to sexuality education needed to be backed by "government, the school administration and the wider community." Educational institutions are expected to respond to changes and societal needs. They should be able to

receive funding to spearhead research and become active agents of societal transformation based on the goals of equality, social justice, and national integration.

(vii) Teachers as facilitators

Teachers exert an unimaginable influence over their students as they are being shaped by curricular experiences within and outside the classroom, for several hours within the regular ‘working’ day. As far as the curriculum is concerned, topics pertaining to gender and sexuality has scope to be included in every school subject – Language, Literature, Social Studies, Science, Music, Mathematics, Art, Business Studies, Philosophy, Commerce, Drama, and Sports, etc. Co-curricular activities within the school, through Departmental and Club-based events, Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) or Queer Collectives, can rope in a variety of gender-related events. Language too can become a vehicle of inclusive communication that does not alienate sexual and gender minorities.

(viii) Gender-affirmative Counselling Services

LGBT students are known to experience a higher level of mental health concerns. Marraccini et al (2022) found that schools which offered a safe space for LGBTQ+ students and opportunities to promote positive social relationships helped students deal with minor stressors and thereby provide timely support in preventing suicide. There is a need for School Counsellors whose professional practice is gender-inclusive and gender-affirmative. Private and personal concerns of gender and sexual minorities can be addressed by an LGBT-friendly counsellor. The counsellor would serve as effective support while bridging the gap between the student and the school on the one hand, and with the family of the student on the other. Kull et al (2016) suggests the need for counsellors to upgrade their skill sets in order that they can handle the needs of LGBT students, as many Counsellors are not likely to have had adequate training to cater to LGBT-needs.

(ix) Gender Audit

It will be a useful measure for Junior Colleges to conduct a Gender Audit of their institutions. A Gender Audit is a means to gauge the efficacy of an institutional gender policy if indeed there is such a policy. It will also help to assess the extent to which institutional infrastructural provisions (e.g. gender-neutral toilets, facilities for transgender students), curriculum, inclusive language, instructional processes, activities, events, seminars, conferences, workshops, festivals, extension, and outreach programmes are specifically designed to be gender-inclusive in thought, word and deed.

Conclusion

The essential purpose of educational institutions is to prepare learners to become sensitive, capable, creative, thinking, and skilled citizens. Junior College is a stage where most of its students are on the brink of legal adulthood. Many students continue with higher education, skill development, or employment. Indeed, in our scenario there are students for whom Standard XII becomes a terminal point in their formal education. However, the shaping of students to be sensitive to human diversity, to critically oppose discrimination that promotes injustice, exploitation, and abuse and to be able to stand up for the rights of 'weaker sections' of society can only yield the betterment of the society in which we live. It is essential for schools transcend tokenisms in the name of gender-equity but become dynamic and positively transforming agents of change. Measures to make schools more inclusive will promote the well-being of not only sexual and gender minorities but all persons, thus furthering the cause of unity amidst diversity.

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