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A Study on Prevalent Unconscious Bias of the Teachers towards the Diverse Learners in Kasaragod

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Abstract:

The present study investigates the prevalence of unconscious bias among teachers toward diverse learners in the district of Kasaragod, Kerala. Given the region's multilingual and multicultural composition, the study explores six major forms of bias—prejudice, gender bias, discrimination, religious/cultural bias, linguistic bias, and favoritism—using a 30-item survey administered to 61 teachers across 30 semi-rural schools. The research adopts a quantitative, empirical design to analyse patterns of bias and identify the most dominant forms present in school environments. Findings reveal that linguistic bias (32.4%) and gender bias (32.08%) emerge as the most prevalent, highlighting structural and cultural influences within institutional settings. Recommendations focus on fostering inclusivity through language sensitivity, equitable classroom practices, and measures to prevent biased behaviors. The study emphasizes the necessity for educators to consciously reflect on and address their implicit attitudes to create supportive learning environments for all students.

Keywords: *Unconscious Bias, Teachers, Diverse learners, Inclusivity.*

Introduction:

The ultimate aim of any educational institution is to make the students achieve the preplanned instructional objectives and cater the individual differences in the process of teaching and learning, leading to a product which gives happy, educated and better citizens of the nation.

Thus, the practices in the institution, the environment provided by the institution and the teachers have a very vital role in forming such an output.

John Dewey has very rightly stated that *'Education is a development from within and that it is formation from without'*. [Education as Conservative and Progressive] It seemingly puts focus on the process of education as an internal development. The external factors such as classroom activities, extracurricular activities, sports, campus life and the school environment in general has a great influence on this internal development

In the present scenario, teachers have to be utmost careful about all their actions/behaviors which will have an effect on the learners who especially in the current era are advanced in culture and modern in thoughts

and are sensitive to a variety of actions, languages, thoughts, ideas which were considered acceptable in the past.

As an educator, it is the responsibility of an individual to develop an inclusive mentality and surpass any kind of bias among the diverse learners to meet the expected learning outcomes from all the learners.

Background of the Study

The bias exists everywhere. So is the case with educational institutions. Some of it can be intentional but most of it tends to be unconscious bias. When the bias is unintended it is known as unconscious bias. If the unconscious bias of the teachers is gone unaddressed, chances are we'll be left with unhappy children, having lack of self-confidence and empathy whose innate potential will not be drawn out through the process of teaching -learning, which ultimately is the failure of the entire educational institution. Unconscious bias can be eliminated only by being aware of its presence in the first place. Kasaragod is a home for a diverse group of learners hailing from different social, economic, religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which makes it the apt place to look for any unconscious bias towards the learners in the teachers of this locality.

Unconscious bias always manifests in different ways and has varying consequences and it affects the behavior and performance of the children. The study is focused on discerning prevalent unconscious biases of the teachers towards the diverse group of learners in Kasaragod.

Objectives of the Study:

i. To analyze the most common unconscious bias across schools in Kasaragod.

ii. To explore the underlying factors that contributed to the said bias to be the predominant one.

iii. To propose recommendations to overcome /eliminate their unconscious bias

Operational Definitions of the Terms/ Concepts:

i. Unconscious bias: An inflexible positive or negative prejudgment about the nature, character and abilities of an individual, based on generalized ideas about the group to which the individual belongs.

ii. Prejudice: Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience. Gender bias: Inclination towards or against one gender

iii. Discrimination: The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, sex or disability

iv.Religious/Cultural bias: Religious bias occurs when assumptions or prejudgements are made on a person's membership in a faith group rather than on their individual merits. Cultural bias is a phenomenon of interpreting and judging phenomena by standards inherent to one's own culture.

v.Linguistic bias: It is defined as a systematic asymmetry in word choice that reflects the social-category cognitions that are applied to the described group of individual(s) Favoritism: The practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to the person or group at the expense of another.

Significance of the Study:

The study helps to make the teachers aware of the existing unconscious bias in their classroom transactions and or campus life of the school community. It also helps to take steps to reduce the impact of such bias in the academic performance, behavior and character building of the learners through the recommendations

proposed. If the unconscious bias is not addressed, it might cause the child to drift away from the subject as the child will have negative feelings towards the teacher.

Delimitations:

i. The responses are based on personal opinions and hence it might not be completely true/ genuine.

ii. The items of the survey are given in English which all the teachers might not be able to follow due to which they may give false responses.

iii. The sample set is not large enough to adequately represent the schools of the district.

iv. Only 6 kinds of bias are focused in the study. There could be several other existing unconscious biases which have not been identified.

Methodology/Research Design:

The following steps were taken for the study:

- Identified 6 areas of focus i.e. different kinds of biases in the education system.
- A survey questionnaire consisting of a set of 30 items were prepared in which 5 items each focused on each of the areas.
- Interpretation scale was prepared and the results were analyzed after collecting the responses/data.
- Proposed recommendations or suggestions based on the result interpretation.

Research type: Empirical research, where conclusions of the study were strictly drawn from concretely empirical evidence, and therefore 'verifiable' evidence. In particular, it is survey research, which generally involved a large audience to collect a large amount of data. This is a quantitative method having a predetermined set of closed questions which were pretty easy to answer.

Sample: 61 Teacher's survey questionnaire response sheet collected as spreadsheet.

Dimensions: Unconscious bias, Prejudice, Gender bias, Discrimination, Religious/Cultural bias, Linguistic bias, Favoritism.

Tools: The tool I used for our study is the 'Survey questionnaire' which included a set of 30

items of which for 13 items we used Likert scale to collect the responses and 17 close ended items. The survey responses were collected on a spreadsheet and the interpretation based on the scale was done to get the final results.

Survey and Data collection: An email invitation to complete an electronic form of the survey was sent to the 61 teachers belonging to 30 Schools of semi-rural area across the district Kasargod, Kerala. Out of the 61 teachers to whom the survey was sent, all 61 has responded by the collection date.

Results:

From the collected data, the responses were segregated into 6 areas of focus respectively.

1. The items 7,12,16,19 and 27 were concerned with prejudices. It was found that out of the responses, about 24.2% of respondents exhibited prejudice.

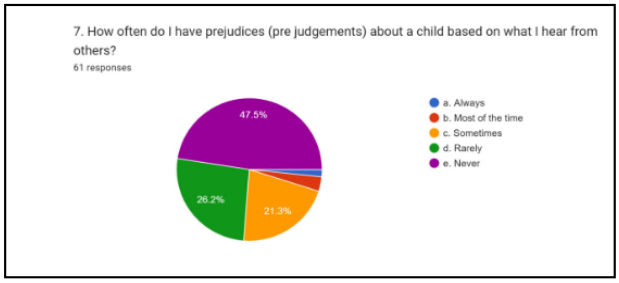

Fig 1: Prejudice-related

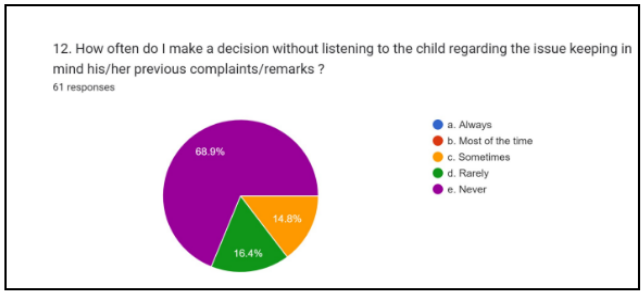

Fig 2: Decision related education

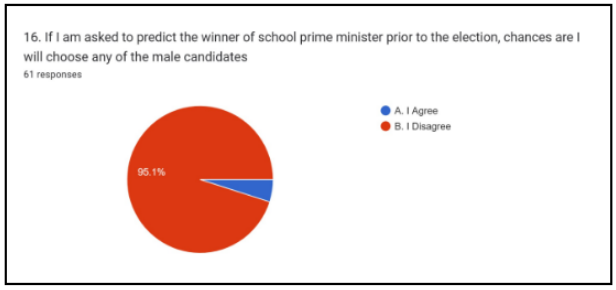

Fig 3: Prediction

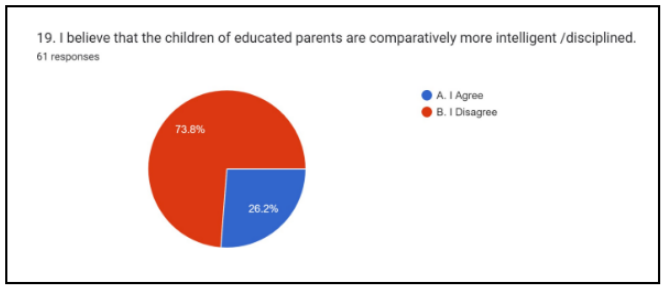

Fig 4: Parents

2. The items 2,5,15,24, and 30 were concerned with gender bias . About 32.08% of the respondents exhibited the presence of gender bias.

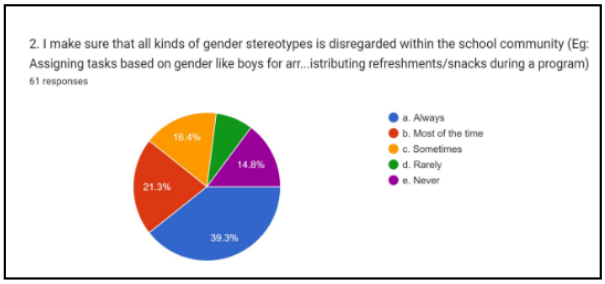

Fig-5. Gender stereotype-1

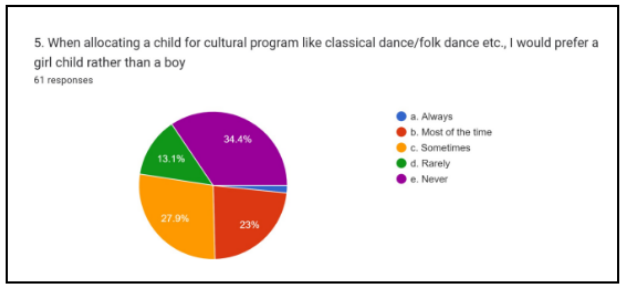

Fig-6. Gender stereotype-II

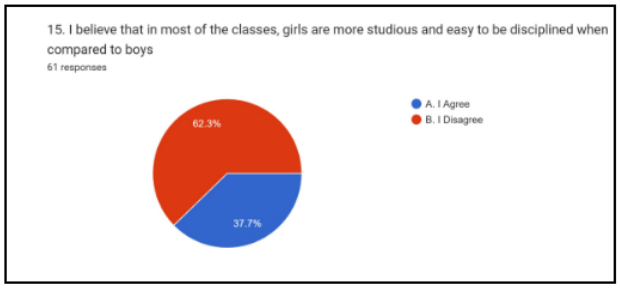

Fig-7. Gender stereotype-III

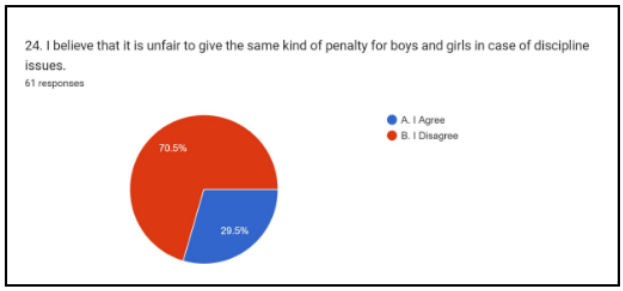

Fig-8. Gender stereotype-IV

3. The items 4,17,18,23 and 25 were concerned with discrimination. 19.3% of the respondents exhibited the presence of discrimination.

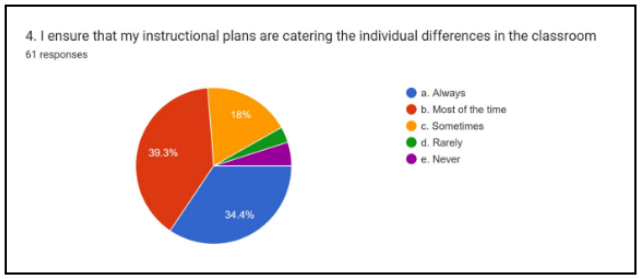

Fig-9. Discrimination-I

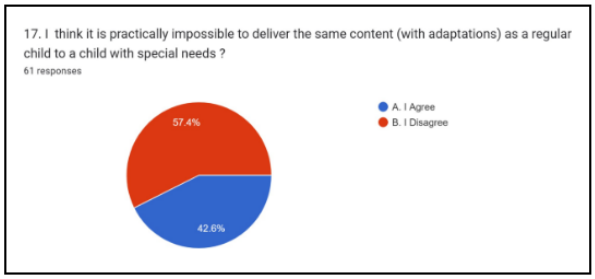

Fig-10. Discrimination-II

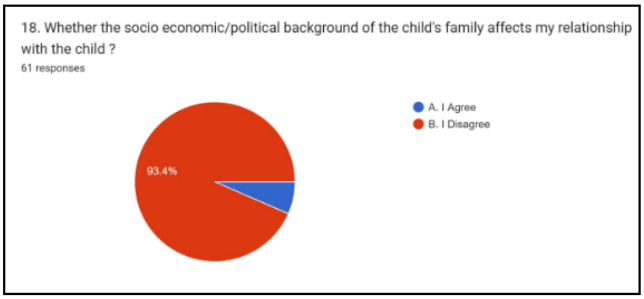

Fig-11. Discrimination-III

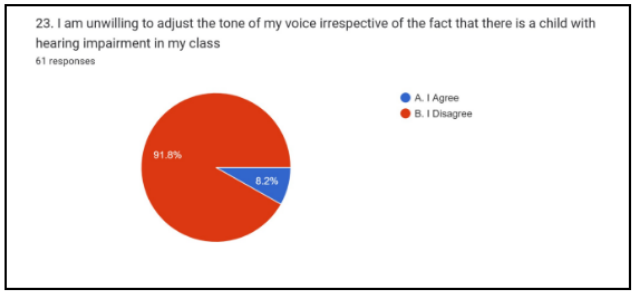

Fig12. Discrimination

4. The items 9,14,26,28, and 29 were concerned with cultural or religious bias. About 12.9% of the respondents exhibited the presence of cultural/religious bias.

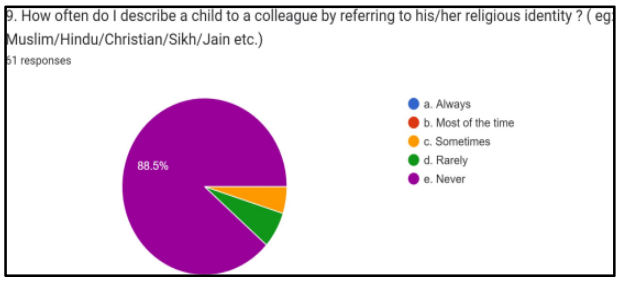

Fig-13. Cultural/religious bias-I

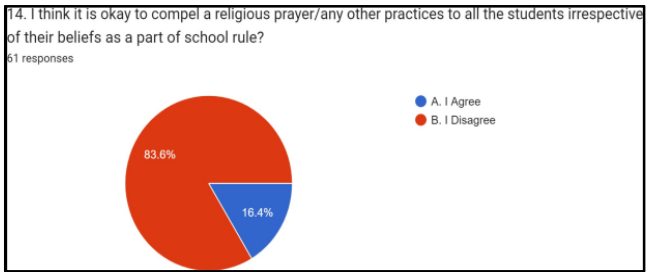

Fig-14. Cultural/religious bias-II

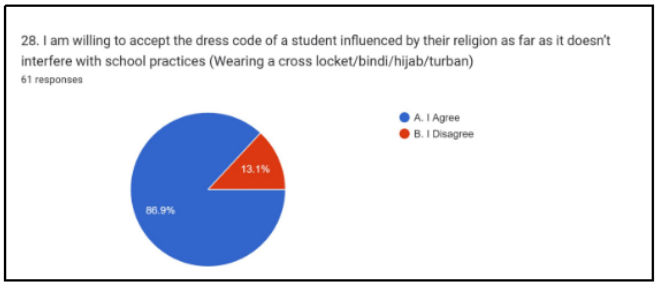

Fig-15. Cultural/religious bias-III

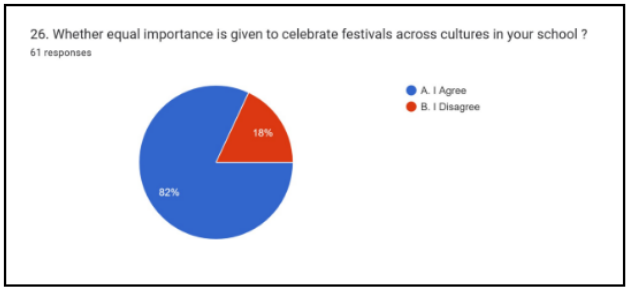

Fig-16. Cultural/religious bias-IV

5. The items 1,3,8,11, and 13 are concerned with linguistic bias and about 32.4% of the respondents exhibited the bias.

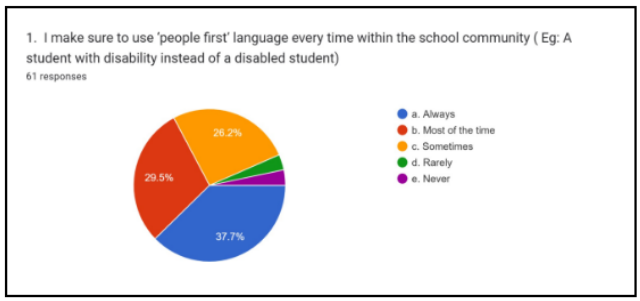

Fig-17. Linguistic bias-I

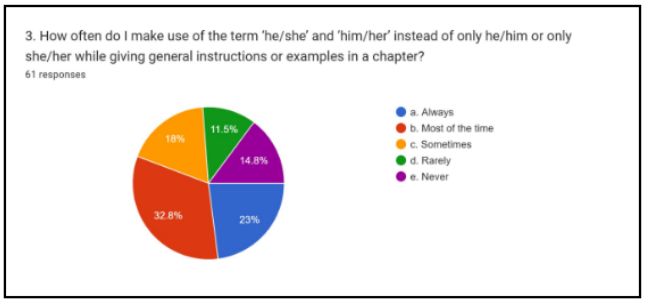

Fig-18. Linguistic bias-II

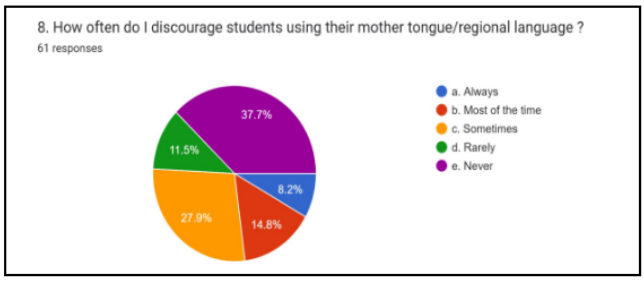

Fig-19. Linguistic bias-III

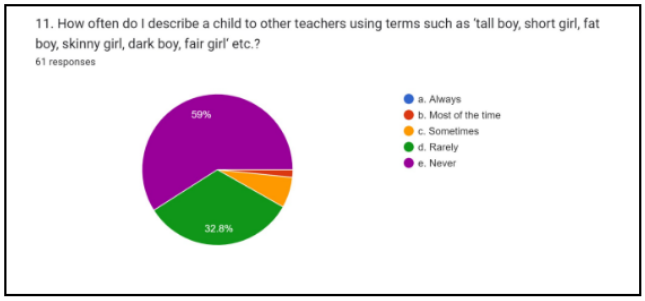

Fig-20. Linguistic bias-IV

6. The items 6,10,20,21, and 22 were concerned with favoritism. Around 22% of the respondents exhibited the presence of favoritism.

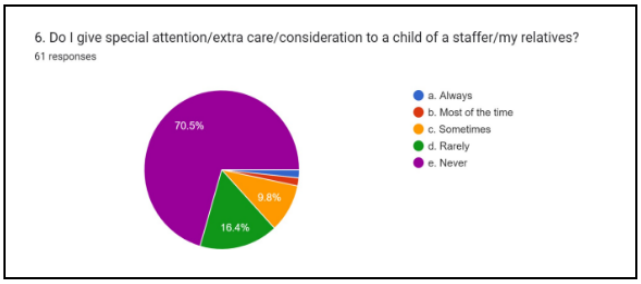

Fig-21. Favoritism-I

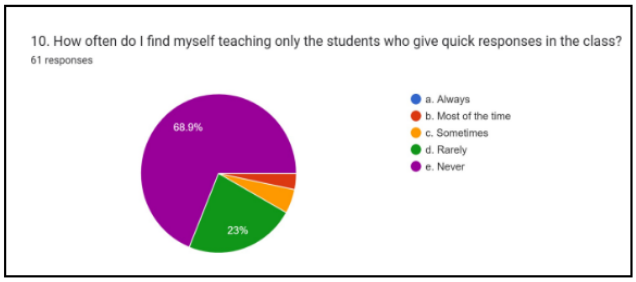

Fig-22. Favoritism-II

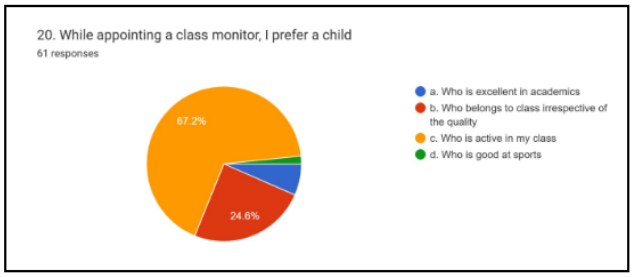

Fig-23. Favoritism-III

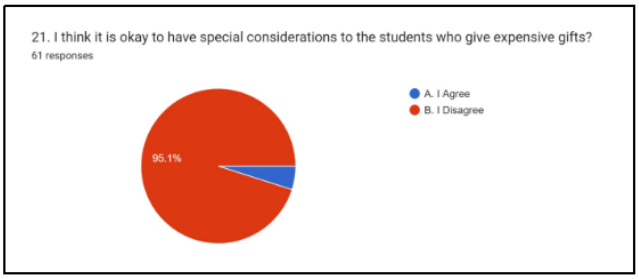

Fig-24. Favoritism-IV

Summary of Key Findings:

Linguistic bias emerged as the most prevalent form of unconscious bias (32.4%), followed closely by gender bias (32.08%), with prejudice (24.2%), favoritism (22%), discrimination (19.3%), and religious/cultural bias (12.9%) exhibiting lower prevalence among the 61 surveyed teachers. Detailed item analysis reveals specific patterns within linguistic bias: 32.8% showed bias on people-first language usage (Item 1), with 3.3% each reporting 'never/rarely' use and 26.2% using it 'sometimes'; 44.3% exhibited bias on gender-neutral pronouns (Item 3), including 14.8% 'never,' 11.5% 'rarely,' and 18% 'sometimes'; mother-tongue discouragement reached 50.9% (Item 8), with 8.2% 'always,' 14.8% 'most of the time,' and 27.9% 'sometimes'; physical attribute terms showed 8.2% bias (Item 11), with 2.2% 'most of the time' and 6% 'sometimes'; and academic performance-based terms affected 36% (Item 13), including 5.5% 'always,' 7.5% 'most of the time,' and 23% 'sometimes'. These findings align with Dee and Gershenson (2017), who documented similar patterns of implicit linguistic exclusion in diverse classrooms.

Explanations in the context of Kasaragod

In Kasaragod's multilingual environment - characterized by Malayalam, Tulu, Kannada, and Beary speakers alongside English-medium mandates - the dominance of linguistic bias reflects institutional policies that marginalize regional languages, particularly evident in the high rates of mother-tongue discouragement (50.9%). Gender bias prevalence (32.08%) stems from entrenched socio-cultural norms in semi-rural Kerala, influencing stereotypical role assignments, while lower religious/cultural bias (12.9%) may indicate relative interfaith harmony despite subtle favoritism (22%).

Implications and Recommendations:

These patterns necessitate teacher training in implicit bias recognition, emphasizing mother-tongue activities, gender-neutral language, and mixed-gender groupings to counter exclusionary practices like those detailed in Items 1, 3, 8, 11, and 13. Schools should revise English-only policies for culturally responsive pedagogy, with policymakers implementing sensitization programs to enhance diverse learners' self-confidence and equitable outcomes.

In operational terms, schools are recommended to conduct classroom and extracurricular activities using the mother tongue or regional language to strengthen inclusion and participation. Teachers should consistently adopt gender-neutral language during instruction and classroom transactions. Children should be identified by name and class rather than by physical attributes, academic performance, or physical impairments, in order to prevent labeling and stigma. Deliberate efforts should be made to avoid segregating boys and girls in academic, sports, or co-curricular settings, and classroom grouping strategies should intentionally promote mixed-gender collaboration. Educational materials should be periodically reviewed to identify and eliminate gender stereotyping and rigid role portrayals. Further, students should be encouraged to raise their voices against discriminatory practices, fostering agency, critical awareness, and democratic values within the school culture.

Limitations:

Self-reported responses may involve social desirability bias, potentially underestimating prevalence, especially with English-language items; the sample of 61 teachers limits generalizability; and focusing on six bias types overlooks others. Future research should use larger samples, mixed methods, and implicit association tests.

Final Thoughts:

To wrap up, linguistic bias emerged as the most predominant form of unconscious bias among teachers, accounting for 32.40% of all recorded biases across the six identified domains. This pattern appears to be closely linked to the widespread institutional practice in most Kasaragod schools, where English is mandated as the primary medium of communication on campus. Such policies, although intended to enhance linguistic proficiency, may unintentionally marginalize students whose linguistic identities are tied to their mother tongue or regional languages. The findings imply that teachers, perhaps unknowingly, discourage or undervalue students' native languages, resulting in subtle forms of linguistic exclusion. This reinforces the need to critically re-examine language policies in schools and encourage more balanced, culturally responsive linguistic practices.

Furthermore, the second most prominent bias identified in the study was gender bias (32.08%), which nearly parallels linguistic bias in its prevalence. This notable percentage suggests that stereotypical gender norms and traditional socio-cultural expectations prevalent in the region may continue to influence teacher perceptions and classroom interactions. The presence of such bias in an educational context is concerning because it shapes how opportunities, expectations, and classroom roles are distributed among learners. Gender bias being the second highest form of unconscious bias among the surveyed teachers should serve as an important indicator for educators and policymakers, prompting them to reflect on their own ingrained beliefs, teaching behaviors, and institutional norms. It underscores the urgent need for targeted gender-sensitization programs, reflective teaching practices, and equitable policies that promote fairness and inclusivity for all learners.

Taken together, the findings and recommendations of this study reinforce the intent of the National Education Policy 2020, underscoring the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, multilingual practices, and gender-equitable school environments that recognize diversity as a foundational strength for inclusive and holistic learning.

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