CHAPTER VI

PEER GROUP INTERACTION

The influence of peers on students’ attitudes and behaviour is deemed significant based on the belief that peers act as a significant socialising agent for students. A ‘peer group’ usually comprises of several individuals sharing the same age or sex and socio-cultural background. As defined in the Encyclopaedia of Educational research, ‘In popular usage the term “peer group” refers to a cohort of persons close in age, most often teenagers/adolescents. In research on schools the term usually indicates student cliques. Cliques form around pairs and triads of friends; these in turn coalesce into larger groupings.... Age and gender are the primary criteria of membership, but social class and ethnicity are often important features of membership.’ (The Encyclopaedia of Educational Research 1999: 5125). The peer system thus refers to interactions, relationships and group structures involving persons in a group of nearly the same developmental level. Age level is often used as an indicator for peer status. (The International Encyclopaedia of Education 1999: 4364). Researchers who have conducted studies on peer groups with regard to schooling also provide their own understanding of peer group. For instance, ‘it is a social context which is defined by the commonality and shared identification of perspectives and values by the social actors that is manifest in their mutual interaction, most of which is informal in nature’ (Furlong 1984).

Within the school, interaction between students and their peer group is an integral element required for constructing the schooling experiences of the students. At school, the development of a child’s perception about her/his social identity essentially takes place within the context of daily interaction with her/his peer group. Studying such interaction not only helps in understanding how students or pupils influence each other in negotiating their schooling experiences; it also highlights the manifestations of social relations being articulated within the school environment.

The study of peer group interaction has largely been a part of the research on student subcultures. While some have attempted to identify the
process of ‘labelling’ that isolates individual students in school (Becker 1963) or analyse the ultimate effects of ‘labelling’ in school (Meighan 1981), others have attempted to identify different models of subculture among different student groups, or division among student groups on the basis of class—some of which could be anti-school in nature (Hargreaves 1967, Lacey 1970 and Willis 1976). Yet others have looked at the basic aspects of interpersonal relations among students, their perceptions and views on schooling (Woods, 1983, Davies 1984, Fuller 1984).

This chapter attempts to explore the dimensions of peer group interaction between two groups of pupils in the five sample schools—one group comprising of children of sex-workers and the other comprising of children who do not belong to the red-light areas. The primary aspect of student-peer group interaction presented in this chapter consists of the dynamics and interrelations of ‘in-group’ peer interaction, that is, between the children of sex-workers themselves. The other aspect of student-peer group interaction focuses on the interaction between sex-workers’ children and non sex-workers’ children. The interaction between these two groups reflects the articulation of social and cultural relations between the dominant and the marginal section of the society, discussed as ‘inter-group behaviour’. Both these aspects together provide an understanding of how peer group interaction socialises a child into her/his social roles, and consequently how this leads to reproduction of the social and cultural position of the sex-workers’ children in the society.

In all the schools, students who were sex-workers’ children interacted amongst themselves as well as with other children who did not belong to the red-light areas. The nuances of interaction, however, differed significantly from school to school, and the nature of interaction depended to a great extent on the strength of sex-workers’ children in each school. For instance, the pattern of interaction between sex-workers’ children and non sex-workers’ children at HAFB or HAFG, where non sex-workers’ children form the majority of the students, is very different from St. Martin, GBFG and Matasundari School where sex-workers’ children are either a majority or equal in strength.
However, an important feature of this student-peer group interaction is that it is impossible to pinpoint regular and consistent trends or patterns in every single aspect of such interaction. It is a widely varied experience, essentially multi-layered and multi-dimensional, rich in a number of probabilities, permutations and combinations, some of which are regular, while some of which are paradoxes co-existing side by side. For instance, at one level it might be observed that the two groups of children interact comfortably during specific teaching-learning activities, while at another level there might be situations in which members of the two groups restrict themselves to forming peer groups only among their own group members. When children of sex-workers' in a classroom are less in number compared to the other children, they might seem to prefer to interact more with their own group members. Moreover, neighbourhood or locality is a vital criterion for deciding friendship for children of sex-workers.

Formation of peer groups

Interaction among children is not determined or regulated by school norms, except when teachers sometimes regulate it to continue with the teaching-learning process. There are no school rules regarding sitting arrangements in any of the schools; students are free to sit wherever they like and interact with whoever they choose to. In fact, teachers use this as punishment, to separate children sitting next to each other if they talk or fight amongst themselves. However, in schools where sex-workers' children are in a minority, they sit next to their para or neighbourhood friends.

Importance of neighbourhood as a factor determining friendship

Neighbourhood is generally an important factor in the formation of peer groups among children, but it assumes a greater degree of significance with respect to sex-workers' children. In the urban areas neighbourhood or communities form the basis of a person's socio-economic positions. Nomenclatures like 'posh locality' indicate the habitations of social elites, or 'slums' delineating the spatial boundaries of lives of those who occupy the lower socio-economic positions. Similarly, red-light areas also indicate that all
those who are associated with the sex-trade in some way or the other reside there—pimps, house-owners, shopkeepers, and the sex-workers themselves, including their children. Due to abhorrence of the sex-trade by members of the mainstream society, the nomenclature for this locality in mainstream parlance are ‘filthy areas’ or ‘dirty areas’ (nongra para in Bengali) or ‘bad areas’ (kharaap para in Bengali). The terms used to demarcate this particular locality aptly demonstrate the marginalized status of the inhabitants of these areas. Within the confines of the physical boundaries of the locality of red-light areas, this marginalized status of the sex-workers and their children get reinforced through their living experiences involving the various aspects of the sex-trade and their interaction with their mothers and all other actors involved with the practice of sex-work—the clients, the madams, the pimps, the police. A student in class II of St. John for Boys confided to the researcher:

I earn a lot of money. My mother gives me money for not disturbing her when she is working. Also, the men who come at our place, they too pay me money for buying food and drink for them.

Experiences such as these are unique to only the locality and culture of the red-light areas, and there are no points of convergence in terms of such daily experiences between the sex-workers’ children and the other students. Even when sex-workers’ children interact with members of the dominant society like the teachers and the non sex-workers’ children as part of their schooling experiences, the physical boundaries of their locality extend to represent the socio-cultural boundaries as well which confine them within their own socio-cultural identity as inhabitants of red-light areas.

The interpretations that sex-workers’ children make of their lives within the red-light areas result in the development of a self-perception that is different from other children not sharing the same social/cultural background. This phenomenon becomes more pronounced especially as a child grows older and gathers maturity. The child then becomes aware of the cultural distance between her/his home and school/teacher/friends not belonging to the same locality, the distance between her/his school experiences that are replete with the cultural experience of the larger dominant society and home experiences
that are manifestations of the marginalized culture of the community of sex-workers. Stemming from such an understanding, a sex-workers’ child usually befriends other children from the same neighbourhood.

Again, neighbourhood seems to be more important deciding factor for girls than for boys. For example, in some instances a son of a sex-worker may befriend a non sex-worker’s child, but such instances have never been witnessed among girls from red light areas. The boundaries of interaction between sex-workers’ children and non sex-workers’ children are maintained more rigidly for girls than boys. A reason for this could be the fact that for boys there are other equally (if not more) important factors for forming peer group relations as compared to neighbourhood. For instance, an inquiry into how boys choose friends revealed that physical prowess exhibited in the games of football or cricket or even while fighting seemed to be a significant deciding factor in building friendships. A student, who, in the eyes of his other classmates, is a brilliant footballer or is a fast runner, or has a reputation of never losing a fight, is invaluable friendship material. He has a high degree of visibility in class, whom almost every other boy would aspire to be friends with. This student, in turn, would befriend classmates who are his equals or at least, aspiring to be his equals in the abovementioned departments of physical ability, and thus, a peer group would be formed.

An example of this would be Shah Rukh Khan in class II of Holy Angels for Boys. Though he was a sex-worker’s child, he was extremely popular in class and had a large peer group comprising of boys from both groups. These boys were his friends because Shah Rukh was, apparently, a good footballer. Kartik, a non sex-worker’s child who was part of this peer group, told the researcher about this peer group formation:

They all know that whichever team Shah Rukh will play for would win. That is why they all want to be in his team and they all want him to be their friend. But he is my friend because we both practice in the same club, and we always play in the same team. If both of us play for a team, nobody can beat that team.
Here Shah Rukh’s friendship with Kartik is a friendship of equals as they are both good footballers and they also interact at the club where they both practice, while others are his friends because of his excellence in the football field and his superior reputation as a player. In this case peer group formation transcends the socio-cultural identity associated with the neighbourhood of a red-light area.

However, while boys can, and do, transcend the boundaries of locality-based peer group interaction due to other external factors, girls choose to maintain these boundaries and restrict themselves to the confines of these geographical and thereby socio-cultural demarcations. For girls it seems that peer groups are formed only when the group members belong to the same locality so that they share the socio-cultural identity and can relate to each other’s experiences. Their common interests are also different from boys. Therefore, girls make friendships at a personal level with intimate groups of twos or threes and home space and home environment is the focal point of conversation between girl students and their peer group. They have conversations of a personal nature e.g. individual collection of accessories, what chores one performs at home, or problems they face at home. The conversation described below between three girls from Matasundari School is just one among many such examples.

Matasundari School. Rakhi, Soma and Mumtaz of class III are conversing among themselves. They have just finished learning a geography chapter.

Rakhi: I’m feeling really hungry.

Soma: Why?

After a slight pause, she says in a low voice:

Soma: Why did you not eat before coming to school? I too had just two bits of bread and some tea before coming here. But why did you not eat anything? (emphasises the last word).

Mumtaz, who had been listening to the conversation till now, speaks.

Mumtaz: Her uncle (the client who stays with Rakhi’s mother) hit her again today.
Soma looks at Rakhi and she hangs her head.

Soma: But he did not let you eat even?

When Rakhi does not reply, she continues emphatically:

Soma: Don’t you know where the food is kept? Can’t you go and quietly eat something without anybody noticing? Even I did that today...maa (mother) kept telling me there is no food, but I knew there is...

Rakhi interrupts

Rakhi: I could not eat. He hit me and then told me to go to school, I did not want to stay and get beaten up again.

After a pause, she continues.

Rakhi: And I did look; there was nothing for me to eat.

Mumtaz: Don’t worry I have money today. We will tell didi and go to that shop on the main road and get two kachoris for you. She won’t scold if we inform her and then go.

Teacher joins the conversation at this point of time and after hearing the gist of the conversation, offers Rakhi two biscuits that she had brought from her home and gives her permission to go to the main road and get food for herself during recess.

All the three girls are familiar with each other’s home environment as they share similar home/community environment. Therefore a peer group is formed in which they share common knowledge and empathise with each other.

In-group interaction among children of sex-workers

Having described the nature of interaction across the two groups of students, viz. the sex-workers’ children and the non sex-workers’ children, it is now important to investigate the nature and extent of in-group interaction among sex-workers’ children themselves. Peer group interaction here assumes significance since the characteristics of peer group interaction are more prevalent within such in-group interaction.

Life in red-light areas revolves around the sex industry and the dynamics of the sex industry affect the socio-cultural environment of the sex workers and, also, their children. These children have homes and families that are peculiar to
the culture of the red-light areas where they learn to adhere to the shared social and cultural practices of such areas. Such sharing is apparent in the in-group behaviour among the children of sex-workers, through which they experience and live their shared identity as the marginalized members of the mainstream society.

However, despite this, children of sex-workers are by no means, a homogeneous group. There are differences among them depending on the mother’s income, the kind of home they have (whether it is a single-mother home or the mother lives in with a long-term client who is a substitute for the father or whether there are other family members in addition to the mother). Also, it depends on the extent to a child is exposed to the life in red-light areas. Some mothers try to protect their children from the influence of the locality by sending them away to tuitions or odd jobs away from home. Some prefer to keep their children under the care of a guardian somewhere in the fringe of the red-light area so that the child might not come directly in contact with the life in the red-light areas. There are others who do not resort to any of these means and whose children grow up in and around the locality of the red-light areas, primarily left on their own to fend for themselves and getting thoroughly involved into the dynamics of sex trade.

Such differences are evident in the interaction of sex-workers’ children among themselves. For instance, Sheikh Mohammad in class III of HAFB did not live within the heart of the red-light areas. His mother lived at Sonagacchi with a long-term client who was affluent and who had made arrangements for Sheikh to live in a different ‘respectable’ locality under a guardian, where his mother would visit him occasionally. Rahul, on the other hand, had been living in Sonagacchi with his sister ever since she had come into the trade. Though they did interact with each other, they did not talk about common experiences shared within the red-light areas since they did not grow up in the same environment.

In-group interaction among children of sex-workers is also marked by formation of peer groups based on gender, and this has been discussed below in greater detail.
Gender-based peer group formation

Gender plays an important role in formation of peer groups among sex-workers' children. Whenever differences in behaviour have been observed among girls and boys, it is evident that these stem from the difference in gender socialisation for the girls and the boys—both at home and at school. Researchers have pointed out that differences in gender socialisation manifest themselves in difference of treatment for girls and boys within the family and the home environment with girls having different roles to play and different duties to perform in comparison to boys (Chanana 1994). Children of sex-workers, though not socialised exactly the same way as the other children within their home environment, are not exempt from differences in gender socialisation. Different roles are assigned to boys and girls. Specifically, girls whose mothers who are already stigmatised and excommunicated, try to add boundaries to the physical and social movements of their daughters in order to prevent them from entering the trade and be stigmatised in turn. Consequently, sometimes these girls have a number of social and physical boundaries and restrictions imposed upon them that are far more inflexible in comparison to boys. Among the five selected sample schools, three schools were co-educational yet girls and boys seemed to gravitate separately towards their peer groups formed solely on the basis of gender.

It is not that mutual conversation and activities in school during or before/after classroom hours are completely absent between boys and girls, but such interaction is neither regular nor frequent. Peer group interaction and activities are almost always restricted to the same gender. Several of these friendships originate in the locality or para (even before schooling experiences start), and it is common that boys play with boys and girls with other girls.

Besides, in red-light areas, sexual exploitation, abuse and violence of the women are also part of everyday life. Therefore mothers tend to be over protective about their daughters. The extent of protection is highlighted by what Rupali, a student in class II from Matasundari school has to say:

My mother does not let anybody else come to drop me to school but herself. She is— (after a pause) she gets very angry if I talk
to anyone on my way to school, she beats me if she comes to know that I have stopped anywhere on my way to school or back to school. I come and go back with Binita and Gouri (her friends). They are also very afraid of my mother.

Here, 'anyone' would also include boys from the same locality, as mothers do not encourage their daughters to make friendship with boys. Instances when boys and girls come to school together is when they are siblings, studying in the same school. A different situation was observed in GBFG where one particular group in class III comprising of both boys and girls from the red-light area of Rambagan arrived and left school together, but during school hours, girls interacted mostly with their girlfriends while boys interacted with other boys.

The concern of the mothers about their daughters’ safety is not the only reason for them to encourage gender-based friendships. Sex-workers understandably are mostly reluctant when it comes to their daughters joining the profession. The fact that their daughter may join the industry as a sex-worker is often a matter of grave concern for them, and the one possible way in which they can prevent this is to marry her off, preferably at an early age, to a ‘respectable’ family, because it is only as part of such a family that the daughter would be free of the environment of the red-light area. The daughters of sex workers are, therefore, brought up with constant reminders of such marriages. Another reason why friendships with boys are not encouraged by the mothers is to protect their daughters’ sexuality.

It is not as if daughters are not aware of the prospect of their early marriage and the reason for their being restricted to friendships with only girls. Marriage and its possible consequences are discussed among girls even in classes II or III and the importance of gender-based friendship is also internalised by the girls. At this point, it might be pertinent to provide an example from class III of St. Martin, a co-educational school in which boys outnumber girls. A group of girls who were sex-workers’ daughters—Seema, Lakhsmi and Chhaya had formed a clique. They were the only three girls in the class, and they maintained a distance from the boys of the class, barely speaking to them unless the occasion demanded, for instance, when they did not
understand something that the teacher had said. In one instance while having a conversation with the researcher about their studies, Lakhsmi said:

My mother will not let me go to coaching classes, she wants ‘sir’ to teach me at home. She does not want me to go to ‘Dhalu’ sir’s coaching where all those boys go.

When Chhaya mentioned that she was, at that point, attending a coaching centre every evening, and her mother did not object to it, Lakhsmi pointed out that Chhaya’s elder brother who also studies in the same coaching, accompanied her.

What emerges from this piece of conversation is that all the girls were familiar about their mother’s concerns, and at least some of the reasons for their gender-based friendships (in their neighbourhood or at school) are extensions of the message that they receive from their mothers regarding not making friends with the opposite sex. However, these are not the only reasons for girls befriending girls. Friendships among girls are also reinforced because they share similar interests—as mentioned earlier, clothes, junk jewellery, etc.

Unlike daughters, sons are not as protected or restricted in their movements as the daughters are. In fact, when comparing between sons and daughters, what is observed is that restrictions imposed on daughters increase with the increase in age while for sons it is the opposite—restrictions decrease with increase in age. For instance, it has been observed across all schools that younger boys (in classes I and II) are accompanied by their mothers or their guardians while coming to school, while boys in classes III or IV arrive or return from school usually with friends, and several times, even alone.

Despite lack of restrictions, it has been observed that even boys form peer groups on the basis of gender due to similar interest and activities. Cricket or football and sports such as running long distances and cycling are gender-oriented activities that boys participate in and girls do not. Again, display of physical prowess through rough behaviour in class is also not a peer group activity that girls indulge in. In fact, sometimes there are is evidence of

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1 A coaching-centre in the vicinity.
altercations between girls and boys when boys tend to display physical superiority. One instance from class III, GBFG is evidence of this:

_Bengali period in class III._ There are only a few minutes left for the period to get over. Teacher is absent from class and children are waiting for the bell to ring for recess. Swaroop, Abhijeet, Shiba and Appu are playing amongst themselves, in the last but one bench. Sitting one bench ahead of them are Kali, Debjani, Rinku and Dalia.

Abhijeet: (trying to twist Swaroop’s wrist) Won’t take more than five minutes... just watch...

Swaroop, trying to distract Abhijeet, hits him on his head with his free hand. Immediately, a ferocious fight ensues, with Abhijeet and Swaroop rolling off from the bench and fighting on the ground. Shiba and Appu wait eagerly to watch who is the winner. Suddenly, Kali turns around and shouts

Kali: Didi is here!

There is a momentary pause in the fight, and Kali takes this opportunity

Kali: Can you boys do anything else apart from fighting?

_Debjani and Rinku join her_

Debjani: Yes, my head starts hurting whenever I sit here. They do nothing but fight all day.

Rinku: Let _didi_ come and hit them with the ruler, they will not learn their lesson otherwise.

Abhijeet: (panting from his position on the ground) Let her hit, it does not hurt at all. I do not feel anything.

The girls turn back to the boys with disgusted looks, and the boys continue with the fight till the bell rings.

In the subsequent sections, more detailed accounts have been provided about peer group activities among sons and daughters of sex-workers, based on the observation of classroom incidents.
Peer group activities among boys

As mentioned above, peer group activities among boys mostly revolve around plenty of physical activity. Added to this is also a tendency to break school rules and indulging in a nonconformist behaviour, pertaining specifically to language choice. In all the schools, boys have been observed as more noisy and aggressive than the girls. In addition, there is a tendency of distracting fellow members of peer groups. Even in HAFB where discipline and code of conduct are rigid, a large number of these boys tend to try and take advantage of situations when they can cross the rules. In schools like St. Martin or GBFG where the frameworks of discipline and school codes are comparatively loosely structured, these instances are more frequent.

For example, during the morning ‘prarthana’ or assembly at HAFB, peer groups, especially among the older boys in classes III and IV, tended not to stand in rigid queues and maintain silence till the prayer song was over. They got distracted easily, and also distracted their other peer group members, leading to creation of disturbance in the assembly. Some boys are leaders who somehow instigate other group members to break rules, while others collectively follow the leader’s behaviour and share the behaviour of rule breaking.

A example of such leadership was observed in class III of GBFG, where there was a peer group collectively responsible for several such incidents of slightly infringing over the rules, or sometimes, directly breaking school rules. The group comprised of three boys, Somnath, Chandan and Rakesh. However, it was Somnath who essentially assumed the roles of a leader, initiating the act of rule-breaking, especially when the school rules demanded peace and quiet, like the morning assembly, or in classroom teaching-learning situations. Somnath led by attempting to distract Chandan and Rakesh so that they would retaliate and a commotion would be created subsequently.

In the process of displaying such collective rule breaking behaviour, sons of sex-workers tend to get marked by teachers as ‘naughty’ (dushtu) or ‘bad’ (badmaash), and sometimes, as incorrigible students who are ‘beyond all
hope'; especially the leaders who are conspicuous due to the mischief created by them in class. Such labelling isolates them from the rest of the class and results in further distancing between them and their other classmates.

Several incidents of breaking school rules stem from an urge among boys to test their strength vis-à-vis their peer group members. The importance of fights and winning in fights is extremely important for them, even at the cost of breaking of school rules and sometimes committing mischief that are extremely serious in nature. In class III of GBFG, Swaroop and Abhijeet, two friends who fought almost everyday under some pretext or other the in order to gauge who is stronger, were once so engrossed in fighting amongst themselves that in the process, they ended up seriously injuring another girl, Srabani, since Swaroop had hurled a pen at Abhijeet which hit Srabani in the eye. However, even after such mishaps and being repeatedly punished by teachers, peer group members still tended to be preoccupied with proving their bodily strength to each other through physical fights.

Within the classroom, boys from red-light areas discuss incidents from their neighbourhood, some of which are peculiar only to these areas. For instance, a characteristic feature of the red-light areas is that there are numerous small-scale religious festivals for minor deities that go on throughout the year, and the entire community, including the children, take part in these celebrations. The nature of these celebrations, however, is far from religious in nature, as is evidenced by what Shiba from class III in Gyan Bharti for Girls had to tell the researcher:

You know didi, in our para during Shivratri (a religious festival), we have decks (amplifiers) playing music throughout the night, we all smoke ganja and dance like mad people (ganja kheye pagla hoye nacchi).

Shiba’s experience is not only his, but is common to for all those boys in his class who belong to the same red-light area (evident from his use of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’), and at the same time, it is specific to these set of boys. The particular manner in which Shivratri is celebrated by these boys in their para, in which factors like blaring of music and smoking of ganja seem to be the religious manifestations of the festival rather than any form of worship,
provides an insight into the nature of the environment of the red-light area that
the boys share, and that which they also bring to school as part of their life
experiences. Facets of experiences such as these that are shared by all boys
who live and grow up in this environment mark the peer group interaction
among them as their collective consciousness. Sharing of such collective
consciousness again leads to their isolation from the students and reflects in
their in-group interaction.

Other shared cultural attributes among the boys belonging to red-light
areas include language and the various aspects of sex-trade that these children
learn. The typical language of the red-light areas loaded with sexual innuendos
mark the conversation of the boys—sometimes, usage of such language happens
outside classroom situations, out of the earshot of teachers and other classmates.
Students, however, also use profanities within the classroom, at times. The
imbibing of the language of the red-light areas is common to even younger
children in classes I and II who may at times not even know the exact meanings
of these words. Likewise the children are also exposed to the activities that are
part of the sex trade, and these also form part of their shared consciousness.
The extent to which children learn these depends on the amount of close watch
their mothers/guardians keep on them. However, living within the environment
of red-light areas, it is impossible to be totally immune to these effects. These
experiences are also shared among peer groups, and sometimes they are
reflected in the in-group interaction of the boys. A statement to this effect from
a teacher of St. Martin has been recorded:

The children see a lot of things around the area where they
belong—you know, things that they should not be exposed to—
sometimes, probably even without understanding, they try to
apply whatever they see, here at school.

Peer group activity among girls

In all the schools, peer group interaction among girls who are sex-
workers' children have been marked more by conversations. There have been
instances when girls were extremely noisy, physically active and mischievous,
but such examples are rare. In class IV of Holy Angel for Girls, for instance,
there was one such girl, Babita, whom teachers had marked as incorrigible,
since she could not be controlled or restricted by any of the applicable school rules. Even severe punishments failed to control her 'wild' manners (as put forth by her teachers). She used to start the process of mischief on several occasions, picked up fights with other girls at the smallest possible opportunity, and talked incessantly in class. However, such instances were not observed in other schools, and it also needs to be mentioned at this point that Babita was not a member of any peer group; she operated on her own.

Girls indulge in small-scale bickering and quarrel in comparison to the open fights of boys, and the reasons for such quarrels are very different from that of the boys' fights. There are instances when mischief is perpetrated in the class and like boys here too, leaders initiate the process. However, what is important is that the scale of mischief is comparatively smaller—girls tend to be more inclined to conform to school rules. Most importantly, in instances of breaking of school rules, the primary tendency is to do so without the teacher's knowledge in order to avoid overt rule breaking. An example of this has been provided subsequently.

*English period in class III of HAFG. Teacher is teaching short spellings of words on the board. Shilpi and Rekha, sitting on the penultimate bench, are busy admiring each other's collection of postcards with pictures of movie stars. Pooja and Reema, their two friends, are sitting on the bench before them.*

Pooja: *(whispers to Shilpi)*: Pass them on after you have finished.

Shilpi looks furtively at the teacher and then slips a hand under her desk to pass on the pictures. Ashwini, another girl sharing the bench with Shilpi and Rekha, notices what they are doing.

Ashwini: Pass on here, too.

Rekha looks at her without saying anything, then turns towards Shilpi and whispers urgently

Rekha: ei, hide, hide them now, we will take them out later, others are watching—we'll watch them during recess.

*The message is passed on to Pooja and Reema, and with low giggles, the girls busy themselves in putting the pictures back into their school bags.*
Here, the girls do not follow the norm of paying undivided attention to the teacher in class, but the act of breaching a norm is not done openly. Care is taken to remain unobserved and unobtrusive, so that the teacher remains ignorant.

As mentioned previously, considerable amount of conversation among girls revolves around dress and jewellery. The girls save whatever pocket money they can and buy cheap, junk jewellery with it. Most of the time, they talk about these in class, and sometimes they also bring them to school to show off to their friends. Even though teachers punish the girls for bringing jewellery to school and threaten to confiscate them, yet this does not put a stop to the occasional showing-off of accessories.

Among the daughters of sex-workers, marriage and its consequences is a topic that is not much discussed, but if and when it is discussed, it becomes clear that the girls share identical approaches towards marriage and its possible consequences. The girls, for instance, are aware that several of them would be married early, and they also have their own explanations for such early marriages. Further, they are also aware of the implications of early marriage upon education. A conversation that the researcher had with a number of girls in HAFG has been described next that aptly illustrates all of the above.

*Recess in HAFG. Jharna, Sarbani and Sona are sitting around the researcher, involving her in their conversation. At one point, Jharna asks the researcher:*

Jharna: *Didi*, which class are you reading in now?

Researcher explains to her the meaning of research and her topic of research. Then Sarbani asks

Sarbani: *Didi*, how long have you been studying now, before you started your research?

Researcher: Twenty-two years.

Sona (*in utter disbelief*): Twenty-two years! Such a long time!

Sarbani: *Didi*, your parents do not want to marry you off?

Jharna (*to Sarbani*): Yes, if her parents were to marry her off she would not have been able to study for so long.
Researcher tells them that her parents think that research is more important, at which Sona says

Sona: My mother would never ever say that. She wants me to be married off very soon.

Sarbani: Yes, right, my mother will never let me study for twenty-two years. She will say, what’s the use? If you get married, you will be taken care of all your life, so get married. A friend of mine will get married next month.

Jharna: Yes, my mother does not want me to work—

At this point, there is a small, uncertain pause, after which Sarbani resumes

Sarbani: I would rather study and work. What harm is there if you work? You get money for it, right? And I can get married also, after that.

Sona (laughing): Yes, for getting work, you will have to study for the next twenty-two years.

Jharna: Getting married is not bad, it is important (she stresses on the word 'dorkaar'—Bengali for 'important'), very important. Everyone has to get married.

Sarbani: Yes, that is true. Anyway, my mother will not let me study for very long, so—

Sona interrupts her

Sona: Do you want to? I will not be able to study for twenty-two years, I would rather get married soon, very soon, I cannot study so much.

Her friends start laughing at the manner in which she says this. The conversation then turns to how Sona never managed to score high in her exams.

The interaction that girls have with their peer groups help to reveal how girls tend to add on aspects of their home experiences to their school experiences and how a composite understanding and sharing of home and school experiences shape the formation of the collective consciousness of peer group members.
Inter-group behaviour between sex-workers' children and non sex-workers' children

Though sex-workers' children and non sex-workers' children belong to different cliques different from each other, yet the boundaries between these groups are not so rigid as to prevent any sort of interaction whatsoever. On the contrary, there are several situations that occur during the day. Such interaction stems from those common areas of student experience that all children undergo as part of mainstream schooling. These include: ‘Oh, I forgot to bring my exercise book, do you have a spare?’ ‘Which are the questions we need to solve now?’ or ‘Why are you asking him, can’t you write on your own? Didi is looking at you’ etc. The learning and internalising process of school knowledge is the common ground that provides for most of the interaction between the sex-workers' children and the other students. Knowledge building or sharing of learning, therefore, is an activity in course of which there is interaction between students across the two groups in some occasions. Pollard (1984) in his comparative study of infant school classrooms described similar situations in his classrooms where “a few key children on each table actually did the work and these ‘answers’ then flowed through friendship groups in a ‘ripple effect’ for knowledge” (Pollard 1984: 38). Two instances have been provided from two of the schools, which demonstrate how children collaborate amongst themselves to produce the correct answers to a given problem.

1. In class III of HAFG, the teacher has given three questions from a history chapter to be answered as a written assignment. Neelam, Sulagna, Shanti and Maya, sitting at the last but one bench are doing their assignment. In the group, Neelam and Shanti hail from the red-light areas.

Neelam: Maya do you know the answer to the third one?

Shanti: Yes, “ancient man used flint stones to light fires”.

Neelam: No, Maya do we not have to write how man discovered fire?

Sulagna: Let us finish writing first, then we will tell you.

Maya: “Ancient man discovered that certain stones emit sparks of fire when rubbed together. With the help of these stones, he
was soon able to start a fire. This is how man discovered fire”
(The answer was memorised from the textbook and exactly reproduced)

Sulagna: Now you know the answer, so let us write.

Shanti: I have already written... I am going to didi to show her.

She gets up from her seat while others busy themselves in finishing their assignment.

2. In class IV of Matasundari School, boys and girls are trying to solve an arithmetic problem in class, after repeated instructions from the teacher to work individually. Soma and Rakhi are sitting next to each other, Deepak is diagonally behind them and Nilesh is sitting on a separate bench. Except for Deepak, all others are children of sex-workers.

After five minutes of quiet, individual attempts, Rakhi turns to Soma and looks at her notebook.

Rakhi (whispers to Soma): What is your answer?

Soma does not reply. Rakhi looks at her own notebook and says

Rakhi: My answer is thousand two hundred seventy eight.

Soma does not look up from her work but whispers back

Soma: Yes, even mine.

Nilesh (complaining loudly to the teacher): Didi the girls are talking.

Teacher scolds the girls and they stop talking. Immediately after this, Nilesh bends towards Rakhi and asks in a low voice:

Nilesh: I have finished my sum, have you?

Both girls laugh.

Rakhi: Now who is talking?

Soma: Why don’t you tell him the answer?

Rakhi: Why should I? He has not done the sum, I know...

Nilesh: I have....here, look.
He moves, but makes no attempt to show his exercise book to the girls and they do not pay any attention to him; suddenly Deepak speaks:

Deepak: Thousand two hundred and seventy eight, right?

*Both girls nod in agreement. Rakhi turns towards him, looks at his work and says*

Rakhi: Here, you have forgotten to add twenty-four and forty-one here.

Deepak: I have added it up mentally, I have just not written it down.

*Soma (with a giggle): What if didi gives you marks mentally and does not write it down?*

*Deepak joins in the laughter that ensues, and Nilesh complains loudly again, at which the teacher tells all of them to hand in their notebook.*

The two instances illustrate that knowledge building and knowledge processing is an interactive peer group phenomenon in which both groups of children participate. Since learning is a process that continues throughout the day, such instances of interaction continue happening throughout the day. What needs to be noted, however, is that such interactions do not necessarily lead to the formation of peer groups. The elements of sharing and commonality—not only of information, but also of beliefs, behavioural patterns and socio-cultural expressions—do not exist in such interaction.

There are also other instances when interaction between sex-workers' children and the others lead to a reiteration of their marginalized and stigmatised status. In such instances, the non sex-workers children might be hailing from families with similar economic resources as the sex-workers' children, yet they identify themselves as being different from them. In some cases, they are also termed by non sex-workers' children as those who inhabit 'filthy' neighbourhoods. Such awareness is another aspect of student-peer group interaction that leads to marginalisation of children of sex-workers.

Two instances have been described below in which such interaction between these two groups have reinforced the marginalized social position of
the children of sex-workers. The nature of conversation and the pattern of interaction in each case are starkly in contrast, yet the end result of each interaction is the same—a re-emphasis on the fact that children of sex-workers are the members of a marginalized community—even when they are a part of mainstream social processes like schooling. The first interaction scenario has been noted in class III, GBFG, in which the researcher was merely an observer. The second instance has been recorded in class IV of Holy Angel for Boys, during which the researcher was also part of the interaction, though not directly participating in the conversation.

1. Mathematics period in class III of GBFG. A heated argument is going on between Mangal, Bittu and Rinku. Rinku is a sex-worker's child, living in the red-light area of Rambagan. The others, though not belonging to that area, stay in the vicinity.

Rinku: It is true, I am telling you.

Mangal: You are always lying.

Rinku: Even you lie always.

Mangal (brushing off Rinku's allegation): where have you leant to lie like this?

Rinku suddenly becomes flustered and at the same time, angry.

Rinku: I am not like you; do you think I am taught to lie at my home like you are?

Mangal (somewhat aggressively): You are the one who is taught to lie at home. You belong to a filthy locality (nongra para), that is why you have been taught to lie about everything here at school.

Rinku has a stunned expression on her face and is quiet for a minute. However, she recovers immediately.

Rinku: I may belong there, and what about you? Do you belong to a very sophisticated locality (bhodropara) yourself? I may belong to that area, but at least I do well in my studies. I am not like you, failing twice in the same class.

At the mention of his academic performance, Mangal stops talking to Rinku and turns way from her.
2. Art period in class IV of HAFB. Rohit and Probeer are talking with the researcher. Probeer is a sex-worker’s child. The researcher is examining some paintings by Probeer who his friends claim is a very good painter. The researcher praises Probeer’s painting skills after having looked at his work, and asks him if he takes drawing lessons. In his eagerness, Rohit speaks up before his friend.

Rohit: Didi, you know, the house where he lives....

At this point suddenly Pronoy almost yells

Pronoy: Hey, shut up! (Ei, chup!)

However, Rohit has already completed his sentence

Rohit: ...the house is at Jorabagan.

Pronoy: Ei, stupid! Is his house at Jorabagan? (To the researcher) My house is at Jorabagan, didi.

Rohit: Oh yes, sorry, Pronoy’s house is at Jorabagan.

Now Probeer speaks up

Probeer: You know didi, I live with a deeda (granny), and she tells me, ‘what would you do sitting all by yourself, it is best you draw....that is how I learnt to draw’.

The two examples of interaction bring out the two ends of the spectrum of the communication process between the sex-workers’ children and the non sex-workers’ children at school. In the first instance, Mangal is not only aware of Rinku’s social position and the locality she comes from, but he also reveals this identity to the rest of the class and to the researcher who is an outsider. His manner of communicating his message to Rinku is extremely forthright; he visibly hurls it at her face, communicating to her his distrust since she belongs to the red light area. Two things are thus highlighted in this interaction; firstly, Mangal’s knowledge about Rinku’s true identity, secondly, Mangal’s distrust of Rinku stemming from his perception that Rinku is taught to lie at home. In stating this he at once connects her social position to her requirement of resorting to falseness. The culmination of this interaction is Mangal’s emphasis on Rinku’s marginalized social position and the instability/insecurity of her identity within the mainstream institution of schooling. Therefore, in this interaction, Rinku’s identity as a sex-worker’s child is reproduced within the
dominant process of schooling by Mangal, who himself belongs to the group of non sex-workers’ children.

In the second instance, the interaction between Pronoy and Rohit displays the fact that Pronoy is aware of where Probeer lives. However, he forbids Rohit to speak of it and attempts to conceal the information from the researcher, who is an outsider. A possible reason for this could be that Pronoy believes the researcher does not know about Probeer living in the red-light area, and he does not want Rohit to divulge any information about this to the researcher. He does not display his awareness of Probeer’s identity to anybody in the class; on the contrary, he attempts to protect this from everyone else. However, in the process, what is being communicated is Pronoy’s perception of Probeer, which constitutes a reiteration of Probeer’s marginalized social status. The fact that Pronoy tries to keep Probeer’s home information confidential focuses on his understanding of Probeer as someone whose identity has to be hidden from outsiders. Thus, Probeer’s marginalized social position as a sex-worker’s child is reproduced through classroom interaction with Pronoy who is a non sex-worker’s child. What is interesting in this piece of interaction, however, is that though Pronoy attempts to silence Rohit when he speaks about Probeer’s home, he does not interrupt when Probeer himself is speaking about his home environment to the researcher.

The reaction of the two children of sex-workers is also noteworthy in the abovementioned instances. In both instances, the children seem to be confirming their marginalized status. In the first instance, Rinku openly admits that she belongs to the red light area and also asserts that her being a sex-worker’s child does not stop her from progressing academically in contrast to Mangal, who is not a sex-worker’s child. In the second case, Probeer, in course of speaking with the researcher, is willing to reveal to her that he stays with someone who is not his parent, not even his relative but rather, a guardian (he says ‘aami ekta deeda-r kacche thaki’). The fact that he knows that his home environment does not consist of a conventional ‘family’ is an aspect of his self-perception who knows that he is different in this respect from his other classmates.
Therefore, interaction of sex-worker's children with non sex-workers' children as part of their schooling experience highlights the social inequality between these two groups.

**Conclusion**

The chapter provides a description of the nature of peer group interaction that has been observed in the schools. The focus of the study has been on the in-group interaction that children of sex workers children have amongst themselves, as well as the inter-group interaction that takes place across the two groups of children, namely, the sex-workers' children and the non sex-workers’ children. As children belonging to the same marginalized community, sex-workers’ children have certain socio-cultural experiences that are shared and mark their peer group interactions. However, depending upon the difference in their home environment, there are differences among these children themselves, which is brought forth in their interaction. Also, friendships among them are also highly gendered, and there are differences in the manner girls and boys interact within their respective peer groups. Thus, peer group interaction within sex-workers’ children have areas of common experiences and areas of differences. The manner in which life experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and language—the various indicators of socio-cultural consciousness—are shared among sex-workers’ children through peer group interaction has been elaborated upon, and also the differences in such indicators have been described.

The inter-group interaction between sex-worker's children and other children highlights the dynamics within the social relations among the actors, namely, the sex-workers’ children and their peer group. The boundaries are transcended during classroom work when the children have discussions regarding their assignments. Also, common interests like sports result in interaction between the two groups of children. Also, there are other instances when non sex-workers’ children are friends due to factors such as going to the same coaching class, or playing at the same club.
What emerges from their interaction is that other children understand the difference between them and the sex-workers' children, and through their interactions, the marginalized position of sex-worker's children is reinforced. The dynamics of these two kinds of student interaction, namely, in-group interaction among sex-workers' children themselves, and inter-group interaction between sex-workers' children and non sex-workers' children, has been examined to develop an understanding regarding the interpersonal relationship between the students and the manner in which such interpersonal relations reinforce the process of cultural reproduction through schooling.