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Gender Disparity from School Structure to Classroom Materials:

A Critical Overview

Sanae ACHAG*Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Faculty of Humanities, Fez, Morocco.*sanae93achag@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article aims to scope gender disparity in various educational settings. It unveils gender gaps in schools, including gender in the workforce, the performance of teachers and students in classrooms, teachers' practices, and gender representations in curriculum and hidden curriculum. Drawing from prior and recent literature reviews, the findings exhibit that gender stereotypes and disparities are still produced and shaped until the present time. Gender disparities in both academic and non-academic contexts remain noticeable at different levels. Typical gender roles are reinforced through the low ratio of women's participation in school leadership positions. Teachers' stereotypical practices, ideologies, methods, and classroom materials may negatively affect and alter students' gender assumptions and thoughts, which increasingly deepens gender gaps. Therefore, the efforts and initiatives to diminish these gender gaps are still insufficient with the scarcity of serious radical changes in international educational policies and reforms.

Keywords : gender disparities, gender gaps, gender stereotypes, schools.

INTRODUCTION

Gender has been a vexing issue in the past decades worldwide. Several countries have become obsessed with the idea of achieving gender equality in all aspects of education. Nevertheless, gender disparities are still recorded in terms of gender imbalance in the teaching staff, students' and teachers' performance in classrooms, teachers' beliefs and methods, and gender representations in educational materials. This is a consequence of gender discriminatory regulations and the scarcity of gender sensitivity and responsiveness among policy-makers and school staffs. In this vein, the current article sets out to deliver a detailed clarification of gender disparities in education from school structure to teaching and learning materials builds on a plethora of studies to find out whether gender stereotypes are apparent up to this point, and provides some recommendations to reconsider gender equality standards in educational materials and practices and rectify gender bias.

1. HIERARCHY IN SCHOOL STAFF

In many countries around the world, women mainly perform teaching in schools. According to a report carried out by OECD (2016), the proportion of female teachers in secondary education in OECD countries reached 68%, whereas the ratio made up only 45% in managerial posts. In the United Kingdom, the ratio of female secondary school principals was 38% in 2018 out of 66% of the total percentage of female teachers. On the contrary, 33% of female principals was recorded in 2019 out of 64% of the teaching force in the United States, as declared by The Department for Education and Skills, and The American Department of Education (qtd. in Martinez, 2021). Therefore, the proportion of male educators, particularly in primary grades is still pretty small because they are extremely portrayed in administrative, decision-making, and leadership positions in the educational system (Lynch & Feeley, 2009). Certainly, men in all educational sectors are promoted more than women to senior positions namely, deans or vice deans of universities, high school directors and executives, and heads of departments, unlike women who are still under-represented in authoritative posts. In case women receive a promotion, they usually occupy administrative roles in lower grades of education including preschools, elementary schools, and high schools (Racah & Ayalon, 2002). Likewise, Davis et al. (2017) emphasized that men are more likely to be promoted to leadership positions than women proposing that entering principalship in schools is usually based on race and gender discrimination. As important, Gabaldon et al. (2016) examined the reasons behind the gender gap in educational administration by highlighting two major perspectives. The first one is the demand side perspective, which is embodied in the whole organizational structure of educational institutions that serves men at the expense of women. Further, the second perspective is the supply side that is associated with the personal level, which indicates that women are primarily engaged in family responsibilities and considered less qualified, self-efficient, and self-confident due to the gender differences in attitudes, values, and gender roles expectations. In other words, the educational sphere is also gendered, and teaching primary grades has feminine characteristics as it is related to the roles society determines for women involving support, care, and guidance, and this is seen as an outcome of gender stereotyping in societies. Additionally, women's invisibility in senior positions generates more gender disparities among principals as it affects their positions and rules in school and thus, creating an imbalanced environment, where women receive no motivation and encouragement to engage in management posts (Martinez, 2021). Consequently, men are over-represented in administrative posts in society which makes them capable to fill decision-making positions in school since they are already seen as leaders. Overall, these are vigorous and cryptic messages about

gender in educational systems. It is true that the percentage of women's participation had increased over the years; however, it remains low as compared to men. This latter is just a result of the dominant gender norms and values in the educational system, where females are extremely introduced to positions that support their low status in society, while males concentrate on upper and economically-satisfying posts that have great effect on policies and decision-making.

2. GENDER PERFORMANCE IN CLASSROOMS

Teachers are regarded as the key element in the school system since the quality of education is extremely based on the efficiency of the instructional staff. The way teachers perform in classrooms usually depends on their attitudes and commitment to this occupation. Remarkably, numerous international research on commitment to teaching and job satisfaction demonstrated that this latter differs from one gender to another (Farrukh & Shakoor, 2018). For instance, a study carried out by Moses et al. (2016) displayed that female teachers show gratification as well as positive intentions for teaching more often than male teachers. Accordingly, as long as teaching is considered feminine, then typically women are the ones who are more committed and satisfied with this occupation compared to men. However, gender is not always a determinant to measure commitment to teaching according to a survey performed by Watt and Richardson (2012) in Australia. These scholars discovered that gender is not a significant element for commitment to remain or leave the teaching sphere, but other factors also play a prominent role in this matter such as salary and social status. Above that, teachers' gender and performance in classrooms have been debated over decades. Indeed, the question of who is better, a male or female educator has been raised by researchers to figure out whether there is a difference between teachers in terms of competence, efficacy, or teaching methods (Drudy et al., 2005). In this context, many teachers and educationists assumed that females are better as educators due to their great experience in care and counseling (El-Emadi et al., 2019). Following a study on early childhood educators, Xu and Waniganayake (2017) showed that males and females have different instructional methods since male educators "adopted a more flexible and open style whilst female teachers employed a more reserved and disciplined approach" (P.527). Moreover, studies regarding educators' perceptions of children's play have also been reported. Wu (2023) displayed that males usually take part in children's activities and games because, for them, this technique is effective to observe and comprehend a child's experience. Whereas females believe that participating in children's play just limits their experience, and make them feel stressed and uncomfortable. Together with teachers, students also play a prominent and active role

in the teaching- learning process. In recent years, students' performance and achievement have been discussed by educationists in parallel with teachers' gender to investigate whether they are connected or not. It was observed that owing to the feminization of teaching as well as the absence of male teachers, notably in early childhood and primary education, boys' academic attainment had been influenced more than girls' which led some scholars to call for more male graduates to serve as role models in school life (Winkelmann, 2012). Within the same framework, in Hwang and Fitzpatrick's (2021) research on student-teacher gender matching and academic achievement, findings appeared that in elementary and middle grades females showed high scores in mathematics and English language arts in comparison to male students. Hence, being taught by teachers from the same-gender affect positively girls' performance. However, Antecol et al. (2015) noted that having a female educator reduced girls' achievement in scientific subjects like math. On the other hand, Puhani (2018) in his study of some German, British, and Canadian primary schools demonstrated that having an educator from the same gender has no significant impact on students' learning and achievement. Equally important, some studies proved that boys perform better in STEM subjects including mathematics, physics, and sciences while girls outperform in other subjects such as languages (Chaochao et al., 2020). However, other surveys exposed that female students do not outperform boys only in reading but also in mathematics and sciences. This signifies the high number of women enrolled in engineering and IT (Santos & Santos, 2020).

3. TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Teachers' attitudes as well as ideologies, whether apparent or cryptic, often affect students' ideas, expectations, and learning results (De Kraker-Pauw et al., 2016). Gender is one of the fields, where this impact has been noticed. Teachers' beliefs about gender involve the distinct features and attributes that are connected with being a male or a female student. To illustrate, teachers' gender perceptions of boys being better than girls at mathematics still exist and some teachers still guide their students to choose particular streams of study in reliance on their gender even though male and female outcomes are frequently equal (De Kraker-Pauw et al., 2016). As a result, these gender perceptions directly influence teachers' practices in the classroom. In fact, any practice teachers do in the classroom including activities, and games in addition to materials and methods they follow in the teaching-learning process affect students' thoughts, actions, and emotions. In light of this, a number of reviews found that Chinese and American teachers take part in what is called gender labeling, which comprises stereotypes, characteristics, and roles that mark someone's gender. These teachers use certain gendered terms such as boys and girls, or males and females to

address students (Chen & Rao, 2010). According to schema theory, this gender labeling helps in the first place in perpetuating gender stereotypes as well as in promoting gender discrepancy among students. Preliminarily, the outcomes of a survey done by Hilliard and Liben (2010) demonstrated that teachers who regularly employ gender labeling to differentiate between students automatically enhance gender prejudices and lower the chances of students in engaging with their mates from the opposite gender. This includes grouping them depending on their gender, choosing for them gender-typed sports, or any other activity. Further, some teachers still split up the content of the board by gender, organize children's lines by gender, utilize discriminatory language such as 'buddy and tough guy' for boys and 'sweetie and princess' for girls, and create intolerance towards the opposite gender more than stimulating team spirit. Beyond that, other educators may also boost gender-bending behaviors by encouraging girls who show a preference for masculine activities and boys who favor feminine activities (Chick et al., 2002). On the bright side, another study carried out by Santos and Santos (2020) on some college educators displayed that there is gender awareness and gender equality in the practices these educators do in the classrooms. They motivated students to engage in the same activities and games, spread gender awareness among students regarding gender differences and roles, treated students equally, they corrected students' typical gender behaviors, encouraged girls to enter masculine-dominated professions such as engineering, or architecture, and use gender-neutral materials and activities.

4. GENDER IN CURRICULUM

Choosing teaching materials has always been very crucial as long as students learn from them. Accordingly, gender stereotypes and typical gender roles in the curriculum have been argued to be acquired by students because "gender models in textbooks may be so suggestive that they gradually shape the way students perceive the surrounding world, which strengthens the gender optics of their worldview" (Osad'an et al., 2018, P. 246). For this purpose, gender responsiveness in instructional materials was and is still seen as compulsory to guarantee educational success and attainment for all students from both genders. Within this framework, it has been argued that schoolbooks had provided fallacious images about gender norms, including the way men and women should behave in society (Shafeer & Shevitz, 2001). A study conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) claimed that textbooks and other instructional materials are still stuffed with gender stereotypical images and perceptions about men and women in professional contexts. That is why mainstreaming gender in the curriculum has been proposed as an effective solution to reducing these

discriminatory images about both genders. Otherwise speaking, at very early stages, educational systems reinforce traditional gender roles in students' minds when females are encouraged to stay indoors to cook, while males are trained to be out doing business. Thus, the quality of curricula is still lagging behind despite the efforts of textbooks' designers to involve women's positive representations and promote gender equality in the educational context. Beyond that, even mathematics textbooks have been demonstrated to generate gender prejudices between males and females as reported by UNESCO (2016), "there were four eggs on the table. Ayse brought two more eggs for the mother. They added up to six eggs" (P. 16). Likewise, a study done by Reina and Torre-Sierra (2023) on mathematics also figured out that textbooks used for third and fifth grade students in some Spanish elementary schools are gender biased. The percentage of women's participation in third grade mathematics schoolbooks was only 6.86%, whereas the ratio for fifth grade reached 7.16%, which indicates that men's participation had the lion's share. In the selected materials, female characters occupied roles related to family and nurturing, administration tasks, teaching, and sciences, while male characters were related to jobs that require power such as construction workers, police officers, and athletes, and jobs that demand knowledge including journalists, doctors, directors and businessmen (Reina & Torre-Sierra, 2023). This way, the hegemony of men and the exclusion of women in the world of technology will not only promote more gender inequality but also will not assist in curricula development either. More significantly, a survey conducted by Achag and Amrani (2023) on four EFL textbooks for the elementary level in Morocco showed that there is still gender bias in some of these materials in terms of gender roles and representations. Hence, regardless of the attempts to minimize gender discrimination in curriculum, it seems that disparities between men and women remain challenging and still exist in instructional materials, especially in the encrypted information that is usually transferred to students from schools and teachers in a form of what is called hidden curriculum.

5. GENDER IN HIDDEN CURRICULUM

The hidden curriculum can be simply defined as "a set of norms, customs, beliefs and language forms that are manifested in the structure and functioning of an institution" (Hernández et al., 2013. P.90). This term was first originated by the educationist Philip Jackson in 1968 (qtd. in Betkowski, 2023). At that time, schools were considered a place to produce and embed traditional gender norms in classrooms to secure patriarchal mindsets outside. Rapidly, the notion was accepted and used by educational scholars to refer to "the non-academic functions and effects' of schooling" (Vallance, 1994, P. 5). In other terms, the hidden curriculum is related to the whole educational structure

and the informal role of the school as a mirror of society and culture on the one hand, and the confusing messages ingrained in the content of the curriculum on the other hand. When teachers are concerned with formal curriculum, they usually have apparent and attentive teaching plans in their mind. A literature highlighted that hidden curriculum appears once the educator brings his or her ideologies and beliefs to the class, and then delivers them to students whether intentionally or unintentionally. For this purpose, detaching values and perceptions from the act of teaching has been considered mandatory. Thus, for Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) the hidden curriculum is formulated to distinguish between curriculum as content and as a set of practices in class and school. In Harper and Webster's (2017) research, findings uncovered that "the informal 'hidden curriculum' of personal growth and development to be strongly present and at times far more relevant than the formal curriculum upon which the field school was justified and approved" (P.79). Linked with gender context, the hidden curriculum as an umbrella term comprises several areas, such as gender clichés, social and cultural values as well as social disparities. In her prominent book, *The hidden curriculum: reproduction in education, a reappraisal*, Lynch (1989) demonstrated that school plays a fundamental role in creating and enhancing gender inequalities whether purposefully or haphazardly. Furthermore, Lynch questioned the real instruments that support the expansion of gender stereotypes to figure out that hidden curriculum is responsible for reinforcing gender values through what the instructional staffs deliver to pupils in class. To explicate more, students are known to have different preferences and interests. Teachers always make boys engage in football, but girls will never be seen involved in football because it is a boys' game, instead, they are included in activities associated with cooking or fashion. On top of that, Sadker and Silber (2006) assumed that there are two categories of stereotypes; visible and hidden. For the sake of figuring out the difference between the two, Sadker and Silber made an experiment, wherein female and male pupils were asked the following question: who is better in math, boys or girls? A high percentage of children's responses were at least non-discriminatory and fair. Moreover, children were told a tale of a dazzling child who can easily solve math problems without referring to the gender of this character. Then pupils were required to tell the story in their style. Here gender stereotypes occurred because the majority said that the child is definitely a boy since boys are always believed to be clever in scientific subjects among which, Math. Therefore, the scholars manifested that this story symbolizes a hidden stereotype that the curriculum is stuffed with (Sadker & Silber, 2006). It is commonly known that gender differences are mostly constructed at a very early age when children start attending preschools, socialize, and coexist with the idea that there are two categories: boys and girls which are

different from each other (Safta, 2017). Early childhood teachers as facilitators of knowledge help in promoting gender bias by making boys involved in masculine activities like playing with blocks and trucks, and girls in feminine games like Barbie dolls and kitchen sets. The existence of this traditional pattern is not visible only in teaching materials, including children's textbooks and storybooks, but it is also embedded in many aspects such as the way classrooms are managed, boxes and shelves, notebooks, stickers, and other school kits used based on gender (Safta, 2017). Therefore, when children are supposed to do a drawing task in class, boys avoid using particular colors, such as pink and purple because they strongly assume they are girls' colors, and girls refuse to use boys' colors, such as blue due to the same reason. Interestingly, a study performed by Jonauskaite et al. (2019) on children aged 10 and 14 years old in Swiss schools exhibited that girls opted for pink as their favorite color while boys chose red. Moreover, both genders showed their preference to blue a favorite color. Accordingly, the idea of gendered colors is still common among students with no profound interference from teachers and school staffs to counteract this assumption.

CONCLUSION

This article intends to deliver a critical overview of gender disparity in education and its current situation worldwide. Compared to past and recent studies, there is still a lack of gender responsiveness in educational systems. The hegemony of men in leadership positions in schools and the over-representation of women in lower grades indirectly affect students' assumptions about gender roles. Hence, encouraging women to participate in senior positions and more men to engage in elementary and pre-primary schools could be feasible to present gender in a non-traditional image. Additionally, teachers' typical gender understandings and practices assist in the spread of misleading ideas about gender that become later deeply rooted in society. Therefore, programming awareness campaigns and relying on gender-responsive manuals in all schools would be useful to identify gender stereotypes among teachers and alter the unconscious bias ideologies and practices in classrooms. It should be emphasized that students' performance varies from one gender to another because each one has his or her own skills and potential. For instance, the idea that male students do better in STEM subjects, whereas females outperform males in literature, arts, and languages might be true, however; it must be admitted also that there are some cases, where males are good in arts and girls in mathematics and IT. These assumptions in one way or another serve men's superiority and hegemony in the educational sphere and perpetuate more gender stereotypes and inequalities. Thus, it could be favorable when teachers encourage students from both genders to choose the

subjects they prefer without reinforcing typical gender roles and preferences. Finally, disparities between male and female characters in curriculum and hidden curriculum remain challenging and exist in almost all instructional systems. It is recommended that opting for a gender-neutral language in textbooks and providing balanced representations of men and women in different roles, activities, and workshops may raise students' awareness about gender issues and equality.

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