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Gender in the Education Sector

Gender inequalities and inequities are both manifested in the education sector and perpetuated through educational structures and processes. A number of issues have been identified which bear upon existing inequalities and their perpetuation within the education system. In examining these issues, it should be borne in mind that they are general trends rather than fixed norms. The situation varies from country to country and, even within one country, is constantly evolving.

Gender Role Socialisation

Various theories have been proposed to explain the complex process of gender role socialisation. It is generally agreed, however, that gender role socialisation begins in the family, and that nursery and primary schools continue the process as well as play a part in constructing gender through their organisation and practices. These processes and practices are then continued by the secondary and tertiary education system, though perhaps in different ways, as children progress into adolescence and then adulthood. The media, interaction with other children and other factors also contribute to the gender socialisation process (Measor and Sikes, 1992: 50).

Three different feminist perspectives on gender and education have been identified: the liberal, socialist and radical perspectives (Measor and Sikes, 1992).

- ◆ The liberal view is that education replaces ignorance and prejudice with knowledge and enlightenment. The major concern is with girls and women being allowed equal access to education, and the legal frameworks ensuring equity of access and equal opportunity in educational settings.
- ◆ The socialist perspective involves a commitment to social change with the objective of eliminating social class inequity as well as gender inequity. From this perspective, schools are seen as reproducing the status quo. The agenda here is primarily concerned with the ways in which education reinforces inequity, and methods which need to be implemented to resist or change this.
- ◆ The radical perspective works towards reforming the power relationships between girls and boys in the classroom, where it is assumed that boys dominate the classroom, to the girls' detriment. Similarly, the curriculum, in this view, is geared toward boys' interests, and teachers are found to favour boys over girls. Sexual harassment of girls by male students and teachers is another concern.

The post-modern feminist discourse, which is particularly applicable to gender and education in the varying countries and cultures of the Commonwealth, emphasises difference across race/ethnicity, class/caste and culture lines, and thus highlights the importance of gender analysis, policies and programmes which are sensitive to a country's social and cultural norms. It is recognition of the importance of this sensitivity which makes it very difficult to develop 'generic' gender analytic tools for use in a variety of countries. No single perspective is able to represent the variety and breadth of issues in

gender and education. Together, however, and informed by other perspectives, these approaches can help build a comprehensive picture of the multi-dimensional education process and its role in gender inequity. Any analysis or attempt to mainstream gender must employ a holistic approach, examining institutions and practices in depth.

School Organisation

The issue of coeducational versus single-sex schools has been the topic of some research. The findings are mixed, with some researchers reporting that the sex composition of the school makes very little difference to the achievement of female and male students, while others note significantly higher achievement for both sexes in single-sex schools. One recommendation is that for certain subjects, the best method of achieving equity is to teach the sexes separately, even though the school may be coeducational.

However, it is also argued that the splitting of pupils into groups on the basis of sex is usually justified not on educational grounds, but for reasons of organisational convenience, and that the convenience of sex-segregation is outweighed by the disadvantageous side-effect that it reinforces taken-for-granted views of 'innate' gender differences in interests and abilities. It is argued that sex segregation in school may reduce the opportunities pupils have to test gender stereotypes against the actual behaviour of classmates of the other sex. On this view, even if it does not occur frequently, the significance of sex-segregation in schools should not be underestimated because the few situations in which girls and boys are treated differently may assume a special importance with respect to evolving definitions of femininity and masculinity.

General Content and Structure of Schooling

The view that schools transmit our 'common cultural heritage' has given way to a recognition that out of the enormous range of ideas, values and knowledge available in any culture, only a fraction is selected as suitable for transmission in schools. The question then becomes: what are the criteria behind this selection, which social groups benefit from the inclusion of their forms of thought, and which social groups lose through the exclusion of their forms of thought?

There are persistent sex differences in educational processes within the schools, based on cultural beliefs about sex differences between women and men in both character and ability. Females and males are subjected to differential socialisation in mixed classrooms and are rewarded for different things. Females tend to learn 'femininity' instead of 'masculinity', i.e. they learn to be docile and subservient instead of independent and thoughtful.

Young women and men get very different kinds of preparation for work. At the secondary level, in job-training and in post-secondary education, young women and men choose to take courses that are predominantly filled with one sex or the other. Thus they enter the labour market with different skills and interests that lead to differential treatment by employers.

What is reproduced in school is a gendered society. What we want young people to learn in school is shaped by gender relations and by notions of what young men and women will do differently at work.

The distinction between women's knowledge and men's knowledge is deeply ingrained in the curriculum. Women's knowledge has been vocational, designed

for the practicalities of being a woman, designed for the private sphere. The rest of the curriculum has been designed to educate men for the public sphere.

Both the content and the structure of schooling and training have been designed to prepare young people for a male world. School has traditionally been a preparation for the public, productive sphere, ignoring the private sphere. Learning for family and personal life has been relegated to the family.

Curriculum

The curriculum, from pre-primary to tertiary level, has been subjected to analysis, and gender biases have been identified in the teaching objectives, the subject choices offered, and the teaching materials. Very often the persons developing, as well as those delivering the curriculum, are unaware of these biases and so the blatant as well as the subtle distinctions and discriminations persist.

Differentiated learning pervades the curriculum. There is a widespread built-in assumption that practical subjects for girls should relate to their future roles as mothers and home-makers, while boys are more likely to need preparation for entry into the world of formal employment, and curricular arrangements such as scheduling allow these differences to persist. Most areas of study exclude or trivialise women's contributions, experiences or knowledge. Frequently, different subjects are provided for girls and boys.

These differences can be maintained through tradition and custom. For instance, since adolescent girls may avoid maths and science courses and have lower achievement scores in these areas, they may be less prepared to enter the academic high schools once reserved for men. Girls are also less often exposed to shop and mechanics courses, which would prepare them to enter traditionally male vocational high schools. This problem is often exacerbated at college level. Some countries are addressing this problem by ensuring that both girls and boys are exposed to such classes as design and information technology as well as cookery/domestic science.

Even the teaching of the same subjects can have the effect of reproducing gender divisions. There are two ways in which teachers tend to perpetuate gender divisions between girls and boys in their classroom.

First, research on the way teachers divide their energies among their pupils has shown that there may be an unintended consequence of disadvantaging girls. Teachers tend to focus more attention on the boys than on the girls in their classroom. This has some important consequences:

- 1 Female students are less likely to be challenged and stretched academically, with serious implications for their future performance.
- 2 Because they are less likely than boys to be singled out as worthy recipients of the teacher's attention, girls feel less valued in the classroom, reinforcing other pressures that urge them to take a back seat in classroom activity.
- 3 This may in turn affect their confidence regarding speaking publicly, and thus their participation in politics and the public sphere.

Teachers should make a conscious effort to channel more of their attention and energies to quieter pupils. The neglect of quiet pupils in the classroom works, on the whole, to the disadvantage of girls.

It is only when teachers create an atmosphere in which girls and boys are, and know themselves to be, equally valued and equally welcome, that girls will be positively

encouraged to voice their opinions and ideas. There is evidence, moreover, that a teacher's encouragement is important to the student's career decision.

Secondly, the style of teaching in mixed classes may incline pupils to believe that the subject is more appropriate for one sex than the other.

Curriculum reform will require a fundamental reworking of what knowledge is valued in the curriculum, how that knowledge is made available and how it is taught.

Educational Materials

Much research has been conducted on this topic, and the implications have been noted of the intensive and extensive use of texts in which the stereotyping of gender roles is explicit. Sex stereotypes in society are reflected in sex inequities in curricular materials, which usually portray females and males differently. Textbooks and tests often depict women and men in traditional roles and in occupations that are even more sex-segregated than those they actually fill.

As regards textbooks, research has indicated that there are no sex differences in the kinds of environment in which female and male children are portrayed, but there are differences in the environments portrayed of adults:

- ◆ Adult females were much more often portrayed in the home, and adult males were more often found outdoors, in business, and at school. Social studies, literature and history syllabuses failed to give full due to the range of activity of both sexes, and incorporated values and assumptions that downgrade and devalue women's experience and achievement.
- ◆ As regards illustrations in textbooks, white males are overly represented and shown in a much wider range of occupations than females.
- ◆ The research also indicated that in test materials, as with textbooks, there was a vast over-representation of content related to males.

The adverse effect of sex-stereotyped educational materials on children's occupational aspirations may be assumed. Thus the production of texts which provide alternatives to those in use, and the training of teacher educators so that they can develop and share a critical perspective even when they are forced to use such texts, is vitally important.

Perceptions and Attitudes

Gender inequalities in the education sector are perpetuated by the perceptions and attitudes of a number of different stakeholders.

Girls' own perceptions

Young women may be unwilling to deviate from sex-role norms during adolescence or to take classes judged inappropriate for them because of peer pressures and the attitudes of male classmates. Furthermore, income differences between women and men, inadequate provision of public child-care facilities and the predominance of families with a traditional division of labour are all part of the world young girls know. Their experience takes on meanings that lead to an expectation that traditional patterns will be continued. Elements of domestic gender relations and norms still shape the way they see acceptable options. Any attempt to show young girls that the world is constructed in a way that might be changed, involves not just talking to them, but also showing them that conditions can indeed be altered. Therefore,

political movements need to push for institutional change that demonstrates the possibility of change in the broader society.

There is also the problem of girls' lack of career planning. The more definitely girls plan their working careers, the more their occupational choices will resemble those of men. Planning for a continuous attachment to the labour force will move women in the direction of men's jobs. Young women's changed responses would change the context in which young men have to act. Being confronted with young women who expect equal relationships or no relationships will produce a changed set of rewards and sanctions for male behaviour, thus requiring young men to accept young women as their equals.

Parental attitudes

Parents' lack of awareness about the benefits of education and training girls for girls plays a role in perpetuating gender inequalities. Research has indicated that there is an inter-generational transmission of behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, it is important for parents to develop a positive attitude towards education for their daughters.

Career counselling

Career counsellors have tended to hold traditional attitudes about appropriate occupations for female and male students, discouraging non-traditional aspirations and channelling women into sex-typical occupational choices.

Employers' attitudes

The relationship between education and the labour market requires careful attention. It would not help women to diversify their education and training if no one would employ them once they were qualified. Employers' attitudes often result in discouraging job prospects for young, educated women.

When asked for an explanation for employment patterns, employers cited poor education in inappropriate subjects. This, they thought, was possibly the result of poor career advice. Traditionally, only a small number of women have been educated in scientific or industry-oriented subjects, affecting employers' perceptions of their suitability for training. This is important because employers do not offer only jobs but opportunities for on-the-job training. Those with approved backgrounds are therefore higher up in the queue for recruitment. Employers' preconceptions of women make them treat women (as a group) as a poor investment and this will be reflected in recruitment. Women face discrimination in certain professions because it is expected that they may become pregnant or have children to care for.

Sex-Based Harassment

This area of research is fairly recent but is yielding much information which previously had remained hidden. The research points to the abuse which many female students suffer as members of mixed sex classes, and the lack of sanctions applied to male students and even in some cases male teachers who are guilty of this behaviour. The harassment of young female teachers by male students has also been documented.

Sex-based harassment, which can include a range of behaviours, is based on the presumption of power relations which discriminate against girls and women. Sex-based harassment relegates girls and women to an inferior position relative to boys and men, and makes a female feel embarrassed, frightened, hurt or uncomfortable

because of her sex. The impact on the social and educational experience of girls can be devastating. In some cases girls escape either by ceasing to attend particular subjects or by leaving the school altogether.

Girls at Risk

Another problem relates to girls who are at risk. These include pregnant teenagers or teenage mothers, girls assisting their mothers with domestic tasks, girls suffering from domestic violence or physical or sexual abuse, girls suffering from serious health problems and homeless girls.

Girls at risk experience school-related problems because the curriculum, teaching practice and organisation of schools do not meet their needs. These girls get lower grades and may passively or even actively opt out of schooling.

Vocational Training

Vocational education programmes have traditionally been sex-segregated, channelling males and females into different courses. While females are trained predominantly in health, home economics, and office and business programmes, males can be found primarily in technical preparation, the trades and agriculture.

Enrolment in such programmes has a very significant impact on subsequent employment. Women are also under-represented in apprenticeships because they are less likely to learn about programmes, to qualify, and to be selected. The third and most important source of training occurs on the job. Female jobs are less likely than male jobs to provide on-the-job training.

Informal Interaction Among Students

Although this takes place on a continual basis it is very often facilitated through clubs and societies, sport and other out of classroom activities. Many of these clubs are single-sex, for example Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, so leadership opportunities exist for both male and female students – although they do tend to occur in the context of gender-stereotyped activities. Where clubs are mixed, it is often the case that leadership is dominated by one sex and the club is often seen as being a ‘male’ club, (e.g. the science club) or a ‘female’ club, (e.g. the cookery club). The gender of the club is usually perceived in stereotypical terms.