

BJES

ISSN 2306-0557 (Print)

ISSN 2310-5402 (Online)

www. <http://bjes.beder.edu.al/>

GENDER EQUITY IN EDUCATION: TEACHER VISIONS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN ALBANIA

Eriada CELA ^m

Article history:

Received: May, 2016

In revised form: May, 2016

Accepted: September, 2016

Published: September, 2016

Abstract

Pedagogy entails teacher-student interaction which influences the learning process more than any other educational component. Teachers play a crucial role in helping children understand how gender roles work and can encourage pupils to challenge the gender stereotypes or simply conform to them. Teacher awareness of gender equity in education can influence children's classroom practices and their performance to great extents. This research aims at discussing teachers' expectations of pupils' classroom behavior and analyzing classroom practices using a gender equality perspective. Classroom observation and interviews conducted with teachers aimed at discovering the reality behind classroom doors regarding gender stereotypes and teachers' interaction with children. Some of the teachers' visions and perceptions are openly expressed; others are more subtle and indirect. The research methodology consists of classroom observations and key informant interviews with teachers in different schools. Results show that teachers who have received additional qualification tend to articulate more easily and show higher levels of awareness regarding gender equity practices in the classroom.

Key words: *gender equity, classroom practices, teachers, education, Albania*

^m 'Aleksander Xhuvani' University, Faculty of Human Sciences, eriada.cela@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of education in today's society is an undisputable notion, which is particularly valid to the lives of girls and boys in Albania where social, economic and political changes are occurring at high speed. When education fulfills its life-changing mission, both boys and girls are better equipped with a set of skills which can facilitate their future engagement in a democratic society as active citizens. Boys and girls can not be fully entitled to the right set of citizenship values and skills if they are exposed to a set of gender stereotypes by teachers during their education process. Obviously, teacher expectations on pupils' classroom performance according to separate gender roles and gendered performances can seriously affect children's behaviors and make them more inclined to fulfill such expectations, thus perpetuating gender inequality and stereotyped patterns. This research aims at identifying the teachers' visions and problematizing the classroom practices of teachers in Albania regarding gender stereotypes.

In the long run, children risk to be exposed to many gendered patterns during their interaction with teachers. This is why all teachers, especially elementary school ones, should be knowledgeable about gender education, including concepts and theory about gender equality and gender equity. Referring to UNESCO definitions, "Gender equality is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in their home, their community and their society" (UNESCO; 2003: 17). On the other hand, "Gender Equity is the process of being fair to men and women. To ensure fairness, measures must often be put in place to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field. Equity is a means. Equality is the result" (UNESCO; 2003: 17). Therefore, teachers who are well aware of the importance of gender education do not have biased expectations regarding their pupils' performances. They do not discriminate against boys or girls and try to encourage children to break the gender-based stereotypes in the classroom and beyond. Only teachers and schools as the most official and long term educational institutions can foster change concerning gender equality and gender equity.

2. METHODOLOGY

The level of teachers' gender awareness and their vision regarding gender equity is implicitly transmitted in the classroom through their interaction with children and their expectations on boys' and girls' performances. Information regarding classroom practices of teachers is collected through observation and key informant interviews with twenty teachers of different elementary schools in the district of Elbasan, Albania. The research instruments, including classroom observation surveys and interview questions for teachers are adapted by the Jo Sanders Manual *Fairness at the Source* (2000). The research was conducted in February 2015 and aimed at identifying the spoken and unspoken specificities of gender patterns in classroom practices. The teachers of the fifth grades in all selected schools were chosen based on stratified random sampling including high-performance, low-performance, rural and urban schools. The stratified sample was based on a regional performance indicators card that was created and used by the regional directory of education, Elbasan in the academic year 2013-2014. This performance evaluation card, along with other indicators such as pupils' achievement in local and national exams, was also based on teacher training as an indicator for the ranking of schools. This research used the teacher training level as a stratum for sample sizing. Not to my surprise, all the teacher respondents in this survey happened to be female, which also reflects teaching as a gendered profession. Apart from the subject of foreign languages, these teachers instruct most of the subjects to the same classroom of children from the first till the fifth grade. The key informants' ages vary from 26-58. A relatively high number of teachers have attended a Master's Degree in Education or are in process of doing so. Two of the oldest teachers hold only a high school diploma of pedagogy and are close to their retirement age. Almost half of respondents had participated in additional training on teaching methodologies prior to this research.

3. GENDER EQUITY IN EDUCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS' EXPECTATIONS

The focal point of gender equity in education is the interaction between boys and girls as well as interaction between teachers and pupils. According to Chisholm and McKinney (2003; 3), the approach to gender equality in the classroom tackles a list of components which includes:

-
- Gender stereotypes
 - Sexual violence, abuse and harassment
 - Differential access to and enrolment of boys and girls in school and the curriculum
 - Ideologies underlying the curriculum
 - Curriculum choices
 - Teaching styles, including differential attention paid to boys and girls
 - School organization and discipline
 - Extra-mural activities.

These components are equally important within the classroom domain, but only the teaching styles and gender differentiated attention in the classroom practices comprise the focus of this research. The list of other components embodies the objectives of different past and future research projects.

As Stromquist asserts, “given that schools are social settings where gender and sexual identities are constructed, negotiated, and officially sanctioned, the overall educational environment offers influential messages about gender” (Stromquist; 2007: 20). More often than not, teachers are the living model of education and they can voice or hush questions; they can encourage boys and girls alike or simply perpetuate gender inequalities. If teachers are well aware of gender education related concepts and theories, their teaching practices can represent an empowering instrument for both girls and boys. Similarly, if children are not exposed to limitations by gender stereotyped practices in classroom, they can learn to be more self-confident and fight gender discrimination. This is how important teacher visions of gender equity are: they can empower or disempower boys and girls alike. Pupils are greatly affected by the teachers’ expectations, and they can perform accordingly, thus resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy of boys dominating certain classroom interactions and girls being more active in teacher-pupil interactions that are related to learning (Stromquist; 2007: 12). The gendered pre-conceptions of teachers may be unconsciously reflected and they are transmitted through interaction such as questions, feedback, criticism or praise (Magno and Silova 2007; Stromquist, 2007 at Eurydice, 2010). Also known as the “Pygmalion effect”, the teachers’ positive or negative expectations are eventually met, thus influencing pupils’ performance in academic achievement as well as classroom interaction patterns.

4. GENDER AND EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

The present education system structure in Albania stems from the most recent basic education reform, including the curriculum reform, which was introduced during 2003-2007 and has been applied ever since. The Albanian Ministry of Education and the Institute of Curricula and Standards suggested gender perspective be mainstreamed in three aspects, including pre-university and university curriculum review and development, developing new textbooks and developing instructional materials for mainstreaming the gender perspective into the curricula (Albania; 2007). The same educational reform also changed the elementary school duration from a total of eight years (4+4) into 9 years (5+4) (Llambiri and Abdurrahmani; 2011).

Children of elementary schools in Albania have most of the subjects instructed by the same head teacher. In other words, the elementary school teachers in Albania spend a relatively long time with children within the classroom environment. Therefore, teachers' visions of gender roles and stereotypes can easily be imprinted into pupils' learning culture through teachers' everyday teaching practices. This is why it is crucial for teachers of elementary schools to believe in gender equity and reflect gender equality awareness in their daily classroom activities and language of instruction respectively.

The PISA 2000-2012 results of Albanian pupils indicate that there exist significant gender differences in the pupils' development and perception of skills. These differences are mainly visible in reading, where girls outperform boys, and mathematics, where girls have lower levels of confidence in their abilities, even though they practically perform well (World Bank; 2012). This gender gap can be explained by presumed different learning strategies used by boys and girls, but most importantly, by different teaching practices used by teachers. Yet again, pedagogy in the classroom is what builds knowledge and beliefs in pupils, who in their turn learn or fail to achieve academically and socially through their own reflection in their teachers' eyes.

5. FINDINGS

Reflecting the main focus of classroom observation and key informant interviews, the findings of this research provide discussion on teaching styles related to classroom arrangement and differential attention in teacher pupil-interaction. Findings also discuss the relevance of remarkable theoretical issues regarding gender equity in the classroom. The stratified sample for this research gave access to interviewing and observing a total of twenty female teachers: thirteen teachers working in the urban part and seven teachers working in the rural part of Elbasan district in Albania.

5.1 Classroom arrangement

Every element of formal education communicates a message to the children, who learn from the formal as well as the non-formal curriculum. When children in elementary schools participate in same-sex or mixed-sex activities, they are also learning gender as being a social construction that is either dichotomist or equivalent. Furthermore, space arrangement and gender division in classroom activities comprise an important element of childhood socialization (Thorne; 1993), while it is also proved that girls are marginalized by the use of physical space in schools and classrooms (Arnot; 2004). The number of children in the observed classes varies from 16-30 pupils per class, with a tendency of rural schools to have fewer children in every class. What is more, one rural school resulted in facing the difficulty of having collective classes, with children of grade 3 and grade 5 instructed by the same head teacher.

Most of the observed classrooms were organized in the common style of having children's desks in parallel rows that face the blackboard and the teacher's desk facing all children. This is a predominant model in most classes in Albania as well as the observed schools, dominating even in groups with less than twenty children which could easily be arranged differently. As teachers say, mostly children prefer to share desks with a same-sex peer, but there are also many teachers who report that they opt for more gender-balanced pairs in same desks. Some teachers affirm they let children free to choose who they want to share the desk with, while others declare that they try to pair boys with girls as a sign of equality and togetherness. However, few of the teachers recognize the importance of gender segregation as a childhood socialization component.

There were five cases of classroom arrangement not following the model of parallel desks facing the board. In one high-performance urban school two teachers holding Master's degrees in Education had positioned the teacher's desk behind the rows of all pupil desks where pairs of girls and boys were sitting together. Being in the fifth grade, the children had worked with the same head teachers for five years sequentially and seemed to have been normally adjusted to this model. Specifically, during the observed classes they could effortlessly work individually or in pairs without much teacher support. These two teachers also showed sensitivity regarding racial issues in their classes. Both having minority children of Roma community in their classes, they openly addressed the cases of Roma children as perfectly fitting in with the rest of the class and equally performing in academic and cultural related activities.

In two other classes in a low performing urban school desks were arranged in a rectangular shape, with all children sharing the same big desk created by all the desks put together. This arrangement model seemed very friendly and cooperative for boys and girls alike, but presented a logistic difficulty for children sharing the same big desk space since their books or personal belongings could easily become messy. One old teacher close to retirement age, who only held a high school diploma of pedagogy and little additional training, used and reinforced gender stereotypes to a great extent throughout her teaching practices. She scolded girls more frequently for not keeping the desk tidy and never addressed boys on the same issue. On the contrary, she asked boys' assistance for hanging a big map on the wall and threatened to send two other boys to the school principal's office if they didn't stop talking loudly to each other. This teacher seemed to have many classroom management issues overall, but her teaching practices that reinforced gender stereotypes in class were mainly prevailing. During the interview she admittedly said boys were the best pupils, boys were the ones that asked more questions and the ones that called out more in class, while girls volunteered more and stayed after class more in order to talk to her.

Another unusual classroom arrangement example consisted of two desks joined together forming a square, and four children sharing the same desk. This classroom in another high performing urban school presented a particular case to notice: when asked during the interview whether children did group work in class, almost all teachers affirmed this. Then, when questioned if the group work was done on the basis of the same-sex groups or mixed-sex groups, the MA-holding teacher of this classroom

answered that they always did group work based on mixed-sex groups. One day in her class during observation, boys and girls were not sitting together but in separate groups and different desks. Recognizing the inconsistency between the reported reality during the interview and the observed reality in class, the teacher felt the need to explain. As she later clarified, that day was an exception since she had asked children to be free to choose their group members. If this is the case, it only means that children tend to choose to work with same-sex peers. However, this also means that teachers can openly identify and articulate issues related to gender equality and keep themselves open to learning and improving their classroom practices of gender equity.

5.2 Interaction between teachers and children

Gender bias in the classroom interaction between teachers and children may be unconscious, but it perpetuates a sense of alienation in the less privileged children and keeps them from developing in personal, academic or professional terms (Davis, 1993). During the key informant interviews most of the teachers stated that they do not discern gender differences in the way they address their pupils. Implying equal treatment between boys and girls while failing to be gender equitable and impartial in classroom practices, these teachers are unaware of their gender-blind position in the classroom. If their attitude later reproduces “unintentional gender bias”, it proves that, as maintained by Sadker, “sexism is still a way of life in our schools...” (Sadker et al.; 2009: 58). Gender bias was previously depicted in one previous research in America as “a syntax of sexism so elusive that most teachers and students were completely unaware of its influence” (Sadker & Sadker: 1995: 2). The conducted interviews and classroom observations were partially utilized as action research: having teachers reflect on their interaction with boys and girls in the classroom makes them aware of their teaching patterns. Once identified and discussed as being intentional or unintentional, fostering equity or injustice, the gender bias hiding in the teachers’ practices is questioned and weakened eventually.

One interview question asked to the teachers, aiming to discover the perceived reality as well as their gender stereotypes regarding pupil academic performance, addressed the issue of the best pupils in class. When asked if the best pupils in class were mainly boys or mainly girls, less than half of the teachers answered that there was no gender difference. Thirty-five percent of teachers replied identifying girls as the best pupils

and twenty percent evaluated boys as their best-performing pupils. Another more balanced reply came from the teachers when talking about the tendency of questioning. Forty percent of the teachers answered that there was no gender difference regarding questioning in class, which may reflect the reality as well as their gender awareness to such a level that does not distinguish or stereotype pupils based on their sex. The remaining teachers had a more dichotomist perspective, with thirty percent of teachers reporting girls as being more inclined to pose questions in class, and another thirty percent of teachers reporting the opposite.

A higher level of gender balance was reported by teachers in another interview question. Aiming to identify teachers' perceptions of gender bias, if present, related to group work, I asked teachers to recall who tended to dominate discussion in their classroom, mostly boys or mostly girls. Out of twenty interviews, eighty percent of the teachers reported no difference between boys and girls, fifteen percent reported girls as tending to dominate group work and group discussion and only five percent of the teachers reported boys as dominant to group work activities. In general, teachers who had participated in additional trainings tended to report little or no differences in gender regarding group activities. However, the reported gender balance was broken when it came to the issue of pupils calling out in the classroom. A total of sixty per cent of teachers reported boys as calling out more and only fifteen per cent of teachers reported girls yelling or having incorrect verbal behaviors. The remaining twenty-five per cent of teachers reported no gender differences in calling out in class. Another gender misbalance teachers reported is related to interaction with pupils after class: sixty-five percent of the teachers admitted that girls were more inclined to stay after class in order to talk to them. Boys were reported to stay after class by twenty-five percent of the teachers, and only ten percent of the educators answered that both boys and girls were similarly likely to initiate teacher-pupil interaction after classes.

Essentially, the number of children in all observed classes was almost equally distributed in terms of sex. There was only one exception in a high-performing rural school in the outskirts of Elbasan where the girls visibly outnumbered boys in the class: eighteen girls and ten boys. Previously taught in two different classes, these children were recently joined into one single class. In fact, the teacher of this class openly expressed her willingness to encourage boys to be more active in classroom participation, as her individual way to compensate for the smaller number of boys in

her classroom. She explicitly stated that “boys need to be woken up”, thus confirming the differential treatment boys receive by teachers as previously criticized by Sadker. Having more than twenty years of teaching experience, this teacher was also in the process of obtaining a Master’s Degree and she openly exposed difficulties encountered in her job. As noticed during classroom observations, she assigned different tasks to three boys in her class with learning disabilities who were simply performing basic literacy and mathematic skills. One of these boys was fifteen: five years older than the rest of his classmates. What is worth mentioning about this teacher is that her interaction with all children was on positive and encouraging terms. Namely, she frequently used praising words to both girls and boys alike, but more openly towards the three boys with special needs. In addition, this teacher also paid particular attention to children of racial minority who faced social problems such as child labor and school drop-out.

6. CONCLUSIONS

“Educational institutions reproduce the gender order in myriad ways. As prime sites for socialization, schools are key institutions for the construction of gender” (Eckert & McConnell; 2003: 29). Within the walls of educational institutions, apart from transmitting the intended subject of instruction, teachers play a crucial role in helping pupils understand the world around them and their own role in it. Therefore, teachers are in the favorable position of assisting pupils to think critically about different gender-related issues. In addition, through their teaching practices, teachers stand between challenging and abiding by the gender stereotypes that boys and girls in schools are confronted with. If teachers are able to understand how influential their role in education is and if they are well-aware of and well-trained about gender equity, their contribution in challenging gender stereotypes in schools can be huge.

References:

Eckert, P. and McConnell- Ginet, S., (2003), *Language and Gender*. Second Edition. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Arnott, M. (2004) 'Gender Equality and Opportunities in the Classroom: Thinking about Citizenship, Pedagogy and the Rights of Children', Beyond Access Seminar 2, Retrieved January 21, 2015 from: <http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Arnot%20paper.pdf>

Chisholm, L., and Carolyn McKinney "Reforms, innovations and approaches used to work with teachers to use them as change agents and facilitators of gender equality in different countries: strengths and limitations" Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4 Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality. Retrieved April 10, 2015 from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001467/146757e.pdf>

Davis, B. (1993). *Diversity and Complexity in the Classroom: Considerations of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Llambiri, S. and Abdurrahmani, T. A. Mulla, "Comparative analysis of current basic education curriculum and that of other countries," Ministry of Education and Science, Education Development Institute. Tirana, May 2011. Retrieved January 10, 2015 from: http://www.izha.edu.al/materiale/Revista_Pedagogjike_2011.pdf

Magno, C. & Silova, I. (2007). *Teaching in transition; Examining school-based inequities in central/southeastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*. International Journal of Educational Development. 27, pp. 647-660. Retrieved February 02, 2015 from:

https://www.academia.edu/302971/Teaching_In_Transition_Examining_School-Based_Gender_Inequities_In_Central_Southeastern_Europe_and_the_Former_Soviet_Union

UNESCO (2003), UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework. Retrieved January 23, 2015 from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001318/131854e.pdf>

Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1995). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls*. New York: Touchstone Press.

Sadker, D., Sadker, M., & Zittleman, K. (2009). *Still failing at fairness: how gender bias cheats girls and boys in schools and what we can do about it*. New York: Scribner

Stromquist, N. (2007). 'The gender socialization process in schools: A cross-national comparison', background paper for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008 – Education for all by 2015: will we make it? UNESCO: Paris Retrieved January 15, from: <http://trylanarkcounty.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Report-Gender-Socialization-in-Schools-Comparing-Countirs.pdf>

Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender Play: girls and boys in schools*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

World Bank Group Executive Summary *Education quality and opportunities for skills development in Albania: An analysis of PISA 2000-2012 results*. Retrieved January 15, from: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDS/IB/2014/09/17/000470435_20140917085339/Rendered/PDF/907420WP0P15190MPL ETE0ONLINE0Aug027.pdf