

2. Gender Equality in Schools



*Girls learning through active participation, Mekong Delta, Vietnam**

This paper discusses the content and delivery of education and how it can reflect and reproduce gender inequalities. Girls' and boys' learning and interaction with each other, and the teacher, are influenced by ways of teaching, the content of the curriculum, and relations within the classroom. The paper considers these aspects of education provision – curriculum, teaching and learning, and the dynamics of the classroom and school. It recommends changes needed to ensure that education provision will promote gender equality.

Gender equality in schools: the curriculum teaching, and gender equality

Education for All (EFA) means enrolling and retaining all girls and boys in school. It is also about ensuring that girls and women of all ages develop their full potential through education and are able to ensure their full and equal participation in building a better world.

For many girls, gender inequality is a feature both of their lives and of their experience of education. Gender equality in teaching is a central component of a good-quality education. To increase equality of access to education, and to sustain progress towards Education For All, it is necessary to develop teaching methods, new ways of learning, and curricula that enable girls and boys to participate in learning as equals. The culture of a school and its practices outside of formal lessons, for example, in the playground or during meal times, also affect how girls and boys learn. So gender equality needs to be a central part of the development of the school curriculum and ways of teaching.

Children will want to come to school and will enjoy the experience of learning if schools implement good-quality gender-equitable curricula, and ways of teaching. Governments have a responsibility to develop gender-equitable education policies for children's learning, as well as for their long-term well-being.

What is 'the curriculum'?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the curriculum as 'the subjects comprising a course of study in a school or college'. It reflects the knowledge that society considers valuable and appropriate to be taught in schools. As society changes, the curriculum will also change, as will the way in which it is viewed and what is considered valuable. This means that the curriculum, and teaching practices, can express ideas about gender equality, or can reproduce ideas and practices marked by gender inequality. Teaching and learning materials, evaluation and assessment procedures, and language policy are also components of the curriculum.

Over the past ten years there has been a great deal of curriculum reform as states reassess their national identity or their position in the global economy (for example in Bolivia, Ghana, and Viet Nam). The curriculum, a key piece of national legislation, is often amended after changes in government or as a result of the influence of powerful social movements. A national education policy and a national curriculum document express the State's commitment in terms of providing education for all children.

Gender equality and the curriculum

In order to increase demand for girls' education, the value and relevance of the education must be clear. The way in which girls, their families, and teachers view education and the content of the curriculum, will be influenced by gender equality in wider society. Across the world, assumptions about what is appropriate for boys and girls to learn can undermine equality in learning. For example, in many societies it is assumed that girls are not good at mathematics and that boys cannot learn about the care of young children.

Curriculum assumptions such as these, and the teaching that accompanies them, may reinforce gender inequalities, with girls often channelled into 'lower status' subjects. In western Europe and North America, as well as in countries such as Peru, Bangladesh, and South Africa, girls have gained equal *access* to schooling. However this does not mean they have gained equal access to the *curriculum*, and the power that is related to certain types of knowledge.

A holistic approach to (gender) equality in the curriculum

In textbooks used for Hindi language teaching in Madhya Pradesh, there has been a conscious effort to present girls in positive roles. Famous women from history are included, for example, women who fought for their state's, and women renowned for their educational achievements and service to society. Clear messages on the importance of girls' education and the need for equal opportunities are included.

However, the tendency to cast the positive roles of women in the characters of the idealised and exceptionally heroic has not been very effective. In addition, gender stereotyping and inequalities persist in the narratives. Women appear largely in maternal roles, while the decision makers and protectors tend to be male. In one textbook (now revised) a lesson on women's empowerment was placed next to a lesson with a very patronizing and alienating description of a tribal community, which was labelled as a criminal community.¹

The dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom

Development of the curriculum to address gender inequality cannot happen in isolation from other aspects of schooling, particularly ways of teaching, learning, and interaction within the classroom. Whatever the content of the curriculum, equity will not be achieved if girls are discouraged from speaking, if boys absorb a disproportionate amount of the teachers' energy, nor if the physical environment does not support equal access to education (for example, the provision of girls' toilets and wheelchair access).

Some of the reasons why girls have learning problems include the low expectations of teachers regarding their intellectual abilities, coupled with a low level of feedback from teachers. In addition, in

some countries teachers say that they enjoy teaching boys more than girls, especially if the girls are seen as passive. Girls' low expectations of themselves contribute to the problem, as does a lack of female teachers in high-status subjects, such as maths and science. Textbooks often reinforce the low expectations of women and girls, as do curriculum and examination materials, while the use of physical space in schools also marginalises girls.²

The curriculum is only as good as the teachers who deliver it. Despite extensive gender inequalities outside school, teachers *can* make a difference inside school. If teachers assume that a girl *can* learn mathematics, it will affect their approach to teaching girls and their expectations of what girls can achieve in the subject. If teachers are seen as *facilitators* of learning, rather than merely deliverers of knowledge, then they are *obliged* to ensure that all children learn.

Good policy frameworks on gender equality are a first step in addressing the problem, and many governments have them. A second step is to ensure that these frameworks guide the development of good policies on ways of teaching and learning in order to achieve high-quality results. To improve practice, teachers, head teachers, and government officers need training, and their ways of working need to be endorsed and supported by the community.

What might a gender-equitable approach to schooling look like?

Gender equality can be associated with a superficial focus on girls' education, to the exclusion of boys. There is a need to go beyond simple access issues and ensure a comprehensive understanding of gender. A gender-equity programme should make an assessment of the school looking at four key questions:

- What perceptions of masculinity and femininity are children bringing to school, and what are they acting out in the classroom and the playground?
- What are the dominant images of masculinity and femininity that the school conveys to children?
- Is gender equality a concern in terms of what the school wants and expects of its teachers?
- What initiatives, strategies, and projects, can the whole school undertake to develop a programme for gender equality?³

Making schools more 'girl-friendly' and gender equitable means challenging the culture of authority, hierarchy, and social control in the majority of schools. At a general level (it will differ according to context), it would mean changes to curriculum and to classroom organisation to allow increased participation of girls and women. A 'girl-friendly' school would encourage questioning of the curriculum,

the breaking down of hierarchies and power networks that exclude girls and women. Head teachers and teachers would have a greater understanding of the conditions which lead to bullying, racism, sexism, and homophobic behaviour, replacing them with more successful forms of intervention. In addition, some value would be placed on students' experience and knowledge, with students being more actively involved in planning and evaluating their work. Students would be encouraged to challenge narrow-minded concepts, and prejudices, and envision an expanded and divergent future.⁴

Making teaching and the curriculum gender equitable

There is already a great deal of work being done at national and international levels to influence curriculum change to include gender equality, and to make governments accountable (although this work on accountability tends to focus more closely on issues of quality in general than on gender).

Partnerships for non-formal curriculum development

Experience in India has shown that developing courses and curricula for out-of-school and adolescent girls calls for strategic, and effective partnerships in practice. This would ensure a sharing of expertise between university professionals, women's groups, NGOs, and education functionaries, for the transforming potential of the course to be fully explored.

Curriculum design for non-formal education, through academic-activist partnerships, was put in place in programmes such as Mahila Samakhya, Lok Jumbish, and the National Literacy Campaigns. For instance, curricula and resource manuals on health education were developed for a residential course for young women, and numeracy manuals were prepared using women's indigenous knowledge of folk and street mathematics.⁵

In schools and teacher training colleges the curriculum is usually full, which means it is not easy to integrate a gender equality perspective in the design, content and teaching approach of the many subjects that teachers may have to cope with. Moreover, curricula are often developed by experts and 'owned' by the State, so it is difficult to lobby for change where this might be seen to challenge government control. But, where diversity is recognised and participatory processes are employed, women and girls from different backgrounds can participate in discussions about curriculum decisions and how they are represented –considering that they are a diverse group.

When considering how teaching and the curriculum can be made gender-equitable, these areas need attention:

- *Curriculum content*: we need to consider what girls from poor, and marginalised environments, are offered by their schooling, and to provide, for example, literacy learning in a way that enhances their confidence, so that they can begin to transform their lives.
- *Learning materials*: often images in textbooks are simply 'check-listed' for their portrayal of gendered images. Children do not necessarily have simplistic, preconditioned responses to images in textbooks, and we need a more sophisticated understanding of and response to how children learn about gender from textbooks.
- *Language of instruction and literacy*: children who are geographically or culturally marginalised from mainstream education may find themselves being taught in a language that they do not use. Girls and women often have less access to, and use of, national or 'prestige' languages than men. In what ways is the language of instruction empowering or disabling for girls and boys differently?
- *Methods of evaluation and assessment*: examinations tend to dominate assessment, but other methods should be used, such as continuous assessment. 'Girls could have more equal opportunities in school if teachers talk to them more and encourage them, for instance by giving them prizes for participating in different classroom activities'.⁶

Educating the teachers

Types of gender training courses

Governments have a responsibility to develop gender equality in teaching through the courses and practical materials that they provide. Teacher education needs to equip teachers to promote an understanding of the profound nature of gender inequity and to overcome the resultant barriers to learning. Ensuring that gender equity is a *central theme* throughout a programme of teacher education, rather than delivered in one-off sessions, is likely to ingrain understanding more effectively. Training needs to help teachers to develop practical solutions, and should be accompanied by monitoring and follow-up support. The efforts of pre-service training institutions, providers of in-service and ongoing professional development, need to be co-ordinated, and well documented. Building networks of teachers to work together or collaborating through school clusters and teachers' centres, are ways of sustaining training and providing ongoing support for teachers and education officials.⁷

Training teachers for gender equality, Mukono, Uganda

With the introduction of Universal Primary Education in Uganda in 1997, there was a huge expansion in enrolment, and hundreds of untrained or unlicensed teachers were employed to meet the new demands. The Teacher Development Management Scheme (TDMS) was introduced to promote gender equality in education and convey information about HIV/AIDS. TDMS co-ordinating tutors are used as important mediators between policy makers and teachers, and between policy makers and representatives of the community and parents. They make teachers aware of the gender dynamics of classrooms, and the kinds of identities and relationships that boys and girls forge at school. Teachers are encouraged to see their pupils both as sons and daughters of parents with particular views about education, and as boys and girls with rights and obligations.⁸

Relationships and styles of learning

The teaching process is about the relationships between teachers and learners in schools. What is considered to be 'good' teaching and what promotes successful learning will change, according to who is involved and the context in which the learning takes place. Teachers need to be able to work with different learning styles. Teacher education needs to equip teachers to work through some of the implications of local gender issues, and to support teachers in developing the confidence to encourage participation from pupils and the local community in shaping a vision for gender equality. For example, men tend to dominate school management committees, while women fulfil the more domestic roles. The school needs to interact with the local community to ensure that significant local issues of gender inequality (for example, abuse of girls by their peers and by teachers) are analysed and addressed.

Teaching and living gender equality

Teacher education also needs to address not only how teachers and other education officials *teach* gender equality, but how they *live* this in their private lives, changing personal behaviour and challenging some of the deeply held assumptions that perpetuate inequalities. Student teachers, and in-service teachers, need opportunities to examine and understand their own gender identities, and to understand how gender discrimination takes place in schools, as well as their role in addressing it.⁹ For example, teachers have to learn how to make their students aware of their sexuality and, in the age of HIV/AIDS, provide a model of risk-free behaviour.

Linking the school and the community

In tandem with the school, clubs and parents'/students'/teachers' associations can provide venues and forums where strong gender-equality messages can be explored and reinforced. Different types of extra-curricular activities can help children who have been silenced to articulate their needs. There is a need for teachers, NGOs, and community-based organisations to work alongside parents and

communities to think about the ways in which they can support boys and girls to learn well at school, in order that both can participate in society.

Girls' clubs in Liberia

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has promoted girls' clubs in Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, and Tanzania. In Liberia, together with Oxfam GB, FAWE has introduced after-school clubs for girls in primary and junior high schools to encourage them to continue with schooling, and to help them analyse their educational problems and find ways of solving them. The girls are mostly living independently in severe economic hardship, and struggling to continue schooling in a social environment characterised by violence and displacement.

Each club receives start-up funding to help the girls to generate further resources for their club through activities such as making and selling soap. FAWE/Oxfam support for the clubs includes training of the club supervisor, gender training for school staff, and workshops for girls on topics such as HIV/AIDS, sexual violence, and family planning.

Future plans to develop the clubs include introducing a life-skills programme and vocational training for girls.¹⁰

Recommendations

Make curricula and teaching more gender-equitable

The curriculum, and ways of teaching and learning, can reproduce ideas and practices marked by gender inequality. Gender inequalities, and wider social, political and economic inequalities, can influence the access that girls and boys have to different parts of the curriculum. Teachers' awareness of, and approaches to, gender issues in teaching and learning, are crucial if gender-equitable education is to be achieved. Curriculum content, the relationship between teachers and students, and teacher education, require special attention and policy development if gender-equitable education is to be achieved.

To achieve the recommendations below, adequate resources are needed, including both financial and human resources. Good practice should be documented, shared, and used to influence policy making and changes in practice.

Governments and non-State providers should:

- Ensure that curriculum development involves consultation at all levels of society about gender equality, and what decisions mean for women and girls, especially those who may be marginalised because of language or social practice.
- Develop and implement government-agreed standards for quality and equality in education.

- Ensure that there are strong legal measures to outlaw sexual violence and harassment in school, with clear procedures for dealing with abuse, which are widely communicated.
- Ensure that training in gender equality is included in the teacher-education programme, both in pre-service training and in-service college-based or school-based training.
- Develop the capacity and role of the inspectorate and gender units to support gender equality in the classroom.
- Assess the planning and budgeting processes, and ensure that officials at all levels have the capacity to implement them. Put in place any necessary training.

Headteachers and teachers should:

- Inform themselves about existing policy for gender equality.
- Develop school-level policies for gender-equitable approaches to teaching and learning.
- Move beyond gender stereotypes and investigate the school's and teachers' own values and culture, and aspirations for gender equality.
- Be trained and empowered to analyse and challenge gender stereotyping and gender bias in curriculum materials, in language use and relations in the school and with the community.
- Recognise the many pressures on women teachers, and encourage supportive networks and practices.

Parents and community members should:

- Take an active interest in their children's learning and ensure that the school learning environment is healthy and safe.
- Play an active part in the management of the education resources to ensure they are used for the benefit of both girls and boys equitably.

Notes

*The photo is of a maths class, with the student pushing forward a paper for the teacher, which she had completed on a particular maths exercise.

¹ Adapted from A. Sharma, (2003) 'Experiences of Thinking through Gender Equality and the Curriculum: The Case of Madhya Pradesh', Beyond Access Seminar 1,

<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Amita%20Sharma%20paper.pdf>

² Adapted from M. Arnot, (2004) 'Gender Equality and Opportunities in the Classroom: Thinking about Citizenship, Pedagogy and the Rights of Children', Beyond Access Seminar 2,

<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Arnot%20paper.pdf>

³ Adapted from Skelton (2001), in Arnot (2004) *Ibid.*

⁴ Adapted from G. Weiner (2004), 'Learning from Feminism: Education, Pedagogy and Practice', Beyond Access Seminar 2,

<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Gaby%20Weiner%20paper.pdf>

⁵ Adapted from A. Sharma (2003), *op.cit.*

⁶ K. Burns (2004) 'Uganda: Harriet Nambubiru Talks to Kim Burns' in *Equals*, Issue 6, June 2004.

⁷ The issue of teacher recruitment is discussed in Paper 6: Capacity Development for Achieving Gender Equality in Education.

⁸ E. Unterhalter, E. Kioko Echessa, R. Pattman, R. Rajagopalan and F. N'Jai (2004), 'Scaling Up Girls' Education: Towards a Scorecard on Girls' Education in the Commonwealth' Beyond Access Project, Institute of Education, University of London and Oxfam GB.

⁹ F. Chege (2004), 'Teachers' Gendered Lives, HIV/AIDS and Pedagogy'. Beyond Access Seminar 2,

<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Chege%20paper.pdf>

¹⁰ H. Johnston and S. Aikman (2005) 'Discussion Paper on the Liberia Education Programme' Oxford: Oxfam GB.

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