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GENDER-BASED BIASES IN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: IMPLICATION FOR CURRICULUM DELIVERY

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Abstract

Gender messages are all around us. From images in schoolbooks to images to those on the cover of notebooks and textbooks. In spite of these, gender equity and equality have remained contested subjects in some quarters. Societies require the contribution of all the citizens to develop especially in this time of depression. Individuals, both women, and men, therefore, need to develop their potential to the fullest to live fruitful adult lives irrespective of gender. Most of an individual's attributes attitudes and desires begin to develop while in school. The classroom, therefore, is the platform for nurturing potential, visions, and ambitions. In spite of policies directing on involving gender perspectives in all issues of life, it is obvious that teachers and school managers are still oblivious to the remarkable impact of their classroom practices and actions during curriculum implementation on students' genders and how to mainstream gender to achieve equity in their classrooms. This paper, therefore, focuses on how teachers and other school workers could employ the gender mainstreaming strategy to further improve equity and outcomes in their students.

Introduction

Gender and sex though distinct are often used interchangeably. Gender is manmade and it is the expectation people have for males and females. Sex, on the one hand, is the physical and biological differences between a woman and a man. Gender ascribes roles and expectations to males and females; it is a structured set of beliefs about the personal attributes of women and men. It is a shared belief and pattern of thinking in a particular society about the sexes. These sets of beliefs cover personality traits (weak for women/strong for men), abilities (girls are good in languages and arts/boys are good in sciences and technology), physical appearance (girls are slim with curves/boys are robust (Ikegulu & Oranusi, 2012)

Gender bias can be described as a prejudicial stance towards males or females. It is an age-long challenge among humans that manifest in different facets of life, It refers to attitude and behaviours based on sex stereotypes, the perceived relative worth of women and men, and myth and misconceptions about the economic and social problems encountered by both sexes. Women have always been the victim of gender bias, it reflects in every facet of their lives, from the home to the larger society. In typical African society, women are expected to be seen but not heard, and their opinion is not sought on several issues. This same bias is seen in education and pedagogical activities. Over the course of years the uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, attention, and talent, with boys getting the lion's share, takes its toll on girls. (Sadker,1994) Teachers are generally unaware of their own biased teaching behaviours because they are simply teaching how they were taught and the subtle gender inequities found in teaching materials are often overlooked. Girls and boys today are receiving separate and unequal educations due to the gender socialization that takes place in our schools and due to the sexist hidden curriculum students are faced with every day.

Gender Biases in Classroom Activities

Past findings have established the unequal attention enjoyed by boys in the classroom over girls. In fact in Africa, girls were marginalized many years ago even in school attendance. It was believed then that educating a girl was a waste of resources; as her education will end in the kitchen and the benefits of educating her will be transferred to the new family she will be married to. So at the onset of formal schooling, only a few girls attended school. Aside from this, girls had limited career opportunities and options to explore. Girls and women were commonly involved in assumed feminine jobs and careers like teaching, nursing, social work, and so on while some careers were seen as masculine. The prejudice against girls goes beyond school attendance and career choices but is evident in daily classroom pedagogical activities. Though only a few teachers would admit to bringing gender bias into the classroom, and much of their influence may be unintentional, girls are usually made to see or told that they are unequal to boys. The socialization of gender within our schools assures that girls are made aware that they are unequal to boys. The bias in the classroom takes different forms:

- Boys and girls seat and line up separately. Every time students are seated or lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently.
- Teachers' tolerance of different behaviours for boys than for girls because 'boys will be boys' (Chapman,2015)
- Teachers may also influence students by the way they give praise and encouragement to students. Past findings suggest that teachers are more likely to respond to boys with praise or encouragement, whereas they are more likely to respond to girls by simply accepting or acknowledging a response without evaluating it. Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and

calm, whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up.

- Assertive behaviour from girls is often seen as disruptive and may be viewed more negatively by adults. When girls assert themselves in ways contrary to traditional femininity they are labeled by teachers as "real bitches". This reinforces the notion that "...girls' misbehaviour is looked upon as a character defect, whilst boys' misbehaviour is viewed as a desire to assert themselves."(Reay, 2001)
- Teachers give boys a greater opportunity to expand ideas and be animated than they do with girls and that they reinforce boys more for general responses than they do for girls." (Marshall, 1997)
- The texts and storybooks tend to favour boys against girls, many of them describe a world in which boys and men are bright, curious, brave, inventive, and powerful, but girls and women are silent, passive, and invisible." (McCormick,1995)
- Many comments that teachers make during lessons, tests, or examination could be diminishing to both sexes, statements like “don't let those girls beat you”. Such statements demean one gender over another and make them appear more immature

Concept of Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is the public policy concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy action including legislation and programmes, in all areas and levels. It is a strategy geared towards realizing gender equality and interaction in all facets of policy intended towards combating discrimination of any form or kind. This is to enable policies and legislation to be of greater relevance to society by responding to the needs of all. The strategy also analyses all existing scenarios so as to identify inequalities and set up the machinery to undo them. It ensures that gender perspectives and attention is given to gender equity in all its ramifications. The term appeared first in international text after the United Nations Third world conference on women held in Nairobi in 1985. After the United Nations Fourth international conference on women(Beijing,1995), the Platform for Action adopted mainstreaming as a strategy for applying gender perspectives in all policies and programmes before decisions are taken on matters that affect men and women.

The principles of gender mainstreaming in activities and implementation measures, include ensuring:

1. Gender sensitive language in texts, publications, posters, textbooks, and addresses
2. Gender specific data collection and analysis. This implies that data should be analyzed and presented according to gender and other socio-economic parameters. This is to make real the information according to life realities.

3. Equal access to and utilization of services. This includes a clear statement on who uses the services, who are to be targeted, are the circumstances of men and women taken into consideration concerning usage of the services, who benefit most, and who suffers most
4. Women and men are equally involved in decision-making. This principle focuses on a balanced ratio of gender at all decision-making levels, measuring geared towards maintaining a balanced gender ratio should be in place at all levels,
5. when appointing people into offices or as speakers at events as well as when constructing workplace structures
6. Equal treatment integrated into steering processes. This improves the success rate and effectiveness and maximizes the utility of resources.

Gender mainstreaming requires the incorporation of both gender perspectives (linkages between gender and the sector areas or issues being dealt with, as ascertained through gender analysis) and attention to the goal of promoting gender equality (actions to be taken, on the basis of the understanding of gender perspectives acquired through gender analysis, to develop policy and programming which supports gender equality) (Hannan,2000). Implementation of gender mainstreaming requires therefore a clear understanding of what the gender perspectives/implications of different sector areas and issues are. Gender mainstreaming has become important for the following reasons

1. it puts people at the heart of policy-making
2. is likely to result in better government
3. it involves both men and women and ensures full utilization of resources
4. it makes gender equality issues visible in mainstream society
5. it takes into account the diversity between men and women.

It is worthy of note that the education sector occupies a significant position in the gender mainstreaming agenda. This is because of the socialization function of education. Aside from this, the classroom is the cradle for attitude and self-concept formation, as well as the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies for use in later life. The role of teachers in the implementation of policies in education is enormous. In other words, efforts at mainstreaming gender may be strangled by poor classroom delivery even in the face of worthwhile policy statements. This is why this paper focuses on practices that could help teachers to mainstream gender in their classrooms during activities and curriculum implementation and their implications.

Mainstreaming Gender in Classroom Activities

Leo-Rhynie (1999) working under the commonwealth secretariat project on gender mainstreaming, conceptualized it as the 'constituent use of gender perspectives at all stages of development and implementation of policies, plans

and projects'. In the education sector, gender mainstreaming encompasses and focuses on activities of the government and its organs at various points of policy formation as well as those of schools, colleges, and other educational institutions. It entails the fundamental transformation of underlying paradigms on which educational practices are posited.

At the classroom implementation level, mainstreaming gender includes an analysis of the curricula of all levels of education from the Early Childhood to tertiary levels to identify biases and to develop strategies and means to eradicate them. These areas include

- Educational policy and access
- curriculum/teaching/instructional objectives
- Subject choices available
- Teaching methods, techniques, and strategies
- Classroom interactions between teachers and learners and among learners (Howe, 1999)
- Teaching materials and facilities/infrastructure
- Modes of delivery
- Learner participation in classroom activities
- Modes of assessment of learning outcomes.

Though many nations have revised their curricula to ensure that both boys and girls are exposed to traditionally gendered areas of learning such as science, technology, Mathematics, languages, and Domestic Science by making some of them compulsory offerings, it is apparent that the way and manner the classroom events are conducted during teaching and learning have significant contributions to engendering division and stereotypes along gender lines (Howe,1999). Though these divisions may be unintended, their consequences are huge. Obasi and Obih (2016) expressed the view that the attitude of teachers either encourages or discourages educational attainment in learners. Citing Edem and Agusiobo (2008) and Krupnick (2008) to buttress the point that the classroom is a complex environment where interactions occur and its quality describes the type of classroom environment and consequently the development of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence in later life. Smith (1995) opines that teacher-expressiveness which is the ability of the teacher to communicate to students through the use of appropriate words, gestures and looks influences the health of the classroom and affects students' interest and motivation to learn even difficult topics irrespective of gender. Studies have also reported that teachers tend to use more negative words/comments for boys (Eccles and Blumenfield,1985) than In terms of classroom activity management, teachers tend to focus attention on boys than girls

In terms of classroom activity management, teachers tend to focus attention on boys than girls. Consequently,

- Girls are less challenged or stretched academically. This has serious implications for their future performance.
- Females and girls are often less likely to receive teachers' attention resulting in a feeling of less value thus reinforcing traditional pressures that force them to take the 'backseat' in classroom activities.
- Girls tend to have less confidence about speaking in public and participating in public issues and policies
- Boys are often more likely to lead groups, handle equipment, and even volunteer to make presentations than girls because of their quieter nature and backseat position.

Howe (1997) summarized the possible effects of interaction patterns on gender in the classroom as

- Boys contribute more than girls to whole-class interaction, and they receive more feedback from teachers on what they contribute.
- The predominance of boys is partly, though not entirely, due to teachers selecting boys to contribute more frequently than they do girls.
- The differences are unlikely to have relevance to academic performance, but may exert an influence on learning strategy, public confidence, and ultimately gender divisions.

Thus, goals to be achieved through gender mainstreaming in education include gender equality in enrolment and completion rates, structural equality within the teaching profession, and the addressing of gender stereotypes in school curricula and teacher education and classroom delivery processes (Neimanis, 2001). Mainstreaming and equity in classrooms require teachers to channel more of their professional efforts towards the quieter members of the class who oftentimes are females. The classroom atmosphere should positively be open to all genders in terms of warmth, recognition, valuing, interaction, and participation in activities including assuming leadership positions during such activities.

Closely related to this is paying attention to the methods teachers employ while teaching. Studies (Moemeke & Omoifo, 2017) studied the effect of expository and problem-solving instructional devices and reported that the PSH (Problem-solving heuristics) positively enhanced females in decision-making and competence development and concluded that some instructional strategies are more gender friendly than others. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has a flagship model for gender-positive classrooms called "Gender Responsive Pedagogy-GRP". The GRP model has been implemented since 2005. It was piloted in three FAWE Centers of Excellence in Kenya, Rwanda, and Tanzania and later extended to other schools and teacher training institutions (TTI) in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Senegal. Currently, the GRP model has been integrated into pre-service Teacher Training in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Teachers need to depart from all actions that tend to

foster the belief that certain subjects are appropriate for specific sexes. This has career decision influence on the sexes though differently.

Mainstreaming classroom activities in early childhood care centers

Evidence (Eccles & Blumenfeld,1985) has it that classroom experiences of children have a lasting impact on their later life choices and attitudes. Mainstreaming gender in classrooms should begin at the preschool level. Four basic gender-sensitive pillars in early childhood education are

1. Staff composition
2. Space concept
3. Education
4. Parental work.

Scambor and Krabel (2008) have suggested a five-step loop for the implementation of equity in early childhood education. These steps are

1. Formulation of main objectives
2. Gender Analysis
3. Formulation of subordinated targets
4. Implementation of measures
5. Evaluation

Traditionally, more women are found as staff in early childhood care centres. Mainstreaming requires that males and females demonstrate a variety of role models. An exchange of responsibilities previously assigned to females will help remove stereotypes.

In the area of space, there should be a conscious eradication of the habit of specifying play areas by gender such as where toys are kept and where building blocks can be assessed. Open fun and play areas should not be specifically defined but wheeled or kept in neutral places so that each child irrespective of gender can grab any one of them at any time.

In the area of education and material, extra care is needed in selecting books, songs, pictures, and illustrations. Those ones that depict mothers as homemakers and fathers asserting at dinner tables should be discouraged. All children should perform all roles irrespective of sex.

Because of the crucial role which parents play in the growing up of children, there is a need for both parents to be integrated into the mainstream of the educational affairs of their children.

For example, letters concerning children from schools should read "Dear parents" instead of the often encountered "Dear Mother". Fathers should be more visible in a matter of education and schooling instead of only women.

In analyzing early childhood care and the education sector for gender disparities, Scambor and Krabel (2008) recommend the 3Rs method put forward by the Swedish scientist Gertrud Aström.

1. Representation refers to the gender composition of girls and boys in different children's play areas. This may reveal disparities in the use of space by both genders and give teachers the opportunity to remedy them.
2. Resource distribution such as time, space, or attention. It may be on the amount of time that boys and girls are spending in different areas of the play such as in the gym, the garden, the toys area, the bathtub, etc, and the size of space that girls and boys use for playing such as painting a picture, playing soccer, dismantling toys and gadgets.
3. Realia refers to norms and values which influence gender roles and the attitudes and behaviour of girls and boys. Questions such as: Are the play areas divided into gender-stereotypical games and activities? Does the name of the game imply gender stereotypes?

Answers to these questions and more will give teachers insight into gender equity in their classrooms. All learners may thus be encouraged to engage in atypical games and to participate more in action-oriented activities. This could be achieved by:

1. Creating free play areas
2. Moving playthings around on wheels
3. Designating separate days for boys and girls to play specific games such as soccer,
4. Rotating leadership positions in the class on a weekly basis
5. Rotating experimentation and manipulation of certain equipment between the genders through scheduling.
6. UNESCO (2015), in its guide on teacher education has noted the conspicuous absence of curricula offering on gender issues in teacher education and called for a revision of teacher education curricula to prepare future teachers to mainstream gender when they begin their practice.

Efforts in this regard should be monitored by teachers through daily observation and inventories and videoing for possible stereotypes and for further remediation.

Strategies for mainstreaming gender in classroom activities

While huge efforts are being made in national, international, and regional circles towards mainstreaming gender, it is necessary to state that there is an absolute need to begin in the classroom where character, personality, vision, and career foci are built. In line with the gender management system (GMS) and Gender Action Plan, school management and teachers need to apply gender perspectives in

1. Provision of facilities and infrastructure that are gender sensitive. For example, it is obvious that girls require spending more time using toilet facilities than boys. For this obvious reason, more school toilets should be allocated to girls than boys. Issues about sanitation should also be considered in this regard realizing the high vulnerability of girls.

2. Considerations about the structure of classrooms, chairs, and tables in order to accommodate the special structural features of boys and girls alike.
3. Appointment of staff and allocation of special duties to them should utilize key ideas of gender mainstreaming since students develop role models from the roles performed by certain individuals.
4. Appointment of students as leaders should also be gender mainstreamed to debunk traditionally held views about gender competence and capacity in role performance.
5. Conscious efforts to mainstream gender should include sensitivity to language used by teachers in the classroom. This is of paramount importance in fostering equity in classrooms. Gender awareness training, orientations, and workshops for teachers and other school workers will help transform some traditional and cultural influences impinging on teachers' classroom actions into more globally accepted ones.
6. Classroom interactions should be open and feedback equitably given irrespective of gender by class teachers. This will encourage more volunteers from both genders during discussions and interactive sessions
7. Use of gender responsive pedagogy (GRP) in curriculum implementation and emphasizing gender achievement in teaching science, technology and mathematics should be consciously and deliberately included in teaching.
8. Assignment of roles during classroom learning activities should consider the gender perspective, especially in performance of tasks, handling of equipment, making presentations, etc
9. Non-verbal communications that accentuate traditional gender differences need to be carefully avoided by teachers. Such cues are easily picked up and have great influences on students' behaviours and attitudes towards learning and choices.
10. All teacher preferences that are gendered should be carefully and meticulously avoided in all classroom and teaching considerations.
11. Selection of textbooks, manuals, and other reading materials should consider the gender perspectives especially as it concerns the author's language use, pictures, diagrams, given examples, and gender achievements that are gender polarized.

Implications of gender mainstreaming in classroom activities

Life issues apply differently to people of different genders. Different genders also have different needs and life experiences. For these reasons, policies and measures that accord treatment may apply to girls and boys differently hence gender deserves a separate and independent consideration to prevent unfairness latently or overtly. Mainstreaming gender in the classroom aims at removing all forms of biases which might give an edge to one gender to the detriment of the other.

The classroom is a psychological and social learning environment whose health and ambiance determine the quality and amount of learning that can occur in it. Mainstreaming gender, race, and other forms of equity-related issues increase the healthy relationship among all concerned and consequently the achievement of learning outcomes.

One of the often advocated teaching approaches by almost all curricula is group work. However, its effectiveness is subject to the appropriateness of symmetry in the constitution of the groups. Howe (1997) explained that symmetry ensures the equitable distribution of abilities and skills needed for the work. Mainstreaming gender thus ensured that the abilities, skills, and knowledge of the learners are equitably distributed to the benefit of all.

Recommendations

The male and female genders made to complement one another in all facets of life. Each possesses a potential that is indispensable in national development. These potentials need to be maximally developed and utilized in both genders for this purpose. Gender biases that arise from cultural, traditional, and religious views undermine this fact. The school and specifically the classroom provide avenues to discourage and remedy these biases. It is therefore recommended that classroom activities should be gender fair in selection, implementation, and participation.

A gender perspective should be employed in determining what should be taught, how it should be taught, and how it should be taught. This should be ensured through teachers' continuous professional development in the area of gender equity.

Since gender mainstreaming has been adopted as an international strategy for fostering equity and equality, education practitioners, teachers, and policymakers in the Nigerian education system should explore and implement it absolutely to create a healthy classroom that supports all types of learning by all gender.

School facilities, infrastructure, and manpower should apply the gender perspective in employment, posting, and assignment of roles to teachers and other school personnel outside the traditional gendered lines to break the status quo and entrench new norms and values. Teachers should work deliberately to discourage all perceived biases in classroom activities in terms of participation, time, space, value assignment, nonverbal actions, and other subtle but influential actions that strengthen traditional gender biases during activities.

The curricula of Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) for preparing future teachers should be carefully revised. A survey of the curricula set by many TEIs around the world, that award teaching diplomas, degrees, and even postgraduate degrees (UNESCO, 2015) reveals a grave shortcoming regarding issues of gender equality. According to the UNESCO statement,

“Students being prepared to become school teachers are given courses on education theories, the psychology of learning, teaching methodologies and class management, evaluation and assessment, and one or two practicum courses. Nowhere can any emphasis on gender equality issues be seen. Even courses on curriculum design do not address such issues. This problem of omission needs to be addressed by curriculum designers of TEIs. Gender equality issues need to form an integral part of the curriculum in order to sensitize future teachers about gender equality so that they can become agents of change when they exercise their teaching profession in schools. It is all very well to guide schoolteachers in becoming gender-sensitive after they finish their pre-service preparation, but it is perhaps more effective to make them agents of change during their training in TEIs by mainstreaming gender into the different courses that form the curricula. The perspective of gender equality should therefore be explicitly recognized and stated in mission statements, as well as in the TEI programme and the course's expected outcomes”.

This statement is not only true but factual and should be addressed by curriculum designers and innovators if the message of gender mainstreaming will be integrated into the curriculum implementation.

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