Gender Equality in Schools: Implications for the Curriculum, Teaching and Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

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 highlights these aspects of educational provision-curriculum, teaching and learning, and the dynamics of the classroom and school. It further discusses a gender-equitable approach to schooling, making teaching and the curriculum gender equitable in schools and ways of educating teachers to promote gender equality in schools. The paper recommends changes needed to ensure that educational provision will promote gender equality in schools in the new millennium.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Curriculum, Classroom interaction.

Introduction

The slogan "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 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 play grounds 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-equality 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.

The Curriculum and Gender Equality

The Oxford Dictionary of English (2010) defines the curriculum as the subjects that are included in a course of study or taught 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 well as the way in which it is viewed and what is considered valuable. This means that the curriculum, and teaching practices, can express 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 years, there has been a great deal of curriculum reform as the country reassesses its national identity or position in the global economy. In Nigeria, 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. The National Policy of Education (FGN; 2004) and the national curriculum documents express the commitment in terms of providing education for all children.

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 the wider society. In Nigeria, 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 in mathematics and that boys cannot learn about the care of young children (Shakeshaft, 1995).

Curriculum assumptions such as these, and the teaching that accompany them, may reinforce gender inequalities, with girls often channelled into "lower status" subjects. In Nigeria, it can be said girls may have almost gained equal access to schooling. However, this does not mean that they have gained equal access to the curriculum, and the power that is related to certain types of knowledge. In Nigeria today, there has been a conscious effort to present girls in positive roles. Famous women from history are included, for example, Queen Amina of Zazau and Inikpi of Idah, who fought for their states, and Grace Alele Williams who is renowned for her educational achievements and services to the society. Clear messages on the importance of girls' education

and the need for equal opportunities are also included. -

However, the tendency to cast the positive roles of women in the characters of the idealized and exceptionally heroic has not been very effective. In addition, gender stereotyping and inequalities persist in the narratives. Women appear largely in material roles, while the decision makers and protectors tend to be male. In one text book, 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.

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 wheel chair access (Akpakwu, 2009).

International researches suggests that boys have a disproportionate share of contributions in whole class interaction due partly to their being selected by the teacher more frequently than girls, but also to their ability to create both positive and negative conditions which attract teachers' attention and facilitate their participation and dominant position in classroom interaction (Shakeshaft, 1995; Taole, 1995; Smith, 1992; Wilson, 1991). This dominant position of the boys provides them with an important learning experience, i.e. the confidence of being listened to and responded to within the public domain, thus stimulating them to participate more (Howe; 997). Girls may thereby be unintentionally pushed out of the centre of the action, learning to expect a lower participation level than boys.

There is substantial evidence internationally (Jungwirth; 1991, Robinson; 1992 and Smith, 1992), that teachers-even those well disposed to the question of equal opportunities - interact differentially with their boys and girls and that this may operate to the disadvantage of girls. Observations in the classroom have shown that boys both demand and get more teacher attention (Wilson, 1991; Robinson, 1992; Akpakwu; 2009). A substantial amount of this is in the form of disciplinary interventions. Boys of all ages also receive more praise from both female and male teachers, even though teachers are adamant that they do not give more attention to boys than girls (Kaiser, 1991).

Studies have also suggested that, within the classroom, teachers often exploit rivalry between the sexes to motivate or manage pupils. Boys tend to dominate classroom talk and there is evidence to suggest that teachers deliberately gear the content of lessons towards boys' interests in order to retain attention and control (Wilson, 1991). Girls remain largely passive and "invisible" in class and teachers have been found to downgrade their achievements (Stanworth, 2003). These studies suggest that such negative interactions in the classroom between boys and girls affect girls' self-esteem and their confidence.

The differences in patterns of classroom interaction appear to be unrelated to the level of experience of the teachers concerned. Studies have found no difference in interaction patterns and the teachers' years of teaching experience (Omvig, 2005). The gender of the teachers also appears not to exert any difference on patterns of classroom interaction (Jungwirth, 1991). Teachers of all levels of experience tend to interact more with male students than with female students. However, previous training in classroom interaction strategies has been found to be significantly related to classroom behaviour, with trained teachers more consistently providing an equitable classroom environment (Omvig, 2005).

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, some teachers say 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 marginalizes girls (Amott, 2004).

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 their subject. According to Akpakwu (2003), 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 in Nigeria 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 administrators, need training and their ways of working need to be endorsed and supported by the community. In order to achieve this, a gender-equitable approach to school programmes should be put in place as discussed below:

A Gender-equitable Approach to Schooling

Gender equity 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. According to Skelton as cited in Amott (2004), a gender-equity programme should make an assessment of the school by looking at four key questions.

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

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 would mean changes to 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 (Weiner, 2004). This calls for making teaching and the curriculum gender equitable in schools.

Making Teaching and the Curriculum Gender Equitable

There is 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. In Nigeria, curriculum design for non-formal education, through academic-activist partnerships, was put in place in programmes such as the National Literacy Campaigns. For instance, curricula resource manuals were developed for a residential course for young women and numeracy manuals were prepared using women's indigenous knowledge (Akpakwu, 2009). In India, experience has shown that developing courses and curricular for out- of- school and adolescent girls calls for strategic and effective partnership in practice (Sharma, 2003). This would ensure a sharing of expertise between university professionals, women groups, Non - Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and education functionaries, for the transforming potential of the course to be fully explored.

In schools and colleges, the curriculum is usually full, which means it is not easy to integrate a gender equity perspective in the design, content and teaching approaches 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 governmental control (Akpakwu, 2009). But, where diversity is recognized and participatory processes are employed, women and girls from different backgrounds can participate in discussions about curricula decisions and how they are represented — considering that they are diverse groups.

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

•   **Curriculum content:** there is need to consider what girls from poor, and marginalized 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 theft lives.
•   **Learning methods:** often, images in textbooks are simply 'check-listed for their portrayal of gender images. Children do not necessarily have simplistic, preconditioned responses to images in textbooks, and need a more sophisticated understanding of and response to how children learn about gender textbooks.
•   **Language of instruction and literacy:** children who are geographically or culturally marginalized 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 "prestige" language than men. In what ways is the language of instruction empowering or disabling for girls and boys differently and how can this be ameliorated?
•   **Methods of evaluation and assessment:** examinations tend to dominate assessment, but other methods should be used, such as continuous assessment. In addition, "girls could have more equal opportunities in school if teachers talk to them more and encourage them, for instance by giving them more prizes for participating in different classroom activities". For teaching and the curricula to be gender equitable in schools, it is important to properly educate teachers on gender quality teaching through the courses and practical materials that are provided. This is discussed below.

Educating the Teachers
(a)   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 bafflers 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 (Burns, 2004).

(b)   Relationship and style 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. Teacher's education 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, as Akpakwu (2005) has observed, men tend to dominate school committees, while women fi1lfill 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 analyzed and addressed. -

(c).   Teaching and living gender equity
         Teacher education also needs to address not only how teachers and educational managers leach 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 theft role in addressing it. For example, teachers have to learn how to make their students become aware of their sexuality and, in this age of HIV/AIDS, provide a model of risk-free sex behaviour.

(d).   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 need for teachers, NGOs, and community-based organizations 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 the society.
         It is in this area that the activities of clubs in Liberia, a West African Sub-Region become very useful to Nigeria. In Liberia, the forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has introduced after-school clubs for girls in primary and junior secondary schools to encourage them to continue with schooling, and to help them analyze 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 characterized by violence and displacement (Johnson and Aikman, 2005). Perhaps the experience of the Liberian situation can be used in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria where girls and boys have been deprived of education due to environmental degradation caused by oil and violence that have made boys and girls to live in severe economic hardships without education.

Conclusion
This paper discussed the content and delivery of education and how it can reflect and reproduce gender inequalities in the curriculum, teaching and classroom interactions. It advocated for a gender-equitable approach to schooling, ways of making teaching and the curriculum gender-equitable in schools and the ways of educating teachers on teaching. The paper concluded that making schools more "girl-friendly" and gender equitable means challenging the culture of authorities, hierarchy, and social control in the majority of the schools. It would also mean changes to the curriculum, the breaking down of hierarchies and the power networks that exclude girls and women. The paper recommended changes needed to ensure that educational provision will promote gender equality in schools in the new millennium.

Recommendations
In order to achieve a gender-equitable education iii schools in Nigeria; the following recommendations are made.

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.

Government and other relevant stakeholders:

•   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 marginalized because of language, social practice or environmental degradation.
•   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 schools, with clear procedures for dealing with abuse, winch are widely communicated.
•   Ensure that training in gender equality is included in the teacher- education programme, both in pie-service training and in-service school-.based, college-based training or university-based training.
•   Develop capacity and role of the inspectorate and gender units to support gender equality in the classroom at all levels of educational institutions
•   Assess the planning and budgeting processes, and ensure that officials at all levels of education have the capacity to implement them. Put in place any necessary training required to achieve this.

Head Teachers

The success of any educational programme depends to a large extent on its implementation by those concerned especially the head teachers. In order to achieve a gender equitable education in schools, head teachers should therefore

•   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 schools and teacher's own values and culture, and aspirations for gender equality,
•   Be trained and empowered to analyze and challenge gender stereotyping and gender bias in curriculum materials, in language use and relations in the school and with the community.
•   Recognize the many pressure on women teachers, and encourage supportive networks and practices.

Parents and Community Members

        Parents and community members play vey - vital roles towards the achievement of a gender- equitable education in schools. They should therefore:

•   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.

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