

The Drawbacks and Transcendency of Gender-neutral Education in China

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Abstract. International consensus on education issues attaches great importance on gender justice. Gender equality is the core of today's concept of the pursuit of equality in education and the pursuit of gender equality in China has gone through over half a century. There are three typical types of education from gender perspective, namely, gender-neutral education, gendered education and gender-sensitive education. China has formed long-standing tradition of gender-neutral education, especially school education. At that certain history background, it has largely improved woman's socioeconomic status but many problems have been exposed at a micro level. The aim, content and process of gender-neutral education ignore and distort the lives, experience and personality of woman. It has reinforced the stereotypes of two genders and set against the masculinity and femininity, which has negative impact on the road of both males and females to grow up into a full person. Gender-sensitive education is the main approach to remedy the gap of gender-neutral education. The basic standpoints and measures of gender-sensitive education include emphasizing the gender differences without being restricted, empowering woman and guiding males and females to be a full person with both excellent masculinity and femininity.

1. Introduction

When it comes to gender-related education, there are three typical types of gender-related education, which is gender-neutral education, gendered education and gender-sensitive education respectively. The initial rudiment of gender-neutral education can date back to Plato's work *the Republic*. The main principle of gender-neutral education is that sex is a difference that makes no difference [1]. With reference to Plato's specialized natures of postulate and postulate correspondence, those suited by nature to perform the same role should be given the same education. For Plato, males and females can engage in the same position in society and therefore education can be the same for them. Plato perceives the job of education to be preparation of people to adapt to their predestined roles in society while it does not include responsibilities and roles in family, marriage and child-rearing.

The history of gendered education can trace back to Rousseau's masterpiece *Emile* where he defines differences of gender responsibilities and therefore advocates differences in the education of Emile and Sophie. The main ideal of Rousseau is that gender is the difference that makes a difference. Like Emile is educated to be a citizen in the state, while Sophie is educated as a good wife and mother bearing full responsibility in reproductive processes. Societal status, responsibilities, personal traits and education are all assigned to individuals according to their gender. Until now, according to our stereotypes, nurturance, supportiveness, empathy and sensitivity still mainly belong to female attributes [2].

Martin proposed a gender-sensitive ideal by joining Rousseau's insight to Plato's insight [3]. The main conception of gender-sensitive is to take gender into account when it makes a difference and ignore it when it does not.

In the past feudal society in China, traditional male and female roles are not only substantially different, but also highly unequal. The most influential and dominant culture is Confucian attitudes that advocate a strong hierarchy in both public and private spheres of life depending on gender. In

ancient China, women are subordinate to men and treated as inferiors. Males are given the dominant position in productive process of society and assigned to superior strength, greater stamina and higher intelligence. Females are encouraged to be submissive and obedient. Males play a predominant role in economic and political authorities, but females are the victims of prejudice and discrimination who are valued as their abilities of reproductive process of society.

Fortunately, in the post-Qing Republican China of the 1920s and 1930s, women are encouraged to acquire modern knowledge and go to work. Communist triumph in 1949 have challenged this hierarchy and evaluated woman's social status sharply. A series of policies and measures are instituted to raise the status of women, as well as the slogan " women are able to hold up half the sky ". Under such circumstances, China has formed long-standing tradition of gender-neutral education since the founding of the country, especially school education. The budding stage of gender-neutral education is the law enforced in the first year of republic. It has indicated that primary schools can be co-educational schools. Gender-neutral education advocates that both men and women could attend the same school and receive the same education [4].

Achieving gender justice in educational sphere has been accorded great importance among international consensus. There are two gender-based goals emphasized by the Millennium Development goals among all the whole eight international development goals in 2015, namely, to achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women. Gender equality is also the core of today's concept of the pursuit of education justice in China, which has gone through over half a century. Equality between genders has long been written into national laws. Constitution of the People's Republic of China adopted in 1982 has articulated in the 48th article: women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal right with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, culture and social, and family life.

At the early stage of a new nation with long feudal history, the notion of the sameness of men and women advocated by our party and government was beneficial to eliminate the traditional thought of " male superiority to female " that was deeply rooted in the past patriarchal society and guarantee women rights. Gender-neutral has improved the enrollment and completion of education of female students rapidly. Between 1949 and 1981, the proportions of female students in primary and secondary schools increased steadily [5].

In spite of these efforts and changes, four decades after the founding of the People's Republic, gender inequality persists in China. Woman's double burden of full-time paid work and major responsibilities for child care and housework, lack of representation of women in political affairs and discriminatory attitudes about proper qualities of husbands and wives have still remained [5].

In gender-neutral education, we understand gender equality as the right to education that focuses on the same access and participation of schooling for both sexes, but neglect the right within education like gender-aware educational environments and interaction, as well as rights through education linked with meaningful education outcomes and gender justice in a wider spheres of social life. However, an exclusive focus on numbers can present apparent progress but hide real patterns of discrimination and disadvantages [6]. The absolute view of justice with emphasis on gender identity and ignorance of gender difference has emerged huge demerits and limitations. Less research has linked the phenomena above with our current gender-neutral education and doubt this kind of gender-free view of education. This paper is aimed to looking at the drawbacks of gender-neutral education in China and exploring a better way of gender-based education to realize gender justice at a more substantial level.

2. Three Main Drawbacks of Gender-neutral Education

2.1 Ignorance and distortion about woman's experience and knowledge related to family and reproductive processes in educational aim of gender-neutral education

The aim of education is the general requirement of what kind of person the educated children are trained to be. It is the starting point and the ultimate goal of all educational activities. As a kind of social policy, the aim of education itself do have certain value orientation with the representative of

ruling class. Through different periods' statement of education purpose from specific education policy in China, we can find that our country's education purpose has reflected distinct characteristics of the times which have experienced the process of " education serves politics " to " education serves economy " . The purpose of cultivating communism successor or the builder of market economy has no substantial difference from the extent that both is aimed at developing contributing people in the field of social sphere and public affairs. From the perspective of western gender theory, the aim of education takes gender-neutral value in terms of cultivating a society person as the basic orientation of school education. Under the past social background of inequality of male and female, gender-neutral education has improved woman's social status rapidly and created more opportunities for their secondary, tertiary education and occupation which allows them to participate in decision-making about public affairs gradually.

However, there are some limitations of the portraying of an educated person with respect to its gender bias. Family and society are two major fields of human activities. People are both social and family existence. The reproduction of human beings themselves is the main code of production in the private and family sphere, while the reproduction of material wealth is the main mode of production in public sphere. Obviously, the aims of education highlight the pursuit of people's achievement of productive process of society, which gives rise to the imbalanced development of these two parts of life. Correspondingly, males and females who are two representative groups of public and private sphere respectively have been attached with different social priorities. More importantly, the value priority of gender-neutral education shows the tendency in favor of the worship of object but not the right, dignity and value of a person.

2.2 gender bias in textbook and elimination of girls' self-efficacy in STEM field

As the 4th The United Nations World Conference on Women has mentioned: " Curricula and teaching materials remain gender-biased to a large degree, and are rarely sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. This reinforces traditional female and male roles that deny women opportunities for full and equal partnership in society. " The State Council ratified a programme for the Development of Chinese Children (2001-2010): " Awareness of gender equality shall be incorporated in the contents of education. " Compared with the unequal access to schooling, gender bias in the content of education especially textbook and curriculum is a low-profile education issue. However, experts have argued that gender bias in textbook is a near-universal, quite persistent but virtually invisible barrier that is camouflaged by taken-for-granted stereotypes about gender roles in the road to realize gender equality [7]. Discriminatory contents in textbook influence the development of students subtly as a kind of hidden curriculum by misrepresenting and ignoring the lives, experience and roles of women, thus reinforcing discriminatory tendencies and undermining female's self-esteem, education aspiration and self-efficacy, which might have profound impact on their academic achievement and easily fall into vicious circle.

There are several patterns of gender bias in textbooks in gender-neutral education in China. For example, in mathematics books using in elementary schools, males are almost two-third of those depicted and comprise 74% of those in stimulating activities, by contrast, females account for 70% of those in passive activities [8]. The number of appearances of male characters in certain education circumstances is disproportionately over-represented. Meanwhile, females appear most often in reading materials that mainly focus on family stories [9]. In Yi's analysis of social studies texts, 100% of scientists and soldiers are male, whereas 75% of service personnel are female [10]. Female characters are generally described in textbook as caregivers in family sphere, while male characters are assigned with decision makers and governors in public activities. Gender bias in textbook has invisibly reproduced the gender-stereotyped roles of females who are passive learners and confined in the family sphere, which will constrain both man and woman's visions of who they are and what they can become.

The content of textbook and other learning materials have profound impact on girls' academic achievement and self-efficacy. The stereotypes of both genders' occupational and household roles have been perpetuated again in textbooks, which may impede girls' academic performance.

Consequently, the underrepresentation of females in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields has become a typical phenomenon around the world. Gender stereotypes relying on biologically-based believe that men performs better in STEM tests, whereas women do better in arts. However, some researches confirm that girls perform similarly or even better than boys on generic science literacy tests in most nations by using the latest international database on adolescent achievement. Nonetheless, women gain fewer college degrees in STEM study [11]. It can be hypothesized that even though there is nearly no substantive distinction between two genders' cognitive level, females' opportunities for further study and occupation in STEM career have been largely hindered due to other causes.

Analysis of PISA results suggests that the gender gap in math scores disappears in countries with a more gender-equal culture with reference to a higher score in the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index that reflects economic and political status, education and well-being for women [12]. At the same time, some articles consider sex differences in science attitudes, including science self-efficacy, broad interest in science and enjoyment of science. Students take their own thought about their relative performance and perceived individual strengths into consideration, when it comes to decisions about further educational and occupational choices [11]. In turn, according to social learning theory, individual's belief that he or she can master a specific challenge, namely, self-efficacy has turned out to be a significant determinant of student's performance. The meta-analysis of self-efficacy has showed that gender does matter for the degree of self-efficacy level in study [13]. Boys are more likely to have higher self-efficacy, more joy in science and pick up a wilder interest in science. Those are the basis of their perceived individual strengths and self-efficacy that play a key role in their future education achievement and occupational choices. As far as the construction background of girls' self-efficacy, some contents of textbook constantly strengthens the natural relationship between male and the competence of learning science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Gender-biased curriculum and textbooks continuously stress a belief bias which mismatches the actual life experience and facts of males and females in China's diverse and rapidly changing communities [14]. Those subtle and interactive effects caused by gender inequality in the contents of education lower girls' education aspiration and self-efficacy towards academic achievement, hence disadvantaged participation in STEM field.

2.3 Gender-neutral education reinforces and perpetuates the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity

Masculinity and femininity are two important psychological conceptions and widely used in gender theory researches. It refers different population characteristics and behavioral patterns between two genders under social culture according to western gender theory. Unlike biological sex that is defined based on an individual's reproductive organs as being male or female, masculinity and femininity are related to an individual's gender in terms of their social roles and status of socially ascribed normative behavior tendencies and characteristics [15]. Masculinity and femininity are generally used to describe males and females respectively. People are likely to believe that masculinity totally belongs to male and femininity totally belongs to female, and they feel that those two traits are substantial, general and static. If a person show so-called characteristic from the opposite gender, they may be treated as the result of gender alienation.

Actually there is logically possible for a person of either gender with both masculinity and femininity. There is no characteristic that only belongs to one gender, such as bold is suitable for both genders. Under the core value orientation in favor of patriarchy, masculinity is assigned as positive gender-based traits, whereas femininity is labeled as negative traits. Not only does some traits which males and females can both possess are genderized artificially, but also they are distinguished and evaluated differently according to sex. Firstly, all the most desirable qualities that related to productive process of society are developed in favor of men, such as powerful, analytical, assertive and dominating. On the contrary, the qualities assigned to women, such as empathetic, supportive and nurturant are confined to reproductive process of society. Secondly, people tend to incline masculinity as positive and active qualities like rational, independent and tolerant, but connect femininity with

negative and passive qualities including sensitive, obedient and blinkered. Thirdly, there are double standards held up to evaluate a disposition that is possessed by male and female, which places a burden on two genders. Consider aggressiveness, aggressive man means ambitious and capable, however, aggressive woman means uncaring and bitchy. Unfortunately, those established norms and society culture has constantly reinforce and perpetuate the gender stereotype. Gender-neutral education is one of the accomplices that strengthens the discrimination from its goal, content and process at a micro level of education system. The definition of narrowly sex-typed traits categories inhibit behaviors that are stereotyped as the opposite sex. It deters both males and females from engaging freely in both masculine and feminine behaviors to realize their comprehensive development.

Bem claimed that many people might be androgynous with both masculinity and femininity and those androgynous persons are mentally healthier and socially adaptive [16]. Gender-neutral education has intensified gender stereotypes and limited the definition of masculinity and femininity. A person's makeup is vivid and flexible. Simply forcing people to comply with take-for-granted gender traits might do harm to both genders and cause a series of social adaptation issues [17]. For example, it does harm to males' mental health, such as alexithymia and low relationship satisfaction [18].

3. Discussion

Jane Roland Martin firstly put forward the concept of gender-sensitive education on the basis of Plato's gender-free education and Rousseau's gendered education. She advocates that we should be sensitive to biological sex differences and its social significance, recognize gender stereotype and understand the causes and consequences, and then take more inclusive measures on gender [19]. There are three main principles and operational guidelines with respect to the transcendency from gender-neutral education to gender-sensitive education.

3.1 Emphasize the gender differences without being restricted

Gender difference is an important part of our human nature. These existences make human life rich, vibrant and vigorous. The progress and innovation of our culture has historically relied on many variation and diversity of human beings, the most typical one among which is gender differences. Education is also the progress of inheritance and innovation of human civilization. It has duty to support both males and females to understand, accept and respect their gender differences. Everyone should be encouraged to express their gender personality multifariously and boldly. School education should lead students to distinguish formed gender stereotypes and understand their causes and consequences, avoiding them falling into the limitation of gender or taking gender bonus for granted. More precisely, such as girls could be rational, brave and independent, boys could also be sensitive, tender and emotional. The general position of gender-sensitive education has two opposite but not contradictory standpoints. Educators do not need to consider gender differences when facing problems that have nothing to do with gender, such as which group should develop logic thinking, which group should develop self-esteem. Meanwhile, gender differences should be taken into consideration when it comes to specific educational methods. That means we should adopt flexible forms of education organizations on the basis of related gender issues.

3.2 Empower woman and incorporate woman's live, experience, personality, and those related knowledge about reproductive process of the society in education sphere

There exists much ignorance and misrepresentation of woman's live, experience and personality in the aim, content and process of education sphere. As the 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report claims that textbooks, curricula and teacher attitudes continue to reinforce stereotype on gender roles in society. Gender-sensitive education advocates to empower women for helping them break the silence and inequality in education field. Both males and females should be exposed to and identify gender bias in schooling which enables them not to be gender-blind in the future. As for males, they need opportunities to engage in so-called academic and professional field with femininity, thus

strengthening their understanding of woman's positive personality, cognitive perspective and experience related to reproduction of the society. Those female celebrities who have shattered the gender ceiling can be good examples to awake and encourage more females to break through their comfort zone. As far as micro level of school education is concerned, curriculum and textbook should incorporate and reflect more achievements from woman in both public and family field. Those excellent personality and perception that is traditionally associated with woman in family sector should also be included in the aim of education for preparation of cultivating a full person.

3.3 Guide the Male and Female to Grow Up into A Full Person with Authentic Masculinity and Femininity

Based on the flexibility and diversity of human being and the development of gender cognition, we need to go beyond biological sex. There never exists one personality that only belongs to male or female. Instead, Generalizing about what is masculine and what is feminine is dangerous. When viewing gender as a pair of opposites, we might miss the fact that maleness and femaleness are complex concepts, there are more similarities as being a human. What is considered masculine and feminine is culture-determined and cultural stereotypes, but not for the purpose of human's integrated development. We need to get away from the extreme qualities but get more in the middle, for all of us to better adapt to the society and develop a healthy balance of characteristics in both sexes.

Starting early is an efficient way to shape an integrated person. It means we can be more effective to challenge extreme gender stereotypes before children take root in boys and girls. At the beginning stage of their gender awareness, boys and girls can be separated in order to allow them to nurture traits traditionally viewed as opposite quality. Boys can learn to be more group oriented and compassionate, girls can be trained to be more strong and willing to adventure. This can help children be more open-minded and have a greater understanding of gender equality. There is nothing like a quick fix to this huge inequality in the world, but if we do a little bit here and there in our way of education, and then we will get some results among our young generations.

4. Conclusion

Educational tradition of modern education in China from gender perspective can be mainly defined as gender-neutral education. Gender-neutral education emphasizes the sameness of males and females and neglects the difference of gender in education sphere. It advocates that male and female should be cultivated into the same kind of person who is equipped with skills and knowledge that are adapted to public and productive process of society. At that certain history background, it has largely improved woman's socioeconomic status and created more college degrees and occupational opportunities for woman to participate in public sphere. It has emancipated the thoughts of woman to fully realize their own potential. However, it reveals lots of limitations which need critical inheritance and innovative transformation. The aim, content and process of gender-neutral education ignore and distort the lives, experience and personality of woman. The gender-neutral education artificially causes more gender inequality that decreases females' self-efficacy in STEM field and therefore impedes their promotion in secondary and tertiary education. Also, it has reinforced the stereotypes of two genders and set against the masculinity and femininity, which has negative impact on the road of both males and females to grow up into a full person. The approach to realize the critical inheritance and innovative transformation of gender-neutral education is to advocate gender-sensitive education. The basic standpoints and measures of gender-sensitive education include emphasizing the gender differences without being restricted, endowing woman with vocal right in education and guiding males and females to be a full person with both excellent masculinity and femininity.

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