



Gender Equality in K-12 Education of Contemporary China

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Abstract. This paper aims to review the issue of gender equality in contemporary China's K-12 education. This paper targets students in K-12 education to study the causes and specific manifestations of gender inequality in the current education system. It is found in this paper that gender inequality in education has always existed, although people may not be aware of it. The long-standing stereotypes of gender in education, along with the neglect and misguidance of LGBT students can demonstrate this. In addition, there are a series of profound and complex reasons underlying the phenomenon of gender inequality in education, which include the impact of school education and family education underlying the influence of society and its culture. The contribution of this paper is to inspire future research to pay more attention to gender equality in K12 education in contemporary China, thereby reducing the gender gap in the future.

Keywords: Education · Gender equality · Gender stereotypes · LGBT students · School education · Family education · Society and its culture

1 Introduction

This paper reviews the gender inequality during the process of K-12 education and analyzes their realistic reasons, along with social and historical reasons. Previous research argues that whenever it comes to the issues of gender inequality in education, researchers tend to study the fact of female students receiving unfair opportunities in education [1]. Given the gradual improvement of the popularization rate of K-12 education in China, especially in urban areas, the author believes that the present research should also focus more on the whole groups of students and the underlying reasons for gender discrimination. When researchers study the issue of gender equality in education, they tend to pay attention to only the issue of equality at the conceptual level, ignoring some behaviors in reality (e.g., invisible inequalities), and lacks attention to LGBT students. This research paper aims to investigate the issues of gender inequality in K-12 education in detail, and studies the causes and effects, hoping to provide some ideas and directions for solving this educational problem.

2 Phenomenon and Causes of Inequality in Education

2.1 Phenomenon of Inequality in Education

According to the characteristics of the object, task, content, and form of education, in this paper, educational practice is mainly divided into three types: family education, school education, and social education [2]. Although female's social status has been rising tremendously and people's awareness of gender equality has also been gradually strengthened since the founding of the People's Republic of China, it is undeniable that gender inequality still exists in all aspects of society, and there's no exception in the field of education. In China, education plays a fundamental and guiding role in economic and social development, also in the process of China's national rejuvenation. And in the current education system, basic education, which is K12 education (kindergarten through twelfth grade) from preschool to high school education, may be the most critical key. Therefore, in order to improve and eventually change the current situation of gender inequality among society, this paper provides few reasonable ideas and perspectives for realizing this great vision of mankind by studying the phenomenon and causes of gender inequality in K12 education.

2.1.1 Stereotypes of Gender

First of all, this paper discusses a typical example of gender stereotypes in education, which fully and vividly reflect the phenomenon of gender inequality. For example, the relationship between branches of Arts or Sciences and the gender of students.

Since 1945, there has been a practice of dividing liberal arts and natural science into two different subjects in China's current education system [3]. There's no significant difference for students in nine-year compulsory education, but they will be branched into Arts or Sciences subjects in senior high school, usually in senior two, and different test papers will be also used in the college entrance examination eventually. Facing this reality, it is almost a common sense that, female students are more suitable for studying liberal arts and male students are more suitable for studying science. Not only educators and parents tend to have such stereotypes, but also students themselves will naturally accept and believe this idea under the influence of such social environment. In fact, this gender stereotype generated by the branches of Arts and Sciences is actually the stereotype of the learning ability of students of different genders. For example, it is generally believed that male students have more advantages than female students in learning mathematics, and female students are better at language subjects such as Chinese and English. The basis of this concept comes from psychologists who believe that there are objective differences between male and female in psychological function. Female are better than male in language expression and short-term memory ability, while male are better than female in spatial perception ability, analysis and comprehensive ability, also experimental observation and reasoning [4]. Nevertheless, some experiments in recent years show that there is no significant difference between gender and students' total scores in Arts and Sciences, which verifies that male and female students have roughly the same potential in Arts and Sciences learning [5]. Educators do not need to give special understanding or guidance to students from the perspective of gender

differences, but should understand their students from the actual state, so as to improve the efficiency of education.

2.1.2 Issues of LGBT Students Has Long Been Ignored

Before discussing the issues of LGBT students in education, first of all, the author believes that, K12 educational stage is the main stage of students' physiological gender development, the formation of gender consciousness and the establishment of gender model. Sex and gender education is a powerful way to help students form a healthy gender identity and gender concept.

At present, China's sex and gender education is obviously insufficient, family education pay too little attention to or tend to avoid responsibility, and school education in K12 stage is in a relatively casual and missing state, moreover, its educational object coverage is not wide enough for ignoring LGBT students in most cases [6]. Even due to the educators' prejudice against LGBT groups affects the survival status of LGBT students in school, which will lead to misguidance and negative self-denial, students' physical or mental doubts about sex and gender of this age are rarely answered, and the lack of care and protection of adults, which makes them more likely to suffer unfair treatment or even violence because of their LGBT identity or showing the tendency of being LGBT people. Even worse, due to these unpleasant experiences during K12 education, they choose to become LGBT people later in their adult life. There's survey data show that the probability of LGBT students suffering from campus bullying is higher than that of common students. The LGBT students who have suffered or witnessed campus bullying will have lower mental health level and the possibility of practicing more risky behaviors [7]. By reviewing literatures, the author found that most of the criticism and campus bullying against LGBT students are due to the behaviors inconsistent with the physiological gender and the homosexuality, and among theses, mainly for physiological male students, who show the characteristics of female students and gay men. Female students who show masculinity are often not condemned, or even regarded as a positive quality or personality [8], and lesbian students are often ignored by peers or educators without causing trouble. The author believes that in the field of education, the deep cause behind these issues of LGBT students is still the long-standing concept of gender inequality. That LGBT students with male physiological gender are more likely to be treated unfairly, reflects the positive social expectation of male gender role and the negative social expectation of female gender role, which is, misogyny in education.

2.2 Causes of Inequality in Education

After analyzing a few typical phenomenon of the gender inequality in education, this paper will discuss the causes of gender inequality in education from the aspects of school education, family education, as well as social education in following articles.

2.2.1 In the Field of School Education

In school education, the teaching work of educators often depends on designated textbooks and their specified syllabus and learning depth. In K12 stage, textbooks are almost

the central content of a class and play a vital role in the educational practice under China's current education system. Textbooks are also a significant source for students to gain knowledge and practice skills, also for accepting social norms and values during this process. However, Scholars at home and abroad have done a lot of research on textbooks and come to a consistent conclusion that gender bias and gender stereotypes are common in textbooks in various countries [9]. The author believes that this is not conducive to students to establish a correct and healthy gender concept, and will further continue the idea of gender inequality among the society. Taking the current version of junior middle school English textbooks published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press as an example, the statistical data show that, the frequency of introducing outstanding figures of male roles is higher than that of female roles. Male roles have far richer occupations and often have better chance of being well paid than female roles. In terms of family description, the participation of male roles is lower than that of female roles, and women are often described as the image of housewife [10]. It can be seen that the textbook has serious gender bias and gender stereotypes in not only single aspect: In the gender interpretation of role behavior, male prefer carrying out activities that need strength, while female only prefer moderate activities; Male students are encouraged to be more active and even naughty, while female students are more industrious and obedient; In describing the family and social status of gender roles, male always occupy a dominant position; In terms of personality traits, male are usually described as more intelligent than female [10]. Under such subtle influence of textbooks, it is rather difficult for students, especially female students, to actually feel gender inequality in their life, but their thoughts will undoubtedly be imprisoned, which may lead to the failure to fully stimulate their potential, which is completely contrary to the original intention of education.

In addition, there is an undeniable lack of sex and gender education in school education. Although the popularity of sex education in schools has improved by steps in recent years, still, formalism is serious, and has not achieved the due educational effect. Most students still rely on self-study and peer communication to spread and gain gender and sexual knowledge [11]. In this way, the efficiency of sex education is very low, putting students at risk of long-term misunderstandings, even the practice of seriously dangerous behavior. Students in K12 stage have experienced a relatively complete stage of psychologically sexual enlightenment and physiological development. If the sexual and gender doubts generated in this stage cannot be properly solved, negative attitudes towards gender and sex and the wrong beliefs will affect their whole adolescence and even adulthood. Due to the lack of gender education of correct and healthy, students in this period, especially female students, often encounter sexual stigma and harassment among their peers due to the obvious development of secondary sexual characteristics, such as indecent nicknames and pornographic jokes with sexual hints. According to the result of the interview organized by L.L. Xu from Zhejiang University in China [12], the embarrassment and inconvenience caused by menstruation often can not be helped and understood by their male peers, but will lead to menstrual shame. The legitimate need to use sanitary napkins has even become a behavior that must be carried out quietly or will brought ridicule [13]; Equally, male students whose secondary sexual characteristics are not obvious or slowly development are vulnerable to ridicule and even

campus bullying. These experiences will inevitably have negative effects on students at this stage. Physiologically, for example, in order to hide their well development of secondary sexual characteristics, they tend to produce bad posture such as hunchback, and irrational weight loss in adolescence will affect physical development and cause long-term sub-health; psychologically, it produces body shame and negative self-denial. More seriously, it distorts students' gender identity, cause biases in gender concepts, or even depression and weariness of learning. These experiences in adolescence will bring negative attitudes towards gender and sex in their adult lives, these affected people are more likely to show abnormal and unhealthy states in facing issues of sex and gender, such as tendency of depression, gender inequality and gender opposition. The author believes that this kind of abnormality and unhealthy on sex and gender issues, through the current school education or without reasonable education, will be continue to pass on from generation to generation.

2.2.2 In the Field of Family Education and Social Education

The patriarchal system and its culture of male's superiority over female have lasted for thousands of years in China. Although all aspects of social development have made progress in today's society, the shackles of patriarchy in this era still have not undergone fundamental changes [14]. Every member in family and social is the educator in the field of family education and social education, and the educator first exists as an individual, often unable to go beyond the era, breaking away from the foundation of its social and cultural background. Gender inequality is objective and universal in today's Chinese society. These gender inequality factors are mapped into family education and will also have a profound unconscious impact on students in K12 education stage. For example, different levels of participation and roles of parents in family life will have varying degrees of impact on teenagers. Harmonious family relations and responsible parents may easier for teenagers to establish correct and healthy gender cognition and gender concepts, while the abnormal birth concept of pursuit of having boys and the patriarchal family atmosphere will probably cause personality defects in growth, the inclination of family resources to male family offspring will also lead to gender inequality in family education [15]. Witnessing domestic violence between parents or suffering from domestic violence between parents and children is devastating, making teenagers more prone to gender identity and sexual orientation problems. Worse still, the impact of native family and parents' education is almost indelible. This concept of gender inequality flowing in the gene will naturally pass on from generation to generation. In other words, family education has a certain inheritance. The concept of gender inequality caused by the lack of sex and gender education in the previous generation will undoubtedly affect the quality of sex and gender education for the next generation. Therefore, the author also found that, solving gender inequality in education is a long undertaking that cannot be achieved overnight.

In the field of social education, public opinion and mass media play a vital role. What is worth studying is that in recent years, there have been frequent disputes over pastoral feminism and the stigmatization of feminism in society along with people's concern about the phenomenon of women are outperforming men, even cause proposing of putting forward the gendered education [16, 17]. Through reviewing literatures,

the author found that pastoral feminism is a kind of feminist idea aiming at certain issues of bride price, childbirth, family responsibility, workplace and body, which obviously has a Chinese characteristic. To a certain extent, it can reflect the contemporary female's attitude of pursuing equal rights, while extremism and radicalism do exist at present. Moreover, it is generally resisted and attacked by most of male members among society due to the touches of actual benefits, which leads to the current feminism stigmatization in the virtual society. These stigmatization phenomena take the virtual community as the main activity place, taking the network debate as the main scene, and spreading rapidly with the help of hot spots of society. It is provocative and confusing for the teenagers who are gradually forming their values in the K12 education stage, its negative impact is obviously greater than the positive impact. In addition, the discussion on the phenomenon of women are outperforming men is becoming more and more intense in today's society. In 2021, the official website of the Ministry of education replied to the proposal on preventing the feminization of male adolescents put forward by members of the National Committee of the Chinese people's Political Consultative Conference, which suggested that the Ministry of education should pay more attention to the phenomenon of "feminization of male adolescents" and take measures, also with advocating the implementation of gendered education [18]. The author believes that gendered education in this context is actually an embodiment of gender stereotypes based on gender inequality. The essence of women are outperforming men is differentiation and diversification, which can not be avoided by social development at any time. Under the influence of such social concept, the problem of gender inequality in K12 education stage will only become more stubborn and acute. The responsibility of social education should be, with no doubt, to help people break through themselves and stimulate their potential, rather than deepen and solidify any kind of social prejudice or discrimination. In the current social environment in China, it is obviously an urgency to respect differences and diversity and focus more on people-oriented methodology, in order to promote gender equality in education.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper reviews gender inequality as an ideological and cultural issue, which is reflected in economic, political, and social life to varying degrees, as well as in present education. Therefore, changing the fact of gender inequality in education has become one of the key issues. In China, previous scholars generally believe that gender inequality in education is often reflected in the inequality of educational opportunities, which is the penetration rate of female education in remote and backward areas is very low. However, with the implementation and popularization of nine-year compulsory education, the problem of female receiving education in more and more areas has been improved and solved. However, this does not mean that China has achieved gender equality in education. When the attention is focused on the students who have received education already, many inequalities have occurred to these young students who are receiving basic education without being noticed. In this situation, people tend to take responsibility for education and educators themselves. While the author believes that the issue in gender-based education is related to the responsibility of the family and the

whole society, which certainly have a great impact on K-12 students, who are exposed to these environments most of the time, besides their school life.

On the contrary, based on the characteristic of intergenerational inheritance of education, changing gender inequality in education will be a grand plan for centuries, which people should always adhere to and give hope. For such dilemma in present education, at least people can work for promoting its development through some basic measures, such as popularizing systematic sex and gender education in k12 education; paying attention to the living and development of LGBT students; understanding and respecting the natural differences in physical and mental development between male and female students, and improving the efficiency of education based on reality. In terms of family and social education, relevant adults should take corresponding responsibilities, pay attention to these social phenomena of hidden gender inequality, and also to their own speech and behavior. The author believes that the future of China's education should eventually lead to pluralism, equality, freedom, and a people-oriented tone, which is in line with the eternal pursuit of the development of mankind and human society.

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