

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND GENDER EQUITY IN ALBANIAN EDUCATION

EL CURRÍCULO OCULTO Y LA IGUALDAD DE GÉNERO EN LA EDUCACIÓN ALBANESA

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: The official curriculum consists of all the subjects taught in school and their respective content varying from one country to another based on their national curricula. «The hidden curriculum, on the other hand, concerns everything that happens in the school that is not ‘official’, for example, social relations in the classroom or playground, friendships, relationships between teachers and pupils, levels of bullying and harassment, and so on» (Eurydice, 2009, p. 26). Therefore, the hidden curriculum can potentially be more harmful as it is based on gender stereotypes that restrict children and their educational outcomes. **Methodology:** This research paper discusses how the hidden curriculum is evidenced in classroom observations and reflected upon in focus group discussions with elementary school teachers in Albania. **Results:** Teachers result to be unaware of having different treatment between boys and girls in the classroom, which is why all states must include gender equality policies in education. These policy guidelines need to provide teachers with special training on gender-equitable teaching to avoid any possible impact of gender-based stereotypes on the lives of boys and girls. **Conclusions:** Dismantling the hidden curriculum when addressed from a gender perspective can increase the opportunities for gender equity in the classroom. On the contrary, if not addressed in time or properly understood by teachers as gender-biased situations, these moments of the hidden curriculum in the classroom can negatively affect both boys and girls.

KEYWORDS: hidden curriculum; gender equity; education; Albania.

RESUMEN: Introducción: El currículo oficial consta de todas las materias que se enseñan en la escuela y sus contenidos respectivos que varían de un país a otro con base en su currículo nacional. El currículo oculto, en cambio, se refiere a todo lo que sucede en la escuela que no es oficial, por ejemplo, las relaciones sociales en el aula o en el patio de recreo, las amistades, las

relaciones entre profesores y alumnos, el nivel de *bullying* y acoso, etc. (Eurydice, 2009). Por lo tanto, el currículo oculto puede ser potencialmente más dañino ya que se basa en estereotipos de género que restringen a los niños y sus resultados educativos. **Metodología:** Este artículo de investigación analiza cómo el plan de estudios oculto se evidencia en las observaciones en aula y se refleja en discusiones de grupos focales con maestros de escuela primaria en Albania. **Resultados:** Los docentes resultan desconocer el trato diferenciado entre niños y niñas en el aula, por lo que todos los Estados deben incluir políticas de igualdad de género en la educación. Estas directrices de política deben proporcionar a los docentes una formación especial sobre la enseñanza con equidad de género para evitar cualquier posible impacto de los estereotipos basados en el género en la vida de ambos géneros. **Conclusiones:** Desmontar el currículo oculto cuando se aborda desde una perspectiva de género puede aumentar las oportunidades de equidad de género en el aula. Por el contrario, si no son abordados a tiempo o bien entendidos por los docentes como situaciones de sesgo de género, estos momentos de currículo oculto en el aula pueden afectar negativamente tanto a niños como a niñas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: currículo oculto; equidad de género; educación; Albania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks are crucial in shaping children's educational experiences. If the textbooks used by children contain gender-biased texts and pictures, girls and boys observe that the expectations towards them are polarized, and consequently the patterns intended to be followed by them are subject to gender stereotypes. Several scholars have concluded that textbooks are extremely important in this regard. For example, Sadker and Zittleman (2007, p. 144) have concluded that «students spend almost 80 to 95 % of their time in the classroom using textbooks, and teachers make most of their learning decisions based on textbooks». Gender stereotypes and gender roles are a serious issue in education since they risk limiting both girls' and boys' visions of what they are and what they can become in the future. Moreover, textbooks play a special role regarding the gender of protagonist children displayed in their images since the gender roles of the main characters in the textbooks have a major impact on young children. To illustrate what children see in texts, Style uses the metaphor of curriculum as a window and a mirror. According to her, it is very important to provide children with opportunities to get acquainted at the same time with windows from the world of those who are different from themselves as well as with mirrors in which students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum by exploring the lives of others (Style, 1998). In addition, besides children using textbooks rich in gender stereotypes, teachers also use several texts and curriculum materials during professional training, some of which have gender-biased content. Not using gender-equitable language and pedagogy in teacher training sessions reinforce gender stereotypical attitudes, mindsets, or inequality, which are rooted among some teachers.

The hidden curriculum is very important in providing information about learning situations that take place inside the school. The questions Janice Koch raises about the curriculum are: What are students studying? Whose lives are worth knowing? How does learning happen?

How do children demonstrate their knowledge in the context of the classroom? In what ways does the curriculum reflect the human condition and provide them with windows and mirrors? (Koch, 2003). Again, Style's metaphor used for the curriculum as a window and mirror helps to better understand what the curriculum contains and conveys. According to Style, the task of a balanced education is to provide everyone with knowledge of the self and the other, to provide enlightenment of the known and enlightenment of the unknown (p. 155).

According to a Eurydice report on the different achievements in school outcomes between boys and girls in Europe, it is concluded that the basic education curriculum is intertwined with the hidden curriculum. The formal curriculum consists of the subjects taught in school and the content they have, which may vary from one country to another according to the respective national curricula. The hidden curriculum, on the other hand, deals with everything that happens at school that is not 'formal', such as social relationships in the classroom or schoolyard, friendships between children, relationships between teachers and students, levels of bullying at school, and so on (Eurydice, 2009, p. 26). The main reason why the hidden curriculum is harmful is that it is mainly based on gender stereotypes that restrict and harm children's image of self and their academic achievement.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper relies on qualitative research as the right methodology for gaining an insight into the teachers' perceptions of their teaching practices, focusing on the hidden curriculum in particular. The research methods used for gathering empirical data in Albanian classrooms for this paper are observation and focus group discussions with elementary school teachers in Albania. The sample of twenty teachers from ten 9-year public, rural and urban schools in Elbasan was selected through stratified sampling. The focus group questions are adapted from a feminist manual on teaching, which was compiled by Jo Sanders (1997). All teachers accepted to have the researcher observe their classes for this research. The questions used for teachers during the focus group discussions are open-ended, closed-ended, structured, and semi-structured questions. Through these questions, teachers expressed their perceived reality of the gendered interactions in class mainly by making comparisons between boys and girls through closed-ended questions with yes or no answers, or filter questions. Aiming at addressing the hidden curriculum in their teaching practices, some questions regarding the involvement of students in the learning process, about group work, or career were also asked. The narrated realities and perceptions are later compared and contrasted with the classroom observation notes to discuss and address relevant issues to the hidden curriculum with a gender equality perspective.

3. RESULTS

The theoretical concept of the hidden curriculum was not openly addressed during the focus group discussion sessions. Teachers were asked several questions regarding their expectations towards the academic performance of students based mainly on their gender. During the first and second questions, which asked about the gender of the students who are generally the best ones in the class and who ask questions most often in the lesson, almost half of the teachers said that there are no gender differences. While only a minority of teachers said that boys are the best students in the class, more teachers have estimated that boys are the ones who ask the most questions in class.

The third question was: Who raises their hand more willingly in your class? According to about half of the teachers included in the study, girls have a greater desire to be active in the lesson, while seven teachers think that there is no gender difference, the other three teachers emphasize that the boys are more willing to raise their hand in the lesson. As for the fourth question, asking who raises the voice the most in the classroom, for twelve teachers it is exactly the boys, in three cases it is the girls and the rest say there is no gender difference. The fifth question was: Who stays most often to talk to you after class? According to thirteen teachers, most of the students who stay most often to talk to teachers after class are girls, and according to five teachers, they are boys, while the rest of the teachers think that there is no difference between girls and boys in conversations outside the classroom.

When asked question six: Do you ask those students who do not raise their hands? all teachers answered positively, as a way to actively engage students regardless of their initiative or expressed passivity. In the seventh question, when teachers were asked if students do group work, this activity was unanimously confirmed by all teachers. Again considering the gender perspective, the eighth question about how groups are formed, almost all teachers answered by saying that groups are comprised of children of both sexes. Only in one case did a teacher say that most often groups are formed with students of the same sex. From the same gender perspective, the ninth question was: Who tends more often to dominate the discussion, the use of equipment, or who chooses their roles within the group? Regarding this question, in most cases, the teachers answered that in their opinion, there are no differences as girls and boys dominate in the same way. A small number of teachers, or three such cases, stated that in the classrooms where they teach, the groups are dominated mostly by girls, while in only one case the group is dominated mostly by boys.

Under the umbrella of effective teaching, communication with students and how this communication is realized are increasingly considered as very important elements in the learning process. At this point, it is worth mentioning the importance of communication between teachers and students on various issues in terms of a gender perspective and the hidden curriculum. Thus, when asked if students are ever asked career-related questions, fourteen teachers said yes and the rest said no. Continuing further on the questions addressed to the teachers by the students, most of the teachers state that the questions come at almost the same amount from both the boys and the girls, while the rest is divided equally between those teachers who say that more girls ask questions about career and those who say about boys, each with two

cases. Since teachers' overall assessment of the dominance of career questions turns out to be shared equally between boys and girls, the question *Have you ever wondered if you address boys and girls alike?* was answered by almost all teachers saying that they address boys and girls without distinguishing between them. However, some teachers have stated that they do not address the same as boys and girls, but they address mainly boys more often. None of the teachers said that they addressed mainly girls.

The feminist methodology aims to reflect on a variety of issues by ensuring that the findings are interpreted in such a way as to include the experiences of marginalized populations that have not been consulted before. One of the main arguments of feminist scholars is that very often the views of women are left silent or neglected, so they show interest in the gaps left in women's conversations and aim to discover what meaning can stay hidden behind a direct confession (DeVault, 1990, p. 217). An example of these sentences where meaning is expressed more implicitly than explicitly, is the phrase: «... as you know...», or «as it is known...». These phrases, according to DeVault, help you hear and accept what is not openly stated, but is present through the hidden meanings, which she calls «submissive knowledge».

Two cases that are often used by teachers to best illustrate the term «submissive knowledge» are used to evaluate the habits and behaviors of boys and girls through the phrases «being a boy...» and «... being a girl...» or «... although she is a girl...», and «... even though she is a girl...». These expressions imply that expectations towards boys and girls are limited within a predetermined space, which is often different according to the sex of the child being assessed by teachers. Unfortunately, based on the way teachers expressed themselves, this can be interpreted as a polarized and unequal perception space for boys and girls, encouraging children to reinforce gender stereotypes and roles. It is important to remember that these expressions were used quite spontaneously and uncontrollably by teachers at a time whose purpose was to evaluate the habits and behaviors of boys and girls in their classrooms.

4. CONCLUSION

Looking at the direct answers given by teachers about the gender differences they observe while teaching, these answers are more controlled and closer to the desired reality or judged as right, making boys and girls equal in total in terms of the tendency to dominate group activities or raising questions in the classroom. Perhaps these assessments are real, but the mismatch of polarized expressions with fully balanced reporting between boys and girls in terms of group activities or questioning leaves room for discussion about the degree of their authenticity. It should not be denied that perhaps the reality in the classroom in these two directions is balanced, which can be accepted as a positive reality and without gender bias on the part of teachers. However, gender balance is not maintained in the case of questions related to raising the voice more in the classroom or standing more often to speak after class, where most teachers report that boys are the ones who raise the voice the most, and girls are the ones who stay most often to talk to teachers after class. This polarized pattern of behavior necessarily requires reflection about the hidden curriculum in the classroom.

Behaviors reported by teachers repeat the gender stereotypes of boys as rude and disrespectful towards the rules set in the classroom, and the stereotypes of girls who may have questions for which there is not enough time or self-confidence to address during class. Highlighting only these two dominant situations is sufficient to understand that in total, the hidden curriculum and gender stereotypes in the classroom are present and if not intervened in time, these stereotypes can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies, as theoretically explained by Susan Basow. Steps to be taken to improve these situations of hidden curriculum would require intervention through teaching methodologies or critical pedagogy with special attention paid to gender equality in the interaction between teachers and students, which was also suggested by the teachers to improve the teaching process. Another important element that is evidenced in this study is that the answers about the best students in the class as a whole are approximated towards equality between boys and girls, with a slight tendency towards girls as better students than boys.

Aiming to avoid the negative impact of gender-based stereotypes as much as possible on the lives of boys and girls, all countries need to include gender equality policies in education, providing teachers with special training in teaching highlighting the negative consequences of gender stereotypes. This is because within the hidden curriculum, stereotypical images of «good and quiet girls» and «strong, disobedient boys» come out openly everywhere in school conversations, on posters on the walls, in stories, and the attitudes, narrations, and perceptions of many teachers. Thus, gender stereotypes expressed in curricula, in the family, or at school can undermine girls' self-esteem in mathematics or lead them to erroneous patterns if the gender perspective is not best integrated.

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