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GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR POLICY MAKERS

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Abstract

This research is related to the importance of introducing a gender approach in educational curricula. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has defined in its 4th goal the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This means that educational systems should have in mind the need to introduce gender debate in different areas of educations, from teacher training to subject knowledge definition, to change traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Using a qualitative research methodology based in documental analyses it will be presented how some European countries have been developing efforts to include gender equality as a topic or as an interdisciplinary subject in school curricula. The research focus on how these efforts are happening in Portugal and how school curricula are not involved in it – and this is an important challenge to be met by policy makers. Some recommendations are issued to foster the goal of gender equality as a tool to improve quality in education and contribute to a more balanced society in terms of gender representation.

Keywords

Gender Equality, Education, Educational policies, Inclusive Language, Curricula

1. Introduction

In history both men and women had social roles shaped by culture and society, that influenced their behaviour, choices and expectations. Several research perspectives have tried to explain gender and sex differences in western culture. Within a progressive approach, it is defended that as society progresses these perceptions also change. The social roles of men and women have been influenced by the nature of a patriarchal society that has been dominant for many centuries in western societies. The role of women was traditionally a subordinated one due to the interpretation of the so-called biological differences in stereotyped ways (Eurydice, 2010).

Within the progressive approach it is understood that sex or gender differences are a cultural phenomenon, a reflex of the dominant ideas of dominant culture. This means that through Education it is possible to change social stereotypes and promote greater equality between the sexes and so change dualistic and stereotyped norms.

Having in mind these considerations this research has the following objectives:

- To understand why education is important in the goal of gender equality
- To learn from some countries what can be done in terms of promoting gender equality in education
- To analyse the Portuguese educational system in terms of gender equality and make some recommendations in terms of research and educational policy.

The research methodology is qualitative – using documental content analysis it will be possible to understand how some countries are pursuing the goal of gender equality in education, problems they are facing and important achievements. Some international, European and national reports will be analysed in this research.

In the following chapters the importance of gender equality in education (as a global challenge) will be discussed, then some examples of Gender Equality in Education from some countries will be analysed and finally the Portuguese situation will be discussed. A final chapter includes some conclusions and recommendations for policy makers in terms of fostering Gender Equality in the educational system.

2. Gender Equality in Education –A Global Challenge

In January 2016, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016) began guiding policy and funding for the next 15 years that included the issue of Gender Equality and

empowerment of women and girls (SD Goal 5) as well as being integrated into other goals, In the following chapters a brief analysis will be made about this topic considering the importance of Gender Equality as a sustainable development goal as well as the importance of Education in the pursue of this societal achievement.

2.1 Gender Equality as a Sustainable Development Goal

According to the UNESCO (2011) Gender Equality exists when “women and men enjoy the same status and have equal opportunity to realize their human rights and potential to contribute to political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results. Gender Equality is the equal valuing by society of both the similarities and the differences between women and men, and the different roles they play”.

The importance of Gender Equality in society is defined clearly by the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5(UN, 2016):

- Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.
- Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.

Considering that women and girls represent half of the world’s population there is a potential here that cannot be lost. Despite being a core value in many national constitutions, Gender Equality is still a challenge in many countries and in many economic activities. This challenge is still critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting the health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys (UN, 2016).

Gender Equality is also viewed as having proven impacts on many other Sustainable Development Goals, including economic growth, health, nutrition, agricultural productivity and reduced inequality (Banham, 2016). In the following chapter the role of education in promoting Gender Equality will be addressed.

2.2 The Role of Education in Gender Equality

There is an extensive research about gender equality in education as this has been a concern in many countries. The fact is that gender inequality is still present in many areas of society – in fact recent studies have unveiled the fact that economic activities remain highly gendered. Vaughan (2016) identifies some facets of the gendered society: there are still significant pay gaps between men and women doing the same job in most economic activities;

despite having the right to vote in almost all countries, political representation of women is still far from equality, with much lower proportions of women taking political leadership or achieving senior political office; gender-based violence is a significant issue across the globe, with recent conflicts, instabilities and high levels of migration associated with particularly high levels of sexual and gender-based violence.

It is important to consider that national educational systems are formed within specific social contexts and many times reflect the inequalities that exist in society. In fact, the way educational systems are organized – contents, learning materials, teacher attitudes and behaviours, classroom and discipline practices – may sometimes reflect biased and harmful social norms about the expected roles and opportunities for boys and girls (Myers, 2007).

An analysis on how education can foster Gender Equality can be based in different dimensions. This research it will be centred in two main dimensions (UNESCO, 2003):

- Equality of access that can be defined as girls and boys being offered equitable opportunities to gain admission to formal, nonformal, or alternative approaches to basic education. Actual attendance, rather than enrolment, is a better indicator of whether access has been achieved;
- Equality in the learning process considering that girls and boys receive equitable treatment and attention and have equal opportunities to learn. This means that girls and boys are exposed to the same curricula (not gendered). Equality in the learning process also means that all learners should be exposed to teaching methods and materials that are free of stereotypes and gender bias. In addition, it means that boys and girls should have the freedom to learn, explore, and develop skills in all academic and extracurricular offerings.

In terms of access to Education some important achievements have been made. There is an important progress towards gender parity in some levels of education: between 2000 and 2015 the number of girls for every 100 boys has risen from 92 to 97 in primary education and from 91 to 97 in secondary education (UNESCO, 2015).

In what concerns the second dimension much needs to be done. As mentioned before the national educational systems exist in specific social contexts and many times reflect their the inequalities. So, despite all the legislation against gender bias it is important to consider an important aspect in gender equality research in education: how school materials may be fostering and perpetuating gender stereotypes (either in language or content).

Gender equality in education systems means equal educational opportunities (including access, retention and learning) for all girls and boys, as well as gender equality for teachers and administrators (Vaughan, 2016). But it can't be achieved without a gender-responsive curriculum, teaching and learning materials. This topic will be addressed in the following chapter drawing on some examples from European countries (including the Portuguese experience).

3. Gender Equality in Education in some European countries

The topic of gender equality in education has been addressed in very different ways by European countries. There are those that have clearly adopted a gender equality perspective in the development of the educational systems while others are starting to give first steps in this analysis. Even with differences there seems to be an effort in terms of including gender and gender equality as a topic or an interdisciplinary theme in school curricula of the majority of European countries. The next chapter analyses some of the results achieved so far focusing on countries that have been addressing the topic of gender equality in education considering gender equality in the curricula and learning materials.

3.1 Examples from some Countries

There are some important topics that European countries have addressed in terms of the research related to gender themes in current educational practice (Eurydice, 2010). This research focuses on the importance of inclusive language in learning materials that is free of gender biases. Some countries examples will be given as to understand the nature of the obstacles that had to be dealt with.

The report refers to the fact that in the majority of the countries there is still some kind of gender stereotypes in teaching materials (in school books, teaching manuals, curricula) as well as their reproduction in the educational process (what is referred as a hidden curriculum). Only Sweden and Norway have introduced explicit anti-discrimination provisions in the education sector and gender equality is presented as one of the goals of the education system. Gender equality is not only seen as promoting equal treatment and equal opportunities, but the gender equality goal is also expressed in all curricula in all levels of education.

The focus on curricula (and not only in legislation) is very important, The UNESCO (2011) has recommended several topics that should be present in all publications (legislation, curricula and textbooks, learning materials). Some of them are presented:

- All publications should employ gender neutral and gender inclusive language;

- All images used (such as photographs, illustrations or even book covers) should be gender balanced (equal representation of men and women) and avoid promoting gender stereotypes;
- All images illustrating active roles of women/girls should be encouraged in order to contradict female invisibility in educational materials;

The use of inclusive language is important in terms of promoting gender equality. The use of male centred references in official documents and text books (in many languages the masculine works as a universal reference) needs to be addressed in terms of promoting gender equality. It is important to be aware that language does not only reflect the way people think: it also forms the way people think. Using only male references (words and expressions that imply that women are included/inferior in/to men) is perpetuating this assumption of invisibility/inferiority and it tends to become part of people's mentality. Research has shown that the use of gender free language is very important in terms of decreasing gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality (Sczesny, 2016).

The Swedish case is particularly important in terms of understanding the important role education plays in terms of gender equality policies. First aspect to mention is that this is a long-term concern – promoting gender equality in education (and through education) has been a concern for Swedish educational policies since the late nineties. This attests the fact that changes take time but are necessary if the goal of gender equality is a concern in the educational system (SADEV, 2010). And, of course, to promote an Education that aims at gender equality is a compromise that will face many obstacles and challenges.

The Report of the Ministry of Education and Science of Sweden (Båvner, 2004) stated some actions towards promoting gender equality in the Swedish educational system. The first step was to create legislation excluding discrimination and other abusive treatment that could occur in all levels of the educational system. According to the report the first steps taken were to eliminate all types of discriminatory references related to gender, ethnic background, religion or other belief, sexual orientation and disability in all educational policies.

Another important doing was an explicit promotion of gender equality in the curriculum. This meant a careful analysis of school materials to eliminate gendered stereotyped contents (Bloomberg, 2008). Finally, it was important to develop teacher training addressing topics of gender equality as well as involving school staff and parents in the process. Some handbooks and

guiding documents have been published making gender equality a thematic priority for Swedish educational leaders.

The research about learning materials has been a concern in many other European countries. Eurydice (2010) gives some interesting examples in terms of gender stereotypes existing in school books and learning materials:

- A Polish study suggested that school textbooks were highly stereotyped and reproduced traditional beliefs ignoring important female figures as well as the achievements of feminist and women's organisations. In terms of language and illustrations textbooks used by older students were more sexist than texts for younger children.
- A Spanish study of gender stereotypes in images present in school language and literature textbooks showed both quantitative and qualitative biases. In terms of representation women's pictorial representation in these materials was roughly half of men's (32.95 % of the total). The qualitative differences were found in the representation of both sexes, regarding different aspects such as image colours (pale and pink for women) and behaviour (based on gender stereotypes). The gender bias was also present in terms of spatial representation as images positioned men in public and women in private spaces.

The use of gender balanced school materials is particular important in some school subjects. As Vahdatinejad (2018) states investigation on how men and women are represented in textbooks (particularly in images) are very important in visually sending messages about male and female roles in society. And if textbooks are considered the formal source of school' subjects knowledge they are very important in students formation and should be free of bias of any kind.

In the next chapter it will be analysed how some of these topics are being addressed by the Portuguese educational policy.

3.2 Portuguese Education and Gender Equality

The Eurydice Report (2010) presents the following conclusions about the situation of Portugal in what concerns gender equality policies:

- Portugal is classified as following a model that considers gender equality in education as equal treatment and equal opportunities in education.
- This means that there is specific legislation on equal treatment and equal opportunities for women and men in what concerns the education sector;
- Specific education legislation also includes references to gender with respect to the goals of equal treatment and equal opportunities (usually viewed as equal rights).

- In spite of these concerns in terms of legislation the report also concludes that gender equality as a goal of the education system is not framed in terms of outcome. This means that general legislation clearly states that education aims at ensuring equal access/equal treatment within education for all pupils but does not include specific provisions on the role of education in reducing gender inequalities in Portuguese society;
- The report adds that there is also little revision of legislation from a gender perspective;

The report depicts is a very accurate portrait in terms of gender equality in Portuguese educational system. One of the most problematic aspects that still need to be addressed by policy maker has to do with the absence of inclusive language in educational legislation, curriculum and textbooks. The majority of Portuguese documents use the masculine reference when refereeing to generic student. Although the use of inclusive language in all public policies and government areas is highly recommended by the Portuguese Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality the fact is that the Ministry of Education is quite detached from these concerns.

The best example is the recent publication of the “Students ‘profile at the end of compulsory schooling” (MEC, 2017). The “students” portrayed here are male students – in Portuguese language (as in many languages) the masculine is the referential for the generic students. UNESCO and the European Union has been publishing recommendations and legislation in terms of fostering gender equality in education using inclusive language (and Portugal is a signatory country of all these recommendations and legislation) which makes it difficult to understand why this is the reality in the documents produced by the Ministry of Education.

Focusing on the importance of inclusive language, research has demonstrated how language is important in promoting gender equality in Education (Sczesny, 2016):

- Research based on various experimental methodologies (from storytelling to measuring reaction times) has confirmed the influence of linguistic forms on the accessibility of mental representations of women and men (Stahlberg, 2007);
- The use of masculine generics restricts the visibility of women and the cognitive availability of female exemplars (Stahlberg, 2007);

If it is believed that using inclusive language refers to using language that places both women and men at the same level, and so avoiding gender stereotypes, it seems that this is an important topic in promoting gender equality in Portuguese Education. Recent reforms are being

planned in terms of introducing gender equality topics in the educational system, but they still lack this awareness regarding the importance of inclusive language.

In the next school year, a new school subject will be introduced in the educational system – Citizenship and Development – where transversal topics will be addressed (Human Rights, Gender Equality and Environmental Education, just to mention a few). The syllabus was tested and evaluated in the present school year and the final document was in public discussion – and it is a gendered document with no regard for the importance of using inclusive language. All mentions to teachers use the generic masculine, all mentions to students use the generic masculine, demonstrating that a lot remains to be done in terms of contributing to gender equality in education by the Ministry of Education.

There is a curricular revision on the way and the Ministry of Education has presented for public discussion a proposal of curricular organization to receive inputs from all members of society. And once again, the language is completely gendered – these facts totally agree with the Eurydice report from 2010 – although in Portugal the legislation speaks about equal treatment and equal opportunities, equality is far from being present in official documents related to the educational system.

Another area that needs urgent revision is the production of school materials, namely textbooks. Following the example of the Ministry of Education, it is expectable that the editorial market doesn't show concern with aspects related to gender equality in school materials. If they follow the guidelines of the official documents maybe they reproduce a gendered language that makes female students invisible. Still, this research needs to be done considering the production of educational materials for the Portuguese educational system.

According to the OECD (2015) language and images used in school textbooks and teaching materials influence students' perceptions of social norms. For this reason, learning materials should avoid conveying a stereotyped representation of the role of men and women. This is an important aspect to be addressed by educational policy makers if in fact gender equality in education is a concern for the Portuguese leaders.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The research presented focused on some important topics related to the importance of promoting gender equality in education. In what concerns the first objective “To understand why education is important in the goal of gender equality” it was possible to understand that gender equality is a central topic for international institutions as it is one important goal in terms of building a better future for men and women. Introducing the topic of gender when analysing educations implies addressing an important topic that many times is forgotten and allows the educational systems to reproduce and maintain stereotypes related to what the education of boys and girls should be.

Introducing the gender lens in analysing education allows the development of a useful framework that may support education policy makers in better planning, monitoring and assessing education projects. It will also allow addressing specific problems related to gender stereotypes that persist in the curricula. Gender equality in education is about creating a school system where boys and girls have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights and contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural, and political development.

Some countries have already taken important steps in embracing the challenge of improving education to obtain societal gains –the Swedish case is a good example of how gender equality is viewed as a fundamental topic in the making of a better society where women and men effectively have the same rights and duties. This was the second objective of this research – “To learn from some countries what can be done in terms of promoting gender equality in education”.

It was possible to understand that the purpose of introducing gender equality in education involves creating effective gender equality legislation but also implies introducing important changes in the way the school system is understood and built. It is necessary to make it gender sensitive and assure that it addresses all genders. Other countries are working on the process of gender equality in education – but as it was shown in Portugal, despite advances in terms of legislation, a more serious approach still needs to be taken.

And, addressing the third objective of this research “To analyse the Portuguese educational system in terms of gender equality and make some recommendations in terms of research and educational policy” it was possible to understand that much needs to be done in several areas. Several recommendations can be put forward in what concerns developing gender equality in education in Portugal:

- Analyse the Portuguese educational system (from basic school to higher education) in terms of gender equality – the focus of this analyses can be the educational curriculum and the purpose is to examine if the guiding/official documents use inclusive language (both girls and boys are the subjects of the official documents); this may involve training staff related to the creation of official documentation in terms of gender equality;
- Building learning environments that promote equality between boys and girls: this may imply a careful revision of learning materials that perpetuate gender stereotypes; this may also imply an important revision of curricula and textbooks;
- Create teacher training programs that place greater emphasis on factors that are favourable to increased equality between boys and girls. These programs should involve teachers from all subjects and all levels of schooling;

Investigation on some of the recommendations mentioned above still need to be done by researchers concerned with educational topics such as gender. This paper intended to be a initial approach on some concrete aspects that still need to be addresses because they are not accordingly with the recommendation of the Portuguese Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

Research should also be developed in terms of assessing specific problems of boys and girls in the Portuguese educational system – access, classifications, dropping out – as it is possible to identify in international research specific problems that have a gender nature – some are more common to boys than girls and vice versa. Because addressing gender equality also means addressing specific gender issues.

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