

## The Practice of Gender Equity Education in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** Like other countries that have legal commitments to gender equity, in 2004 the Taiwanese government promulgated the Gender Equity Education Act with the aim of legislatively implementing gender equity in education. The introduction of this education-related legislation reflected the Taiwanese government's intention to redefine and transform gender and sexual norms in order to create a gender-friendly society. This article focuses on how gender equity curricula, material, and activities have been developed, practiced, and taught in Taiwanese elementary and junior-high schools. How gender equity education was practiced in curricula and teaching before the White Paper on Gender Equity Education was announced, and what efforts are being made and will be made in the future is elaborated, followed by a discussion of what can be done to further improve gender equity education.

**Key words:** gender equity education, curricula, LGBT education

### 1. Introduction

Like other countries that have legal commitments to gender equity, in 2004 the Taiwanese government promulgated the Gender Equity Education Act (GEEA) (The Republic of China Taiwan, 2004) with the aim of legislatively implementing gender equity in education. The introduction of this education-related legislation reflected the Taiwanese government's intention to redefine and transform gender and sexual norms in order to create a gender-friendly society. This article focuses on how gender equity curricula, material, and activities have been developed, practiced, and taught in Taiwanese elementary and junior-high schools with the aim of encouraging students to develop their potential without discrimination based on their gender. How gender equity education was practiced in curricula and teaching before the White Paper on Gender Equity Education (Ministry of Education, 2010) (henceforth referred to simply as "White Paper") was announced, and what efforts are being made and will be made in the future is elaborated in the first sections, followed by a discussion of what can be done to further improve gender equity education, and the drawing of conclusions in the final section.

### 2. The Practice of Gender Equity Education before the White Paper Was Announced

The Ministry of Education dedicated itself to promoting gender equity education in elementary, junior-high, and senior-high schools when the GEEA came to effect in 2004. In the surveys regarded to how gender equity education had been practiced in curricula and teaching, and the obstructions encountered by these teachers, both Fang and Yu (2008) and Lee (2011) found that teachers had their own diverse interpretations of what gender

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equity education means. The teachers chose topics that they believed to be normal, ethical, and legitimate in their teaching, but their judgements about whether gender issues were actually normal/abnormal, ethical/unethical, or legitimate/not legitimate indicated the presence of gender bias and discrimination in the teaching process. Fang and Yu (2008) therefore concluded that the surveyed teachers did not have sufficient gender consciousness.

Four pressing challenges were identified by the present author regarding gender equity education curricula and teaching, as described in the next four sections.

### **2.1 Misunderstanding the Meaning of Gender Equity Education**

Teachers have failed to update their curricula and teaching according to the GEEA, and instead then to stick to the old concepts that view gender education as being related only to sex education, intimate relationships, marriage counseling, and family harmony. Given that the purposes of the gender equity education are misinterpreted as focusing on paying respect and keeping harmony, the teaching of gender equity education has been assigned to courses such as parent education, domestic economy, and civic education (Lo, Chou, Pan, Hsieh & Su, 2007).

### **2.2 The Lack of Systematic and Critical Curricula**

Due to the lack of consensus on the meaning of gender equity education, school teachers practice gender equity education by promoting policy, relying on outside resources, giving a speech, or organizing activities at festivals and school anniversaries, and without applying a systematic approach (Fang & Yu, 2008; Lee, 2011; Lo et al., 2007).

These practices are safe and easy, but they do not provide students with sufficient time to internalize the concepts of gender equity. Also, knowledge-base teaching is unable to lead students to think critically and acquire appropriate values regarding gender equity (Lo et al., 2007). Media literacy is important for developing critical thinking by students about subtle and unintended messages hidden in the media, and Lo and her colleagues (2007) found that this teaching approach was adopted by the smallest number of teachers.

### **2.3 Failing to Include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Education in Curricula and Teaching**

Fang and Yu (2008) found that most of the teachers included in their survey focused on the narrow dimensions of parity between men and women as well as sexual harassment and assault prevention, and ignored lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) education. In other words, school curricula have excluded the perspectives, histories, and experiences of people whose gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations differ from the social scripts of heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity that are imbedded in the mainstream culture.

### **2.4 Challenges in Integrating Gender Equity Education in the Seven Learning Areas**

The survey of Fang and Yu (2008) also revealed that teachers experience difficulties in establishing the elements of gender equity across curriculum boundaries, and restructuring and reframing curricula. The teachers who participated in their study also complained that insufficient time was allocated to gender equity education.

In summary, during the first few years after the GEEA came to effect, the curricula were not implemented in a systematic manner and did not include LGBT education. The White Paper, which was announced 6 years after the GEEA came to effect, provided a blueprint for schools to achieve the aims of the GEEA. The following sections describe the efforts that have been made and that will be made in the future to promote gender equity education.

### **3. Efforts Made to Promote Gender Equity Education since the White Paper was Announced**

The White Paper mainly focuses on schools as a means of influencing curricula and teaching by promoting and executing several specific policies. This section elaborates on what has already been done and what will be done in the future to promote gender equity education through these policies.

#### **3.1 Including Gender Equity in Curricula**

The efforts made by the Ministry of Education to include gender equity in curricula include (1) revision of the General Guidelines of the Grade 1–9 Curriculum and (2) developing indicators to evaluate the contents of textbooks to remedy gender bias in learning materials, as described below.

##### **(1) Revision of the General Guidelines of the Grade 1–9 Curriculum**

The Ministry of Education revised the General Guidelines of the Grade 1–9 Curriculum of Elementary- and Junior-High-School Education on a yearly basis with the intention of including gender equity education in the seven learning areas (i.e., language arts, social studies, arts and humanities, science and technology, mathematics, health and physical education, and integrative activities). The revised guidelines reflected the tenets of the GEEA and provided a blueprint for the development of systematic curricula.

There are three core competences that students are expected to achieve: gender self-understanding, gender personal relationships, and gender self-breakthrough. Each core competence has its main concepts and subconcepts, and these concepts are expected to be included within the seven learning areas (Ministry of Education, 2012).

##### **(2) Developing indicators to evaluate the contents of textbooks to remedy gender bias in learning materials**

An invisible obstacle to gender equity is the gender bias present in textbooks, such as underrepresentation of females, stereotypes of both genders' occupational and household roles that overwhelmingly underplay the contribution and importance of women, and presenting gender stratification and roles in an obscure manner. All of these messages may lower the achievements of female students (Blumberg, 2009).

As in countries such as Sweden (Stromquist, 2007), initiatives of the Taiwanese government are aimed at reducing gender bias in textbooks by developing indicators to evaluate the gender messages in the textbooks used in elementary, junior-high, and senior-high schools. These indicators can be used during the selection, editing, and screening of textbooks. Although there are ongoing efforts to remove gender bias from learning materials, their effects are not yet clear (e.g., Chuang & Lu, 2009; Liu, Lu, & Chen, 2012).

#### **3.2 Establishing Comprehensive Frameworks for Promoting Gender Equity Education**

Comprehensive frameworks for promoting gender equity education were established to ensure the goals of the GEEA are achieved to the greatest possible extent in school curricula and teaching.

The Gender Equity Education Committee was established at the central level to promote the efficacy of the GEEA, whose tasks were aimed at developing policies, promoting ideas, designing courses and teaching materials, and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching in gender equity education. This committee is also responsible for developing operating procedures to supervise and investigate cases of sexual assault and harassment on campus, support activities hosted by nongovernmental organizations, and promote gender equity education through the mass media (Gender Equity Education Committee, Ministry of Education, 2014).

The functions of the the *Curriculum and Instruction Consulting Committee focusing on Gender Equity*

*Education* (CICC-GEE) include Building a support system to facilitate the inclusion of gender equity education in curricula and teaching at elementary, junior-high, and senior-high schools; helping municipalities and cities to establish local gender equity education guiding groups, and organizing district meetings for local gender equity education guiding groups to share experiences and resources. This is also one of the focuses of the 2014 plan of the K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education.

Gender Equity Education Resource Center Schools were set up to establish a database for teaching materials and media as well as for promoting the establishment of learning groups (Ministry of Education, 2010). The 2014 yearly plan of the K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education requires each municipality to establish at least one gender equity education resource center school (K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education, 2014). This approach demonstrated the determination of the Taiwanese government to build solid frameworks to support teachers in integrating gender equity education in the seven learning areas.

### **3.3 Providing Comprehensive Training**

A comprehensive training system has been well developed and offered to in-service teachers, seed teachers, and administrators. The training is offered to in-service teachers in many forms. Usually they are offered at different levels (e.g., basic, advanced, and leadership) (CICC-GEE, Ministry of Education, 2014). The training is also provided by local gender equity education guiding groups visiting in-service teachers in their schools. Consultants help in-service teachers with professional development, teaching guidance, and self-instruction skills in gender equity education during the visits. In addition to the above-two forms of in-service teacher training, courses are offered by local governments and universities for in-service teachers to obtain credits (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The seed teacher system is designed to ensure that gender equity education is taught systemically in the seven learning areas, and it delivers concepts of gender equity to in-service teachers. The training aims at helping to equip seed teachers with the ability to be mentors and to accomplish the missions (CICC-GEE, Ministry of Education, 2014).

The inclusion of gender equity education in the seven learning areas of the curriculum may be obstructed by gender bias exhibited by the curriculum policymaker. Administrators are therefore mandated by Ministry of Education to attend training to ensure their support for the development of systematic and critical curricula that include gender equity education (Ministry of Education, 2010). Having administrators — especially those who in charge of academic affairs — receive training was one of the main yearly plans announced in 2014 by the Ministry of Education.

Incorporating gender equity education in curricula has never been easy since most of the teachers who participated in the above-mentioned training held professional degrees or were in the positions for promoting gender equity in the schools (Gender Equity Education Committee, Ministry of Education, 2010). In other words, the failure to include gender equity education in curricula was due to the lack of understanding on the part of teachers in the seven learning areas. In the plan for 2014, the Ministry of Education specified that teachers who participated in primary-level training on the basic concepts and laws of gender equity education had to have degrees in other than helping professions (Ministry of Education, 2014).

### **3.4 Including Gender Equity in Teacher Education**

Gender equity education seeks to improve the development of appropriate attitudes toward gender in learners by looking not only at issues regarding gender differences and limited opportunities based on social constructions

of gender, but also by analyzing inappropriate social or cultural systems that limit individual development regardless of gender (Chuang, 2004). For teachers to be capable of including gender equity education in the subjects or areas they teach, they must (1) understand the construction of gender within historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, (2) be able to examine gender discriminative content inherent in curricular texts and develop gender-sensitive teaching materials, and (3) be aware of gender biases in schoolwork; these characteristics will make it possible for them to develop gender-inclusive teaching strategies and create gender-sensitive learning environments so as to bring gender equity to the instruction they provide (Wang, 2013). However, one-shot in-service training offered in the form of speeches or workshops does not provide sufficient time for teachers to examine their sexist assumptions and unconsciously biased interactions with students. They might not even realize they are holding these beliefs and acting on them. Sanders (1997) argued that real changes are only possible when education is provided to teachers in semester-length courses.

Gender education courses in teacher education programs have been shown to improve the gender consciousness of preservice teachers in Taiwan. In Wang's (2013) study, students at a teacher college considered the course to be very helpful in terms of understanding the dangers of gender-based prejudice, the diversity of gender roles, and diverse sexual orientations. Certain approaches such as a critical reflective approach have been claimed to provide a more complex and rich understanding of identities, leading teachers to respond to gender issues more critically and sensitively (Letts, 2002). Wang (2005) used journal writing to determine the development of gender consciousness among teacher-college students in a gender equity education course. The analysis of their journals revealed that the students experienced anxiety and contradiction when they first encountered feminist discourses in the classroom. Through the course, most of the students started to re-examine and re-interpret what was happening in everyday life from feminist perspectives. Their gender identities were shaped as they engaged in these activities. Some of the students even tried to convert their gender consciousness into actions, both in public issues and personal events. The reflective approach was found to be helpful in changing the gender consciousness of preservice teachers in teacher education.

Given that previous education laws and regulations did not mandate gender equity courses in teacher education, preservice teachers are unlikely to receive the kind of semester-long course that would give them sufficient time to deconstruct fixed and oversimplified gender ideology that limit the development of individuals and make them willing to include gender equity education in their learning. The White Paper declared that the provision of gender equity education courses in teacher education is one of the goals of the Ministry of Education.

### **3.5 Developing Resources**

The self-learning resources for in-service teachers are solidly based on the platforms of the CICC-GEE and local gender equity education guiding groups. Exemplars, materials, and methods are offered by these platforms to show how to integrate each of the core competences of gender equity education in the seven learning areas. Resources such as books, journal articles, and website resources (e.g., gender-issues-related films, journals, and newsletters) are also available on these platforms.

## **4. What More Can Be Done to Improve Gender Equity Education**

### **4.1 Providing Teachers with Incentives**

Revising education laws or regulations so that knowledge of gender equity becomes mandatory when

obtaining a teacher certificate is one strategy that could to attract preservice teachers to take credit courses or to attend training sessions (Ministry of Education, 2010). Moreover, encouraging schools to hire or promote teachers and administrators who have been certified by training systems would also provide incentives for them continuing to receive training (Ministry of Education, 2010).

#### 4.2 Improving the Teaching of LGBT Education

According to Article 17 of the GEEA, schools must design curricula and activities to encourage students to develop their potential, and must not discriminate students on the basis of their gender. Moreover, Article 13 of the Enforcement Rules for the GEEA states that a curriculum must provide affective education, sex education, and gay and lesbian education. However, LGBT education remains a marginal item in gender education.

Tsai (2012) reported the experiences of the LGBT movement of the Taiwan Tongzhi (gay) Hotline Association in schools, and found that school curricula generally limit LGBT education. Fang (2012) also found that teachers rarely include any discussion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships in their lessons. The findings of both studies indicated that barriers to the provision of gay, lesbian, and bisexual education are mainly caused by society's prejudices and discrimination, a lack of knowledge among teachers, and time limitations. The attitudes of parents regarding the inclusion of sexuality in education thus became one of the important issues for the 2014 yearly plan of the Ministry of Education (K-12 Education Administration, Ministry of Education, 2014).

Based on the findings that teachers who had received sexual-orientation, lesbian, and gay education during the previous 3 years provided more sexual orientation teaching than those who did not receive such training, Fang (2012) suggested that all teachers should receive training regarding sexual orientation.

### 5. Conclusion

The Taiwanese government initiated gender reform in educational settings in 2004, since when it has established comprehensive frameworks and training systems, and provided resources to ensure the inclusion of gender equity education in curricula and teaching. During the 10 years since the GEEA was enacted, 80% of elementary- and junior-high-school teachers have received training. However, due to the lack of training relating to LGBT and a reluctance of teachers to attend the associated training programs, less than half of the teachers have received LGBT education training. This means that the tenets of the GEEA — to promote substantive gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination, uphold human dignity, and improve and establish education resources and an environment of gender equality — are not yet full achieved. It is crucial to revise education laws in order to provide further incentives for both preservice and in-service teachers to attend training sessions and remove the messages of gender inequity that are still present in curricula and teaching.

Moreover, the task of promoting gender equity education has mainly focused on schools. In response to the negative attitudes among both parents and society as a whole, family education and social education should be the focus of attention during the next stage. Providing parent education via schools would be a good place to start.

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