

An Investigation of the Gender Responsiveness of the Upper Primary Social Studies Curriculum in Rwanda

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Abstract

This study investigated the gender responsiveness of the Upper primary Social Studies curriculum in Rwanda. Forty-one people participated in the study, including pupils, teachers, and education officials. Data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions, lesson observations and content analysis of nine Social Studies textbooks. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data collected. The findings showed that while Social Studies curriculum considers gender issues, there is some gender stereotype regarding women's and men's roles within the textbooks. There were significant differences in how rural and urban pupils perceive the impact of gender on children's education. The findings from lesson observations indicate that teachers are generally gender sensitive in their teaching practices. Some teachers agreed that gender has a significant impact on education while others felt that it is no longer an important issue. In short, while efforts have been made to ensure gender responsiveness, textbooks and teaching practices, still need some enhancement.

Key words: Gender responsiveness, primary curriculum, teaching and learning

1. Introduction and Background

Gender Bias in school learning materials and Curriculum in general affects affect learners' learning and their conceptualization of future identities (Rong, Xue, Zhang, and Zhou, 2021). This is why in an attempt to realize quality education as one of the sustainable development goals [SDGs] the emphasis of inclusiveness and equitable access to education for all was re-iterated (United Nations, 2019). Rwanda, like many other developing countries, is a signatory to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and therefore considers gender equality and equity in the school curriculum as essential.

However, the Ministry of Education (2003) notes that before the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis, Rwandan formal education was discriminatory and characterized by gender insensitivity, as girls had limited access to meaningful education. This gender discrimination originated from the colonial period when the first school for boys was established in 1900 while the first school for girls was established almost four decades later in 1937 (Tukahabwa, 2018).

Today, the Government of Rwanda promotes gender equality in all spheres of life especially in education. For instance, girls' education policy (2008) stipulates that education practices should aim towards achieving gender equity by ensuring that a curriculum is gender sensitive. Similarly, the education sector policy (2003) upholds an education system, which enhances positive values through a curriculum that is free of any kind of discrimination. No wonder today, Rwanda is one of the few countries in the world where the majority of parliamentarians are women (64%) compared to 36% men (Warner, 2016). This could in part, indicate the

government's commitment to "achieving gender equality, empowerment of women and promotion of the rights of women" (Abbott & Malunda, 2016, p. 561).

Many African countries' social studies curricula pay attention to gender aspects on the ground that, it enables both boys and girls develop their own identities and understand the identities of others (Tupper, 2002). Nevertheless, the teaching methodology used still has many gaps in gender balance and this can easily perpetuate inequality. If such gaps are not addressed, social studies education structure might support a hierarchical framework that privileges one sex over another.

Regardless of the relentless efforts to promote gender equality worldwide over the last several decades, gender inequality is still an issue of concern and there should be efforts to systematically investigate and address gender gaps (Hurren 2002). However, there is insufficient data regarding the extent to which the Rwanda primary school curriculum and its delivery currently meet the government's education policy objectives of gender equality. This study explored the extent to which the upper primary social studies curriculum is gender responsive and how its implementation responds to gender issues with the view to enhancing gender equality and equity as learners' develop their ideas and beliefs about gender identity (Thornton, 1994).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Gender and the School Curriculum

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and responsibilities that are deemed appropriate for men and women, boys and girls (UNGEI, 2012). Gender responsiveness is essentially about identifying gender issues; considerations and taking action to address them to ensure gender equality and equity (Mluma et al., 2005). In a school context, gender equity means being fair to boys and girls in terms of their respective learning needs (UNESCO, 2009) while gender equality entails providing equal opportunities to both boys and girls so that each may realize their potential (UNGEI, 2012).

Steck and Perry (2017) argued that, "the school curriculum serves as a powerful cultural mechanism through which dominant interests, values, and acceptable ways of behaving are communicated and reinforced". (p. 327). Every society and culture has gender beliefs and gender stereotypes reflected and portrayed in various sectors of society including the school curriculum. Gender beliefs and gender stereotypes change over time. When learners enter the school environment, the images of male and female in books influence their concepts and understandings of gender and consequently affect their own self-image, behaviour, aspirations and expectations (Mirza, 2006). Exposure to these images shapes their gender identity.

Longwe (1998) argued that schools are institutions founded on a dominant male culture and they can perpetuate societal gender inequalities through power relations within schools, pedagogy and portrayal of male and female roles in textbook and learning materials as well as the hidden curriculum (the implicit values, behaviours, and norms). In the same way, it has been found that even when taking the same courses, boys and girls experience differential worlds in the same classroom. Teachers' differentiated enactment of the curriculum

as well as their behaviour and attitudes towards male and female learners may have an effect on school inequalities (Mutekwe et al., 2013).

The school environment and curriculum, in particular, play an important role in children's development of gender identity and gender-typed behaviours. Children develop gender identity in school as a result of interactions with their immediate social environment through the hidden and formal curriculum in and out of classroom (Crawford & Unger, 2004). The school curriculum may strengthen gender inequalities by indirectly perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes and/or by ignoring the diversity of learning needs of girls and boys. In contrast, the school curriculum may also promote gender equality by mainstreaming gender equality and modelling a gender equality and equity school environment.

Mama (2003) noted that gender in school plays an important role in shaping male and female behaviour to conform to the prescribed gender roles politically, culturally, and socially. This behaviour may result in gendering the choice of careers with boys overrepresented in sciences while women may concentrate in social and arts fields. An example from Zimbabwe is that home economics is most often pursued by girls while agricultural technology is most often pursued by boys (Mutekwe & Modiba, 2012). World Bank (2012) reported that these gender differences, perpetuated and reinforced through schooling, have significant consequences particularly for girls' future employment and earnings.

In contrast, the school curriculum can promote positive messages about gender equality and human rights (CIDA, 2010). Tantengco (2014) argued that the school curriculum can be a vehicle for engaging boys and girls to understand gender issues and practices not only within the school context but also within their social context. Therefore, a gender responsive curriculum is instrumental in providing a basis for understanding the specific needs and welfare of males and females, identifying gender biases, sharing information and forming a network of contemporaries with a strong commitment to advancing gender equality and equity (Tantengco, 2014).

Similarly, Eurydice (2010) contends that "mainstreaming gender into the school curriculum is not limited to being mindful of gender issues in textbooks; it also entails addressing gender inequality in the curriculum (p.57). To ensure that the school curriculum is gender responsive, curriculum developers must address gender concerns at the earliest stages of curriculum development (Tantengco, 2014). Thus, curriculum conception, design and development, implementation, and evaluation should take into account gender issues and consideration. This suggests that gender bias can be significantly reduced if not eliminated in the learning environment and instructional processes.

3.2 Gender within Teaching and Learning Materials

The way gender concepts are presented in school textbooks reflects societal perceptions and this influences pupils to understand gender roles in their society. Pupils' perceptions are biased by the way gender issues are presented in the textbooks (Dhamo, et al., 2005). In school, gender roles are constructed during curriculum

development through the illustrations of males and females in textbooks that are used by learners as well as the teaching methodologies used by teachers over a long period of time (Dhamo et al., 2005).

According to Stromquist, Lee, and Brock-Utne (1998), textbooks and curricula content have a lasting influence in students' memories, as phrases and stories heard, read, and written about women and men as well as girls and boys affect their perceptions about gender by determining the position of men and women, boys and girls. Similarly, Thun (2001) asserts that textbooks do not only represent the real world, but also act as a link between the school, parents, and students. Textbooks contain the knowledge and skills, which strongly influence children's view of life by reproducing gender stereotypes in society as Steck and Perry (2017).

Within the instructional space, the textbooks adopted, materials used, homework assigned, and classroom topics discussed inculcate, validate, and reinforce through unspoken but powerful rules and routines heterosexual values and norms that influence student explicit (formal, codified information) and tacit (experiential) knowledge and meaning making about the past, present, and future (p. 328).

Mburu and Nyagah (2012) noted that textbooks describe women mostly in terms of their care-giving role as housewives and/or babysitters, as they do household chores like washing, cooking or looking for firewood. In textbooks, occupations related to "soft jobs" are ascribed to female characters while males are mostly portrayed doing "hard jobs". This tells the textbook readers (who are pupils) that the latter positions are for men and that women are supposed to do mostly nurturing occupations such as primary teaching and nursing.

Thus, girls need female role models in textbooks to positively impact on their self-image, aspirations, and motivation. Leu (2005) posits that gender roles, beliefs, and actions that discriminate against girls are often reflected in teaching materials and that when girls see themselves represented as being passive and boys as being active, girls may presume that they should be passive while boys may act in aggressive and competitive ways.

In terms of gender and pedagogical approaches, research shows that teachers are influential in propagating gender role beliefs and stereotypes that result in gender polarisation of social roles for boys and girls, men and women in society (Mutekwe et al., 2013). From a pedagogical point of view, gender-responsive teaching entails identifying/recognizing the different needs of girls and boys and taking actions to address those differences to advance gender equality and equity in the classroom. In fact, gender responsive teaching takes into account the specific needs of boys and girls in the academic, social and physical environment aspects like teaching methodologies, teaching and learning materials, classroom interaction, and management of academic processes (Mluma, et al., 2005). It is against this background that this study investigates the extent to which the upper primary school social studies (SST) curriculum in Rwanda is gender responsive.

4. Methodology

The specific subject of this study was the Rwanda's upper primary school pupils. This study used mainly qualitative approaches. Qualitative approach was employed in order to deeply understand respondents' views, opinions and experiences gender responsiveness in both curricula and its delivery. The purpose of this study is

to investigate the gender responsiveness of Rwanda's upper primary school Social Studies curriculum and its delivery (Primary 4, 5 and 6).

Upper primary (when pupils are 10 – 12 years old) was chosen because at this age children develop their understandings of social construction of gender much clearer (Leinbach, Hort, & Fagot, 1997). At this age (upper primary school), children develop gender schema that are much broader than simple play preferences (Leinbach, Hort, & Fagot, 1997). More so, at this age pupils are getting ready to join secondary education where girls and boys are adolescents ready to develop their notions of the differentiated gender roles in the society.

This study targeted three categories of participants for information triangulation purposes (Creswell, 2008): The study used purposive and simple random sampling techniques ensuring gender balance in participants. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers and Rwanda Education Board (REB) officials while simple random sampling was used to choose pupils. Participants included upper primary pupils and social studies teachers as well as REB officials in charge of curriculum development and implementation. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the sample of participants.

Table 1: Participants of the Study by category and sex

Category of Participants	Female	Male	Total
Upper Primary Pupils (primary 4, 5, and 6)	12	12	24
Teachers of Social Studies	3	5	8
Rwanda Education Board officials	2	5	7
Total	17	22	39

Teachers and pupils were selected for this study from four randomly selected schools: Two schools from urban areas (one public and one private) and two from rural areas (one public and one private). The geographical locations of the schools were considered in order to examine the extent to which the school setting – urban or rural – and its status – public or private – had an impact on the way gender is mainstreamed in the teaching and learning process. The two urban schools were chosen from Kigali City and the two rural schools were chosen from the Southern and Northern Provinces. At each school, two Social Studies teachers (one male and one female) were chosen to participant, as were two pupils (one female and one male) from three class levels (primary four, primary five, and primary six).

This study used semi-structured questions for in-depth interviews, focus group, classroom observations, and content analysis of social studies textbooks and curricula to collect and analyze data. Interviews were conducted with key informants in the sampled schools and Rwanda Education Board officials. Since pupil participants were minors, the researchers received informed consent from each of the adult participants and from the parents/guardians or local authorities. The participants' anonymity was also respected.

5. Results and Discussion

Results are categorized into the following thematic areas: curriculum content, curriculum delivery and assessment, gender in textbooks and gender awareness. The analysis of these results were linked to what literature and other studies stipulate.

Curriculum content

The assessment of the upper primary SST curriculum is divided into two sections. Section A and Section B. Section A contains general introductory materials including the national context within which the curriculum is taught and learnt, the meaning and importance of SST, general objectives of SST, methodology and teaching aids, and suggestions for assessing and evaluating pupils' learning outcomes. Section B contains the content to be taught and is subdivided into units, topics, objectives, and content.

The assessment indicates that, the upper primary SST curriculum objectives are responsive to gender. One of the objectives of the SST curriculum that precisely talks about gender responsiveness stipulates that: 'With examples, explain the importance of gender equality and complementarity among boys and girls. More so, gender equality and a demand for increased attention to gender in the curriculum is emphasized in *life skills*, which is part of the SST curriculum.

Topics with a clear gender focus include *Gender in our District* and "*Gender in our Province*" and are included' across all the upper primary SST curricula. There are also other gender related topics such as "*Things everyone can do to maintain peace in the District*", "*Factors of disharmony in the District*", "*Equality among people in our Province*", and "*Democracy in our District*" have gender issues implicitly integrated in the content.

By assessing and analyzing the use of language in curriculum, it was evident that, throughout the introduction to the curriculum (Section A), third person pronouns such as *him* and *her* as well as *her* and *his* are used. Sometimes the male pronoun comes first while in other cases the female pronoun comes first. Seldom does a female or male pronoun appear alone. Table 2 below shows the frequency of third person pronouns in the primary 4 - 6 SST curriculum.

Table 2: Frequency of third person pronouns in the primary 4-6 SST curriculum

Pronoun	Frequency			Total
	P4	P5	P6	
He/she	-	1	1	2
She/he	-	-	1	1
Him/her	-	-	1	1
Himself/herself	2	2	-	4
Her/his	14	13	3	30

His/her	29	31	3	63
Her	-	3	-	3
She	-	-	2	2
Total	45	50	11	106

It is evident therefore that male and female pronouns mostly occur together in all the three upper primary SST curricula. Cases where the female pronouns *her* and *she* occur once are minimal. This generally implies that the curriculum respects gender responsiveness. However, the pronouns *his/her* occur more than twice as often as the pronouns *her/his* indicating that greater effort is needed to ensure one sex is not favoured over the other in terms of language used.

Curriculum delivery and assessment

According to Mutekwe et al (2013), teaching methodologies influence gender polarization. Unfortunately, after assessing and analysing Rwanda's SST curriculum, it was found that, its delivery or teaching methods do not have an obvious gender element that is responsive to gender. Rwanda's SST curriculum suggests several teaching methods including explanation, discussion, guided discovery, storytelling, problem solving, and cooperative learning, among others.

However, during lesson observations, teachers did not demonstrate any delivery mode or teaching methodology responsive enough to gender issues. Gender considerations were not evident in teacher-pupil interaction. Teachers did not appear to consider gender when putting pupils into groups of work. As a result, some groups could be made up of only boys or only girls depending on the sex of pupils seated in neighbouring desks. On the contrary and as per the best practice, teaching methodologies must be explicitly highlighting key gender approaches in teaching especially in mixed schools. Explicit delivery and teaching methodologies in any curriculum helps teachers who may be gender blind or who do not recognize how male are commonly favoured over female based on widely held societal beliefs.

However, in terms of pupil participation during all the lesson observations, girls were significantly more active in classroom activities compared to boys. Girls were more eager to participate in class activities. Girls more often than raised their hands to answer questions than boys did. Comparatively, teachers assigned leadership roles for group work activities to girls more than boys. This is evidence that, teachers are not gender sensitive. Teachers should encourage both girls and boys to participate actively in learning activities rather than concentrating on one sex. Some teachers in this study demonstrated weak understanding of how gender can be incorporated into assessment and teaching. For instance, a male P.5 teacher remarked: "You cannot plan to ask questions to an equal number of boys and girls. What is important is to ensure that learners follow and understand the lesson".

Generally, this study found that, the teaching methodologies teachers use in Rwanda's upper primary school is neutral in terms of gender responsiveness. No teacher appeared deliberately discriminating against

either boys or girls during the lesson observations. In some cases, teachers could not use a pupil's name when the pupil is called to answer a question. It was also observed that when the teachers ask questions in class, both boys and girls raise their hands to eager to respond to the question. Likewise, during lessons, both boys and girls ask questions to their teachers. There was no clear and observable evidence suggesting that teachers are guided by any gender considerations when choosing pupils to ask or answer questions in class.

Gender responsiveness in textbooks and Teachers' Perception

A sample of nine commonly used textbooks in Rwanda's upper primary school were selected for analysis. In all the nine textbooks analysed, males were portrayed in more differentiated and varied roles than females. Roles associated with male images included positions of leadership, and occupations such as physician, banker, security personnel as well as men doing labour intensive work such as oil drilling, farming using modern technology, looking after animals, and fishing, among others.

In contrast, female images were mainly depicted in domestic, service oriented and household roles such as caring for children, weeding, and harvesting, fetching water, selling groceries, making handcrafts and nursing. In nutshell, males were seen to dominate in well-paid jobs whereas females were mainly associated with domestic work as well as less paying jobs. Mburu and Nyagah (2012) argue that gender stereotypes are characteristic of patriarchal society where men tend to overshadow women in public life.

Some SST teachers, particularly those teaching primary 5 and 6, noted that the history content demonstrates gender stereotype. For example, on the topics regarding the *pre-colonial* and *colonial periods*, males were predominantly depicted as leaders while females were mostly engaged in household chores and agricultural activities.

In an attempt to be gender sensitive, teachers reported that, when they are teaching topics in history with such gender stereotypes, they explain to learners that such gender stereotypes are of the past and that nowadays things have changed. For example, when teaching "*Gender in our District*", teachers make it clear to pupils that all men and women have equal opportunities of doing business and getting jobs and that all boys and girls have equal opportunities to go to school.

This study has revealed, largely, that Rwanda's upper primary textbooks enforce gender stereotypes. Majority of the textbooks do not acknowledge the contributions of women towards national development in Rwandan society. Yet, Rwanda's Parliament leads the world with the highest percentage of women that is 64% women against 36% of men (Warner, 2016).

As Lloyd (2005) puts it, the message and image that textbooks convey pertaining gender roles of men and women can mislead children because children take all the information they read in textbooks as truthful. From textbooks, children learn the gender identity as well as particular behaviors related to their sex, which strongly influence their view of life and gender socialization (Thun, 2001).

All the nine textbooks assessed and analyzed depict women expressing affection or kind-heartedness while men were aggressive and, in some cases, drunk. Pupils have to be protected from gender stereotypes to

enable them to have a better future free of gender biases by eliminating gender role stereotyping in school textbooks. While both boys and girls can be negatively affected by gender stereotyping images in textbooks, girls are more affected especially in terms of building self-esteem as well as choosing careers (Cornbleth, 1984; Perry & Bussey, 1979).

Rwanda's upper primary textbooks actuality contradicts the government of Rwanda efforts for gender balance. The present situation in Rwanda with regard to gender roles, gender equality, and participation of women in socio-economic development is far different from what the SST textbooks illustrate. In Rwanda today there are many women in the private sector competing with men in different businesses and, in some cases, they outnumber men. Likewise, a considerable number of women serve as senators, parliamentarians, ministers, directors, doctors, vice-mayors, and executive secretaries at provincial, district, sector and cell levels.

However, regardless of gender being a criterion for textbook development, it was found that the upper primary SST textbooks are still very far from being gender responsive. This implies that the current mechanisms to ensure the production of textbooks that are free from gender stereotyping are inadequate. It is a known fact that the promotion of gender equality is an important factor for meaningful development of the country to take place, but a lack of gender awareness coupled with the existence of patriarchal ideologies continues to militate against efforts made to ensure that the schooling process is gender responsive.

Pupils' Knowledge of gender

Interviews with pupils revealed that majority of the pupils had heard about gender issues. However, their understanding of gender varies from an urban pupil to a rural area. For instance, a P.5 boy from a rural school stated that, gender is about "birth control" whilst a P.4 girl from Kigali city school stated that, 'gender refers to the way Rwandan society defines men or women's roles'.

This is exactly all about the socially constructed characteristics of women and men. There were also differences in how rural and urban children understand the impact of gender in their lives. Pupils from rural schools reported no impact while those from urban schools were able to highlight the negative impact of gender insensitivity has in their lives.

One of the P.6 girls interviewed in an urban school pointed out that, 'some subjects such as Mathematics and Science are believed to be for boys while arts are for girls. When girls fail mathematics, some teachers think it is normal because mathematics is for boys. This kind of stereotype can discourage children to put more effort study science Mathematics.

6. Conclusion

This study found that Rwandan upper primary social studies curriculum tries to address issues related to gender. The curriculum content includes some topics on the study of gender issues. However, gender implications are not well articulated in the content. Teaching methodologies used to deliver the social studies content were found neutral in terms of gender responsiveness.

Despite of the efforts to eliminate gender-stereotyping, textbooks for social studies textbooks is very weak. There is serious gender stereotyping in textbooks. There is still a gap between the gender education policy's intentions and actual practices within textbooks and delivery mode. Although gender parity in education has been achieved in terms of access to education and other areas, there is still a need to address gender inequality in textbooks, and as Mlama, et al. (2005) says, teachers should be able to develop and utilize gender-responsive teaching and learning methodologies. It is in these regards that this article recommends that teacher training institutions and prospective teachers should be trained on how to identify and effectively address gender issues in classroom teaching, and that in all school textbooks, males and females should be depicted equitably in different and varied roles, responsibilities, and activities.

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