



The Role of Gender in Intercultural Teaching and Learning: During and After the Pandemic

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Abstract

When gender problems are intersected with other issues in an intercultural teaching and learning context, they often present as bias and discrimination toward people with marginalized genders or gender identities. Unfortunately, the pandemic and quarantine have intensified these people's disadvantages. In the last five years, as remote education became increasingly accepted in most regions of the world, many students missed opportunities of interacting with teachers and receiving help from them; students who were victims of gender-targeted violence became more likely to encounter difficulties in finding assistance. Additionally, information about gender bias spread widely on the Internet, putting students under a great deal of mental burden. This essay aims to address gender issues in the intercultural learning environment, especially during the pandemic in the past few years. In the first section, the relevant issues are defined and the concepts to frame the study are briefly introduced. Then the essay makes a cross-cultural reflection between Chinese and American cultures, highlighting the challenges encountered by educators when they promote gender equality in these cultural backgrounds. In the following section, the essay draws implications for future teaching in multicultural remote learning environments on the relevant subjects.

Keywords

Gender equality; intercultural education; remote learning

1. Introduction

When gender problems are intersected with other issues in an intercultural teaching and learning context, they often present as bias and discrimination toward people with marginalized genders or gender identities. Unfortunately, the pandemic and quarantine have intensified these people's disadvantages. During the remote education period, many students missed opportunities of interacting with teachers and receiving help from them; students who were victims of gender-targeted violence encountered difficulties in finding assistance. Additionally, information about gender bias spread widely on the Internet, putting students under a great deal of mental burden. This essay aims to address gender issues in the intercultural learning environment during the pandemic, by defining issues, reflecting on them, and drawing implications for future teaching.

2. Context of the Study

2.1 Importance of the Study

There are many considerations why gender is a subject that should not be overlooked in our society at large or in an intercultural classroom at the micro-level. Inequity between genders has a long history in some cultures, spanning

thousands of years, and it adversely affects at least half of the population. Additionally, the gender issue is more complex than a dominance gap between males and females, as there are individuals who identify as non-binary, including but not limited to transgender, gender fluid, and gender-neutral: according to Flores, Herman, Gates, and Brown, June (2016), there are 1.4 million people in the United States who identify as transgender. People of oppressed genders continue to face prejudice and are not accepted by the majority of cultures' concepts. Boske and Oskalo (2016), for example, addressed the microaggressions ("microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations") (p. 1) that many students encounter in a multicultural learning setting. They examined an example of discrimination against students based on their gender and sexual orientation in the study, which was "classified as actual manifestations of aversive and subversive intercultural behaviors and illuminate the personal experiences of people impacted by microaggressions" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic and the quarantine (although it was necessary and helpful in controlling the infection), aggravated the disadvantaged situations of people with marginalized gender/gender identities. From the perspective of multicultural education, based on Bozkurt et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted education throughout the world, and lockdowns had "negatively impacted adolescent girls and women" (p. 7). Compared with school closures against Ebola infection in 2019, the school closure during the COVID quarantine could also probably lead to "increased gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies, child marriage, exploitation and other forms of abuse against adolescent girls" (p. 7). Mittal and Singh (2021) reviewed gender-based violence from a global viewpoint and concluded that "COVID 19 has not only led to an increase in the gender-based violence but has disconnected them from their support networks" (p. 5). The Hechinger Report (2020) also pointed out that "students who are navigating their sexual orientation or gender identity are finding it harder to turn to their favorite teachers for advice" as schooling has shifted to the online mode.

Indeed, students were restricted to their cultural communities and cut off from the school and wider society as a result of remote learning. In this case, the negative effects of gender inequality within societies could be much more harmful as there was little chance to escape. Additionally, nowadays students are threatened by violent cases against marginalized genders, such as the Atlanta Shooting on May 16, 2021, targeting Asian-American females. Cases similar to this have been increasing since the pandemic began, which, according to a report of NY Times on March 17, 2021, may reflect an increase in "a phenomenon called 'male supremacy terrorism' driven by aggrieved male entitlement and a desire to preserve traditional gender roles".

2.2 Concepts Used to Frame the Study

A conclusion can be drawn from the previous discussions that teachers working in an intercultural setting must be aware of the gender problem and its effect on disadvantaged students, which requires them to find theoretical supports. The Black Feminists have made many insightful arguments on how to view and consider the gender problem as a complex intersection of different forces. These Black Feminist theories have a strong reference value in an intercultural context, where gender issues are exclusive to specific racial or class groups. For example, Intersectionality is a valuable tool for assisting teachers in taking the first step toward identifying and naming these gender problems. Cooper (2015) explained the usefulness of intersectionality: "bringing into view lives that have been occluded by obtrusive structures, such as racism and sexism... means that the structures making them invisible are now clear and that the negative impact of those structures must be addressed" (p. 8). Students' emotional awareness is also critical, and teachers can take advantage of the benefits of an intercultural learning environment, where students can interact with cultures that value all genders and gain an awareness of equity through comparison and contrast. This necessity of understanding and developing awareness is well supported by Freire (1970) in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "until they concretely 'discover' their oppressor and in turn their consciousness, they nearly always express fatalistic attitudes towards their situation" (p. 47).

Another methodology applied in this study is Culturally Responsive pedagogy, which is used in the following analysis and reflection of the cross-cultural learning environment of Eastern (with Chinese as an example) and Western (with American as an example) cultures. Hammond (2015) explained this pedagogy: "culturally responsive teaching is when the teacher grounds the lesson in community issues that is relevant and meaningful to students' daily life as a vehicle for teaching content. Or when the teacher uses students' natural cultural learning tools like talk and wordplay to help them process new content". However, teachers must avoid engaging students' context cultures without first conducting a critical review of the drawbacks these cultures may offer, as many "traditional" notions advocate a power of males over females.

3. Findings

3.1 A Cross-cultural Reflection Between Chinese and American Cultures

Chinese and American cultures are representative of Eastern and Western cultures. The process of comparing and contrasting the notions of males and females and the gender inequalities in the two cultures in education can provide much inspiration to teachers who work in a multicultural environment. It is worth noting that “Eastern” and “Western” are divided in general and do not include all the cultural branches in the world. Also, cultures in China and the United States have their unique aspects, which are not representative. As a result, this comparison only aims to explore some probable implications for teachers in cross-cultural education, which are not meant to be definite and conclusive.

Chia et al. (1994) have studied gender role attitudes of Chinese and American students and concluded that there is a common belief that “all females, regardless of culture, expressed the desire to be more equal” (p. 28). In the past two decades since the publication of this study, the belief in gender equality has been continually reinforced with the development of Feminist theories both in China and the United States. However, at the same time, as Chia et al. (1994) pointed out, the female students held such a belief also means that “males expressed a desire to continue to play the dominant role, suggest[ing] that we are still far from the ideal equal and just society” (p. 28).

Females from both ethnic backgrounds have historically faced barriers to educational equality. On the one hand, female students from Chinese cultural backgrounds have been negatively affected by traditional Confucianism, which emphasizes rigid patriarchy based on male desire. Gang and Guiyang (2000) have concluded that to some degree, young Chinese women “are products of a complex interweaving of modern values of gender equity, officially, and the experienced reality of a strong patriarchal and paternalistic culture” (p. 49). From the perspective of teaching, education about the language is highly relevant to the transmission of traditional cultural values, as Fan (1996) pointed out, “The physical structure of the Chinese language testified to the continuing inequalities of gender within Chinese society, the roots of which revert to antiquity” (p. 111). On the other hand, in the United States, under the hegemony of Western culture, the role of genders in education is also experiencing an inequality, regardless of academic success. Weaver-Hightower (2009) observed the education of boys and girls and noted that “Girls' needs may not show up on a test, but they are still very real. ... Girls still struggle with access to technology and technological literacy, access to high-status fields, and equitable outcomes from schooling such as workforce and economic indicators” (p. 25).

The remote learning mode has been mainstream since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Students of different genders and different cultural backgrounds respond differently to this new learning routine, which brings up new questions. For example, Chandler (2020) collected data of students' interactions with the teacher during remote learning and found that “on average, the 37 girls are interacting more than the 54 boys” (p. 3), which led to questions because “results for an “in-person” learning experience showed the opposite result” (p. 3). Chandler's (2020) hypothesis was that “Perhaps the girls found the online communication *safer*” (p. 3). Besides, students' perceptions towards the teachers' behavior are different between cultures, which means they may have different expectations on the interactions with teachers in the classroom. Stork and Hartley (2014) conducted a study of students' perceptions of the professors' actions, and found that “American females perceived the item's rating potential professors' behaviors as more offensive than did any other group. American males followed, with Chinese males then Chinese females” (p. 99). The explanation they gave was that students with a Chinese cultural background tend to expect teaching with “formality, strictness, and teacher-initiated learning” while American students expect “a more casual, student-centered, mutually-engaging learning environment with professors who share a challenging learning process with them” (p. 103).

It is also worth noting that in an intercultural remote learning environment, students with a Chinese background are more reserved than students with an American background. For instance, from the observation of a graduate-level *Intercultural Communication in Multicultural Education* (ICME) course in New York University, Chinese students are less likely to speak up and take the lead in both group and whole-class discussions. Although proficiency in English may contribute to this fact, there are also influences from the Chinese and American students' differing expectations of the classroom environment and teacher-student relationships.

3.2 Implications for Teachers in a Multicultural Remote Learning Environment

The following are some implications taken from the cross-cultural research above, aiming to foster a gender-equitable classroom climate in multicultural education. A special emphasis has been put on the current mode of remote learning.

A critical application of culturally responsive pedagogy can be effective in this situation. The basis of this critical reflection is an in-depth understanding of the students' different cultural backgrounds. As previously mentioned,

Hammond (2015) advocated this pedagogy of “mimicking students’ cultural learning styles and tools”, which assists students in connecting the knowledge with their real-life experiences in their cultural communities, thus reinforcing their understandings. At the same time, however, the “mimicking” of cultural environments should not be indiscriminate. It is necessary to remove concepts from cultural traditions that are against equality, such as the notions of obedience, rigid patriarchy, and male dominance in traditional Chinese culture, before applying them to in-class discussions. Students can be encouraged to participate in this process. As Sayer and Meadows (2015) pointed out, “The teacher’s role then is to problematize culture in order to stimulate students to explore their identity in relation to Other in a way that engages them with the diversity of cultural practices” (p. 276).

To take action, another important step is to recognize and address the emotional needs of gender-oppressed students, as reforms must begin internally. According to Black Feminist Lorde (1984), the value of inner strength of feelings and emotions is as follows: “For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings ... our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (p. 58). To facilitate the awareness of the role of genders in the classroom, the teacher needs to help students develop an emotional ability of empathy, so students from different cultures and with different gender identities can understand each other. Emotion is necessary for students to conduct any act of recognizing and supporting mutual respect. “Emotion is the rudder for thinking, learning, and decision-making” (Annenberg Learner, 2020). To students who are negatively affected by their cultures and have internalized the traditional notions of inequality, it is necessary for them to be supported and encouraged to build confidence.

Besides, more chances of interaction need to be provided in the online learning environment, which has made it difficult for students to communicate within the classroom. For one reason, the Zoom Online classes limit the opportunities for students to interact with each other; for another reason, as students usually have the freedom to close their cameras, the teacher usually has difficulty in knowing their situations. In this case, students are enclosed in their cultural environment, which is not helpful to cross-cultural communication, mutual understanding, and breaking down stereotypes among genders.

Furthermore, extra attention should be paid to the texts used in class. Teachers need to maximize the advantages of online learning, which makes it more convenient for students to get access to the most current information. At the same time, a critical reflection should be made on traditional textbooks, which may contain contents against equality, as Song (2013) concluded, there is “a need for teachers and textbook writers to develop a critical cultural and linguistic consciousness in order to discuss intercultural interactions, injustice, and unequal cultural representations at a deeper level” (p. 389).

To support students who have already been victims of domestic violence and other gender-targeted violence, teachers can take a cue from the “healing centered engagement” by Ginwright (2018) which “highlights the intersectional nature of identity and highlights the ways in which culture offers a shared experience, community and sense of belonging”. This supportive activity should center on the students as individuals with emotional needs, instead of focusing on their traumatic past experiences. If necessary, teachers should help students get professional help from therapists.

4. Reflections

In conclusion, gender is an aspect of intercultural education that cannot be overlooked. Through this research, I gained a deeper understanding of gender equality in society and realized new challenges to gender equality during the COVID pandemic. As I connected this knowledge to my experience as a graduate student and teacher in a cross-cultural context, I realized the complicity and uniqueness of gender issues in multicultural education. Several implications have been drawn from this study, including knowing the gender issues and developing awareness of gender equality, critically examining and rejecting culturally opinions against equality, building a healthy classroom environment of inclusiveness and empathy, paying special attention to the interaction among members of the learning community in remote learning, providing support to students with gender-based traumas, etc.

However, this study does have limitations. This study focuses on the gender equity between males and females, with little discussion about non-binary genders such as genderqueer and transgender. Besides, references after 2020 are majorly news reports and factual articles, without much support from reliable theories that can stand the test of time. Also, this study lacks sufficient evidence from classroom observations. Future research could focus more on the analysis of the online class model and the different ways in which gender inequality is reflected in the online class model to provide teachers with more practical methodologies.

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