

Exploring the Gender Imbalance in Teaching Staff in China: How to Break Gender Stereotypes in Education Industry

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Abstract. In China, with the increasing proportion of female teachers especially in primary and secondary schools, the gender imbalance in the number of employees in the education industry has attracted increasing attention, as many people believe that the continued increase in the proportion of female teachers will bring some negative effects. The teacher occupation has been “sex-labeled” for a long time. It is traditionally regarded as a “women’s job”, because many of the qualities a teacher should possess are considered feminine in popular perception. Therefore, more and more women tend to become teachers, while men are reluctant, which further exacerbates the gender imbalance in the education industry. On the basis of existing research, this article discusses the reasons for this phenomenon and the limitations of the current solutions, and explore how to better break the stereotypes in the education industry to solve the gender imbalance problem in a proper way, contributing to the promotion of gender equality effectively. Instead of simply improving the treatment towards male teachers, it is revealed that the fundamental way to solve the problem of gender imbalance is to let the public establish the concept of gender equality.

Keywords: gender imbalance; education industry; stereotypes; gender equality.

1. Introduction

The gender imbalance in the number of teachers has been one of the major concerns in China's education field in the past few years. In modern society, teachers are considered by more and more people to be a "women's profession", as many of the qualities that teachers need to possess, such as tolerance, love, empathy, etc., are considered to be highly overlapping with femininity. Driven by this notion, many women also tend to choose teaching as their job. The proportion of female teachers in China has continued to increase in the past few decades, especially the proportion of female teachers in primary and secondary schools, which has already exceeded 50% in 2012 [1].

Among the students in pedagogical colleges in China, the proportion of female students exceeds 60%. Many studies have pointed out that the gender imbalance among teachers stems from social stereotypes about women [1]. Meanwhile, women prefer the teaching profession more than men. Studies have found that the teaching profession can give women more upward recognition and downward contrast, which means to have a certain sense of superiority, making them think that they belong to the "high-end" industry and widen the gap with the "low-end" industry. So, the teaching occupation has a significantly positive impact on the attractiveness towards women. However, at the same time, the teaching profession gives men more upward comparison and downward recognition. They think that they are not as good as others and that they belong to the "low-end" industry. They can only seek recognition from the same industry or so-called "lower-end" industries, so the teaching profession is less attractive to men [2]. In traditional concepts, women are considered to be more suitable for education-related industries, while men who engage in teaching rather than researching in the education industry will face certain discrimination because teachers, who need to be delicate, tolerant, friendly and empathetic are considered to be in conflict with men's social gender role traits. This not only reduces men's willingness to engage in the education industry, but also restricts women's employment. Moreover, this concept also involves discrimination against the education industry. For women, it is a very good choice to choose the teaching profession for stability, while for men, teaching is an inferior profession. This is a belittling of the significance of the education industry.

As the problem of gender imbalance in the education industry has become increasingly prominent, Chinese society has paid more attention to this phenomenon, and people have begun to worry about whether such an imbalance will have a negative impact on the effectiveness of education or other aspects [3]. For example, a very common view is that, the stage from kindergarten to middle school is an important period for students to form their gender awareness. If boys are surrounded by female teachers, they will miss the opportunity to develop their "masculinity" and become feminine. Some people even submitted proposals at the Provincial People's Congress meeting, suggesting that gender quotas should be implemented in the enrollment and teacher recruitment of pedagogical colleges to increase the proportion of male teachers in primary and secondary schools [3]. Many current studies in China have pointed out the seriousness of the gender imbalance problem, and even believe that the excessive proportion of female teachers is one of the reasons that indirectly lead to the gender dysphoria of students. As boys accept and imitate the delicate and emotional teaching style of female teachers too much, in severe cases, they tend to be more feminine [4].

Nevertheless, a serious paradox arises. On the one hand, these studies oppose conformity to stereotypes, and believe that an excessive proportion of female teachers causing by stereotypes is not a good thing. It is necessary to break the stereotype that "teaching occupation is a women's job" and to abandon the traditional concept of "gender labeling" of the teaching profession. However, on the other hand, these researchers believed that after receiving education from female teachers, male students will show some so-called feminine traits, such as delicateness and gentleness, which are inconsistent with the masculine temperament that men should pursue. This is precisely a behavior that caters to stereotypes and an implicit contempt to some traditional femininity traits [4, 5]. At the same time, most of the existing studies advise attracting male practitioners simply by giving them preferential treatment, but they do not consider the adverse effects of these practices on female practitioners such as exacerbating the unfair competition faced by women [4, 6, 7]. Also, they ignore the adverse impact on the education industry itself. Lowering the conditions for recruiting male teachers is not a good way to ensure the quality of teachers. Simply increasing the treatment of male teachers or lowering the standards for recruiting male teachers is not really conducive to gender equality in the education industry or eliminating stereotypes about the education industry.

Discussing how to improve men's willingness to engage in the education industry without compromising the rights of female practitioners is of great significance for promoting the realization of real gender equality and the healthy development of the education industry. This article mainly adopts the literature research method combined with the method of descriptive analysis of the current situation to explore the reasons why gender constrains the education industry and how to break relevant stereotypes. Meanwhile, this article will try to promote the public to establish a correct understanding of the education industry, break the sex-labeling pattern of the education industry, and form the awareness of abandoning stereotypes at the root instead of falling into self-contradiction, and the most important, to promote real gender equality in China's education industry.

2. Review of the current situation of gender imbalance in China's education industry

The gender imbalance in China's teaching profession is mainly reflected in primary and secondary schools. The data has shown that the gender imbalance of teachers in primary and secondary schools of China tends to increase, and the lower the school level, the higher the proportion of female teachers. Since 2014, the proportion of female teachers at all school levels has exceeded 50% [2]. At the same time, according to data from the Ministry of Education of China, in 2020, among the full-time primary school teachers nationwide, female teachers have accounted for as high as 71.14% [8].

At the same time, from the perspective of age structure, there are more old male teachers and fewer new male teachers, but female teachers are showing a younger trend [2]. In 2020, among primary school teachers aged 24 and below, female teachers accounted for 84.99%, and among teachers aged 50-54, female teachers accounted for 59.95% [8]. Also, the proportion of women who are qualified

to become teachers is higher than that of men. This gender difference in age structure will lead to an increasing proportion of female teachers in primary and secondary schools in China [9].

2.1. Limitations of current practice

In order to alleviate the current situation of gender imbalance, some people advocate preferential treatment for male teachers to encourage more men to work in the education industry, especially as primary and secondary school teachers. One of the main methods of this is to recruit male teachers with lower scores. For example, in a teacher recruitment in Changsha High-tech Zone in 2021, a male applicant only scored 4 points, but still entered the re-examination. In the same database, it can be seen that the minimum score for female applicants is 75 points. The official response was that the score was lowered because there were too few male applicants [10]. The unfairness of this approach is obvious, but this is not an isolated case.

Even if several strategies such as lowering recruitment requirements of male teachers or simply improving treatments towards male teachers, really can improve the enthusiasm of men to engage in the teaching profession, they will be harmful instead of beneficial. On the one hand, such an approach simply squeezes out the employment space for women. Women with equal or better abilities may be excluded instead, and the unhealthy competition among women in the teaching profession will be further intensified. On the other hand, giving male applicants preferential treatment reinforces their sense of superiority, as they can get jobs with less effort or lower ability than female applicants. In many cases, the professionalism of male practitioners hired with reduced scores cannot be guaranteed, on the contrary, these male practitioners may act against professional ethics.

3. Reasons why the teaching profession is sex-labeled

The root of the gender labeling of the teaching profession lies in stereotypes. As it is mentioned above, most of the qualities that teachers are supposed to possess match the traditional concept of femininity. In Chinese society, the function of teachers has also been endowed with more meaning. In the process of forming the modern school in China, the teaching profession, as an extension of the function of "mother", has been reshaped in the traditional gender-segregated culture. Gender segregation in the teaching profession has a double symbolic meaning. On the one hand, the stable gender identity of the job means that it can only be handled well by a specific gender group, and the appearance of the opposite sex is a special case or only occupies a small gender scale. On the other hand, the work itself also involves, projects, and produces a specific type of gender temperament. Therefore, it is not only suitable for teachers to be molded and assigned as women in the context of gender symbol practice, but also the characteristics of love, care, compassion, gentleness, and patience in femininity should also be transformed, dominated, and utilized [1].

When explaining the phenomenon of feminization of the teaching profession, the public should see that when women choose teaching as a profession, in addition to considering personal interests, abilities, and free will, society's expectations of gender roles are equally or even more important. The entry of men and women into different occupations is related to gender identity and social expectations [2, 11]. Men are placed in the man box by society, while women are placed in the lady box. There are different characteristics in the two boxes that they need to follow due to their biological sex. If they violate it, they may suffer from misunderstanding, discrimination or even oppression. Women's work is more inclined to their social expectations of nurturing, caring and supporting others. Women acquire gender cultural norms in the process of socialization, and they usually have and agree with the idea that "women are suitable for teaching". Some scholars have clearly pointed out that in a context with traditional assumptions about women's roles, teaching is a profession that can integrate family and work commitments. As for men, because society generally expects them to "support the family" and "be famous", they have a higher desire and pursuit of success and wealth. Most men hope to be more successful in their careers than women to make a difference. However, pedagogical colleges have obvious inclinations and orientations for men's future careers. Most men or many

outstanding men choose to give up applying for pedagogical colleges and engaging in teaching professions [2]. The traditional concept holds that men should pursue higher pursuits outside of the teaching profession, while women should just be satisfied with a stable job.

However, it should be pointed out that in Chinese society, the teaching profession is often labeled as a “women’s job” only in primary and secondary schools. Men are not in the minority as professors that people trust more in universities, which is also a product of stereotypes. Traditional concepts do not discriminate against men engaged in the education industry in academic fields, but they sometimes believe that men have better academic potential than women in many fields. It turns out that the potential of female teachers is not necessarily inferior, and female teachers can even promote the performance of female students at certain times without negatively affecting the performance of male students [12].

4. Proper ways to improve

4.1. Promote the establishment of the correct concept of the education industry

The core purpose of the education industry is to teach and educate people, and the possible negative impact of measures in order to alleviate the gender imbalance in the teacher industry should not be ignored. Instead of using a “quick” way to increase the proportion of male practitioners, what should be done is to pay attention to the guidance and training in the education process. The public should infiltrate the concept of gender equality in education, tell children that they should not be defined by biological sex. For example, teachers can encourage boys and girls to actively explore various fields in the teaching process, instead of restricting students’ self-development based on what kind of occupation is suitable for girls or for boys with the traditional concept. Meanwhile, the public should let children know that teaching is a meaningful profession, and can encourage more boys to become interested in the education industry.

4.2. Improve the overall treatment of the education industry

It is unreasonable to only increase the treatment of male practitioners, because it is not conducive to the healthy development of the education industry [13]. To truly make the education industry more attractive, the overall level of treatment including salaries and welfare in the education industry should be improved. Also, a broader platform can be built to provide more chances for all the teachers to show their talents and abilities in all aspects, in order to let them gain more sense of achievement. Accordingly, not only more and more people will be attracted by the teaching profession, but also society will realize that the education industry is indeed valued, and that engaging in the education industry has a bright future.

4.3. Break gender stereotypes

From the foregoing, it is not difficult to summarize that the core of the problem lies in breaking gender stereotypes. Labeled gender identity cognition simply equates the social gender roles of men and women with the biological sex characteristics of men and women, and uses biological gender cognition to dominate social gender cognition. It believes that gender is innate, and gender differences are natural and distinct, but ability, quality, etc. should never and cannot be defined by biological sex. Female teachers can be strong and resolute, and male teachers can also be considerate and meticulous. Strong and brave, decisive and witty, gentle and considerate, patient and meticulous, etc., these character traits should not be sex-labeled. They are shared by both sexes. The current teacher group should establish the concept of constructing the gender identity of teachers in educational practice, which will help teachers examine their own gender awareness and behavior, avoid bringing gendered language and action symbols into the classroom, and encourage children to play in a childlike way, developing a character trait that combines rigidity and softness in harmony and happiness [14].

In addition, the guidance of public opinion is also very important for the transformation of public opinion. For example, the media can report some exemplary news about the education industry, create

a positive image of the teacher community, and shift the focus to individual abilities and traits rather than gender-related stereotypes. The media should avoid shaping or reinforcing gender-related stereotypes when reporting. They should uphold this concept in various types of reports: women can be strong, and men can also be attentive. There is no absolute sense of masculinity or femininity. Whether one's biological sex is male or female, personality is diverse. It is ability and quality that determine whether one can become a teacher, not biological sex.

5. Conclusion

This article mainly focuses on the current gender imbalance in China's education industry and discusses its current situation and root causes. Also, this article has discussed some limitations of existing research, such as suggesting increasing the proportion of male practitioners by crowding out women's employment space in the education industry without considering the negative effects. On this basis, ways to promote the development of the education industry on the premise of breaking stereotypes and ensuring gender equality are briefly explored. The core method to realize the transformation of ideas is education, so the transformation of teachers' own ideas and the training and cultivation of teachers are crucial.

The main contribution of this article is that it explores how to solve the problem of gender imbalance in the education industry from a more logical and correct perspective. However, the research in this article is relatively superficial, as its method is simple and it only focuses on China's domestic perspective without analyzing this issue from a global perspective. Richer and more comprehensive conclusions probably can be drawn from a broader and more diverse perspective. Future research should dig out more feasible practical measures and improve the practical significance of the research, which can not only effectively increase the enthusiasm of men to engage in the education industry, but also protect the rights and interests of female practitioners, and jointly promote the healthy development of the education industry.

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