How Chinese Primary and Secondary School Teachers Unconsciously Construct Gender Identity through Everyday Discourse: A Discussion Based on the “Boy Crisis”

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Abstract. This study focuses on the "boy crisis" by exploring how primary and secondary school teachers unconsciously shape gender identity through their everyday discourse. In doing so, semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary school teachers are analyzed, drawing on Foucault’s Discipline and Punish and Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex, which focus on the implicit gender norms in teachers’ speech and the eventual effects on subjectivity among students. Teachers commonly use gendered language in classroom management and evaluation of students, for example "girls are quiet and attentive" and "boys are mischievous and impulsive". These two discourses reproduce stereotypes of gender and also establish an invisible power structure: students who happen to possess “feminine traits” such as obedience and calmness are praised whereas other boys who are less typical are implicitly disfavoured on the basis of their behaviours and identities. De Beauvoir's theory in The Second Sex further reveals that the essence of this educational disciplinary logic is society's attempt to shape all students into "manageable others." The "boy crisis" arises as boys are forced to take on the "second sex" role within the disciplinary system. The study suggests that educational practice should reflect on gender biases in discourse and evaluation systems to promote more diverse and inclusive processes of subject construction.

Keywords: gender identity, Foucault, second sex, boy crisis, educational discourse.

1. Introduction

In the fields of sociology and education, gender identity construction has always been one of the important topics. With the rise of the discussion on the "boy crisis", more and more scholars and media have begun to notice the phenomenon that boys are at a disadvantage in academic performance, classroom performance and behavioral evaluation. However, mainstream public opinion often attributes this phenomenon to the "natural" differences of boys, such as liveliness, impulsiveness, and lack of concentration, but ignores the role of the education system itself in the construction of social gender. In fact, as a space where power and knowledge are intertwined, schools have long since transformed from a simple place for knowledge transmission to an institution for the replication and reproduction of social gender norms [1]. Traditional socialization theory is usually accompanied by a certain tendency of gender essentialism, believing that men and women have inherent "natural attributes". For example, Parsons pointed out in his functionalist sociological theory: "Instrumental roles are mainly undertaken by men, which are behaviors that maintain the economic function of the family; expressive roles are undertaken by women, who are responsible for the emotions and daily care of the family." The concept of "men are science-oriented and women are literature-oriented" was emphasized [2]. However, recently, domestic and foreign research and media reports have pointed out that girls often perform better than boys in academic performance. For example, a study showed that 13 of the 16 top scorers in the college entrance examination in Chongqing from 2001 to 2008 were girls [3]. China Youth Daily also reported in 2021 that "girls' overall scores surpassed boys'"[4]. These trends have triggered widespread discussion in society about the "boy crisis", and it is believed that the decline in boys' scores has become a problem that cannot be ignored. Therefore, this article will try to reveal this mechanism from two theoretical paths.

First, according to Foucault's theory, schools, like prisons, the military, and hospitals, are classic disciplinary institutions. Such places produce "appropriate bodies" through limited space and time, and authoritative "superiors" through discourse practices and other behaviors [5]. This means that in the educational context, students' postures, behaviors, and gender identities are constantly defined by teachers' discourse and behavioral discipline. Li Kongwen used Foucault's theory to make an analysis in 2011. He believes that Foucault's knowledge-power theory helps to reveal how the education system creates obedient individuals in daily operations, thereby better improving the education system [6]. At the gender level, Wang Yan believes that school power uses micro-mechanisms such as teachers' language, reward and punishment systems, and classroom order to continuously discipline students in a gendered manner, gradually associating the standards of "good students" with traits such as docility, carefulness, and discipline [7].

To further analyze this phenomenon, this article will introduce Simone de Beauvoir's "Second Sex" theory to explore whether the education system unconsciously shapes all students, regardless of gender, into "manageable others" (the Other). From this perspective, we can rethink the essence of the "boy crisis": Are boys forced to adapt to a "second sex logic" in the process of being disciplined as "qualified students," that is, educational expectations of obedience and being managed?

Finally, the research question of this article is: How do primary and secondary school teachers unconsciously construct students' gender identities in their daily discourse system? The study uses a semi-structured interview method to analyze the classroom experiences and language expressions of five primary and junior high school teachers, using Foucault and Beauvoir's theories as a dual analytical framework [8].

This article assumes that through language, evaluation, and teachers' behavioral norms, which can observe how the education system constructs and reproduces gender order at the micro level, thereby revealing the deep social mechanisms behind the 'boy crisis.' [9].

2. Research Methods

This article used a semi-structured interview method to interview five primary and Secondary school teachers. The background information of the interviewed teachers is shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1. The information of participants

Participant	School Level	Subject	Years of Teaching	Grades Taught
A	Primary	Chinese	10	3-6
B	Secondary	Chinese	12	7-9
C	Secondary	English	11	1-3
D	Primary	Mathematics	7	1-6
E	Secondary	Mathematics	20	7-9

The five interviews mainly talked about classroom management, student performance differences, and gender expectations. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes. Teachers A and B were interviewed online by phone, and the other three teachers were interviewed face-to-face.

3. Findings

By summarizing the interview materials, three typical gendered discourses can be basically identified.

The gendering of behavioral norms is the first point. According to the majority of respondents, boys are viewed as "naughty, careless, and requiring more management," whereas girls are "quiet, obedient, and sensible." For example, "Girls are generally more careful and write neatly, while boys tend to be careless," said teacher A of a primary school. This demonstrates how teachers frequently describe students' everyday behaviors using gendered language.

Academic achievement and gender norms are the second point. A number of interviewed teachers think that girls perform better in subjects such as Chinese and other humanities subjects; boys, however, still have “more potential” for developing an aptitude for sciences subjects. Among learning attitudes, such as diligence and conscientiousness, are usually scrutinized by teachers. These characteristics are more suitable for the learning methods of girls." Girls' homework are always done in a tidy manner; notes are also neatly done, boys tend to be lively in thinking but they aren't very careful in words," said secondary teacher C. "Boys surely have an advantage in science, girls have the advantage in humanities; it has been like that for many years," said Secondary teacher E.

The third point is reproducing gender roles and moral judgements. Teachers tend to use language related to traditional gender roles to describe the morals and personalities of their students. “Boys need to be responsible” and “girls need to learn patience”, for example. Primary school teacher D described it this way: “Boys are tough, and girls are gentle.”

On reviewing the content of the interviews, it becomes apparent that these statements about the nature and quality of learning are not just descriptions of what is; these statements have a strong value orientation. They were repeated and highlighted by teachers, and, under their impact, get internalised and accepted by students.

4. Discussion

In recent years, discussions about the "boy crisis" in China's education sector have gradually increased, and a number of empirical studies and media reports have provided supporting data. For example, Wang Jin and Chen Xiaosi's empirical research on junior high schools in Guangzhou found that the worse the school environment, the more obvious the phenomenon of boys lagging behind in academic performance, which shows that there is an interaction between gender discourse and learning environment. In the context of poverty, this difference is even more prominent [10]. Research from the School of Education at Peking University also pointed out that among poor students, the gender performance gap is even greater, showing the dual role of educational resources and gender identity construction [11]. In addition, Liu Jiang and Wan Jianghong's research shows that China's "female educational advantage" has already existed significantly, and the admission rate and enrollment ratio of female students at the undergraduate and junior college levels are generally higher than those of male students [12]. Overall, whether it is from media reports or academic empirical research, it shows that the "boy crisis" is not a single individual problem, but the result of the joint action of gender discourse, school system and socioeconomic environment. This provides a realistic background for understanding the impact of gender identity construction on academic performance and highlights the social significance of studying this issue.

According to Foucault's theory, the teacher's discourse itself is a manifestation of power. It is not a rule external to students, but rather a way of producing "appropriate boys" and "appropriate girls" through daily minor disciplinary practices. When teachers constantly associate "quiet" and "careful" with girls, they are actually constructing a "feminine ideal student image." At the same time, if boys do not meet the expectations of "bravery" and "responsibility", they are often considered "not masculine enough." This differentiated discourse invisibly strengthens the gender order.

In the interviews, many teachers repeatedly emphasized the differences between boys and girls in learning and personality. For example, primary school teacher D said: "Little girls like to raise their hands to answer questions in class, while little boys are active and don't follow the rules." This distinction actually constitutes an early gender education. Students gradually learn to "perform" gender through teachers' observation and evaluation [13].

Through the materials and analysis in the previous article, we can analyze and explain this phenomenon. Primary and secondary school teachers unconsciously reinforce a social expectation through daily language: boys = active, extroverted, impulsive, girls = quiet, obedient, and hardworking. This gender expectation may only be gendered verbal discipline in the social system, but the problem is that in places like schools, being “obedient, careful, and diligent” is more in line

with the standards of excellent students than being “active, impulsive, and hyperactive”, so girls are more likely to be recognized and get good grades. However, boys, after being repeatedly labeled as “naughty and careless”, are likely to develop a negative academic self-identity, which leads to a decline in their academic performance, which puts them at a disadvantage under the school’s disciplinary system.

At the same time, the fact that most teachers in the education field are female has also had some impact. For example, the study “The Impact of Teacher Gender on Student Academic Performance - A Study Based on the Perspective of Teacher-Student Gender Matching” mentioned that in basic education, the gender of the teacher and the gender of the student being female has a positive impact on the performance of girls in certain subjects, while the impact on boys is not significant [14]. Li Min’s research found that there are significant differences in teachers’ expectations of classroom participation, discipline, quietness, and activity levels for male and female students in primary school classrooms. Meanwhile, the higher number of female teachers is also one of the reasons why teachers more frequently describe girls as “obedient and attentive” [15].

This difference is not only seen in how students behave but also in their performance at school. Many teachers said in interviews that girls tend to do better in subjects like Chinese, English, and history. Girls are often expected to be patient, focused, and able to remember things, which is what these subjects require. Boys, on the other hand, are often called "not focused" and "not interested in studying," which makes them do worse in these subjects. Many teachers also agree that "in middle school, girls usually do better overall," even though traditional views indicate that boys are better at science. This shows that what teachers think and expect about gender is closely related to how well students do in school.

As a result, all students are evaluated using "feminine" standards. Many boys who lack or choose not to exhibit these attributes are disadvantaged in this kind of evaluation system, in terms of grades and tests.

More importantly, it is often hard for teachers even to see themselves unconscious construction of this. Gender bias was there in their interviews - even though many teachers themselves said that they deal with boys and girls “equally”. For example, they were talking about the type of things that students are expected to think and be doing when they say things like “boys are careless but better at science” or “girls are quiet and good at liberal arts”. Accepting this kind of identity narrative restricts students: girls lose confidence in science and boys are less likely to try hard in the liberal arts. In the end, their grades are lower as a result of this stereotype [16]. This is the heart of gender discourse and its influence on the grades.

But how exactly do these disciplines and social expectations come into being? Why do schools acknowledge “obedient, careful, and hardworking” which often linked with females as the standards of an “excellent student”? From the perspective of Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, we can understand the logic behind this. Society shapes women into “the Other” , through education, culture, and institutional practices — an identity that is controlled, regulated, and managed by others [17]. The school’s disciplinary mechanism is essentially an attempt to transform all students into “manageable others” [18]. In other words, the “ideal student” pursued by the education system often embodies a “feminine” submissive temperament, which causes boys to conflict with institutional logic when trying to maintain the characteristics of “first sex” (initiative, independent, and competitive) [19]. By analyzing the interview materials, we find that this educational discourse actually requires boys to adapt to the "second sex logic" in the education system while "should be the first sex" - as shown in Figure 1, they are expected to obey and be managed, which creates tension with their social identity expectations and constitutes the root cause of the "boy crisis."

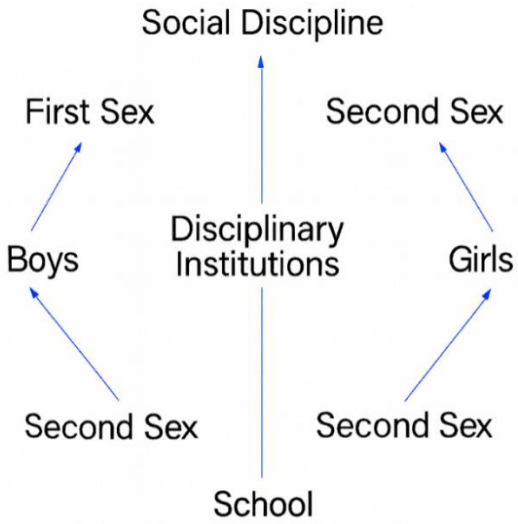


Fig. 1 Second-Sex Logic in Schooling

5. Conclusion

Teachers' everyday discourse is not a neutral communication tool, but rather a crucial mechanism for the reproduction of gender ideology. Foucault's disciplinary theory shows that these discourses, while shaping student behavior, also produce specific gendered bodies. Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the second sex explains how schools, as disciplinary institutions, are charged with treating students equally and cultivating them into "administered" individuals. Natural or physical factors are not the only factors that determine the academic performance gap between science and liberal arts students. Additionally, it is the outcome of ongoing construction and reproduction by social expectations, the educational system, and gender discourse.

Yet, there is more to the "boy crisis" than boys just not study hard. It results from the unspoken bias in favor of girls in the educational system's hidden standards. This helps explain why girls tend to do better in primary and secondary school and why some boys, even if they are smart, might not behave well or live up to expectations. They eventually come to view learning negatively as a result of this.

This research indicates that traditional methods, like "giving boys more attention" or "teaching them to be more responsible," will not be sufficient unless the idea of what constitutes a "good student" is reconsidered and modified. Deeper reforms and more humanistic attention are needed in today's educational system. In order to ensure that various gender characteristics in the classroom are viewed positively rather than as merely "good" or "bad," these reforms need to reconsider how schools set evaluation standards and employ common discourse. Education can only effectively attain gender equality and reduce the "boy crisis" by doing this.

At the same time, due to limitations in research conditions and scope, this article still has the following shortcomings: First, the sample size is limited and concentrated in a specific region. This study conducted only semi-structured interviews with a small number of elementary and middle school teachers. The sample's gender ratio, subject distribution, and school level are relatively uniform, which may affect the generalizability of the conclusions. Future research could expand the sample to include more teachers from urban and rural areas and different types of schools to conduct more representative comparative analysis.

Second, the interviews primarily present the teacher's perspective and lack student voices. While teacher discourse can reflect the gender power logic within the education system, further exploration is needed to explore how students accept, resist, or reconstruct these discourses. Future research can adopt two-way interviews or classroom observation methods to present the interaction between teachers and students in a dynamic way, so as to reveal in more detail the generation mechanism of gender identity in daily school life.

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