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Role of Reflection in Facilitating Teachers for Gender Sensitive Political Literacy Instruction

Sadaf Furqan *

Abstract

This paper is written around the study that was initiated to analyze the challenges that students especially girls face in being developed as leaders in the political sphere. It was carried out to understand how a teacher educator could facilitate gender sensitive political literacy instruction in schools through action research. Reflection is embedded at every stage in Action Research. Reflection helps teachers in shifting the focus from what they teach to what students learn. The research process involved exploring, understanding and reflecting on teachers' current perceptions and practices of gender sensitive political literacy instruction. Later, teachers were facilitated to teach for gender sensitive political literacy and lesson plans were developed and taught collaboratively in primary and secondary classes. Reflective dialogue was held after each lesson that teachers taught in the classroom. Findings revealed that teachers do not perceive any need for girls to be educated for political knowledge and skills and even if they acquire some knowledge it can be best utilized by keeping their husbands and children informed about current affairs. The classroom practices also revealed discriminated teacher-student interaction where boys dominated classroom discourse of teachers, gender blind teaching and learning materials, authoritative school culture and gendered perceptions of roles and responsibilities of men and women held by society.

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Introduction

In the General Elections of 2002, only 25% of the voting population went to cast their votes. The figures are even lower for female voting population, as only 7.8% appeared at the polling stations. The statistics illustrates the apathy of the population of Pakistan towards politics particularly elections and voting. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) assures male and female citizens' equal right to vote and hold public offices. However, application of this assertion has proved to be challenging throughout the political history of Pakistan. In 2002, 60 women were elected on the especially reserved seats in the National Legislature for woman, and thirteen women were elected on the non-reserved open seats however, it has been feared that even when women are elected, it is unlikely that they will be able to exercise any political power because of lack of training and exposure to political skills.

The low quantity and quality of female representation in political affairs also reflects the complex socio-cultural scenario of Pakistan. Women participation is limited to the private sphere of life which mostly refers to the reproductive and care-giving roles. However, men also lack the knowledge and skills to become active participants in the civil society. This raises serious questions about the quality of political education in Pakistan. Literature suggests that political education in many countries including Pakistan is not considered important for school students (Dean, 2005), as they are thought to be cognitively immature to be provided with knowledge and skills of political literacy (Maitles & Deuchar, 2006). Even in the West, when students complete their schooling, they are not exposed to any political ideas and thus are unable to handle complex situations, debates, discussions on political issues (Maitles, 1999). However, Connell, Greenstein, Stevens (as cited in Davies, Gorard and McGuin, 2005) claimed that 'when young children are exposed to images about society they can make sense of them' (p.353) and hence need to be offered the opportunity to enhance their political knowledge and skills.

In Pakistan, Citizenship education is the aim of Social Studies education. Citizenship education is about equipping children with the knowledge skills, and attitudes to become active, responsible citizens, enabling them to make a difference in the society (Claire & Holden, 2006; Crick, 1988;

Kershaw, 1981; Maitles & Deuchar, 2006). Political literacy is a vital dimension of citizenship education. Through political literacy, students even at primary levels are made aware of where and how decisions are made in the society; they gain familiarity of the range of political ideas, language and forms of argument, and awareness of their rights and responsibilities (Maitles & Deuchar, 2006). Along with this the concepts of power, freedom, equality, democracy, sovereignty, participation and representation constitute the knowledge aspect of political literacy. Skills such as discussion, debate, argument, and advocacy are cultivated in boys and girls along with the values of human dignity, equality, and respect for others through political literacy.

It is generally believed that girls have less political understanding than boys and are less interested in political affairs (Claire & Holden, 2006; Hahn, 1998). Schools play an important role in promoting the belief that girls are not suitable for political education through textbooks, teaching and learning experiences and student-teacher interactions. Studies conducted in Pakistan have reported that teaching and learning experiences create a context that offers better learning opportunities for boys as compared to girls (Dean, 2005; Halai, 2006; Mattu & Hussain, 2004). Where the majority of literature reports unsuitable classroom experiences of girls (Beaman, Wheldall & Kemp, 2006; Sadkar & Sadkar, 1993; Myhill & Jones, 2006; Younger, Warrington & Williams, 1999) many researchers have found boys to be having negative learning experiences in the classroom (Connell, 1996; Garrahy, 2001). Hence, the need is to create equitable learning experiences for boys and girls, where political literacy can be achieved by all students.

Teachers have the major responsibility to equip students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to become informed, responsible and active citizens. In this regard, Leung (2006) has reported the characteristics of teachers, who can facilitate boys and girls in becoming politically literate such as: open mindedness, being knowledgeable, whole heartedness, willing to care and participate in societal issues, willingness to care for students and courage. Presence of these characteristics is also essential to engage in reflection. Reflection was first proposed by Dewey in 1933 as an integral part of continuous teacher development. Teachers need to reflect on their day to day teaching and learning practices to enhance students' learning and understanding.

Many see reflection as an end to the teaching and learning activity but others see it as way of enabling teachers to make sound judgments of their own teaching and learning practices for the purpose of taking actions to improve them (Zeichner and Liston, 1987). However, many scholars have argued the individualistic nature of reflection proposed by Dewey (1933). Gerard (1995), referred to reflection as a meaningful social activity through which teachers engage in their own capacity building by deliberating and learning from each other. Teachers collaborate by asking questions from one another and helping each other to gain new insights about context, perceptions, situations and values. This notion of collaboration gives way to reflective dialogue. Through reflective dialogue teachers engage in sharing of ideas, asking questions, making suggestions for improvement, and responding to each other's reflections.

This study focused on facilitating teachers in developing political literacy in both boys and girls. The research question was: How can Social Studies teachers be facilitated for gender sensitive political literacy instruction? To help answer the main question a number of subsidiary questions were used however, this paper will focus on one: What teacher education strategies could be helpful in facilitating teachers for developing gender sensitive teaching for making students politically literate? A number of strategies were used though this paper will focus on reflection as a teacher education strategy.

Research Design

Two primary and secondary school social studies teachers Ghazal and Naghma (pseudonym) were purposefully selected for the research study. Both the teachers teach in a private English medium school catering to middle income class families.

Action research was selected for the study. Koshy (2005), defines action research as “an enquiry undertaken with rigor and understanding so as to constantly refine practice, the emerging evidence-based outcomes will then contribute to the researching practitioner continuing professional development” (2005, p.1). Reflection was embedded at every stage of the action research process in the study.

Reflecting on the existing practices

Classroom observations and interviews were used for fact finding. The observations focused on the seating arrangement, teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, and teachers' instructional strategies. Semi-structured interviews were used because it allowed the researcher to be flexible to further probe the participants to raise their own concerns and issues.

The script tapes of the classroom observations and transcribed interviews were shared with the teachers. They were provided with reflective questions such as: How did they interact with girls and boys? Did boys and girls get equal classroom participation opportunity? Did the instructional strategy they used facilitate in developing political literacy in girls and boys? The questions helped teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and enabled them to some extent to see that most of the times they did not provide equal opportunities for classroom participation. They also observed that whatever chances girls got during teaching and learning it was limited to smiling, nodding or giving one word answers. The transcribed interviews assisted them to reflect on their perceptions on providing opportunities to boys and girls for developing the skills and attitudes for political literacy. Teachers reflected on their own perceptions that they do not regard girls suitable for political literacy because they have to get married and serve the families. They also perceived that even if girls get any knowledge about politics it will be useful to inform their husbands and children in future about current affairs. The reflective questions were discussed in more detail in a reflective dialogue. Initially, it was difficult for the teachers to challenge their own perceptions and classroom teaching practices however, the researcher with the help of using more probing questions assisted them. Two reflective dialogue sessions were held with the teachers where ideas were shared, questions were asked and each responded to other's reflections.

The researcher maintained a reflective journal throughout the study, where the feelings, questions, queries, anxieties and understanding of the situation were mentioned. Koshy (2005) suggests that the reflective process involved in writing the journal contributes to the professional development of the researcher.

Facilitating for developing political literacy in boys and girls

The reflections on the existing teaching practices led teachers to inquire more on their teaching and they shared the need for improving their practice. However, the researcher felt that first teachers needed to develop the understanding of gender sensitive political literacy instruction. An educative session was held to develop teachers' understanding of gender issues. However, as gender beliefs are strongly held due to religious, social and cultural practices it became difficult to alter their perceptions. Realizing this reflective dialogue was held where the teachers reflected on their own lives along with the researcher to become conscious of the presence of gender. Reflecting and analyzing their own experiences from childhood helped them to see the presence of gender in the larger society which became the basis for identifying gender issues in their own classrooms. Later, teachers were facilitated to develop an understanding of political literacy and how some of its skills can be developed in students such as discussion. Simultaneously, teachers were also provided with some guiding questions to facilitate teachers in the process of writing reflections and maintaining a reflective journal.

Lessons were co-planned with the teachers to be taught in the classroom. Teachers were also facilitated to develop lesson plans on their own. Teachers analyzed their own lesson plans with the assistance of the researcher to detect gender bias to and include gender sensitive teaching strategies. As the teachers decided to use discussion skills using gender sensitive teaching strategies, lessons were demonstrated by the researcher. Teachers observed the lessons, reflected on the instructional strategy and later developed lesson plans to use for discussion in the classroom. Teachers' reflections also helped the researcher to understand the situation and revise the plan.

Finally, teachers practiced using discussion in gender sensitive ways in their classrooms. This helped the researcher to evaluate the educative process as gender sensitive instruction is a complex skill and demands complicated behavior and attitude changes, it was anticipated that the outcomes may not be obvious in the first few classroom lessons. Also, the real use of the skill takes longer to translate into classroom practice. However, observations at this stage helped to reflect on the issues and challenges faced by the teachers and subsequently assisted in planning for the next stage. Reflective dialogues were held after each lesson. These dialogues focused on teachers' experiences of how their lessons

went and what challenges did they encounter while teaching a newly learned strategy for gender fair teaching.

Findings and Discussion

Key findings of the study indicate that reflection and reflective dialogues could be introduced in schools in Pakistan. This is evident in the manner the participants of the study responded positively to reflective dialogues. The reflections were regarded by teachers as an important learning collaborative learning tool with did not only impact on their classroom practice but also in their perceptions. Teachers were able to cite instances where their classroom teaching practice improved as they tried to provide equal participation opportunity to girls and boys to develop political literacy.

Role of Reflection in Shifting Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Sensitive Political Literacy

Reflecting on the notion of gender sensitive political literacy helped the teachers to analyze their own gendered life experiences and restricted participation in the public sphere being females. This happened as the researcher together with the teachers reflected on their childhood experiences. However, initially the teachers resisted in recognizing gender issues due to their beliefs and perceptions, which helped in changing the teacher educator's assumptions that teachers would accept whatever is told to them. Their resistance led to review the literature to facilitate teachers in understanding the difference between 'sex and gender' or in other terms 'nature and nurture'. The strategy worked to some extent, as teachers were able to see the different values, expectations and responsibilities that were attached to them being women since childhood and this had implications for their active participation in the public and the political sphere of the society. This helped the teachers to see the possibilities of gender issues prevailing in the society with strong influence on its educational institutions such as schools as from, "I teach equally to boys and girls" they moved to "Yes, now I can see that I do not teach equally to boys and girls and unconsciously favor boys" (Naghma, field notes, March 9, 2007).

Role of Reflection in Shifting Teachers' Practice of Gender Sensitive Political Literacy

Teachers' past experiences and knowledge of politics were valued and used to enhance understanding of political literacy. However, Naghma

reflected that students particularly boys can misuse political knowledge and skills by getting engaged in violent protests and strikes. Her fear stands true as due to the lack of exposure to the skills of political literacy such as, discussion, advocacy and debate, students are only left to follow the path of strikes, violent protest and destruction of public and private properties which negatively effect their participation in the political sphere. However, after a number of reflective dialogues a shift in her perceptions was noticeable, as she gained awareness about political literacy, where the emphasis is on development of skills such as discussion which students can use to challenge the status quo and bring improvement in the society rather than getting engaged in violent actions.

The teachers reflected on the limitation of using textbook as the only resource and tried to come up with ways of enriching them through consulting reference books and using innovative teaching strategies such as discussion. Their effort in enriching the content indicated that teachers required and appreciated reflection as an important professional development strategy which emerges they themselves can engage in with others.

Reflective dialogues helped teachers to discussing their previous session, lesson plans and responded to each other's questions. This helped in utilizing their strength of collaboration in assisting each other during lesson planning and observing to bring improvement in classroom practices.

During the reflective sessions after each educative session, guiding questions were used to help the teachers to reflect on their teaching and express feelings about gender sensitive strategies for developing students' political literacy. The questions focused on issues such as, "What did you learn today? Why do you think this learning of yours is important for you? How this learning can help you in your classroom? What do you think should be done to make the interaction (between the researcher and the teachers) effective? Which part of the session do you think was not fruitful for you?" This exercise helped in bringing teachers' ideas and thoughts at the forefront and examining them to form new ideas for improvement in the classroom.

Implications for using reflective dialogue as teacher education strategy:

Teachers were able to use reflective dialogue to improve their gender sensitive political literacy instruction which helped them to develop a positive attitude towards reflective dialogue. This suggests that reflection can be used as an effective teacher education strategy in Pakistan and teacher education programmes can adopt a reflective approach. It also becomes imperative that in-service teacher education programmes should be introduced where reflective approach should be promoted and where time should be allocated to hold reflective dialogues for teachers.

Conclusion

Building and enhancing knowledge of reflection as an effective teacher education by engaging in reflective dialogue with two teachers, providing them time for reflection and reading the literature proved to be helpful. As Dadds (2001) asserts that learning is a social experience, which is fostered through the exchange, critique, exploration, and formulation of new ideas. It is learned that to develop into an effective teacher educator, becoming a learner first is important, as a result, constant reflection on actions is fundamental. This is not achieved only because of the teacher educator efforts; rather, the input of the research participants was extremely valuable in shaping teacher education experiences.

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Madrasah Education in Pakistan: Issues & Its Effects on Education System of Pakistan

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Abstract

This is an analytical paper that deals with an in-depth study of the Madrasa Education system in Pakistan. Madrasa Education System is of great importance as a lot of our young kids are getting Education by that system. Madrasas were once considered purely religious institutions, but the students of Madrasas have different point of view, where as those if general Education System have completely different vision, which leads to problems of adjustment in society. Instead of having bad feeling for each other, some uniform patterns can be introduced in both systems. To streamline Madrasa Education system on an agreeable and common way of thinking, an in-depth study of that system is required. This paper, therefore throws light on the objective syllabus and system of Education people who belong to Madrasa. This paper gives a clear picture to the readers and Educationist about Madrasa Education System, so that some initiative may be taken to increase the similarity of Madrasa Education System and formal Education System.

Introduction:

Religious Scholars and policy makers are giving more attention on the sensitive Issue of Modernization of Madaris' Education now days as indicated by Jilanee (2006). He says that The U.S Policy maker's interest has been increased in the Islamic religious Schools known as