

# Problems and Development Paths of Gender Education for Primary and Secondary School Students

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**Abstract:** The issue of gender education in primary and secondary schools in China has received extensive attention in recent years. However, there are still deficiencies in the popularization of gender education in primary and secondary schools, as well as in addressing these problems. This article mainly analyzes the gender cognitive bias, as well as the common gender education problems in primary and secondary schools, and their causes. This article, through analysis, demonstrates that scientific gender education can help students establish accurate gender concepts, learn to respect their own and others' differences, and cultivate values of equality and inclusiveness. Based on the research conclusions, this paper puts forward the following suggestions: First of all, the education department should improve the gender education system, incorporate it into the regular curriculum, and construct a systematic gender knowledge framework. Second, strengthen the construction of the teaching staff, enhance the gender theory literacy and teaching ability of teachers, so that they can correctly guide students. Finally, create a favorable social environment to foster a more inclusive atmosphere for the growth of teenagers.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the gradual opening up of concepts, concepts such as gender equality, multiple genders, and mobility orientation have been widely spread through online media. Gender education for primary and secondary school students has increasingly become an urgent matter. However, gender education in primary and secondary schools in China is still in the development stage. Problems such as gender cognitive bias and traditional gender stereotypes are widespread, which are profoundly affecting students' mental health and the process of socialization. Existing research shows that the implementation of gender education in China presents obvious differences among educational stages: Gender education is relatively widespread in higher education, while it lags and is lacking in basic education (Luo, 2021). Research by Professor Liu Wenli and other experts has confirmed that conducting sex education at an appropriate age, including an objective introduction to sexual minorities, helps children establish correct self-awareness and respect for others. At present, there are many problems in the practice of gender education in primary and secondary schools in China, mainly

including the ambiguity of gender education concepts, the absence of institutional norms, the singularity of educational content and the limitation of educational coverage objects (Luo, 2021). It is worth noting that the shackles of traditional cultural concepts have led to a widespread mentality among teachers and parents that they are reluctant to discuss this topic, which constitutes an important psychosocial obstacle to promoting gender education.

This study is based on the current situation of gender education in primary and secondary schools in China, and systematically analyzes the development trend and influence of gender cognitive bias in primary and secondary schools in China. Reveal the main problems and causes of this current situation; Put forward constructive suggestions to optimize the gender education and teaching system in primary and secondary schools, provide a new perspective for the optimization and upgrading of gender education, and promote the healthy, peaceful and equal development of gender in society.

## 2 TRENDS AND IMPACTS OF GENDER COGNITION ISSUES

### 2.1 Current Situation of Gender Cognition

Gender cognition, also known as gender self-identity, is a term coined by psychiatrist Professor Robert J. Stoller.

Created in 1964, it refers to a person's subjective feelings about their gender. The current society divides gender into male and female, forming the mainstream gender binary system, and the majority of people follow this mainstream system. In recent years, with the rise of social media, the topic of gender cognition has also gained increasing popularity. More and more non-traditional gender topics and groups have made public appearances on social media to share their daily lives and popularize relevant knowledge about such groups to the public. The public also maintains a respectful attitude.

### 2.2 Causes of Gender Cognitive Bias

Gender cognitive bias usually refers to the difference between an individual's gender identity and biological gender or the conflict with traditional gender norms in terms of behavior and appearance. The secular world usually regards gender cognitive bias as a psychological problem - gender cognitive disorder (misalignment).

First of all, one of the reasons for the bias in children's gender cognition is biological factors. General research holds that core gender identity is firmly formed by the age of 3. Even more scholars believe that children will have sexual enlightenment between 18 months and 2 years old (Solomon, 2013). The formation of gender identity is influenced by stable biological factors and is also affected by cultural and social construction, while the formation of gender cognition is influenced by many factors, and deviations are formed among them (Bukatko & Daechler, 2001).

Secondly, family factors are one of the important factors contributing to the formation of deviations. In the early years of childhood, many activities of children mainly rely on imitating the people, things, and events around them. However, many parents do not take it seriously, believing that the formation of gender cognition is a natural thing and will be completed naturally at a certain age. Therefore, if children are neglected and lack the correct guidance of their parents, they can be confused about gender

roles. Parental misguidance, such as parents dressing up young boys as girls, can also lead to gender confusion. Therefore, the educational and guiding role of parents has a huge impact on the formation of children's gender cognition. As the first teachers in their children's lives, parents should impart the correct gender concepts to their children and lead them onto the right track.

Finally, social factors are also one of the important factors. Due to the particularly fierce social competition in the 21st century, girls are no longer required to be "gentle and reserved" but are judged as "assertive", which is completely different from the traditional expectations of gender roles. Instead, it is easy to foster a trend of "strong women and weak men", and for boys whose minds are not yet mature, there is a high probability of causing a cognitive imbalance that is different from the past. Moreover, the development of the Internet has made it easier for today's society to access the LGBTQ+ community. Although modern society's acceptance of gender diversity has increased, which is conducive to people expressing and exploring gender identity, from the perspective of children, it will, to a large extent, cause gender confusion and lead to blind following.

### 2.3 The Influence of Gender Cognitive Bias

The influence of gender cognitive bias on primary and secondary school students is dual. On the positive side, this kind of challenge also prompts some students to explore themselves more firmly and develop creativity, while promoting the new generation to form a more inclusive gender concept and cultivate social empathy. On the negative side, students who do not meet traditional gender expectations are prone to psychological stress, school bullying, and opportunity limitations. For instance, boys who like dancing may be ridiculed by their classmates, which can lead to low self-esteem and anxiety and affect their future development. Such behaviors that do not conform to traditional stereotypes are likely to be labeled as "unsociable", and in more serious cases, they may be bullied. Some unconscious "gender discrimination", such as encouraging boys to participate in computer science competitions and guiding girls to take part in more cultural and artistic activities, gradually deprives students of their rights and opportunities for diverse individual development.

### **3 THE ROLE AND PROBLEMS OF GENDER EDUCATION IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

#### **3.1 The Role of Gender Education**

Gender education plays an important role in the personal development of primary and secondary school students and social progress. In simple terms, the core of gender education in primary and secondary schools is to promote gender equality and eliminate gender stereotypes. This view has also drawn attention from an international perspective: On the occasion of International Women's Day in 2022, UNESCO published a fact list on gender equality, emphasizing how to break gender biases and stereotypes in education (UNESCO, 2019).

Gender education in primary and secondary schools lays a solid foundation for students to build a correct cognitive system, and enables them to have a clear understanding and reflection on social stereotypes, interpersonal relationship handling, and the prevention of school violence.

##### **3.1.1 Establishing the Awareness of Gender Equality**

The primary and secondary school stage is a crucial period for the stability of gender awareness. Systematic gender education helps cultivate a new generation of citizens who are equal, free, and inclusive in many aspects and promotes the steady and sustainable development of society. It has been pointed out in some literature that the outdated and stereotyped gender concepts over a long period have, to some extent, restricted people's personal development. Some are even eroding the gender value system in the form of distorted values, affecting the comprehensive, healthy, and sustainable development of individuals and society (Chen, 2018). Therefore, implementing it in primary and secondary schools can not only help students establish gender equality awareness and break away from so-called stereotypes, but also cultivate students' social cognition of respecting diverse gender expressions. Gender equality is not merely verbal equality, but also equality at multiple levels, such as politics, economy, society, temperament, and family. In today's society, inequality often leans towards women, and the fermentation of many events also stems from dissatisfaction with the excessive preference for men.

All these may be more or less related to the lack of gender education.

##### **3.1.2 Building Friendly Interpersonal Relationships and Preventing School Violence**

During the educational process, students can also learn to establish equal and respectful interpersonal relationships, laying a foundation for handling family division of labor and close relationships in the future. Because the stereotype of "soft women and tough men" permeated in traditional culture has deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, students are taught from a young age to develop according to the gender characteristics established by the secular world. As a result, some traits that go against gender stereotypes are not accepted by students, leading to the continuous emergence of gender prejudice and school bullying. Carrying out gender education can effectively prevent gender discrimination and school violence, reduce the phenomenon of gender prejudice and sexual harassment among students, and respect others on the premise of protecting oneself. More importantly, gender education enables students to better understand the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, cultivate an inclusive mindset, and prepare for building a fairer and more diverse society. It can be said that gender education in primary and secondary schools is not only about imparting knowledge but also a crucial link in shaping values. It plays an irreplaceable role in cultivating new era citizens with an awareness of equality and a confident personality.

#### **3.2 Problems in Gender Education and Their Causes**

##### **3.2.1 Excessive Emphasis on Subject Learning and the Absence of Gender Education**

In Chinese education, there exists the concept that "grades come first". Chinese primary and secondary schools mainly aim for academic success, so many schools focus on subject learning (Li & Liu, 2022). In other words, in the primary and secondary education system in China, gender education has long been marginalized. School educational resources are mainly concentrated on the imparting of subject knowledge, while gender education is often simply classified as an appendage of "physiology and hygiene courses" or even directly ignored. The reason lies first in that schools pay more attention to hard

indicators such as the college admission rate and regard gender issues as "unimportant" content. Secondly, traditional cultural concepts make many teachers ashamed to mention relevant content. Furthermore, the current curriculum system lacks a systematic gender education syllabus, and teachers generally lack relevant professional training. This lack of education leads to the absence of correct guidance for students in aspects such as gender cognition. Not only is it difficult for them to form a healthy concept of gender equality, but they may also be influenced by online information and develop cognitive biases.

### 3.2.2 Sexual "Verbal Confinement"

Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, sex has been in an indescribable state at any time in history, and this state has persisted until now. The form of incorporating gender education-related content into the teaching system has not yet been widely adopted or formed. The main reasons for this are: First, due to the deeply rooted traditional concepts, teachers regard them as forbidden fruits and do not include them in teaching tasks. Second, teachers' professional qualities in this aspect need to be improved. It is difficult for them to accurately combine knowledge with teaching and impart it to students. There is a concern that improper knowledge output may lead to improper "sexual behaviors" among students (Li & Gong, 2020). Moreover, the dissemination channels of gender knowledge are diverse and not solely dependent on classroom teaching. However, gender education is fragmented and prone to distortion, which has led to the slow formation of gender education in primary and secondary schools.

### 3.2.3 Tagging Imitation in Social Media

With the integration and open development of global cultures, social media nowadays serves as the main carrier for the dissemination of non-binary gender cultures. Short-video platforms have simplified non-binary gender identities into a series of entertainment tags, inducing students to distort gender identity into a traffic code. This kind of entertainment-oriented pastime leads students to form a one-sided understanding of sexual minorities through participation methods such as following the trend and imitating, but lacks a scientific understanding of gender. The deeper problem lies in the fact that the phenomenon of following the trend driven by commercial traffic and the conservative gender education in schools forms a gap, which may cause cognitive biases among teenagers due to the absence

of education. At the same time, some social media content simplifies related issues into trendy labels or extreme positions, lacking scientific guidance. This may exacerbate gender confrontation or herd behavior on campus, interfering with the systematicness and age-appropriate nature of gender education in schools.

## 4 SUGGESTIONS

### 4.1 Improving the Gender Education Curriculum System

Given the current severe situation of gender education in primary and secondary schools in China, it is urgent to build a complete and appropriate gender education system.

Students of different age groups have different levels of understanding and acceptance of gender. Designing course content in stages based on age as the classification criterion is conducive to children building a more solid gender knowledge system. The age range of 7 to 13 (primary school stage) is the enlightenment period. The teaching content at this stage should center on gender equality and respect for individual differences, and convey concepts such as no gender boundaries in occupations through books and games (Liang & Dong, 2023). At the same time, basic physiological hygiene enlightenment education is carried out to teach students about the physiological differences between boys and girls and privacy protection. From the age of 14 to 16 (junior high school stage), it is the deepening period. At this time, systematic physiological and sexual knowledge should be incorporated, including but not limited to the changes in adolescent development, gender identity, and sex education content. At this stage, children have a stronger ability to accept new things and have a further understanding of gender education. It is more appropriate to discuss issues such as gender stereotypes, LGBTQ+, and gender-based violence, which is conducive to the budding of students' social gender thoughts and helps to the diversified development of their personalities. By the age of 17-19 (high school stage), students generally possess the ability of critical thinking, and the sensitivity of teenagers to elements such as society, emotions, and relationships also increases significantly during this period (Cherewick et al, 2021). At this time, it is excellent to introduce the sections of gender and socio-cultural analysis and strengthen the sections of emotional education and relationship handling.

Furthermore, enriching the forms of courses is also an important construction goal. The diversification of course forms is a powerful tool to stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning. Therefore, setting up a large number of interactions in the classroom, such as role-playing, debate competitions, and case analyses, can help increase students' participation in class and enable them to better absorb and understand the course content. Appropriate and interesting discussions can enable students to have a deeper understanding of gender more vividly. Integrating gender into the disciplinary perspective is a curriculum learning approach that is highly consistent with China's education system. For instance, in the teaching process of Chinese textbooks, students are guided to analyze literary works from a gender perspective and appreciate gender concepts of different eras, enabling them to acquire the vision and ability to examine gender culture (Li & Gong, 2020). Practical activities such as professional experience and social research can enable students to perceive gender equality, inclusiveness, and respect in practice.

## 4.2 Strengthening the Construction of the Teaching Staff

At the primary and secondary school education stage, China has not yet solved the problem that the teacher training system is not yet perfect. Including sex education ability in the teacher training plan can lay a solid foundation for teachers in schools to develop gender education ability (Li & Liu, 2022).

First of all, regularly conducting gender education teacher training can help teachers eliminate their own gender biases from a theoretical and ideological perspective, help them consolidate the theoretical foundation of gender knowledge, and better impart and teach students in the classroom. At the same time, during the training, the teaching plan templates and guidelines for dealing with controversial issues should be improved. The school can join hands with gender research experts from universities and public welfare organizations to refine more professional course content. Special gender education advisors should be assigned to the school to answer questions and provide guidance for teachers and students at any time. Establish a dynamic tracking mechanism - regularly use anonymous questionnaires to gather feedback on the actual situation of students, observe the changes in daily behaviors, and combine the data of gender-related events on campus to provide real-time feedback and modify the teaching mechanism. At the same time, fresh cases are promptly integrated

into the teaching content to ensure that gender education always remains "alive" in the present.

## 4.3 Creating a Favorable Social Environment

To build a truly inclusive campus, the first step is to establish rules - strictly prohibit gender discrimination and violence in black and white, and set up smooth channels for reporting. Furthermore, it is necessary to break those invisible shackles, such as the unwritten rules like "Boys must have short hair" and "Girls are not allowed to play football", so that students are no longer bound by the rules and regulations but can find themselves. Involve parents as well. Through parent open days and parent-child classes, let them understand that gender equality is not about "causing trouble", but about paving the way for children's future (Zhou, 2023).

## 5 CONCLUSION

Gender education in primary and secondary schools in China, as an important part of the education system, has significant implications and influences on the physical and mental health development of primary and secondary school students. The long-term absence of gender education, the confinement of "sexual" language, and the influence of information on social media have led to the current situation of gender education and the gender cognitive bias among primary and secondary school students.

Nowadays, in this era of rapid development, the improvement of the gender education system in primary and secondary schools should start from the curriculum and the living environment. The diversified curriculum design, strong teaching staff, and inclusive social environment play a promoting role in cultivating and instilling correct, inclusive, equal, and respectful gender knowledge in students.

To sum up, there are still many challenges in the gender education system of primary and secondary schools in China. Therefore, the improvement and reform of gender education is imperative to build a more comprehensive, scientific, and reasonable gender education system and promote the all-around and healthy development of gender education in primary and secondary schools in China.

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