

Revising textbooks from a gender perspective

National workshop

Do Son, 21-23 July 2009

Concept note

Workshop context and background

The national workshop in Do Son marks the launching of the UNESCO project carried out in partnership with the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) *“National textbook review and analysis from a gender perspective, including piloting teacher-training programmes to incorporate Gender Equality issues in line with the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Domestic violence Prevention and Control”* (JP GE activity 1.3.15).

The project is part of the UN Joint Programme on Gender Equality bringing together 12 UN agencies, including UNESCO. It is implemented with the technical support of the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) specialized in curriculum matters (education/learning structures, content and methods).

The main project aims are to assist the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training to develop the capacities of national and provincial decision makers, curriculum and textbook specialists, as well as teacher trainers, to integrate gender issues and promote gender equality through quality textbook development and teacher education and training programmes. In 2009, the project is focusing on textbook assessment from a gender perspective, while in 2010 priority will be given to the integration of gender issues and the promotion of gender equality through innovative teacher education courses to be pilot-tested as a basis for improving pre- and in-service teacher education and training in the country.

Beside its direct beneficiaries (i.e. policy makers, curriculum and textbook specialists, teacher training institutions and specialists), through expected outcomes such as improved textbook and classroom practices promoting gender equality, teachers, headmasters, students, other stakeholders and communities at large will equally take profit from the project in a mediated way.

The workshop will be attended by decision makers and education specialists of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training as well as by representatives of education stakeholders. After the workshop, a selected technical team, led by a national consultant, will carry out an in-depth analysis of the primary education textbooks with a view to issue recommendations to MOET for improving textbooks from a gender perspective and promoting gender equality in an enhanced way.

Workshop objectives

Textbooks, as the most “visible” part of the curriculum, have an important role in the transmission and internalization of values, and the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Gender biases, as all other biases, are usually inculcated

quite early and textbooks may be central to the way learners shape their understanding of themselves, the other and the world especially in primary education.

While today, in most countries, textbooks no more are the unique resource for learning, they continue to be quite influential given that “...at the interface between the curriculum and the classroom, policy and practice, theory and implementation – at the crux of government efforts and private initiative – textbooks have a lot of practical and symbolic importance” (Braslavsky, 2006, p. 21).

Textbooks are obviously not the only place where biases of all kinds (including gender biases) may occur, however, given their powerful role in early years of schooling, it is critical to identify in textbooks those aspects hindering gender equality through intentional and/or un-reflected prejudices and stereotypes.

In order to prepare a careful process of analysis from a gender perspective, the participants will work cooperatively to:

- explore the understanding of concepts such as “gender”, “gender perspectives” and “gender equality” in the context of VietNam and internationally with a focus on education (curriculum, textbooks and teacher education and training);
- develop appropriate methodologies of textbook analysis and assessment from a gender perspective that should be integrated in draft Guidelines for analyzing primary education textbooks in selected subject areas;
- prepare the members of the local expert/technical team to carry out subject-related textbook analysis and assessment from a gender perspective with a view to provide recommendations for textbook revision;
- plan for the follow-up, including the actual textbook analysis phase; the preparation of the Report on findings; and of an international workshop to share the outcomes of the analysis and recommendations to MOET to improve primary education textbooks (tentatively October 2009).

Expected outcomes

“Gender” differs from “sex” for the reason that “sex” refers to “the biological differences between males and females” while “gender” relates to “culture and the social division into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ ...[in other words]...to the qualities, tastes, aptitudes, roles and responsibilities associated with men and women in a society.” (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009, p. 27).

“Gender differences” are one category of differences people may experience among many other, such as differences pertaining to culture (including language, religion and tradition), ethnicity, skin color, age, social and geographical background, upbringing. As

in the case of many other such “differences”, the question of their “natural” and/or “social and cultural” nature raises heated debates.

For different reasons, such “differences” are quite often sources of positive and negative prejudices engendering discrimination/marginalization and violence on the ground of believes that the “otherness” is either threatening and/or inferior. Textbooks should thus avoid “oversimplified views of characteristics attributed to persons, groups, objects and situations, based on fallacious generalizations ignoring individual cases” (Georgescu & Bernard, 2008, p. 16) and should promote instead a nuanced, “multi-layered” concept of identity(ies).

More generally, textbooks should avoid biases of all kind, such as those identified by Blumberg (2007, p. 52-54): *invisibility* (complete or relative exclusion of a group); *stereotyping* (unfair assignment of characteristics to a group, at the cost of individual attributes and differences; *imbalance and selectivity* (presenting only one interpretation of an issue, situation, or group of people); *unreality* (ignoring unpleasant aspects in favor of flattering ones); *fragmentation and isolation* (presentation of don-dominant groups as peripheral members of society); *cosmetic bias* (things seemed to have been “corrected”/“improved” in books, but bias persists in different ways).

In order to prepare through the present workshop the process of analyzing primary education textbooks from a gender perspective based on appropriate conceptual and methodological approaches (including an appropriate analytical framework), it is expected that the participants will arrive at the following results:

- Shared understanding of concepts such as “gender”, “gender perspective” and “gender equality” and how they apply to education in the context of VietNam and internationally;
- Draft Guidelines for analyzing primary education textbooks integrating appropriate conceptual and methodological dimensions, including concrete subject-related examples;
- Enhanced skills of Vietnamese specialists to carry out comprehensive, relevant and reliable textbook analysis from a gender perspective;
- Realistic work plan for the follow –up period, including the actual textbook analysis phase; the preparation of the Report; and of an international workshop to share the result of the primary education textbook analysis (tentatively October 2009).

Working methodology

The workshop will contribute to an in-depth reflection on “gender issues” and “gender equality” as a particular case of right-base approaches in education. Theoretical aspects

will be discussed against concrete examples of “gender issues” in VietNam and internationally with a view to help develop an appropriate conceptual and methodological framework for textbook analysis from a gender perspective.

In order to provide room for as much as possible practical activities leading to an agreed outline of Guidelines for textbook analysis from a gender perspective, there will be a balance of plenary sessions and (hands-on) group work. The participants will be facilitated access to online and hard copy resource materials reflecting Vietnamese and international gender and education issues and they will be provided with a workshop training package serving as a basis for collaborative work in both plenary and group sessions.

It is intended that, based on the inputs offered in the training package, the participants will be stimulated to contribute with their own experiences and views to the improvement of a comprehensive outline of the Guidelines based on which the textbook analysis will be carried out over the next months.

References

Blumberg, Rae, Lesser. 2007. ‘Gender bias in textbooks: a hidden obstacle on the road to gender equality in education.’. UNESCO. EFA-GMR. (Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008 Education for All by 2015: will we make it?)

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Georgescu, Dakmara and Jean, Bernard. 2008. *Thinking and Building Peace through Innovative Textbook Design*. Report of the intern-regional experts’ meeting on developing guidelines for promoting peace and intercultural understanding through curricula, textbooks and learning materials (Paris, 14-15 June 2007). UNESCO, UNESCO IBE and ISESCO