

The Role of Age in Attitude Formation towards Gender Role Stereotypes among Secondary School Students, A Case of Bomet District, Kenya

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Abstract

This paper examines whether there is a relationship between students' age and their attitudes formation towards gender role stereotypes in secondary schools in Kenya. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of age on attitude formation toward gender role stereotypes among secondary school students in Bomet District, Kenya. The study was based on Erick Erickson's theory of psychosocial development. The theory states that the development of an individual behaviour occurs within a series of eight psychosocial stages. At every stage there is a crisis to resolve that is caused by the complexity of the demands of the society. The manner in which the crisis is resolved has a bearing on the development of positive or negative aspects of one's behaviour. The study adopted a causal-comparative (ex-post facto) research design. Purposive sampling plan was used to select the schools that were used in the study and simple random sampling plan was used to select the participants of the study. A total of 208 subjects were randomly selected from form four students in mixed secondary schools of Bomet District. A questionnaire consisting of a five-point Likert scale was used to measure subjects' attitude towards attitude formation of students' gender role stereotypes. Subjects were categorized as having positive or negative attitude towards students' gender role stereotypes. Subjects with attitude scores ranging from 60-100 points were treated as having positive attitude while those whose scores ranged from 20-59 points were treated as having negative attitude. Data was analyzed using SPSS computer program. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used to compare subjects' ages and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes. Pearson-product moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between students' ages and their attitude towards gender role stereotype. The study found that there was no significant relationship between age and attitude formation towards gender role stereotypes, an indication that age does not explain why students of different ages have the same attitude towards gender role stereotypes. Thus, parents and teachers should be aware that at adolescent stage the attitudes held by female and male teenagers towards gender role stereotypes are not different. In spite of the fact that adolescent boys and girls are growing towards adulthood they do not have strong feminine or masculine attitudes. Therefore, parents and teachers should provide equal opportunities and encouragement for both boys and girls. Further, the implication of this study is that once an attitude has been established it is maintained, hence parents and teachers should use learning experiences that impart positive attitudes in their adolescent children

Keywords: age, attitude formation, gender role stereotypes, secondary schools, bomet district, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

According to Dezolt and Hull (as cited in Santrock, 2004), there are a number of ways in which the classroom is biased against the boys. First, a large majority of the teachers are females in elementary school. This makes it difficult for the boys as compared to the girls to identify with the teachers and model their behaviour. Secondly, school personnel tend to stereotype boys behaviour as problematic and teachers tend to ignore that many boys are clearly having academic problems especially in the language. On the other hand, Feldman (1996) identifies ways in which the classroom is biased against girls. Among these is that in a typical classroom situation, girls are more compliant and boys are more rambunctious. Further, boys demand more attention while girls are more likely to wait quietly for their turn. Again boys

tend to get more instructions and more help than girls when they have trouble with questions. Lastly, boys are often given more time to answer questions, more hints at correct answers and further tries if they give wrong answers.

In Sweden, a teacher distributed questions from an equity perspective. This was made possible by teaching pupils in single and mixed sex groups each week over a three year period. The social interaction between teacher and pupils in the different groups was analyzed using a video recording. The first conclusion was that the teacher did not display an equitable attitude when distributing questions to pupils whether in mixed or single sex groups. She also did not seem to have similar demands on or expectations from boys and girls. The second

conclusion was that there may be an advantage with teaching pupils a few lessons each week in single sex groups if the teacher is aware of the difficulties from an equity perspective. These groups allow boys and girls to have the same amount of abilities and interests independent of gender affiliation (Karjel, 2005).

The above literature seems to suggest that there certain unconscious practices in the classroom that tends to restrain participation in the teaching learning process. Kandaswamy (2005) notes that teachers instil gender stereotypes among youngsters unconsciously. He cites an example in which during a teacher in math class in India would pick on boys to solve a problem even though some girls volunteered and by mid-term the girls would not volunteer any more. When a class topper who was a girl was asked why she was not volunteering, the answer was that girls were never given a chance anyway and that there was no need to volunteer anymore.

A study by Kamuyu (2001) that involved mixed secondary schools within Uasin Gishu, found that girls and boys as well as their teachers contribute towards gender inequality. The study was conducted by way of interviews and observations. Sixty-five per cent of the teachers interviewed asserted that girls were not enthusiastic to participate actively. The reasons given for the gender gap was that girls fear boys and that they are self conscious when answering questions and mostly wait to be pushed by teachers to speak.

Teachers asserted that girls' chronic inaudibility was irritating and therefore teachers were left with no choice than to nominate boys to talk. Seventy-two per cent of the teachers interviewed credited the boys for their daring attitude in class; 90% of the boys interviewed agreed that they volunteered to answer questions. They argued that they wanted to excel academically and the only way was to participate actively in class. Through observation, it was noticed that the boys utilized all the interactive techniques to secure speaking than the girls. Seventy-five per cent of the girls argued that teachers often scold them more than the boys when they fail to answer questions. Yet when the boys fail to answer questions correctly, the teacher is upset but does not scold as harshly as they do to the girls. The conclusion of this study was that boys get more speaking turns than do girls while the latter were timid and shy thus giving way for the boys to dominate the learning process. Teachers too, consciously or unconsciously, promote gender inequality in the class due to the unequal attention they give to boys as opposed to the girls.

Hetherington, Locke and Parke (1999) are in agreement with this and report that teachers tend to interrupt girls more frequently than boys during

conversation and pay more attention to boys' assertive behaviour, than girls. Kandaswamy (2005) asserts that teachers' classroom behaviours affect children's perception on gender role stereotype enormously. In schools, there is a hidden curriculum about power struggle between boys and girls that interrupts both learning and teaching. It affects the way students learn, teachers teach and interact with students and students interact with each other and with teachers.

Gender Role Stereotypes and Age

Socialization of gender role stereotypes begin at an early age as noted previously. Beal (1994) says that by the time children are about four to five years old, their play is usually gender typed. This is evident by the way parents purchase gender typical toys for their children. Santrock (2004) theorizes that gender stereotyping changes developmentally. Stereotypic gender beliefs begin to take root during early childhood years, increase in elementary school years and declines in the late elementary years. During early adolescence, stereotyping increases again. The safe strategy for boys at this stage is to become the very best male possible (masculine) and the safe strategy for girls is to become the best female possible (feminine). Golombos (1992) notes that gender intensification created by pubertal change can produce greater stereotyping in young adolescence

Beal (1994) concurs by stating that early adolescence is a time when children cling to stereotypical notions of gender and a 13-year old girl can say she is not good at math to signal her femininity. If such notions are not corrected early then they may eventually influence a girl's interest in mathematics. In a study of west German teenagers, girls who were more interested in dating than other girls did less well in math than would have been predicted on the basis of their general intelligence and their grades in other subjects.

During school going age, parents grant boys more independence than girls of the same age. Girls are required to play at home while the boys are free to go to the neighbourhood. The reason boys are granted that independence is that boys are more able to take care of themselves than girls of the same age. This enables the boys to develop their self confidence while girls have fewer opportunities to build a sense of self efficacy. When it comes to career counselling, boys seems to be guided towards certain career options such as medicine, law and engineering while career choice is left open for the girls.

Rathus and Jeffrey (1992) hypothesized that certain courses are still considered part of the male domain. Historical evidence also suggests that gender stereotyping influence educational chances in that girls were in the past considered unsuited for

education. The education system itself can also serve to reinforce existing stereotypes which view the that girls are unsuited for academic achievement as compared to boys. Siann and Ugwuegbu (1980) contend that older girls become more influenced by stereotypes.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Gender role refer to all the behaviors that communicate to us the degree to which we are masculine or feminine in terms defined by our culture. It can also be understood as the outward expressions of gender identity. Gender role stereotypes are widely held beliefs on how men and women or boys and girls should behave.

According to social psychologist gender roles are acquired through socialization which occurs at home, at school or through the media. Through socialization we acquire information and attitude from parents, authority figures such as teachers and mass media. Further, each culture has approved sex roles that are transmitted from parents to the children and every society has its own traditional allocation of roles for men and women. This implies that by the time the students get to secondary schools they have learnt what the society recommends as appropriate roles for boys and girls.

Gender role expectations are not only expressed by parents alone but also by peers and teachers. This is done mostly in subtle but very effective ways. Gender roles may produce stereotyping and influences behavior such as in the way in which members of the opposite sex may treat each other. If gender stereotypes are negative about women, this may negatively influence their academic performance. Further, gender stereotypes may lead to unfortunate consequences of more favorable behavior toward men than women. Consequently, the existence of gender stereotyping at school, can affect a girl's performance.

The influence of gender stereotyping is expected to be observable in co-educational schools where mixed sex classes take place. It has been reported that boys in mixed sex classes live up to their gender expectations of dominating classroom discussions or question and answer sessions while girls remain quiet and accommodate the male directed talk. School halls present different worlds for both boys and girls. At school there are different games and sport activities for boys and girls. Boys play football while girls play net ball. In class, boys are encouraged to pursue science subjects while girls are oriented to arts or home science. At school also girls are commended for their neatness and boys for their hard work. This study examined the role of age in the attitude formation of gender role stereotypes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of the study may not reflect what happens in other parts of the country, thus the findings are only considered applicable to the area of the study. This therefore limits the generalization of the study to other districts within Kenya. The sample size of the study was drawn from form four classes in mixed secondary schools; therefore, the results can only be generalized to mixed secondary schools within Bomet District. The results of this study cannot be generalized to primary and single sex secondary schools or even to higher institutions of learning. The sampling method may not have given a true representative sample since the ratio of boys to girls varied from one school to another.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was carried out in Bomet District of the Rift Valley Province, Kenya. The District lies on a latitude of $0^{\circ} 29'$ and $1^{\circ} 03'$ south of the equator and between a longitude of $35^{\circ} 05'$ and $0^{\circ} 35'$ East. The neighbouring districts include Nakuru to the east, Kericho to the north east, Nyamira to the west and Narok to the south. The research study adopted a causal-comparative (ex-post facto) research design. This design enabled the use of both descriptive and inferential statistics.

The target population was all the secondary school going age going students within Bomet District. There were 52 secondary schools in Bomet District out of which 38 are mixed secondary schools and 14 are single sex. Mixed secondary schools were purposely selected for the study. The selected schools were those that had a large student population of form four classes so as to obtain a good sample size. The estimated number of secondary school going age children from 1997 to 2001 had a ratio of 103 to 100 males and females respectively. The secondary school going age population ranges from 13 to 21 years. The research population was all the form four students enrolled in mixed secondary schools in Bomet District.

The study used eight mixed secondary schools within Bomet District. The subjects were sampled from form four classes. Form fours are also in a better position to respond to the questionnaires. From each school, 26 students were randomly selected for the study, thus the total sample size was 208 form four students. Only those students who had sat for end term exam for three previous consecutive terms were selected to participate in the study. Small pieces of paper corresponding to the number of male students required were marked Y while the rest were marked N. The marked pieces of paper were placed in a container and shuffled and each male student asked to pick a piece of paper. Those who picked papers marked Y, were included in the study sample. The same procedure was separately applied for the female

students. To guard against the confounding effect of gender, a ratio of 1:1 was used to select males and females in each school. Thus the sample was made up of 13 boys and 13 girls from each school; and the study sample consequently had a total of 104 subjects of each gender. The sample was expected to be representative of the population.

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data about the subjects' attitude toward student role performance. Respondents were supposed to indicate whether they strongly agree (SA), agree (A), undecided (U) disagree (D), or strongly disagree (SD). (SA) was given a score of 5 points, (A) a score of 4 points, (U) a score of 3 points, (D) a score of 2 points, and (SD) a score of 1 point. Possible highest score was 100 points and the least possible score was 20 points. The attitude scores were categorized into two, the positive and negative attitude. Attitude scores ranging from 60-100 points were treated as positive attitude while scores from 20-59 points were treated as negative attitude.

Data was analyzed using SPSS computer program. Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used to compare subjects' age and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes. Pearson-product moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between students' ages and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to investigate the relationship between age and attitude towards gender role stereotypes. To achieve this objective, a research question was formulated as follows: Is there any relationship between the age of boys and girls and their attitude toward gender role stereotypes? To answer the question, the age of the respondents were obtained from the research instrument where they were supposed to indicate their ages. The ages of the respondents ranged from 16-21. Next the number of respondents with ages and who had positive and negative attitude toward gender role stereotypes was determined. The results are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Attitude towards Gender Role Stereotype and Age Count

Age	Negative stereotype	Positive Stereotype	Total
16.00	17	3	20
17.00	44	15	59
18.00	57	22	79
19.00	14	12	26
20.00	11	7	18
21.00	3	2	5
22.00	1		1
Total	147	61	208

Table 1 shows that 90.4% (188) of students (boys and girls) who were seventeen years and above had positive attitudes towards gender role stereotypes and only 9.6% (20) had negative attitude towards gender role stereotypes .

To evaluate the null hypothesis of no relationship between respondents' ages and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes a correlation between the respondents' ages and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes was determined. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations for Age and Gender Role Stereotypes

		Age	Attitude Score
Age	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.076
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.276
	N	208	208
Attitude score	Pearson Correlation	.076	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.276	.
	N	208	208

Table 2 shows that there is no significant relationship between age and attitude of boys and girls towards gender role stereotypes $p = .276 > .05$. The null hypothesis was therefore accepted and concluded that there is no relationship between the age of boys and girls and their attitude towards gender role stereotypes.

These findings agree with the findings of Santrock (2004) that stereotypic attitudes are stronger during early adolescence and once they are established they are maintained and the expression would be the same even at later stages in life. Through socialization, children acquire appropriate attitudes to gender role and may not be easy to change them. A study by Rubin, Provenzano and Luria (as cited in Raven and Rubin, 1983) suggests that stereotypes are instilled from quite an early age so that by the time they reach adolescence they already have a cognitive schema relevant to their gender. Rathus and Jeffrey (1992) support this view by stating that children develop a cognitive awareness of their gender roles from an early age.

However the findings of this study contradicts the views of Raven and Rubin (1983) that boys and girls of same age are treated differently and that of Siann and Ugweugbu (1980) that girls are affected by stereotypes as they grow older. This contradiction could be attributed to the fact that the age differences of the respondents were not wide. A wider age gap than was in the case of this study, could have revealed different results.

This finding means that parents and teachers should acknowledge that at adolescent stage the attitude held by teenagers towards gender role stereotypes are not

different an indication adolescents do not have strong feminine or masculine attitudes though they are growing towards adulthood. Hence it is the role of parents and teachers to provide equal opportunities and encouragement to both boys and girls.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study established that there is no significant relationship between age and gender role stereotypes. This means that age does not explain why students of different ages should have the same attitude towards gender role stereotypes. The implication of this study is that once an attitude has been established it is maintained. Therefore parents should be knowledgeable on how to impart positive attitudes in their children.

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