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**School libraries and gender: Initial teacher training in EFL for Secondary Education**
Biblioteca escolar y género: formación inicial del profesorado de ILE en Secundaria

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of the educational innovation project 'Literacy, Gender and Diversity' which promotes the integration of gender perspective into English teacher training. Previous research indicates a scarce presence of literature in English teaching and seeks to promote the construction of school or classroom libraries with a gender perspective within the concept of social justice. The relevance of these libraries in secondary education, where their use is limited, is analyzed, and the need to include female authors, protagonists, and illustrators is emphasized to promote an educational model sensitive to social justice and intersectionality. Following a qualitative research methodology, the study conducted with students of the Master's Degree in Secondary Education Teaching at the University of Valencia includes semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire to show the beliefs of future teachers about the suitability of these topics in school libraries.

KEYWORDS

LITERACY, GENDER, SOCIAL JUSTICE, SCHOOL LIBRARY

RESUMEN

Este artículo se enmarca en el proyecto de innovación docente "Literacy, Gender and Diversity" que promueve la integración de la perspectiva de género en la formación docente en inglés. La investigación previa da cuenta de la escasa presencia de literatura en la enseñanza del inglés y busca promover la construcción de bibliotecas escolares o de aula con una perspectiva de género dentro del concepto de justicia social. Se analiza la relevancia de estas bibliotecas en la educación secundaria  y se enfatiza la necesidad de incluir autoras, protagonistas e ilustradoras para promover un modelo educativo sensible a la justicia social y la interseccionalidad. Siguiendo una metodología de investigación cualtitativa, el estudio realizado con estudiantado del Máster de Profesorado de Educación Secundaria de la Universitat de València, incluye entrevistas semi-estructuradas y un cuestionario para mostrar las creencias del futuro profesorado sobre la idoneidad de estos temas en las bibliotecas escolares.

PALABRAS CLAVE

LITERACIDAD, GÉNERO, JUSTICIA SOCIAL, BIBLIOTECA ESCOLAR

INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of a gender perspective from the postulates of social justice and intersectionality is one of the premises of the teaching innovation project (UV_SFPIE_PID_2732068) Literacy, Gender, and Diversity (LITGENDI): Multimodal Lectures to Work on Intersectionality and Social Justice in Teacher Training in English. This project delves into, among other aspects, the need for an appropriate selection of illustrated literature corpus (picture books, comics, and graphic novels) for inclusion in classrooms across all educational stages. Additionally, this project aims to show future teachers various selection strategies and criteria, addressing the significance of including challenging and provocative themes (Hanán-Díaz, 2020), which represent an opportunity and a challenge for developing critical thinking and a sense of civic and social belonging based on equality, freedom, plurality, and democratic and civic values. Furthermore, it is essential to address how this future teaching staff can undertake this arduous and complex task through the exploration of different active methodologies based on their prior experiences with the treatment of subaltern subjectivity, analysis of specific case studies, and/or structured critical debates from feminist perspectives that promote situated, committed, and responsible knowledge (Jiménez, 2021, p.182).

In line with the basic premises of this project, the main goal of this research is to examine the beliefs of future secondary education teachers regarding the suitability and relevance of building a multilingual school or classroom library with a gender perspective from intersectionality and social justice. It also aims to assess their level of knowledge about how to develop such projects in the classroom. Therefore, three elements are found in this research: school library, gender perspective, and social justice, which will be succinctly analyzed below.

Firstly, after conducting a thorough review of the preceding literature, it is clear how the construction and relevance of a classroom school library are prominently researched during the Early Childhood Education (EI) and Primary Education (EP) stages, with studies like those by Albelda-Esteban (2019) on its contribution to acquiring reading comprehension skills, or those by López and Vellosillo (2008) on promoting Citizenship Education through the school library. However, in the case of Secondary Education, only a few references are found as a dynamic agent (Fernández, 2018) and about the implementation of reading clubs, but with scarce presence of female authorship in English literature (López, 2021). Therefore, in light of these results, there is a detected need to understand the beliefs of future teachers about the advantages and suitability of constructing this library, as Lage (2013) rightly states that one of its essential goals is to awaken a taste for reading. Moreover, this library significantly contributes to the structuring of learning through documentation and research (Romero, 2023), in generating equal opportunities (Castán, 2008), and in developing an intercultural awareness from a critical, reflective, and creative perspective (Padilla and Franco, 2021).

Regarding the gender perspective, as we have just indicated, the presence of female authors and illustrators is often poor, and as Lasa (2016) pointedly states, their inclusion remains a pending task in Secondary Education classrooms. This inclusion responds to the need to promote an educational model based on social justice and sensitive citizenship (Otero, 2021). Social justice, understood from the postulates of critical feminism (Fraser, 2008), highlights Rawls's (2010) theories about distribution,

recognition, and participation and, when applied to the school or classroom library, reveal the moral, civic, and democratic tri-dimensional demand to: (1) achieve a fairer and more equitable distribution of authorship and protagonism in literary works; (2) propose a visible and poignant recognition and re(dignification) of the feminine; (3) design participation strategies from the uniqueness of the active female subject. To this understanding of social justice from a feminist perspective, we must add the premises of intersectionality and avoid direct and indirect double or even triple discriminations when more than one stereotype and/or prejudice converge, such as discrimination based on ethnic, religious, class, and gender issues.

With the construction of a school or classroom library with a gender perspective, it is intended that future secondary education teachers, and thereby their students, become aware that

> working with women's experiences from a critical perspective could lead students to identify with the actions presented about the past and empower them in the present. Active participation in society could generate a fight against gender inequalities, stereotypes, and the marginalization of women (Marolla and Pagès, 2018, p.310).

Additionally, another advantage of configuring this library is the critical cementing of generic identities through literary education in adolescence, favoring patterns of femininity and masculinity adapted to the transformation of societies in the 21st century (Martínez et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to follow a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2009) focused not only on understanding the future teachers' perceptions and prior beliefs regarding the construction of school and/or classroom libraries with a gender perspective but also on identifying effective strategies for the practical implementation of these libraries in secondary educational contexts. To achieve this, we have employed a multiple case study design (Stake, 1999) with semi-structured final interviews, which facilitates a detailed analysis of the students' experiences and knowledge concerning multimodal texts and gender education, thus allowing for the development of concrete proposals for the creation and management of inclusive school libraries, specifically for the English classroom in secondary education. Following a learning situation designed around the theme of gender perspective in secondary school reading paths, with special emphasis on the introduction of multimodal texts in the English as a Foreign Language class, participants answered a subsequent questionnaire, whose questions required responses in both Likert scale format and brief text. The 11 questions in the questionnaire were structured into three different sections: I. Gender identification (short answer); II. Previous knowledge (5 questions in Likert scale or short answer about the concepts of social justice, gender perspective, and intersectionality); III. Construction of a school or classroom library (5 questions in Likert scale or short answer). Finally, 4 students participated in a semi-structured interview (Kvale, 2011), through which it was possible to reflect on the contribution of social justice and the gender perspective (Weissler, 2022) to a school or classroom library in the EFL courses. From these instruments, the aim is not only to describe existing realities and perceptions but also, and more importantly, to translate the findings into practical recommendations that guide the development of school libraries that truly reflect and promote gender diversity and social justice. This approach directly responds to the identified need to offer not only a diagnosis of the current state of knowledge and

student interest in the theme but also applicable solutions to address the observed challenges.

*Participants*

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the subjects of Learning and Teaching English Language and Supplements for Disciplinary Training in English Language of the Master's Degree in Secondary Education Teaching at the University of Valencia are composed of a total of 72 students, 73.2% women, 24.3% men, and 2.4% non-binary. The age ranges are: 21 to 29 years (92.3%); 30 to 39 years (4.8%) and over 40 years (2.4%) and regarding the place of birth, in the province of Valencia (68.3%); rest of Spain (17%) and in another country (14.6%).

*Instruments and Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis*

The research strategies followed in this work are qualitative in nature. Specifically, a final questionnaire was conducted after different activities including the gender perspective in teaching. This questionnaire consisted of 11 questions structured into three different sections. Subsequently, 4 semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2011) were conducted, for which consent was signed to be recorded in audio format, to four students with families from Valencia, Palma de Mallorca, San José de Costa Rica, and Granada. The interviews lasted 15 minutes and were conducted after the sessions of the subjects. They were subsequently transcribed into Word using naturalized transcription (Bucholtz, 2000) in a document to work and analyze the information. Once the questionnaires were analyzed and the interviews transcribed, a thematic content analysis was carried out using NVivo 11 software, specialized in processing qualitative data (Lopezosa, 2020). An initial coding was performed through an inductive categorization process, as indicated in the specialized literature (Strauss and Corbin, 2002). This categorization, consisting not only of identifying repeated patterns and common elements but also the uniqueness of each discourse, has helped establish the benefits for working with the gender perspective in center and classroom readings. Then, an analytical induction process (Martínez, 2006) was carried out, consisting of obtaining categories from the entire data set. For this, groups of textual units were associated around the categories that emerged from the interpretation of the data provided by the students, both from the questionnaire and from the focus group interviews. Once all the information was organized (categorization and analysis of results), an approach to presenting results based on realistic narrative (Sparkes and Devís, 2007) was chosen, in which references and comments on some textual quotes from the interviews have been incorporated, serving as reinforcement for the set of reflections and interpretations that are subsequently presented:

Figure 1
Categories and units of significance resultanting from cualitative analyses.

| Categories | Codes |
|---|---|
| Awareness and respectful attitudes towards gender equality | - Concept of gender perspective<br>- Prejudices based on traditional gender roles<br>- Identification and reflection from multimodal texts |

| Building knowledge around Social Justice | - Reflection on the concept of Social Justice<br>- Identification of themes<br>- Identification of readings that promote a Social Justice perspective |
|---|---|
| Didactic use of literary works that promote gender perspective | - Language learning through literature<br>- Ability to select works with a gender perspective<br>- Creation of learning situations that promote reading<br>- Creation of an appropriate corpus for a school or classroom library |

Source: developed by the authors

RESULTS

The inductive analysis of the data collected, both through the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews conducted, provides a set of parameters for categorizing the need to work on the gender perspective and school library binomial. The oral interviews, conducted in the classroom context, were structured into three thematic blocks: I. Regarding the classroom material used; II. Regarding the gender perspective; III. Regarding the creation of a school or classroom library. From their naturalized transcription (Bucholtz, 2000), the NVivo 11 software was used to search for repeated patterns and common elements, shown in Figure 2. The responses from the interviewed focus group of students confirm the need for inclusion of the gender perspective in the texts used in the classroom, as well as the updating of the spaces and readings offered in educational settings:

Figure 2
Parameters for the review of readings and multimodal resources with a social perspective in additional language classes with adult students.

| Classroom material - Multimodal resources | - Need to review readings and the canon<br>- Opportunity presented by working with literary texts in additional language classrooms<br>- Need to introduce other multimodal resources that fosters critical thinking |
|---|---|
| Gender perspective from Social Justice | - Need to update and contextualize debate topics in additional language classes<br>- Need to provide topics that stem from students' interests<br>- Need to emphasize and make visible situations that pose a social challenge<br>- Need to include an intersectional gender perspective within the resources selected and used in language classes |
| Creation of a school or classroom library to promote reading | - Opportunity to create welcoming spaces for reading promotion, based on neureducation premises.<br>- Need to update reading spaces in schools<br>- Opportunity to provide meaningful teaching through the presence of books in multiple formats |

Source: developed by the authors.

The responses, analyzed along with the results from the questionnaires completed by all participants in the research, facilitate the categorization of a graduate profile aware of the need to work with readings that promote gender equality in an intersectional manner, yet they still highlight the ongoing need for education in this regard. Regarding the first subcategory, classroom materials and multimodal resources, we find that:

**Student 1#**: *I came into the master's program thinking that as a future English teacher, I would have to abandon my interest in literature (...) After these thematic sessions, I see that I was wrong and that working with multimodal texts that foster critical thinking in the classroom greatly improves English language learning.*

**Student 2#:** *The photographs by Dina Goldstein impacted me greatly because they made me rethink traditional gender roles. Their subsequent relation to James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories opened my eyes to the traditional narratives I have always heard and found grating, without knowing why. Finally, working intensively with these gender roles has been an interesting and multimodal task with great potential for the EFL classroom.*

**Student 4#:** *Approaching the potential of literature from a gender perspective has changed the way I understand the EFL classroom. By literature, we do not only mean canonical texts, but also the illustrated genre and the texts we can create from reflection (...) Working with classic texts like* The Yellow Wallpaper *from the three dimensions of literacy has been interesting.*

While the broadening of perspectives on what literary learning means in the 21st century is important, so is the selection of multimodal texts around a specific theme. In this case, the approach to the gender perspective from the concept of social justice has provided visibility and an approach to non-canonical realities:

**Student 1#:** *I had never heard the concept of social justice. Separating the words and considering the topic we have been discussing these past sessions, I would say it relates to fair treatment of all genders. That's why visibility is basic and I liked that when we worked the interaction between image and text, the selection of albums we analyzed featured protagonists of all kinds: from cis heterosexuals to non-binary or transitioning individuals.*

**Student 3#:** *Social justice is based on equality of rights and opportunities. In this sense, recognizing the gender of the students is important.*

**Student 2#:** *Social justice is a somewhat complicated concept to understand, as explored in the series "You would too" (*Tu también lo harías*) because what many consider fair, sometimes is just what people need to believe. This often serves to have someone to punish or to disparage for having done X without really trying to understand what motivated them to do it.*

Finally, once we have integrated multimodal literary texts into the English classroom, we want to know the students' opinions regarding the importance of reading in the classroom and the creation of suitable reading spaces. Therefore, the last questions are related to the description of the classroom or school libraries they have had previously in their compulsory education stages, the requirements they must meet, and finally, the titles they consider essential:

**Student 3#:** *I never had a school library as such. It was limited to a room with display cabinets locked with a key where there were books for compulsory readings and served for punished students or, during recess, for people who had no friends and preferred to be invisible (...) For me, a school library should be a place where students have access to books they might not otherwise have access to (...) The books that should definitely be included are* The House on Mango Street *by Sandra Cisneros,* Their Eyes Were Watching God *by Zora Neale Hurston, and* La plaça del diamant *by Mercè Rodoreda.*

**Student 1#:** *I had a school library in elementary school, also a classroom one. They were fantastic. In high school, there was a library but, even though I liked reading, I never used it since they had books that were not of my interest (...) An ideal library would be one that considers the gender perspective and is also an open space, with books on different themes and not divided by ages (...) Texts by Bechdel would be essential. It would also be interesting if the students themselves proposed the titles.*

**Student 4#:** *A school library is one in which you can find academic and cultural materials that can develop and increase the knowledge of the readers (...) I did have a school library in elementary and secondary school, but it did not have multimodal texts (neither comics nor illustrated albums, for example), only books in classic format (...) My classroom library would include works that make women visible and deal with important topics for students, such as* The Mystique of Femininity *and* Gender Trouble.

In summary, as shown in Figure 2, students feel that they have not thoroughly worked on the concept of social justice in all its facets, that they had not considered the gender perspective from the concept of social justice and, on the other hand, that while they recognize the importance of bringing different readings to students, they are aware that the role of libraries, especially in secondary education, has not lived up to what would be expected.

DISCUSSION

The article analyzes the importance that future secondary school teachers place on creating school and/or classroom libraries with a gender focus to promote social justice. It is based on the experience of students from the Master of Secondary Education at the Universitat de València, who, after engaging in a learning situation that integrated the gender perspective into English teaching through multimodal texts, responded to a survey to examine their perceptions about social justice, its relation to gender, its integration in English as a foreign language classes, and the creation of school libraries and reading paths committed to social justice. Regarding the responses obtained through this questionnaire, it is notable that 78% of the students agree that, firstly, a school library that integrates social justice themes fosters greater understanding and respect for cultural and social diversity. Secondly, they indicated that it prepares students to analyze societies from a critical viewpoint (22%). Additionally, 90.2% of those surveyed believe that learning about social justice develops critical thinking skills and empathy towards different perspectives and experiences. 68.6% consider the gender perspective from intersectionality as the understanding of gender and the vicissitudes of women from a framework of complex relationships, followed by 17.6% who understand it as giving visibility to women belonging to more disadvantaged or vulnerable social groups. Finally, 13.7% understand it as the visibility of gender away from the spheres of patriarchal power.

Regarding the female references currently available to them as future language teachers, 60.8% consider that it is not sufficient and that the literary canon is still male-dominated and needs further research and visibility. 37.3% consider that during their mandatory schooling they have had teachers who have shown a canon with a gender perspective, and only one person surveyed has responded that as a future teacher of EFL, they will not need literature. Lastly, when asked to indicate the three most important requirements for forming a school library with a gender perspective, 53% of the participants state that, firstly, these should showcase a richness of female characters from intersectionality and social justice, followed by the avoidance of stereotyped characters (21.6%) and the didactic and pedagogical characteristics of the books included (11%).

Despite the encouraging findings we have observed regarding the perceived importance of school libraries with a gender focus and their potential to promote social justice, it is crucial to recognize that our study has also revealed areas for improvement and challenges to address. In this regard, there is a clear demand from students for greater diversity and representation of female references in the literary canon and a concern about the persistence of gender stereotypes in educational materials. To move towards a more inclusive and equitable educational practice, it is essential that educational institutions and teaching teams work collaboratively to develop effective strategies to address these deficiencies. This could involve revising and updating educational curricula to include a wider diversity of voices and perspectives, as well as implementing policies and practices that promote gender equality in education. Additionally, it is pertinent to provide the new generations of teachers with the tools and resources necessary to integrate the gender perspective effectively into their pedagogical practice and to create inclusive educational environments where all students feel valued and represented.

Personal contribution of each author:
Conceptualization: Rocío Domene-Benito
Formal analysis: Margarida Castellano-Sanz and Rocío Domene-Benito
Methodology: Margarida Castellano-Sanz
First draft: Margarida Castellano-Sanz y Rocío Domene-Benito

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