

## Gender Issues in English Language Teacher Education: Cinderella's Awakening through Comparative Literature<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The socio-dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom reveals the importance of gender sensitivity as a living mechanism which constructs both intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. This study explores how reading and discussing comparative children's literature could impact pre-service English teachers' understanding of gender issues at a university in the west of Turkey. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the present study involved 25 senior pre-service teachers who were taking the literature course in the 2018-2019 academic year, fall term. Data was collected through written reports and semi-structured interviews. We analyzed the data inductively with codes and themes developing out of a recursive process of data collection and analysis. The findings display that a comparative analysis of fairy tales is an effective means through which the pre-service teachers develop gender sensitivity and become critically literate as a teacher. Besides, the comparative analysis helps the female participants improve self-sufficiency as a woman. Implications are also included for language teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Gender Issues, Pre-Service English Teachers, Qualitative Case Study

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<sup>1</sup> For the comparative analysis of the tales *Ashputtel* and *The Magical Little Date Tree*, which was the inspiration for this study see Kumlu, E. (2020). Unveiling the Implicit political Agenda: A Comparative Analysis of the Construction of Gender Roles in Grimm's *Ashputtel* and Giuseppe Pitre's *The Magical Little Date Tree*. *Litera*, 30(1), 155-175.

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## **Introduction**

The answer to the question; ‘What do we need to do to become well-qualified or ready for today’s world?’ has become one of the main issues of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The practice of teaching has undergone dramatic changes in recent years mainly due to the dynamics of a chaotic world, but at the same time, it has the potential to minimize the negative effects of today’s world. This may be achieved, not only by preparing students through educational practices, but also by encouraging them to be socially conscious individuals who are aware of the need for a better social life. It is evident that the teacher and the practice of teaching have been exposed to the harsh social realities and traumas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, they have the power to bear the burden of these difficulties because the teacher is no longer the one expected to have certain methodological knowledge only, but a guide/coach who prepares her students for life. Especially in the case of teacher education, developing pre-service teachers’ awareness for certain issues is vital and gender issues can be regarded as one of the most significant subjects as they affect the way pre-service teachers interpret and define both themselves and others.

In order to develop pre-service teachers’ gender sensitivity, the comparative analysis of fairy tales can be a tool as fairy tales are the very source of the way we interpret societal gender roles (Cashdan, 1999; Lieberman, 1986; Parsons, 2004; Rice, 2000; Rowe, 1999; Tatar, 2003; Walkerdine, 1984; Zipes, 1987). Also, comparative literature increases empathy and encourages understanding of others (Kefeli, 2000). In relation, this study explores how reading and discussing comparative children’s literature could impact pre-service English teachers’ understanding of gender issues at a university in the west of Turkey. To do this, the paper first reviews gender issues in pre-service teacher education programs and the representation of gender roles in comparative children’s literature, especially in fairy tales. It then depicts the methodological aspects of the study and presents the findings and concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for pre-service teacher education programs.

### **A Neglected Perspective in Pre-service Teacher Education: Gender Issues**

Gender is both a cultural and a societal issue that shapes the way we interpret the world. The term “gender” was separated from the term “sex” in the late sixties (Simmonds, 2012). Gender is “the social and cultural overlay that exaggerates and builds on presumed biological differences between males and females” (Kennelly, Merz & Lorber, 2001, p.598). Unlike sex, gender is believed to be constructed by socio-cultural forces which designate the definition of being a man and a woman in society (Bartkey, 1990; Bordo, 2020; Butler, 1999). As gender is defined as a “cultural construction”, gender stereotypes can be defined as general beliefs about what females and males are like and what they should be like (Halpem, 1992).

With the developments in psychology and gender studies in the 1960s, the idea of social construction of gender roles has increased the importance of gender sensitivity. The importance of gender sensitivity lies under the fact that socio-cultural forces affect the way we interpret how we should act, what we should wear, how we should talk or where one should be among the society. It is at this point that the importance of pre-service teacher education intersects with gender issues. As underlined by Skolverket (2011, p.10) “the education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and human rights, covering the inviolability of people, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, gender equality and solidarity between people”. Therefore, there is a need for including gender issues, courses or components in pre-service teacher education programs so that pre-service teachers could “generate the ability to analyze social and cultural phenomena through the lens of gender” (Kuruvilla, 2014, p.36). There exist some studies which displayed that teachers have the power to influence their students’ ability to become more gender sensitive (e.g. Eriksson-Barajas, 2008; Kollberg, 2016; Pace & Townsend, 1999). Therefore, nurturing gender sensitivity of pre-service teachers has the power to shape the way they interpret themselves, their students and the society in general and has consequences at micro, meso and macro levels.

### **Representation of Gender Roles in Comparative Children’s Literature**

Comparative literature, as Henry Remak proposes (1961, p.3), “is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief”. Deriving its origin from differences, comparative literature fosters the ability to understand others and encourages the development of tolerance, empathy and respect towards others (Cuma, 2019; Kefeli, 2000). Comparative literature, in this sense, could be a tool for fostering gender sensitivity of pre-service teachers in combination with fairy tales.

In *Touch Magic*, Yolen (2000, p.27) notes that “fairy tales are the thumbprints of history, but they are harder to read than any yellowing birth certificate or a well-loved photograph in a family album”. Apparently, fairy tales have tremendous effects on our lives as no matter what culture they are from, children develop in the same way and fairy tales focus upon universal themes and experiences (Campbell, 1993). The tales influence children’s attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society (Bettelheim, 1976; Joosen, 2011; Tatar, 2003; Zipes, 1997) and the construction of their identity, their beliefs and expectations towards others, and their conscious and unconscious associations in social life and their interpretation of the cultural norms (Joosen, 2011, p.51).

The cultural norms represented in fairy tales have tremendous impacts upon the socialization process of the child who associates herself with the characters in the tales. Thus, gender perceptions and conceptions that are the results of the reading process are significant for children not only for understanding themselves but also for understanding the behaviors of others (Meece, 2002, p.409). It is patent that the importance of the teacher's awareness of dominant canonical literary texts is extremely important as students generally identify themselves with these characters. As opposed to the ideological stance in canonical fairy tales that define the borders of womanhood and manhood, teachers should therefore propose resistant or oppositional reading practices (Kuo, 2005).

### ***Cinderella in the Classroom***

Fairy tales can be interpreted as historical documents (Darnton, 1999) which have the potential to act as cultural barometers (Paul, 1998) and cultural artifacts (Gilbert, 1992), and no other fairy tale enchants us as the story of *Cinderella*. Her glass-slippers, the pumpkin, her stepsisters, the evil stepmother still live with us. With hundreds of versions, *Cinderella* is “the best-known fairy tale in the Western world, and the one woman most often name as their favorite because all of us, male and female, have known despair and several times in a lifetime seen ourselves as unwanted, looked down on by others” (Gould, 2006: 39). *Cinderella* can be regarded as the mother of fairy tales as her primordial story is the story of societal gender roles which have been imposed upon both men and women for centuries. As Lieberman (1986: 194) put it, “the child who dreams of being a Cinderella dreams perforce not only of being chosen and elevated by a prince, but also of being a glamorous sufferer or victim”. The dependent, helpless, submissive girl in ashes was so powerful that she would later be an inspiration for “the Cinderella complex”, a term in psychology postulated by Dowling (1981). In her book, Dowling highlights the dependent female figure who fears from movement and displays neurotic dependency, learned helplessness, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence.

The story of Cinderella has been reinvented by different cultures so many times that in each version she has different characteristics (Tatar, 1999: 102). Although there are numerous versions of the story, the most popular one is written by Grimms and Perrault who portray Cinderella as a passive and incompetent female figure. However, with the beginning of the women's liberation movement during the 1960's, modern feminists began to interpret the tales from different perspectives. The socio-political and socio-psychological readings of the tales from a feminist point of view illuminated how the discourse used in the tales aimed to oppress women (Haase, 2004; Joosen, 2011; Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979; Schanoes, 2016; Tatar, 2003; Zipes, 1987). As a result, the romantic ideals in the tales were no longer convincing as women realized that “all men are not princes” (Rowe, 1979: 222). The modern readings of the tales transformed the passive and incompetent Cinderellas into competent and powerful ones. Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and Angela Carter's *Ashputtel or*

*the Mother's Ghost: Three versions of One Story* (1987) are the few examples of the new Cinderellas that call for a liberation from the patriarchal discourse.

The literary analysis of *Cinderella* in the classroom is a marvelous tool for understanding the power of the embedded messages of the patriarchal canon of fairy tales. In this study the fairy tale from traditional canon *Ashputtel*, widely known as *Cinderella*, by Grimm Brothers is selected to highlight how fairy tales could impact pre-service English teachers' understanding of gender issues. The text is analyzed comparatively with Giuseppe Pitré's *The Magical Little Date Tree*, which provides an oppositional perspective. While *Cinderella* is the very symbol of enslavement, dependence, lack of self-confidence and submissiveness, Pitré's protagonist *Ninetta* is the very symbol of freedom, independence, creativity, and self-reliance. Pitré's version of *Cinderella* is quite valuable because he employs a corporeal language of resistance and portrays a female body as a site of both power and resistance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Methodology**

We adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how reading and discussing comparative children's literature could impact pre-service English teachers' understanding of gender issues at a university in the west of Turkey. We aimed to provide an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a six-week course module aimed at improving pre-service English teachers' gender sensitivity at a specific teacher education program in Turkey.

### **Contexts and Participants**

The study was conducted with senior pre-service English language teachers in a public university in the west of Turkey within the scope of the literature course in the fall term of the 2018-2019 academic year. The six-week module prepared was embedded into the course content. There were 25 students (19 females and 6 males) in the course. They all provided verbal consent to participate in the study. In order to prevent coercion, we informed the students that participation in the study would not affect their grading in the course. In order to provide confidentiality, we gave participants numbers and used the acronym PST for pre-service teacher.

### **Structure of the Course Module**

For the two-hour course conducted by the first author, we selected Giuseppe Pitré's *The Magical Little Date Tree* (1875) from Italian literature and Grimm Brothers' fairy tale *Ashputtel* (1812) from German literature to provide oppositional perspectives. We believed oppositional perspectives would enable the pre-service teachers to compare and contrast the two different versions of *Cinderella*, which highlights how fairy tales shape and construct gender-appropriate behavior in society. To analyze the patriarchal canon of fairy tales and the cultural messages embedded in them, we chose the fairy tale *Ashputtel*, widely known as *Cinderella*, which can be regarded as the mother

of the traditional patriarchal canon of fairy tales with more than 700 versions (Bettelheim, 1976). Each version, especially the older ones, takes almost the same position about societal gender roles and defines women as helpless beings. The Grimm’s version is also based on the submissiveness and passivity of the female body that results in lack of self-confidence and self-reliance. In order to explore how *Cinderella*’s story shapes the construction of gender-appropriate behavior in society, the pre-service teachers were encouraged to analyze the dominant patriarchal ideology in these fairy tales.

In the first week, the pre-service teachers were expected to develop a general understanding of the nature of comparative literature, its history as well as its theories and methods through discussions. In the second week, we focused on Colette Dowling’s *The Cinderella Complex*. The pre-service teachers were actively engaged in discussing the work of Dowling as the tale they had known since their childhood gained a new meaning for them. The concepts of neurotic dependency, learned helplessness, fusion, the fear of separation, blind devotion, and the wish to be saved, the symptoms of the Cinderella complex, were the main discussion topics in the class. In the third week, we had a whole-class discussion on *Ashputtel* and focused upon the depiction of the protagonist in terms of societal gender roles. In the fourth week, the student teachers were ready to analyze Giuseppe Pitré’s *The Magical Little Date Tree* from Italian literature. While the Grimm’s version is the very symbol of the submissive and passive female character, Pitré’s protagonist Ninetta strictly proposes an opposite attitude. She is a self-reliant, independent, bold and courageous woman who subverts gender roles and shapes her destiny according to her desires and choices. In the fifth week, we comparatively analyzed the tales within the light of comparative literature and feminist literary criticism. The feminist discourse used aimed to highlight the socio-political and socio-psychological dimensions of fairy tales. In the final week of the course, we had a discussion on the pre-service teachers’ takeaways concerning gender issues as presented in the selected fairy tales. The structure of the six-week course module is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Structure of the six-week course module

Week	Content	Purpose
1	Introduction to comparative literature	Developing a general understanding of the nature of comparative literature and feminist literary criticism
2	The Cinderella Complex by Colette Dowling	Discussing the psychological aspects of the fairy tale Cinderella and gender issues
3	Ashputtel	Analyzing and discussing the tale in terms of societal gender roles
4	The Magical Little Date Tree	Analyzing and discussing the tale in terms of societal gender roles
5	Comparative analysis of the tales	Comparatively analyzing and discussing the tales in terms of societal gender roles
6	Wrap-up	Discussing the new perspectives gained from the comparative analysis of the tales

### **Data collection and analysis**

The written reports of pre-service teachers on their reflections concerning the fairy tales they read and discussed comparatively in class constituted the primary source of data in this study. The participants wrote two reports, one in the fourth week and the other in the sixth/final week of the course. The written reports were acronymized as WR in the study. In addition to written reports, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 pre-service teachers (all females) who provided rich data in their written reports and who were willing to take part in an interview. Each interview lasted 20 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interviews were acronymized as I in the study. We analyzed the data inductively with codes and themes developing out of a recursive process of data collection and analysis. We read the data two times individually and then discussed the emerging themes until we reached consensus on the overarching themes.

### **Findings**

Analysis of the data revealed three major themes that concern the participants' professional and personal lives: Developing gender sensitivity as a teacher, becoming critically literate as a teacher and improving self-sufficiency as a woman. We discuss each theme below with the relevant excerpts from the participants' written reports and interviews.

#### **Developing gender sensitivity as a teacher**

The data analyzed revealed that the participant pre-service teachers, both males and females, had regarded societal gender roles as natural elements of human life before the comparative analysis of the selected tales. The comparative analysis of the tales within the light of feminist literary criticism unveiled the reality that the participants began to interpret gender-appropriate behavior in society as a cultural construction. For instance, on reading *Cinderella's* and *Ninetta's* stories, PST11 mentioned:

After I had analyzed the tales comparatively, I realized that the passive-submissive female role which has been tried to be imposed upon me is the suppression of society. After the course, I criticized myself a lot because as a pre-service teacher I was unaware of the reality that gender is a cultural construction and the way I had been defining womanhood and manhood was completely wrong. I became conscious of the reality that as a teacher I should be much more qualified in order to encourage my students to develop gender awareness. However, I need to confess that first I should be like Ninetta (I).

In a similar fashion, PST2 commented, "I did not know that I am a Sleeping Beauty who has ignored what happens in society. I was unaware that societal gender roles are really constructed by culture. I now feel I need so many qualities to be a teacher" (I). In their overall evaluations of the fairy tales, the participants associated gender sensitivity with the crucial need of raising awareness on many

subjects as a pre-service teacher, as underlined by PST13, “I could not imagine that fairy tales can shape our interpretation of gender roles. I decided to give great importance to raising my awareness as a pre-service teacher” (I).

The participants’ increased awareness of gender issues also boosted their understanding of the important role the teacher plays in a student’s life. For instance PST5 said, “Every little girl in class should read the story of *Ninetta*, who gives the message of what the society expects from a woman. Just like Ninetta, I want to improve my students to become independent women who respect both men and women” (WR). In relation to gender issues, the majority of the participants highlighted “the importance of the right to choose” and “the necessity of interpreting cases from different perspectives”, as highlighted by PST7:

After the comparative analysis of the tales, I came to realize that just like many other concepts like religion, race, color, our perception of gender is simply a product of culture. As a pre-service teacher I realized that treating both men and women equally is as important as having methodological or linguistic knowledge. As a teacher we should be aware of that for our students (WR).

As this excerpt illustrates, the majority of the participants mentioned how important it is for a teacher to understand gender and foster gender sensitivity in daily life and classroom practices.

### **Becoming critically literate as a teacher**

Having developed the idea that texts are socially constructed from particular perspectives, the pre-service teachers in the study expressed that they considered critical literacy skills essential for teachers. For instance, PST13 mentioned, “I did not know that the tales may subconsciously provide such motives. Especially while teaching young learners, it might be quite harmful to read them in class. As a teacher I should read and analyze the materials very carefully” (I). Similarly, PST19 said, “The comparative analysis of the tales led me to interpret the tales from a different perspective. I was not aware of the fact that the materials we use in class are very important for a teacher. I have decided to develop myself in many areas; history literature, psychology” (WR). The participants also commented that they were not aware of the power of fairy tales in our lives. After having analyzed the tales comparatively, they said that they gained different perspectives. For instance, PST6 wrote, “I decided to read the materials I will use in class very carefully. I noticed that the examples we give in class are crucial. I can create Cinderellas or Ninettas, I was not aware of that power” (WR). A male participant PST18 further added:

Next year in my classes I will choose my materials in accordance with the needs of our society. I would like to give examples such as: “He washes the dishes; She works in the office; He cooks dinner” to affect my students in a positive way. I did not know that the materials we use in class

or the works we read have such a tremendous effect on our lives. I should take into account that as teachers we can change the future. I think I have totally developed a different perspective about fairy tales and gender roles (WR).

On the whole, the participants reported that they should be much more careful while reading any kind of written document. They underlined the need for analyzing what they read in detail and questioning the possibility of different perspectives as a teacher.

### **Improving self-sufficiency as a woman**

The female participants in the study associated themselves with the female characters in the fairy tales and described *Cinderella* as the character whom they are forced to become in social life. On the other hand, they defined *Ninetta* as the one whom they should be as a woman with the qualities of self-sufficiency, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect and self-reliance. For instance, PST17 said, “I had thought that only men could be self-confident. Now I believe that everybody has the right to be self-confident whether a woman or a man. I would recommend my students to read literary works that will increase their self-confidence” (WR). The participants internalized *Cinderella* as a flesh and bone symbol of the women in their society who need an outside force to escape a situation, as indicated by PS4:

The comparative analysis of the tales helped me to understand that a woman should not think ‘I can’t do that’ or ‘only my husband can do this’. I understand that a woman should be brave and self-confident. Marriage should not be an escape from the responsibilities for women. I noticed from *Ninetta*’s story that we should educate ourselves to become self-confident women (WR).

In addition, PST 5 underlined, “As a woman I begin to feel more self-confident as I see that we have the power to become *Ninetta* instead of the girl in ashes waiting to be saved” (WR). The majority of the participants regarded *Ninetta* as a good role-model for them as the fairy tale character shapes her life according to her own choices and desires, rather than having her life choices made by others.

Most of the participants identified this as proof of a deep-rooted sense of own worth and secure self-esteem. For example, PST16 indicated, “*Ninetta*’s story helped me to learn how to respect myself. I should not let anyone interfere in my life. If I respect myself, my students will respect me too” (I). Another female participant, PST12, mentioned:

I thought that I should be as beautiful as Cinderella, the princess. I think my interpretation about my outlook has completely changed. I can feel strong and beautiful regardless of social norms. I should respect my body and I do not need to be slim or blond to feel beautiful. I did not know that

even our outlooks are shaped by culture. *Ninetta's* tale helped me to confess that society has decreased my self-esteem" (WR).

PST24 highlighted the significance of self-respect for a woman in her written report, "As an individual, I should not always seek for others' approval of what I do. Being *Cinderella* would not bring me happiness. First, I should respect myself so that others will respect me" (WR). Similarly, PST16 described *Ninetta* as a self-reliant woman who strives towards her own goals bravely, "Most people think that women are inherently inadequate and in need of support. *Ninetta* proves that women do not need the support of others. She goes from one place to another, she makes plans and achieves her goals all alone" (WR).

### **Discussion and Implications**

The use of fairy tales, especially *Cinderella*, has been the subject of several research studies in education (e.g. Demarest & Kortenhaus, 2000; Kim, Wee & Lee, 2017; Mendelson, 1997; Westland, 2006), yet rarely becomes a component of teacher education programs. In this study, *Ashputtel*, widely known as *Cinderella*, from the traditional fairy tale canon was analyzed comparatively with *The Magical Little Date Tree* within the light of feminist literary criticism in pre-service English language teacher education. Feminist literary criticism, which is concerned with "the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson, 2006: 83), was adopted in the in-class analysis of the tales. The feminist framework aimed to encourage the students to focus upon gender issues and the patriarchal ideology that aim to limit the female characters in the texts.

The findings of the study indicated that the comparative analysis of the tales encouraged the participants to develop gender sensitivity, become critically literate as a teacher and improve self-sufficiency as a woman. In their written reports and interviews, the pre-service teachers described gender roles as a determinant factor on who they should be in social life. They also mentioned that their conceptions of gender have direct effects on understanding the self and others. The majority of the participants in the study defined gender sensitivity as one of the prominent issues of teaching as a profession, which suggests that gender issues should be on the agenda of teacher education programs (Lahelma, 2011; Sanders, 2002). The comparative analysis of the tales helped the pre-service teachers become aware of gender as a culturally constructed notion and education as a kind of "political act that controls destinies" (Howe, 1982, p. 283). The majority of the participants, both male and female, identified themselves with the characters in the tales and mentioned that they, as teachers, became aware of the importance of fairy tales upon the construction of gender-appropriate behavior in society.

Besides, the comparative analysis of the tales from a feminist perspective enabled the pre-service teachers in the study to question the importance of becoming critically literate as a teacher.

Critical literacy has been defined as “learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one’s experience as historically constructed within specific power relations” (Anderson & Irvine, 1982: p. 82 ). Therefore, critical literacy promotes an active, reflective manner during the reading process through focusing on the cultural and ideological assumptions hidden in the text and encourages readers to focus on different cultural contexts (Luke, 2000). That kind of a critical stance supports “the transformation of self or one’s world” (McDaniel, 2004: 474). The majority of the participants in the study stated that, after the comparative analysis of the tales, their understanding about the construction of gender roles altered dramatically. The pre-service teachers emphasized that they need to learn to be critically literate and gender sensitive as teachers in order to choose the right materials in class. Many expressed that they were highly surprised at the hidden ideological messages in traditional fairy tales and found the discourse of the tales dangerous for children. The participants underlined that they should develop themselves in many areas such as psychology and history in order to choose the best materials in class.

The findings also suggested that improving self-sufficiency as a woman was another theme that encouraged self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect and self-reliance among the female participants. The female pre-service teachers mentioned that the comparative analysis of the tales helped them question the possibility of different choices and options in social life as a woman. They particularly questioned the Barbie doll beauty standards set by the society and reported that *Ninetta’s* story was an inspiration for them to feel complete and whole. Moreover, they underlined the possibility of self-sufficiency as a woman as opposed to the limitations of the society.

On the whole, the course module provided gave the pre-service teachers a chance to question the significance of becoming aware of the roles designated to women and men in society and taking a gender conscious approach as a teacher. The most significant point is the fact that they not only decided to develop themselves on certain issues just for their own good but also for their students. They began to question the importance of being a teacher and the crucial necessity of critical literacy, gender sensitivity and self-improvement in order to be a good role model for their students. Their comments revealed that being a teacher encapsulates various qualities such as an awareness of the dynamics of social life. The depiction of gender issues in the course module, as the core subject of daily life, helped the participants enhance new perspectives concerning their professional and personal selves.

As the nature of qualitative research suggests, the current study does not aim at reaching generalizations. Yet, it has several implications for teacher educators who consider gender issues an essential component of pre-service teacher education programs. Such a course module which provides a comparative analysis of fairy tales or any other literary texts can contribute to gender sensitive pre-service teacher education and pre-service teachers for a better life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Similar modules

can be integrated into pre-service teacher education programs so that teachers can act as agents of change to nurture gender sensitivity in the classroom and beyond.

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