

Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Gender training in education

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Comments Paper – United Kingdom



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Gender Policy and Practice in Education in the UK

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1. Introduction

1.1. Policy Shifts on Equality

Two main policies have impacted on gender in the UK. First, the devolution of the organisation of education to the nations which make up the UK (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England) resulting in the development of different trajectories regarding the control and content of education, and also with regard to gender. Second, in particular in England, educational reform has been high on the agenda of various recent political administrations, leading to a fragmented system of schooling, involving currently: independent schools, selective schools (grammar etc.), local authority-administered schools, academies and free schools, each of which is differently controlled in relation to the centre (Westminster). This makes gender change difficult to assess or promote

1.2 Equality Legislative Framework

Anti-discrimination laws have been in place in the UK since 1975 when the first Sex Discrimination Act was passed. Currently anti-discrimination legislation covers a wide number of areas. The latest Equality Act, passed in 2010, provides a single, consolidated source of discrimination law, seeking also to remove anomalies and inconsistencies of previous legislation. As far as schools are concerned, the new law continues to make it illegal to discriminate against pupils and students on the grounds of sex, race, disability, religion or belief, and sexual orientation. Protection from discrimination is now extended to pupils who are pregnant or undergoing gender reassignment although exceptions to the discrimination provisions continue such as in curriculum content, collective worship for, and admissions to, single-sex and religious (or faith) schools.

The introduction of a new single equality duty (on schools etc.) replaces three previous separate duties (race, gender and disability) and is designed to make the legislation 'less bureaucratic and more light-touch'. For example, schools are required to provide equality information and objectives, rather than meet targets. 'Positive Action' provisions allow schools to work to alleviate disadvantages experienced by certain groups of pupils in the form of, e.g. 'catch-up classes' for Roma children or initiatives aimed at alienated Asian boys.

2. Policy Debate on Gender

2.1 Issues

Over the years there has been a debate about the extent to which gender should be treated as a 'stand-alone' topic or integrated into an 'equalities' framework which includes ethnicity, social class, disability etc. As we have seen, the most recent legislation, the Equalities Act (2010¹) and the creation of a body responsible for equalities (EHRC²) suggest government preference for the latter: however feminist and gender researchers and activists have warned that this is likely to mean less attention to gender.

Further, the preoccupation with examination attainment and the perception that girls have overtaken boys in performance have led to a focus on boys' perceived underachievement and a reinterpretation of gender inequality as a boys' issue. However as Francis (2011) points out, this is but a small part of the overall gender picture with research showing that schools continue to perpetuate gender inequality which harms girls as well as boys. These may be summarised as follows:

- Girls and boys tend to sit separately unless organised differently by the teacher;
- Boys and girls behave in different ways as they engage in 'gender category maintenance work' (Davies, 1989);
- Teachers continue to interpret the distinctions in classroom behaviour as 'natural' rather than socially constructed;
- Boys continue to dominate school space, physically and verbally, and to receive a greater amount of teacher time, although this may be negative attention;
- Constructions of heterosexuality are ubiquitous and strongly gendered (viz. boys as active, girls as passive) with sexualisation and homophobic abuse acting to control and restrict gender behaviours;
- Bullying and harassment emphasise gender conformity; and
- Gender inequality is perpetuated through gender-differentiated subject preference and career choices.

Such inequalities suggest a 'hidden curriculum', the term used to identify patterns of behaviour and socialisation that are not included in the 'official' curriculum or organisation of the school. The hidden curriculum transmits to young people a collection of messages which reinforce sex-stereotypes and thus sustain 'a sexual division of labour in the social process of schooling' (Humm 1989, 95). It is at the level of the hidden curriculum that the resistance to gender change has been most marked.

¹ See government website: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act/>

² Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has a 'statutory remit to promote and monitor human rights; and to protect, enforce and promote equality across the nine "protected" grounds - age, disability, gender, race, religion and belief, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, sexual orientation and gender reassignment' (<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/>, downloaded 13-08-12)

2.2 Projects and Strategies

Following the passage of the first anti-discrimination legislation in 1975 and the introduction of a national curriculum in 1988, a variety of policies and strategies were developed to generate gender change in school ethos and practice. Many were small-scale and piecemeal; yet taken together with supporting legislation, had considerable impact (Eurydice, 2010). Thus in 2011, UK has the narrowest gender gap in educational achievement out of 135 countries surveyed by the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2011)³. Also important has been the collection of data on gender and performance which is now incorporated into government practice. Examples of strategies developed in the UK over the years are:

2.2.1 Analysis and interpretation of performance data

The government, local authorities and schools are each expected to collate and analyse performance data, such as patterns of under-achievement, other patterns where gender differences occur (e.g. exclusions, truancy), pupils at risk and also to identify additional factors contributing to (gender) inequality – as a basis for policy and action (Arnot et al, 1999; Sukhnandan et al., 2000).

2.2.2 Teaching methods and school organisation

The aim is to engage the interests of all students whether girls or boys. This has involved teacher-led work, switching to mixed-sex pairing or single-sex grouping where appropriate, offering targeted learning support, and eliminating sex-stereotyping in school texts, reading schemes, examination questions, display materials etc. Regular in-service training for practitioners ensures that they are up-to-date on the legal context for gender equality and research on the extent to which teaching, subject content and assessment influence gender behaviours in the classroom (Myers et al, 2007). Other strategies include development of school policies on gender equality, monitoring of classroom dynamics and levels of attention and support, increased teacher expectations, and the use of firm but fair discipline procedures.

2.2.3 Resources

Resources to support practitioners in developing gender-sensitive practice include guidelines such as the Scottish on-line *Gender Equality: a toolkit for education*⁴ and publications such as *Genderwatch* (Myers et al, 2007). Resource initiatives

³ World Economic Forum (2011) *The Global Gender Gap: Report 2011*. Geneva, Switzerland: WEF: authors, Ricardo Haumann, Laura D. Tyson and Saadia Zahidi. The components of Educational Attainment comprise literacy rate, and enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Additional data includes the percentage of female teachers, and the length of girls' and boys' schooling.

⁴ Scottish Executive (2007) *Gender Equality: a toolkit for education* staff <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/08/30161011/0>

currently under way include packs for primary schools and parents on body image⁵, and moves to avoid gender stereotyping in careers' guidance as part of a ministerial initiative concerning improving the position of women and the economy⁶.

2.2.4 School sub-cultures

A goal of much recent work on gender is to transform the negative impact of certain school sub-cultures and the poor attitudes to school-work of individual or groups of boys (and sometimes girls). The intention is to encourage (male) students to achieve academically without fear of ridicule or disruptive behaviour. Warrington et al (2006) identify the following five factors of a positive school culture:

- *Behaviour*: expectation of high levels of self-discipline, supported by prompt and consistent attention to misbehaviour and courtesy extended to pupils.
- *Equal opportunities*: commitment to valuing diversity through curriculum content, classroom grouping arrangements, school activities, and where appropriate, worship.
- *Fostering pride and achievement*: emphasis on pride in work and behaviour, as well as high expectations of performance, responsibility and independence. Pupils' progress and satisfaction with school is seen to be highly valued.
- *Imaginative thinking*: pupil engagement in the life of the school, and staff committed to ensuring pupil involvement.
- *Values and aims*: transparency and consistency among staff and permeating the life of the school.

2.2.5 Mentoring

Mentoring schemes usually target students from 15 upwards who are at risk of underachieving, though mentoring is also used for younger 'at-risk' students, often boys (Wilcox and Gray, 1996). Mentoring schemes may involve older students mentoring younger students, between-staff mentoring and drawing on the local community to provide role models and mentors. Both male and female mentors are expected to avoid sex-stereotyping and discourage perceptions of male 'gender superiority' (Sukhnandan et al. 2000).

2.2.6 Parental Involvement

Parents are seen as vital to the promotion of gender equality in schools (Condie et al, 2006). Particularly effective has been the creation of spaces and opportunities so

⁵ Teaching pack for primary schools on body image (with Media Smart, downloaded by app. 1200 schools) and follow-up parent pack (also with Media Smart, downloaded over 10,000 times in first week), <http://www.mediasmart.org.uk/resources-body-image.php>;
<http://www.mediasmart.org.uk/parents-pack.php>

⁶ Ministerial initiative on women and the economy which focuses on gender inequality in three areas: starting out (i.e. education, careers advice, gender stereotyping in school, etc), talent pipeline, and then 'at the top'. Women's Business Council:
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/women/women-work/business-council/> -.

that less privileged parents have a voice and representation within their children's school. This has been achieved through materials designed to help parents support their children's learning, 'drop in sessions' and parent-teacher discussion groups (Maguire, 2007).

2.2.7 Action and/or Research Projects

Action research projects involving collaboration between teachers and researchers from higher education were developed in the UK from the 1980s onwards to challenge stereotyped gender patterns and relations. Early projects focused on girls' curriculum choices and their lack of involvement in science and technology as well as raising gender consciousness more generally (Weiner, 1994). Later projects focused on changing school cultures and raising boys' achievement (Pickering, 1997; Warrington et al., 2006)

3. Transferability Issues

While much has been achieved on gender in the UK, most would agree that the future of gender change looks bleak. Current government policy (as in much of Europe) is to shrink the state which has been a proportionally important source of employment for women (Women's Budget Group, 2011) and also responsible for initiatives on gender. Other policies include reductions in public expenditure; a shift of resources from universal provision to targeted individuals or groups; and devolvement of responsibility for 'social action' to the charitable and voluntary sectors (less evident in Wales and Scotland). This situation has implications for the take-up of projects on gender as we shall see.

Both initiatives from Denmark could be replicated relatively easily in the UK. In particular in relation to school texts, there have already been a variety of UK projects aimed at eliminating gender bias in reading schemes and textbooks, and producing non-sexist children's literature. However, such initiatives can only be successful as part of a wider push for equality and, as Cecile Nørgaard points out, they must be accompanied by professional training for teachers and other school personnel as well as a substantial input into initial teacher training on gender issues and their implications. The second Danish initiative – on body confidence – is more unusual and shares some elements with a current project on body image in the UK (see above). In parallel, a group of UK gender researchers (e.g. Ringrose et al, 2012) are currently investigating the sexualisation of children and young people in and outside school, and particularly, the impact on them of internet porn and 'sexting' (the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photographs, primarily via mobile phones). Individuals from this group are already going in to schools to talk about their work and it is hoped that eventually this research will be used as a basis for further action at school level.

The Spanish initiative which is aimed at training teachers to be 'gender-sensitive' is particularly apt given the necessity, as stated above, of professional training for teachers in order that specific gender projects can be sustained and mainstreamed. Spain has had a considerable history of gender innovation in education (Zufiaurre et al., 2010), and I see this project as a further means of embedding gender equality into schooling and social life generally. Its transferability to the UK context, however,

is unlikely because the UK is not able to draw on such a history of commitment to challenging gender relations that we have seen in Spain.

The Portuguese initiative – Guides for Education ‘Gender and Citizenship’ – is impressive in its scope and the ambitious nature of its goals. So, I have no doubt that it could be replicated satisfactorily in countries with a relatively centralised education system, substantial resources and strong government commitment. However its transferability to the UK is likely to be problematic on three counts at present: first, the UK education system is highly devolved and fragmented as already stated, second, the relative high cost of its implementation would not be guaranteed at the present time of austerity and economic down-turn, and third, expanding ‘equalities’ is not a high priority for the current government.

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