



Exchange of good practices on gender equality

Gender training in education

Portugal, 18-19 October 2012

Comments Paper - Iceland



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This publication is supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013).

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Gender training in education in Iceland in view of good practices in Portugal, Denmark and Spain

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1. Introduction

The focus of the good practices here discussed, is materials for teaching on gender equity and citizenship and teacher training regarding the same issues. The legal and institutional context for both gender equity in schools and gender equality in teacher education has recently changed in Iceland. These will be described shortly in part one of this paper, first the issue of gender and equality in schools, and then the discussion about gender and equality issues in teacher education. Secondly this paper will focus on some policy issues being discussed in Iceland and the problems foreseen in implementing the gender and equality issues in Iceland. Thirdly this paper will comment on transferability issues from the good practices in gender and education here discussed from Denmark, Portugal and Spain to the Icelandic context. Finally some recommendations for action are presented both in this paper and on the special form included for that purpose.

1.1. Formal status of gender equality and education in Iceland

The status of gender equality has recently changed formally in Icelandic compulsory school law and in the new national curriculum. Equality education has been required at all educational levels by the equality law over 30 years or since 1976, but has mostly been ignored in schools (Eygló Árnadóttir, 2009). Since 2008 (Law for the primary schools, 2008, art. 25) equality issues is a new subject in compulsory schools, a special subject within social studies, and also an important value to guide the work of the schools. This interpretation has been supported by the Ministry of Education (Mennta-og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011). Since 2011 equality is formally one of six pillars or values of education in the national curriculum guidelines for all school levels, the other 5 being reading, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights and creativity.

In the national curriculum guide the equality concept is defined in a wide sense, focusing on age, area of living, dis/ability, gender, sexuality, colour, religion, culture, class, religion, language and nationality. The Ministry of Education is now preparing guidelines for implementing this for all school levels, expected to be ready in the end of this year. Local educational authorities are already asking experts, including the author, for guidelines of how to implement the equality dimension in the primary schools. In the upper secondary schools, individual teachers and schools have been

focusing on gender equality in courses on gender studies that have received much attention and discussion in the media.

Gender and education in Iceland became an issue around 1990, with the participation in the Nordic project Nord-Lilia 1992-1994 (Nord-Lilia, 1995, Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2007, 2009a; Eygló Árnadóttir, 2009;). From 1997 or so the so-called boy-turn discourse has been dominating and some effort has gone into discussing boys in schools especially at conferences sponsored by local educational authorities, and in Reykjavik a developmental project aimed at boys in school was initiated (Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, et al., 2009). Another gender equality school project was initiated by the national and local equality authorities in 2008 (see <http://jafnrettiiskolum.is/jis/?D10cID=News>) and discussed at a Nordic conference on the topic in Reykjavik 2009. This project was initiated by 5 local authorities and focused on pre- and primary schools. This project was administered by the equality officers of the five local communities, not the educational authorities or the head masters of schools, who were not cooperating. One of the suggestions for improvement from that project was to make gender studies a compulsory course in teacher education and strengthen that focus in the further education of teachers (www.jafnrettiiskolum.is/D10/_Files/Lokaskýrsla%20verkefnisins.PDF).

Not involving educational leaders, headmasters and teachers was one of the main weaknesses of this endeavor and probably this sector in general. There is political pressure from laws and equality bodies to promote gender equality in schools, but teachers and the education sector focus on the child from a humanist perspective, and many regard gender as a politically sensitive topic, and are not prepared to change that view. This comes through in Icelandic as well as international research. (Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2009; Lahelma, 2011; Lahelma and Hynninen, 2012).

1.2. Gender and teacher education

Teacher training in Iceland has recently by law been extended from 3 to 5 years, for teachers at all school levels. Teachers in pre-, primary-, and secondary school now need to have a master degree to be a qualified teacher. Teacher training for all school levels is since 2008 offered only at The University of Iceland, The School of Education, as well as at the University of Akureyri.

Gender and teacher education in Iceland first became an issue around 1990, with the participation in the Nordic project Nord-Lilia 1992-1994. All teaching education institutions participated and a few schools were involved. At the University of Iceland a course on Gender and education has been taught since 1990, and has since been optional for secondary school teachers only. Gender studies is also taught at the University, but not for teachers. In spite of legal requirements to focus on gender equality issues in teacher education and in schools, it has never been done systematically (Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2007, 2009; 2012; Eygló Árnadóttir, 2009).

In October 2009, following a Nordic conference on gender and education in Reykjavik, the author of this paper was asked for a report on the matter by the president of the School of Education, a report on how gender issues are covered in the teacher education at the University of Iceland now and how it should be improved.

Available research on gender issues in teacher training in Iceland was not extensive, but it is often claimed that gender issues are covered indirectly. So the

first recommendation was to research this properly, which was done from 2010-2012. In our research we took interviews and 8 focus group interviews to teacher educators in various disciplines. A questionnaire was also given to the teacher educators, but unfortunately the response rate was too low to be meaningful. The findings indicate that some teacher educators are interested in equality issues, in a wide sense, but others not, and their views are more often than not based on their conviction that they are equally oriented already. Very few of the teacher educators interviewed had knowledge of basic concepts of gender studies, that are considered necessary to overcome essentialist views of gender and gender stereotypes (Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir and Steinunn Helga Lárusdóttir, 2012).

These findings are similar as elsewhere (Finland, Sweden, England) that education on gender and equality issues in teacher training has been poor, met with resistance and a gap is between scientific research on gender issues and what is taught in teacher training. There have been optional courses or projects by dedicated teachers, but required courses are resisted or opposed in spite of equality laws and the new policy of the present educational authorities, with equality as one of six fundamental pillars at all school level.

This lack of focus on gender in teacher education probably supports existing gender stereotypes both in education and in society for adults at the labor market or as leaders and entrepreneurs (Weiner, 2000; Hollingsworth, 1995; Weaver-Hightower 2003; Younger, 2007; Younger and Warrington, 2008; Ahl, 2006; Þórdís Þórðardóttir, 2005; Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, et al ,2009; Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2007, 2009a; Unesco, 2009; Eurydice, 2010).

There seem to be many reasons for poor education on gender issues and for its resistance in teacher education and in schools: One is curriculum overload. Another reason is that gender issues are sensitive and politicized, it is not acknowledged that this is about scientific knowledge on gender issues and educational experience (Lahelma, 2011). Also gender issues on masculinity and femininity are considered complicated and contradict traditional essentialist views on gender differences, too complicated to be practical (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Butler, 1990, 2006).

The present author agrees with views from England (Skelton 2007; Younger and Warrington 2008); Younger 2007), Sweden (Weiner 2000, 2007) and Finland (Lahelma, 2011; project TASUKO or *Gender awareness in teacher education* (<http://wiki.helsinki.fi/display/tasuko>) that increased emphasis on gender issues is important in teacher education in order to promote gender equality in schools and society. In some respects the discourse has changed very much since 1990, especially the focus has changed from girls to boys, but in other respects the traditional view of gender differences remains. Some teacher educators claim that gender is an irrelevant dimension in education or should be dealt with indirectly as one of many difference dimensions. After twenty years of equality and education discussion, is still weak and controversial in schools and teacher education.

In the author's report to the president of the school of education (Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2009) it is considered very important that the proposed changes will not emerge top-down from specialists, from the Ministry of education or the equality authorities, but rather that the teachers in schools and teacher educators themselves decide what to do in cooperation with specialists. This may take longer time, and not be as focused, but it is better than not being dealt with at all by teachers and teacher educators.

Finally it is considered important to discuss the conceptual approach used in view of the educational policy in general, so that policies or emphasis on inclusive schooling, citizenship, multi-culturalism and gender equality can all be implemented without one issue dominating another. In view of the economic collapse in 2008 and the present education policy with emphasis on equality it is important to make a fresh start with a focus on citizenship, equality and democracy.

Emphasis should be placed on gender equality as a central issue for other difference variables with focus on social justice and in line with the existing equality laws and accepted values and aims of our schools. It is also important to remember that to be sensitive to gender or other difference variables is not a question of teachers' personality but a question of scientific knowledge on gender and other difference issues, teaching experience and practise (Lahelma, 2011).

2. Policy debate

Paradoxically the implementation becomes difficult as the two changes of policy mentioned above:

- to make equality issues a subject in primary schools by law and an important pillar of education at all educational levels according to the national curriculum guides and
- the strengthened status of teacher education as an M.Ed/MA course at the University

apparently can outbalance each other, as the teacher educators can formally reject policy changes they do not prioritize. Our suggestions to have a course on Gender and education offered in the new 5-year teacher education (compulsory or at least optional) has not been accepted. Those who decide formally is the department of teacher education, the teacher educators themselves. There is a hot debate about what should be included in the new 5-year teacher education program and so far gender equality is not a priority. Teacher educators fight for their own subjects, or other priorities regardless of what is required by law or the educational policy. This academic year 1-2 lectures and a small assignment related to gender equality is offered in the first year of teacher training for pre-, and primary school student teachers. Secondary school student teachers can select an optional course on gender and education (10Ects) and some of them do.

It is not clear how these contradictions will be resolved, to have an educational policy decided by politicians or by law and then have the teacher educators themselves decide on the teacher education curriculum, like other University departments or faculty.

This kind of paradox also came up in a recent discussion of teacher education in Norway and Finland at the ECER conference in Cadiz in September 2012 and hopefully it can be addressed in Lisboa.

Although the legal and national curriculum documents have been strengthened in Iceland lately, it is not clear if that will change anything in practice regarding gender equality in our schools. It should also be pointed out that education on gender

equality has been legally required by the equality law since 1976, but mostly ignored by school authorities.

It is therefore my conclusion that a top-down approach is of very limited use, we have to find a way to motivate teachers, teacher educators and the schools to participate and make gender equality their issue. That however is very difficult without scientific knowledge of gender studies, so there continues to be a danger of a gap between theory and practice, as often pointed out (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2009; Lahelma and Hynninen, 2012).

After 15 years of neoliberal education policy in Iceland (since 1996) and the emphasis on multiculturalism, inclusion and the boy discourse in education, an emphasis on gender equality may not be as “acceptable” as before, even if promoted by the present social democratic or left wing government and by legal documents. The scientific knowledge of gender studies has not yet changed the professional discourse of educators and the widespread essentialist view of gender, and it is not easy to bridge that gap.

3. Transferability issues

In this final section I will discuss the transferability of the good practices from Denmark, Portugal and Spain¹ to Iceland including possible constraints.

3.1. Denmark

The situation in Denmark, sounds very familiar to us in Iceland, not least the conclusion reached on page 5, that professionals are not prepared to work along new ways of working towards gender equality. Also that work without such research based knowledge might even be undesirable, as gender stereotypes might get strengthened.

The theoretical orientation or research tradition these projects are based on, as described in the beginning of chapter 3 (page 10) is the preferred tradition from our point of view, but at the same time this approach is alien to those that have no scientific gender knowledge and rely on essentialist views of the two binary genders.

3.1.1. *The childrens book on gender roles and educators guide*

This book has been translated into Icelandic and distributed to all play schools, by the Minister for gender equality in May 2009. It was used as a part of the developmental projects initiated in Iceland in 2008 (www.jafnrettiiskolum.is/D10/_Files/Lokaskýrsla%20verkefnisins.PDF).² I am not

¹ From Denmark, Cecile Nordaard, Gender training in education ; from Portugal Paula Botelho-Gomes, Guides for Education "Gender and Citizenship" ; and from Spain, Exchange of good practices on gender equality: Fact sheet.

² See the book in Icelandic translation <http://leikskolinn.is/hvammur/skjalasafn/hvammur12.pdf> and the teachers' guide http://www.lundarsel.akureyri.is/jafnrettisverkefni/Kennsluleiðbeiningar_Friðrik_Friða,_Rósa_og_Ragnar.pdf

aware of a systematic evaluation of the use of the book in Iceland, and the experience mentioned in the Danish paper is valuable and interesting.

It would be interesting to find out if the book was more of an inspiration for change than a provocation working against its objectives, as suggested (p.9). The book was not introduced or referred to in teacher education at the University of Iceland in 2011-12, according to our focus group interviews with teacher educators. It would be valuable to investigate better how this book is used in Icelandic pre-schools, and if the user guidelines from Denmark or the ones developed in the developmental project in Lundarsel in Akureyri, are used by others. Also how teachers and children and parents have reacted to the use of this book.

I am afraid that the conclusion reached by Cecilie Norgaard, that the success of this project depends on the implementation of research based knowledge of gender and gender perspectives in the curriculum of teachers both in the initial training and in further education, is equally valid in Iceland. As that knowledge is widely lacking, the usefulness of the book may be questioned.

3.1.2. The magazine and film/CD for girls and boys about body confidence and "porn-chic" and teachers guide

I have not seen these materials, and wonder it is possible to get them online? It will be very useful for those that understand Danish like Icelanders. These materials sound very promising and it would be interesting for us in Iceland to get access to them as an increased emphasis on gender issues is formally on the agenda. Are the materials fully developed already? Is it not planned to do an evaluation of the effect on pupils and teachers?

The same problem about the teachers as mentioned in the former project may come up, but good educational materials is one thing and the education of teachers another. So it sounds as if we could certainly learn from this materials and the Danish experience of implementation. The first step would be to see the materials, and a later decision would be to have them translated, and adjusted to Icelandic conditions and try them out.

3.2. Portugal

The aim of the project **"Educational Guides Gender and Citizenship"** is very ambitious and it is aimed at many important target groups, from teachers, pupils and students to professionals in education and vocational guidance. It is not clear if head masters or local politicians in charge of education were involved, which would have been important in Iceland.

After a theoretical framework on gender and citizenship, where gender studies and citizenship concepts are introduced, the second part is more content specific for each grade level, and the specific focus on the body and health, decision making situations and leadership, the use of ICT and vocational choices, are very well chosen, both in view of the aims and to be able to integrate this education into different school subjects.

Besides development, publishing and distribution, teacher training was planned in the process, and has already been 150+120+100 hours (p. 13). The training

covered 43% of all teachers who participated in the monitored implementation of the Guides in the seven school clusters, and the implementation process is still ongoing (p. 14). This limited number of teachers trained restricted the spread of the project to other regions, due to financial constraints at the time of economic crisis.

The evaluation suggests that the guides proved useful for reaching their aims of critical awareness of gender issues in education. The training proved very useful, but teachers claimed that further training was needed. The online access of the guides has made their impact even greater. The monitoring team believes that the goal of integration of gender issues in school educational projects has been achieved. They also point out that the real impact on both students and teachers, is not known and it would be necessary to develop specific assessment tools to investigate that.

Again the main weakness of this project is considered to be the implementation of the guides and the corresponding shortage of delivery of teacher training, particularly in continental Portugal, as well as in Azores and Madeira. Also it is not known if the positive change observed in 2010-2011 is permanent or only temporary. Of course it is important to continue with the good work, but that may be difficult during economic hard times.

The questions asked (p. 18) are all very relevant and show the main weakness of all efforts to change education top-down. It is important to involve education authorities and school administrators, headmasters etc. It is not ethically possible to make individual teachers responsible. They are often ready while paid for the training but if they get no institutional support in their teaching the enthusiasm is likely to disappear, when resistance shows up, and before they have managed to keep their gender equality glasses permanently on.

The fact that two of the guides, the 3rd grade and the pre-school one, have been translated into English is very interesting for transferability to other cultures. For us in Iceland, getting access to those would be very valuable, both for our work on getting gender and equality education into the schools and for possible cooperation and research.

3.3. Spain

The good practices from Spain are about online training courses: "**Coeducation: two sexes in one world**". This project sounds very interesting and effective, the aims are credible and the idea of an online course is an efficient way of getting to teachers, who clearly rate the course highly (4.5 of 5, p. 3).

What is not clear from this short fact sheet is if the teacher training is done in cooperation with those in charge of teacher education and to what extent the trained teachers actually use what they learn in their own schools, with the permission of school authorities, parents etc. It sounds as if at least the second course that focuses on cooperative work is focused on the educational practices of the teachers. The new module added in 2011 on "New technologies, new challenges for co-education, are particularly interesting from my point of view (see Guðný Guðbjörnsóttir, 2010, <http://netla.khi.is/menntakvika2010/009.pdf>)

It would be interesting to discuss and know if the students at different school levels have been influenced in some way or what kind of reactions or influences are noticed among the pupils/students.

It is not clear from the fact sheet what motivates this good participation of teachers, if they are paid for their participation, regardless of using their knowledge in their teaching? Or if it was required of them to participate. Were all the participating teachers employed or was their motivation for participation, besides getting credits (ECTS?) to increase their salary or employability?

I would be interested in seeing an English version of this course, for transferability to other cultures, including Iceland. Also in discussing if this model can be used to overcome the barriers related to teachers in the other good practices here discussed, both those from Portugal and Denmark.

4. Conclusions

Online training of teachers with good educational materials may be the best way to move ahead. This would have to be adjusted to the institutional circumstances in each country, and closely connected to those in charge of teacher education and the further education of teachers.

We have found considerable resistance to education on gender equality among teachers and teacher educators in Iceland as elsewhere. It is not advisable to teach about gender issues by special outsiders, so in my opinion the only way to integrate or mainstream gender issues into the curriculum is doing this through the teachers and the leadership of schools at an institutional level.

Perhaps an online course in English could be developed at a European level, aimed at national leaders, experts in gender quality, teacher education and online working environment.

They would then adjust the material to their own country, have it translated and provide training at a national level, in agreement with national laws and local interests. The target groups for such training in Iceland would be those in charge of education at the local level, leaders of pre-, primary-, and secondary schools, as well as teachers and teacher educators. Parents would not need to be involved as education on gender equality is required by law in Iceland, but of course the outcome is likely to be stronger if parents participate and take part in the project for example through home assignments or school visits, as tried in the Nord-Lilia project in the 1990's (Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir, 1994).

The main problem remains how to motivate these participants, and how to make this a normal part of the curriculum at each school level. At the moment only visionaries and optimists may have answers, how realistic they are remains to be seen.

Another way to approach the latter problem is to make sure that the educational policy, in this case on gender equality, and the professional development of teachers are linked better than is the case at the moment, at least in Iceland. At the University of Iceland the university department of teacher education decides on the curriculum in teacher education, and teachers in schools get little credit for further education. Therefore the teachers, having gone through an economic meltdown of

the economy, may not be highly motivated for further education in general, and gender equality as a topic is often resisted as well.

Without action the gap between research on equality issues and gender studies on the one hand and the practice in schools on the other, will remain large and not in line with modern views of gender equality of most European states.

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