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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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FESTSCHRIFT FOR LISBETH LUNDAHL

INVITED SECTION

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Gender Awareness in Finnish Teacher Education: an Impossible Mission?

*Elina Lahelma**

Abstract

The need to promote gender equality within and through education has been on the agenda in Europe for decades. Similarly, Finland has also evidenced a history of hundreds of projects and reports that have repeated the same aims, ideas and practical innovations for promoting equality, challenging educational segregation and providing girl-friendly or boy-friendly pedagogies. However, the actual pace of change has been very slow.

In this article I discuss some of the constraints that feminist teachers and teacher educators constantly face in this endeavour. Firstly, the paper draws on analyses conducted in studies carried out at several teacher education institutions within a context of a national project entitled “Gender Awareness in Teacher Education” (TASUKO). Secondly, I use my own experiences and documents gathered as an actor in the field of gender equality in education since the 1980s, along with findings from my own studies.

Keywords: gender awareness, equality, teacher education, gender in education, equality project

Introduction

Initial teacher education should provide the prospective teachers with a readiness to promote gender equality in their profession (*Ministry of Education, 1988*).

The above is one of the recommendations included in a Finnish report by the “Commission of Gender Equality in Education” from 1988. I acted as secretary to this Commission, the task of which was to explore the changes required by the legislation on gender equality, which had placed new obligations on education.¹ The report included some concrete suggestions that were based on the research and experience stemming from the Commission’s initial experiments, as well as projects conducted in other countries (*Ministry of Education, 1988*).

Twenty years later I was asked to lead a national research and developmental project, running from 2008-2010, on gender equality and gender awareness in teacher education, to be funded by the Ministry of Education. The project, known by the acronym TASUKO², included participants from every university that offered

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teacher education. Starting this endeavour was a moment of “*déjà vu*” for me. When I returned to the report from 1988, I realised that most of the recommendations were still relevant today. Very little change had taken place in the context of Finnish teacher education during these 20 years. One testimony to this is the fact that the Ministry of Education asked me to lead the project, even though I am not a teacher and have never worked in the context of initial teacher education. Moreover, the coordinating unit at the University of Helsinki was the Department of Education, not that of Teacher Education.

In this article, I discuss the interlinked reasons for the difficulty in including ideas of gender equality and the results and perspectives of feminist studies in teacher education, and describe some of the results of the TASUKO project. Firstly, the paper draws on analyses conducted in studies at several teacher education institutions within the context of TASUKO (e.g. Lehtonen, 2011; Vidén & Naskali, 2010). Secondly, I use my own experiences and documents gathered as an actor in the field of gender equality in education since the 1980s, along with some findings from an ethnographically grounded life historical study of young people (e.g. Gordon & Lahelma, 2003) and other studies that I have been involved with in one way or another. Methodologically, the article is informed by multi-sited ethnography in which ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location, contextualised by macro constructions of a larger social order, to multiple sites of observation and participation (Marcus, 1995). Auto ethnographical understandings are also used. Auto ethnography is the methodological practice of moving between a person’s vulnerable inner experience and outer experiences of a social, historical and cultural nature so as to search for deeper connections and understandings (Allen & Piercy, 2005).

The context of this analysis is Finland, a country that has become world famous for its excellent PISA results. Effective teacher education has been regarded as one of the reasons for this. The responsibility for providing education to prospective primary and secondary school teachers was transferred to universities in 1971, and the basic qualification was set as that of a master’s degree. However, in a book celebrating the high standard of Finnish teacher education (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006) I was asked to write a chapter on what I called one of the “blind spots” (Lahelma, 2006: 211) of teacher education: gender.

When reflecting on the findings presented in this article on gender awareness in teacher education in other Nordic countries, it should be remembered that gender studies came to Finland relatively late, arriving in the early 1990s rather than in the 1970s and 1980s (Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2008). It was actually the work conducted in the Commission of Gender Equality in Education that triggered research and the first stimulus for gender studies in education. In fact, I was the first to complete a PhD on gender and education (Lahelma, 1992).

Stability in teacher education

In the situation of group teaching, the teacher urged the student teachers to tolerate the boys' breaches of discipline and order. "Creating a disturbance is a phase in boys' development" (Norema, Pietilä & Purtonen, 2010: 12).

During the next lesson almost all students made lots of noise, and the teacher sent a couple of boys out of the class room. After the lesson he commented to the trainees that were following the lesson that, in the name of equal opportunities, he should have sent some of the girls out as well, but he did not remember their names because they all looked the same" (Norema, Pietilä & Purtonen, 2010: 19).

The educator suggested that when "calling each other homos or whores – they don't mean anything, they are kind of letting off steam" (Norema, Pietilä & Purtonen, 2010: 34).

These examples from everyday life in current teacher education are included in a small size ethnography that the student teachers Anne Norema, Penni Pietilä and Tanja Purtonen (2010) conducted in the context of TASUKO during a period of their own teacher education (2009-2010). The first extract repeats the essentialist understanding of boys' development. In the second extract, even though the need to pay attention to gender equality was familiar to the second teacher educator, a lack of gender awareness is evident in his reflections. The last extract suggests that the educator may not have even acquainted himself with Finnish research on the experiences of non-heterosexual youth at schools (e.g. Lehtonen, 2010). The kinds of assumptions voiced by these teachers could equally well have been drawn from studies conducted in the 1980s (e.g. Lahelma, 1992).

The experience of Norema, Pietilä and Purhonen (2010) also includes examples of situations where teacher educators have encouraged students to problematise and deconstruct simplified gender assumptions. However, their general conclusion was that the teacher education they received did not provide them with the tools for promoting gender equality (Norema, Pietilä & Purtonen, 2010: 36). The explorations conducted in the context of TASUKO in other Finnish universities providing teacher education suggest similar patterns.

Finland has a history of hundreds of projects over the last few decades with national, Nordic or EU funding that have repeated the same aims, ideas and practical innovations for promoting gender equality, challenging educational segregation, and providing girl-friendly or boy-friendly pedagogies, without any sustainable change. Projects on gender equality generally arouse enthusiasm and a feeling of solidarity among their participants, but sadly the results tend not to be sustainable. (Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen, 2005; Brunila, 2009; also see e.g. Arnesen, 1995; Sunnari, 1997.) When the extra money granted by a project is spent, it is not easy to continue the new practices – partly because of a lack of support or even open hostility from some colleagues (see e.g. Kenway & Willis, 1998). One may ask whether the small amounts of money (in relation to the resources given to projects with trendier aims) that are granted to equality projects are a cheap way for the donors to show political correctness, without having to worry that any real change would take place.

It is, of course, still cheaper just to write a few sentences about gender equality in some report. For example, the “Commission for Teacher Education” published a report shortly after the aforementioned “Commission of Gender Equality in Education”, in 1989 (Ministry of Education, 1989). It was specifically required by the Ministry of Education to pay attention to the fulfilment of the aims of gender equality. In the report, gender equality was mentioned twice, without any suggestions for changes in teacher education. The ability to promote gender equality was described as if it were simply one of the personal traits of a good teacher, rather than a theme that should be included in the curricula of teacher education (Lahelma, 1992).

Coming back to the present day, there is now high standard gender research in education in Finland too. However, an analysis of teacher education curricula suggests that the theoretical and empirical results of this research have not been included in mainstream teacher education. Although there are examples of gender courses and gender studies integrated into teacher education, in all these cases they are the results of determined efforts of feminist teacher educators or researchers, and these achievements are constantly challenged (Lehtonen, 2011). It is still possible to become a teacher without having heard of the requirements of the Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986/2005), not to mention learning what these requirements mean in the practices and processes of schools. When gender questions are not on the agenda, unquestioned cultural gender assumptions are reproduced in teacher education – as the examples above suggest.

Gender equality in a country of “genderless gender”

I, kind of, at least I do not maintain them [the differences between girls and boys]! I never, I definitely do not, I do not agree with maintaining them, I regard the whole idea as disgusting! I kind of think that it is an insult to each individual! (*A teacher of mathematics, male, lower secondary school, interviewed in 1995 by Tuula Gordon*).

To me it [gender] doesn't make any difference. It really doesn't! No, because (...) even the girls here are so different from each other, so that you can't say that there is such a thing as an archetypical girl. [There are] kind of those who are traditional, then again, there are girls with masculine features. (*A teacher of arts, female, the health and social services sector of vocational education, interviewed in 2009 by Sirpa Lappalainen*).

The first extract from a teacher interview is drawn from our collective ethnography at a lower secondary school (e.g. Gordon et al., 2006). The teacher almost became angry when asked whether the school maintained differences between girls and boys. However, as is common in Finland, more of his high achieving female students tended to choose lower level mathematics courses than his high achieving male students when they progressed to upper secondary school; this choice limits their options for further studies (Lahelma, 2005). The second extract draws on Sirpa Lappalainen's ethnographic study in the health and social services sector of vocational education. In vocational education, gender is largely a muted category and therefore teachers have not necessarily thought

of it (Isopahkala-Bourét et al., 2010). Even though gender segregation in educational choices is especially strong in Finland, and is regarded as a problem by the EU as well (e.g. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2010), this teacher did not reflect on the fact that almost all her students were female. On the other hand, in a situation with hardly any male students, she was aware of the differences between women – unlike the teacher educator cited earlier for whom all girls looked the same.

Gender runs through structures and cultures as well as subjectivities, and it is difficult to grasp. Gender equality is a concept that is understood in several different ways. Finland has been called a country of “genderless gender” (Lempiäinen, 2000; Ronkainen, 2001). Genderless gender is created when mute or hidden gendering and sexualisation converges with the gender neutral rhetoric of the individual self. Gendered structures, processes, cultures and subjectivities are taken for granted and people are treated as persons in their own right, without gender. Gendering practices tend to keep the whole issue of gender out of public debate in society at large, which means that there cannot be any collective understanding arrived at through such public debate (Korvajärvi, 1998). The history of education, teacher education and educational politics and policies suggests two contradictory understandings of gender equality. On one hand, gender neutrality has been understood as gender equality. On the other, it has been argued that gender equality requires paying attention to essentially understood gender differences. While these understandings seem to be in opposition to each other, they can exist at the same time, also in the perceptions of the same people (e.g. Lahelma et al., 2000.)

Gender neutrality means that talking about gender is avoided and, accordingly, the impact of gender is muted. The idea of a gender-neutral comprehensive school (Lahelma, 1992) suggested a political willingness to promote equality. However, there is evidence of various small, but persistent, structural and cultural patterns in contemporary Finnish schools and educational structures that actually reinforce gender segregation and male dominance in society. The teacher of mathematics and the teacher of arts cited above suggest gender neutrality and, therefore, ignore the impact of actual gendered choices. Another example is provided by the teaching of crafts in Finnish schools. In the curriculum, the subject of crafts includes technical and textile crafts. While there is no hint that the first is a subject for boys and the second for girls, neither are there any instructions for schools to avoid gender segregation. The result is that in the majority of schools children have to already choose one of these options at primary school, and the choice is strictly gender divided (Kokko, 2009.) The gender-neutral curriculum becomes gendered when it confronts gendered structures and cultures, and the self-evident expectations of children and parents concerning what is expected, possible or to be avoided.

An example of the essentialist understanding of gender difference is provided by the teacher educator in the first extract, who regarded it as natural for boys to act disruptively. An example from the legislation is found in the Act on Comprehensive

Education: “In teaching, special attention should be given to the different needs and the differences of growth and development of girls and boys” (Act 1435/2001, §4; translation EL). This sentence is based on the assumption that girls and boys belong to two groups that differ from each other. However, it remains unclear what the different needs and differences between these groups actually are.

One recurrent effect of the difficulty of the concepts surrounding gender equality is that teachers or teacher educators who in one breath suggest that gender is not a problem in schools might in the next express a general worry about the poor achievement of boys. Over the last few decades, this concern about boys’ lack of achievement has travelled from one country to the next (e.g. Epstein et al., 1998; Francis, 2000; Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2008). In Finland this concern was emphasised after the first PISA results. As one respected authority in the field of education put it in an interview in the country’s leading national newspaper in 2002: “The reading test in PISA suggests that boys lag behind girls”. The “world record” results for Finnish children, boys and girls, were overshadowed by the worry of a gender gap, which was widest in Finland.

Impact of the gendered history of teacher education

I have elsewhere discussed the “boy question” in education (Lahelma, 2005; Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2008) and there is a wide discussion internationally of this theme (see e.g. Francis & Skelton 2005). Therefore, I do not return to this theme here. However, a topic that is regularly expressed when the worry concerning boys is expressed is that of the lack of male teachers (e.g. Martino, Lिंगgaard & Mills, 2004; Skelton, 2009). I will reflect on this issue from a historical perspective. Traditions in teacher education change slowly, even if the structures change (Sunnari, 1997; see Kvalbein, 2003; Erixon Arreman & Weiner, 2007 concerning other Nordic countries).

The first primary teacher seminar that opened its doors in Finland in 1863 was a sign of the progressive political thought of the period. It was opened to both sexes, although there were various differences in objectives, educational tasks and curricula for male and female students. This co-educational seminar remained the exception as the next seminars for primary teacher education were established separately for men and women. This tradition of gender-segregated teacher education changed when the task of teacher education was transferred to the universities in 1971, and co-educational teacher training institutions were established (Sunnari, 1997, 2003). However, there was a quota for male entrants to teacher education of about 40 percent. This meant that male candidates with lower credits than their female peers were accepted into these highly sought-after master’s level programmes. The quotas were abolished because the Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986) judged them to be unlawful. Whilst male quotas were not generally regarded as problematic for gender equality, their abolition provoked some media discussion and caused displeasure among some professionals because of the anticipated feminisation of the whole profession and the

potential disadvantages for teachers and pupils, especially for boys, and the effect on the prestige of the profession (e.g. Lahelma et al., 2000).

These worries were generally shared by the teachers whose opinions we sought in questionnaires and interviews in the late 1990s. We analysed the arguments used in this discussion and suggested that they were based on inconsistent and stereotypical assumptions of gender differences (Lahelma et al., 2000). Moreover, young people did not seem to share this worry; the fact that the teaching profession is female dominated is more a problem for adults than for boys or girls (Lahelma, 2000). As an adult problem, it should be regarded, in more general terms, in relation to gender segregation in professional life. It should be added that in Finland the feminisation of the teaching profession has not been as marked as in some other countries. Men still account for almost 30 percent of primary school teachers, and the majority of head teachers.

One of the obvious effects of the presupposed “need” for more male teachers is that men are receiving hidden support at every step towards and within the teaching profession. Female teachers and student teachers – even if they agree with the desire for more male teachers (c.f. Gannerud, 2009) – often have the feeling that their male colleagues are favoured in the application process for teacher education, during teacher education, when applying for jobs and in the staff rooms (Sunnari, 1997; Lahelma et al., 2000; Vidén & Naskali, 2000; Lehtonen, 2011).

Teacher education has changed dramatically since the first seminar, but Vappu Sunnari (1997, 2003) suggests similarities remained in gendered processes between the first seminar and the new university teacher education that was organised in the 1970s. Although at that time teacher education became gender-neutral and co-educational, this formal neutrality did not eliminate gendered processes in, for example, student teachers’ choices of study subjects or their tendencies when reacting to girls and boys as pupils (Sunnari, 2003: 223-224). Further, as I have suggested earlier in this paper, there is no evidence of major changes occurring after 1970 either (also see Vidén & Naskali, 2010; Lehtonen, 2011).

Whilst the female majority regularly features as the gendered pattern in teacher education discussed in the media, the gendered processes within teacher education processes remain unchanged and are hardly called into question. I suggested above that the difficulties in the concepts surrounding gender and gender equality were one reason for this. Now I will move on to the second reason: the difficulties in challenging gendered assumptions.

The difficulty of challenging gendered assumptions in teacher education

When student teachers learn new practices for teaching mathematics, for example, this knowledge provides them with greater self-confidence concerning their future tasks as teachers. This knowledge does not touch them as individual women or men. In contrast, the deconstruction of unquestioned expectations that are embedded in cultural

understandings of gender does not necessarily increase self-confidence, and might even increase a person's sense of insecurity. Gender awareness goes beyond your skin. Whenever student teachers start to see how gender difference and gendered inequalities are built into the practices and processes of teaching and learning, they start to see the same patterns in society – and in their own lives and partnerships. In their study diaries, students have described how their whole world view has changed. One student described her astonishment when she started to wonder, for the first time, why the boys' clothes were on blue hooks and girls' clothes on red hooks at her daughter's kindergarten.

Discussing gender issues is also challenging because it introduces the kind of critical theory that is so often avoided in teacher education, as Marie Carlson (2008) suggested in a study concerning the presentation of gender, class and ethnicity in Swedish teacher education. Changing one's whole world view is extremely challenging, and university teachers and teacher educators are confronted by students' resistance and opposition, and arguments about a lack of objectivity when the results of gender studies are presented. In a study conducted at the University of Lapland in the context of TASUKO, a male teacher had this to say on his experience of a gender course he had attended during his initial teacher education: "It is difficult to find an objective point of view in gender aware teaching. The issue easily gets politicized, and it turns into a liturgy preached from one perspective" (Vidén & Naskali, 2010: 45). A female teacher educator suggested:

When discussing these themes, it is kind of experienced – the boys experience it – as if it is directed towards them as individuals, and that, kind of, men are being evaluated and criticized, and this is just the traditional, classical expectation. [Sometimes] even girls have stood up [...] to strongly defend men (Vidén & Naskali, 2010: 57).

I have had similar experiences. Even if negative comments come more often from the few men present, rather than from the female students who comprise the majority in the lectures, sometimes women are strong supporters of male privileges. During one of my recent lectures on the sociology of education, a heated debate began in which several women suggested that mothers should stay home with young children. A male student argued that women are marginalised in the labour market because of motherhood – and even because of the possibility of motherhood.

Janet Holland and her colleagues have used the concept "the male in the head" (Holland et al., 1999). This concept is used for analysing situations in which young women agree to practice unsafe sex because they want to please their male partners. I have found the concept useful in other contexts too. I used it, for example, when analysing the path to gendered adulthood of a young, high achieving, working class woman called Salla (Lahelma, forthcoming). In an ethnographically grounded life historical study (e.g. Gordon & Lahelma, 2004), I "walked alongside" (McLeod & Thomson, 2009) her for more than 10 years, interviewing her at the ages of 13, 18, 20 and 24. Salla had noticed that boys' behaviour is easily forgiven and that they sometimes received better grades than they deserved at school, and that university teachers did not always look

on young women with respect. Nevertheless, in each interview she repeated, in one way or another, discourses that suggest that Finland is a country with gender equality.

Now there is so much talk about equality. There are also some studies [that suggest], that there is not equality in Finland either, kind of that the woman takes care of all the housework. I don't know, maybe equality should not be measured in housework[...] I don't care if the man is not a kind of mother-figure, or a kind of (...) soft, gentle man, as long as the human value is equal (*Salla, 18 years old*).

She also suggested that school is unfair towards boys who “are not really allowed to be themselves (...), that they, too, should be nice and peaceful, and sit there at their desks” (*Salla, 20 years old*). In the same interviews, she also expressed her wish to get a male partner and her worries that she would remain single forever. When I reflected on these ambivalences, I suggested that heterosexual desire was also important in the ways that the gendered imbalance was accepted and taken for granted in her plans, dreams and actual life trajectories in this country of genderless gender (*Lahelma, forthcoming*.)

Women in teacher education are at the age when the search for a heterosexual partnership is often acute. Women who strongly support gender equality, or who are even feminists, may not be the most desirable partners for all men. *Vidén and Naskali (2010)* have made similar suggestions, drawing on their interviews with teacher educators, teachers and students. Sometimes my students describe having had arguments with their male partners after becoming excited and trying to share with them the new world view that has opened up with feminist understandings.

The situation for teacher educators or other university teachers who try to keep gender awareness on the agenda is not any easier because they are bound to hear negative comments from their colleagues as well. When the question of gender is discussed, power relations are always involved, and challenging the current gender order does not go down well with everybody. I remember my own feelings when I started to work at the Commission of Gender Equality. The attitudes of several of my colleagues towards me changed so that, whenever I sat at the same table with them during a coffee break, I was asked provocative questions and was the target of jokes and intimidation that I was expected to laugh at (c.f. *Brunila, 2009*).

Conclusion: Difficult but doable ³

In this article, I have discussed the difficulties and controversy surrounding the effort to include practices that support gender awareness in teacher education. I suggested that one of the main problems was that some teachers and teacher educators regard Finland as a country in which gender equality has been achieved. I analysed this assumption from the perspective of “genderless gender” (*Lempiäinen, 2000; Ronkainen, 2001*) and suggested two general understandings of gender equality in relation to education: that gender neutrality is believed to promote equality, or that it is argued that gender

equality means paying attention to essentially understood gender differences. I further elaborated this problem with a short description of the gendered history of Finnish teacher education. Then I moved on to the second difficulty in gender-aware teacher education: the deep involvement of gender issues in personal lives and subjectivities. I suggested that challenging hegemonic masculinities and gender inequalities in schools and society might be especially difficult for young women who are actively in search of a heterosexual partnership – women who have “the male in the head” (Holland et al., 1999). I also suggested that addressing critical theoretical perspectives such as gender theories is difficult in teacher education for more general reasons (c.f. Carlson, 2008).

Finally, in order to suggest a somewhat more optimistic outcome, I will describe some of the results of the TASUKO project. Even though I have described the difficulties of including the perspective of gender awareness in teacher training, I would also like to emphasise its possibilities. The feeling of happiness when students’ awareness is awakened is a terrific experience, as the teacher educators suggest in the study of Vidén and Naskali (2010). I remember having this experience already during the first courses of gender equality that were organised in the context of the Commission of Gender Equality in Education in the 1980s. There were always teachers and students who were reluctant to participate, but after the courses the general feeling was that this kind of knowledge should be obligatory for every teacher (Lahelma & Ruotonen 1992). The same results are found again and again, in optional as well as compulsory courses for gender studies, in the courses and seminars that are organised within the context of TASUKO, and in the study of Vidén and Naskali (2010; also see Lehtonen 2011).

In the context of TASUKO, we have reviewed the current curricula for teacher education programmes, started some research projects and organised courses on gender studies in teacher education. Its wide network helps disseminate good ideas on what are the necessary course contents needed for each student teacher, and on what literature is recommended for those who plan to do their master’s thesis on this area and how to negotiate with those colleagues who are hostile towards the project. Although this is another short-term project, we now have an active network in every teacher education institution. We now look forward to more solid progress towards gender-aware teacher education – with the further aim of gender-aware schools.

To conclude, it is important to emphasise that gender awareness – or awareness of ethnicity or sexuality – is not a personal characteristic that teachers do or do not have. Theoretical knowledge of gender in relation to other dimensions of differences is needed, as is practical pedagogical training. Moreover, knowledge of gendered injustices also sensitises teachers to inequalities based on other differences.

Elina Lahelma is a Professor of Education at the University of Helsinki. She has conducted ethnographic research in schools and life historical studies on young people’s transitions. Currently she is the responsible leader in a research project of the Academy of Finland on citizenship, agency and difference in upper secondary education. She has also been leading a national project on gender awareness in teacher education.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The 'Act on Equality between Women and Men' of 1986 has stated that its purpose was to "prevent discrimination based on gender, to promote equality between women and men, and thus to improve the status of women, particularly in working life." (§1). The Act also delineates concrete responsibilities for educational authorities: "Authorities, educational institutions and other bodies providing education and training shall ensure that women and men have equal opportunities for education, training and professional development, and that teaching, research and instructional material support attainment of the objectives of this Act." (§5) (Act on Equality between Women and Men', 609/1986, with amendments 232/2005. (<http://www.tasa-arvo.fi/en/publications/act2005>))
- ² <http://wiki.helsinki.fi/display/tasuko>
- ³ This title is taken from a report in which Finnish equality projects were analysed (Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen, 2005).

