

Issue topic: International perspectives on social education

INSPIRATION

Inspiration

Project: Enhancing gender sensitivity of teacher trainee students in Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary

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When talking about diversity we should not forget about gender. Gender represents a main axis of social differentiation and systematic discrimination. Acknowledging gender diversity and having an awareness of gender inequalities in education is therefore important, so that educators can create a learning environment in which everyone is equal and able to benefit from their learning capacities.

We consider education to be one of the most important subsystems of society, in which social inequalities can simultaneously be alleviated, reproduced, and even exacerbated. For education to fulfil its responsibility to reduce social inequalities, including gender-based inequalities, schools should teach critical thinking and encourage the questioning of social norms and forms of injustice.

And it is the critical thinking of teachers and their ability to question social norms that we wanted to improve within the project Towards Gender Sensitive Education. More precisely, the project, which was implemented by five organizations - Association for the Development of Feminist Education and Teaching Models EfEU (Austria), Gender Information Center NORA, Masaryk University (the Czech Republic), and Eötvös Loránd University and the Hungarian Women's Lobby (Hungary) - was designed to enhance current and future teachers' gender sensitivity, including knowledge, attitudes, self-reflection and its application in their teaching practice.

We piloted courses on gender-sensitive education; five courses were realized for in-service teachers and five courses were held for teacher trainee students at Masaryk University, University of Vienna and Eötvös Loránd University. All the courses were delivered in line with the principles of feminist pedagogy (a form of transformative pedagogy that focuses on power relations and gender equality), used drama techniques as an experiential way of learning, and took participants' experiences as an important asset for the courses.

At our courses we worked with some of the personal stories participants shared. It became clear very soon to participants during our work that they all had encountered gender-based distinctions, discrimination, or even violence during their school career. Still, even though gender inequalities are so much ingrained in the daily lives of schools and - as our desk research (cf. [Rédei & Sáfrány, 2019](#)) revealed - in education policies, curricula and teaching materials, we found that there is very little training offered to teacher trainee students and in-service teachers about gender relations in education in our countries. Both our research and education activities have confirmed that at the current level of gender-sensitivity, schools and educational policy-making in general are unable to properly address gender inequalities, respond to social changes regarding gender, educate young people for equality and deal with discrimination. We greatly appreciate school-based, teacher education-level and policy-level initiatives to tackle gender inequalities in education, but much more needs to be done and more systematically in order to enhance gender equality in society.

Our contribution to the current situation is concentrated in a handbook, to be published by the end of April 2020, which introduces the best practice of our courses ([Outputs, 2020](#)). It is a compilation of more than fifty activities that can be used by teacher trainers to enhance gender-sensitivity of both in-service teachers and teacher trainee students. In the handbook, we provide ideas for an education that contributes to a safer society for all - sometimes by making collective gender and sexual identifications unsettled. The international cooperation of experts for gender-sensitive education from three different countries and universities has been instructive and challenging: different (political) positions

in dealing with gender and discrimination have inspired us to develop a common product that is applicable and helpful for all.

During the more than three years of preparation for and realization of the project we have encountered discourses against gender equality, gender studies and the freedom of gender expression. They are present in all three partner countries but in Hungary they are also part of governmental education policies (cf. Rédai & Sáfrány, 2019). The anti-gender movement claims that they are acting in protection of “the natural order of things”, “nation”, “family” and “traditional values”, but in fact, its protagonists are afraid of the deconstruction of the familiar, fixed and hierarchical social organisation along gender lines, and they long for security and clear boundaries.

How can education, which is always also political education, encourage us to go our own ways beyond rigid norms and authoritarian desires? Education must focus on the voices and concerns of excluded and marginalised groups. Sensitization for discrimination – particularly on grounds of gender and sexual orientation – therefore is a major topic for education.

We generally assume that the political sphere is not in opposition to the private sphere, and how and where the private sphere is constructed is a political process. It is then also a political question how people working in education and training themselves are entangled in social power relations. In education the political can be negotiated. It is not only about teaching factual knowledge. Rather, experiences can be viewed and classified in a new way, the scope for action can be expanded and new references to the self, to others and to the world can be developed that go beyond the existing.

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