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"The day the gender system collapses will be a good day": Students' memories of being girls or boys

This article draws on research carried out at the School of Education, University of Iceland. First year teacher students were asked to document their first memories of being girls or boys. The findings show that 82 out of 126 students' anecdotes involved communications with school personnel in pre-, elementary, and lower secondary schools. The narratives indicate that the students went from believing that they were free to adopt any type of gender identity they chose, to accepting that the choice was limited to the type which was seen as acceptable by the dominant discourse for their gender. This process was characterized first by optimism, second by disappointment, and finally, after a long lasting struggle against gender cues and gendered messages, by resignation. The authors contend that teacher educators could benefit from exploring students' narratives in their efforts to remediate this situation.

Keywords: gender, students memories, hegemonic masculinity, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

This article draws on recent research, carried out in the School of Education, University of Iceland. The main aim is to examine the impact of significant others on students' gender identification process and to explore to what degree their involvement supported children's gender identity formation. A second aim is to highlight how students' own experience of being gendered subjects as girls and boys can be used by teacher educators to address gender equality in the teacher education programme. The research is prompted by our experience of teaching and researching at the School of Education, after a long career as teachers and leaders at all school levels. We have learned that gender is often absent from school curricula and practice as well as in the current teacher education programme (Bjarnadóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Guðbjörnsdóttir & Lárusdóttir, 2012; Magnúsdóttir, 2005; Þórðardóttir, 2012).

Our epistemological stance is that gender identity is socially constructed within the various life arenas, such as family, school and peers, in a complex context of interrelationships between gender, identity and culture.

For teacher educators and their students, it is particularly important to be aware of, and acknowledge, the impact gender has on the lives of young people. Recent research (Guðbjörnsdóttir & Lárusdóttir, 2012), however, indicates that while Icelandic teacher educators at the School of Education, University of Iceland, see themselves as equality oriented, they have a tendency to either ignore or resist the issue of gender equality or focus on gender as an essentialist concept in their teaching practice. The same seems to apply to the wider context of teacher education. For instance, Weiner (2000, 2002, 2006) found that gender equality and gender education have been neglected in teacher education in Europe despite flourishing research in the area for the last three decades. Despite international research-based literature on gender equality, as well as supportive legislation in Iceland, this gap remains wide (Einarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2011; Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2009). Drawing on information from teacher education and teacher education students, as described above, the following research questions are addressed:

How do student teachers' narratives reflect their experiences of embodying and negotiating their gender construction in childhood?

How can teacher educators use students' narratives about being girls and boys to address gender equality in the teacher education programme?

BACKGROUND

The present Icelandic legal framework on equality education provides a supportive environment for equality efforts at all school levels. At the same time, it places new requirements on schools to address equality in both school curricula and practice (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012).

Gender and equality education in Icelandic legislature

In 2008, new requirements for equality education for all school levels, except the tertiary level, were mandated by law; for instance equality education was stipulated as a subject in the Compulsory School Act of 2008 § 25 (Compulsory School Act No. 91/2008). In a revised *Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014), equality education is listed as part of social studies, along with eight other subjects. In addition, equality is categorised as one of six pillars of education for all school levels in the curriculum guide.

The first gender equality law was passed in 1976 and confirmed in the newest version 2008. § 23 states:

Gender mainstreaming shall be observed in all policy-making and planning in the work of the schools and educational institutions, including sports and leisure activities. At all levels of the educational system, pupils shall receive instruction on gender equality issues in which emphasis shall be placed, amongst other things, on preparing both sexes to play an equal

role in society, including work and family life. (Act on the Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men No. 10/2008)

The legal framework in Iceland, moreover, stipulates that teachers at all school levels play a critical role in promoting equality. Therefore, the statutes place a particular responsibility on Icelandic teacher educators who are now held accountable for addressing gender equality and equal rights in their practice. These laws raise pressing questions about the ways in which the University of Iceland will prepare its teacher education students for teaching "equal rights affairs" as a subject.

Research indicates that the teacher education programme at the University of Iceland does not prepare students for meeting the requirements of paragraph 23 (Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men No. 10/2008; see also Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2009; Þórðardóttir, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). Currently students in the School of Education can only choose between a few optional courses on gender and education. Apparently the lack of courses in gender and education can lead to difficulties in fulfilling the equality policy. However, it needs to be noted that a new optional course, Gender equality in schools, will be offered in autumn 2016 in the Faculty of Teacher Education. The course focuses on legislation relating to gender equality and gender, as well as key concepts in gender studies.

Constructing gender identities

Femininities and masculinities are embedded in person to-person relationships; that is, with children, teachers, parents, and in institutions such as schools, which refer to gender identities as "man" and "woman" and stipulate what is seen as an appropriate behaviour for them (Sinclair, 1999).

However, as Paechter (2006) suggests, this would not be a complicated task, except for the fact that we do not have a clear picture of what men and boys, or women and girls do. For this reason, people end up attributing hegemonic masculinity to the most aspiring lifestyle, both in dominant male groups and in particular social circumstances such as schools.

Similarly, other theorists address a multiple identity girls and boys can empathise with. However, as Connell (1995) points out, gender identities are usually defined with reference to hegemonic masculinity which she defines as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the accepted answer to the problem of the legitimated patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken as guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (Connell, 1995, p. 77)"

While the concepts masculinity and femininity contribute to the understanding of gender dynamics, they should not be used for fixed character types (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) but rather, as Paechter (2003) points out, as a way to negotiate masculinity and femininity in various contexts. It follows, therefore, that varying elements comprise what is labelled "hegemonic masculinity" at any given time. The concept is mainly meant to shed light on how all males are required to position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity, but it also describes the legitimated global subordination

of women to men (Connell & Messerscmidt, 2005). Furthermore, the concept is seen as particularly useful to explain how some boys and most girls are excluded from play and peer-group activities (Hearn et al., 2012).

Fluid gender identity

Children enjoy a range of ways in which they can construct and enact their masculinity and femininity, at least theoretically. Most children develop a clear sense of gender identity, of being either "a boy" or "a girl" at a young age. These ideas are further confirmed when children begin their early childhood education. Änggård (2005) found that stories of pre-school children reflect the ideas of their teachers who expect boys and girls to choose different themes for their storybooks. Änggård (2005) contends that because children learn early on that the "world is divided into men and women ... they have to choose the 'right' gender to be accepted" (p. 551). Therefore, it is not surprising that they use the most characteristic traits when they position themselves.

Änggård´s (2005) findings, referred to above, highlight the crucial role of educators in creating an open and accepting environment in which children can develop and construct their gender identity. It is particularly important for them to be critical of discourses that emphasise hegemonic gender identities and reflect stereotypical views on men and women. In this context it may be wise to remember that neither girls nor boys are "naturally 'tough' and 'hard' but have to work hard at constructing themselves as this ..." (Pattman, Frosh, & Phoenix, 2005, p. 558). Pattman et al. found that boys who were loud, funny, and misogynist in some group interviews were like different people when interviewed individually, where they were "much quieter and more serious and spoke about close relations" (p. 561). The varying behaviour of Pattman's et al. interviewees suggests that they gave in to peer pressure and behaved in ways they believed to be accepted within the group rather than in ways they would have wished to behave were they alone. This needs to be duly noted because there may not be many men who "actually meet the normative standards" of masculinity (Connell, 1995, p. 79).

The gender system: Cultural messages and gender cues

In theory, girls and boys can choose between different subject positions within the "competing discourses of gender that are available to them" (Davies & Robinson, 2013, p 256). In reality, however, as highlighted above, children are under pressure from various agents in their environment to conform to stereotypical ideas about what is seen as appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. These agents are inherent in a gender system, a social system of traditions, rules and dominance which exists at all levels of society. The system puts pressure on women and men to stay within domains seen to fit their gender (Bjarnadóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2011). Therefore, while ideas about femininities and masculinities change over time, there are few, if any, indications that basic ideas about the different nature of men and women are disappearing (Ríkarðsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2012). Similarly, the gender system where men always seem to be more powerful than women prevails (Bjarnadóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999).

In this system, children search for cultural messages and gender cues to guide them as they choose which activity they should or should not take part in and who can play with whom. These gender cues, from agents at all levels of society, help them to interpret what they see and hear and to develop personal standards for behaviour (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Moreover, "many elements of gendered culture and experiences" are hidden in a complex web of communications in everyday life (Ríkarðsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, and in accordance with the gender system, consciously or not, boys and girls continue to be encouraged and praised for highly divergent patterns of behaviour as a way of guiding them towards the accepted way of behaving. Many girls are praised for stereotypically feminine characteristics, such as being conscientious, responsible, obedient, and helpful, while boys are more often allowed to break the rules of conversations, to talk loudly and dominate and to cut in and speak without raising their hands (Magnúsdóttir, 2005, p. 163). Þórðardóttir (2012) came to similar conclusions for 4 to 5-year-old pre-school children in Reykjavik.

Court (1994, p. 5) has pointed out "how cultural ideas, developed within Western societies about appropriate ways to "be" feminine or masculine, are associated with beliefs about the kind of work men and women are most suited to". In her view, these beliefs have been particularly significant in the context of education where specific experiences are found to have shaped the way children see themselves as adults. Further research (Magnúsdóttir, 2005) has shown that young male students position themselves within various masculine discourses. Magnúsdóttir (2005) found that boys' positions in the power hierarchy of their peer group are predominantly determined on the basis of their athletic prestige, their popularity with the opposite sex, and their courage. Such perceptions can only be formed through the cultural messages they receive and are reinforced by the gender system. Similarly, Þórðardóttir (2012) found that 4 to 5 year old pre-school children seem to construct knowledge of femininity and masculinity by comparing real life experience to the content of popular culture. In the comparison they make meanings of femininity and masculinity where superhero masculinity related to superhero powers, sits at the top.

Here schools at all levels have an important role to play. If educators intend to honour the gender equality law in their practice (Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men No. 10/2008) and the *Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools* (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014), they need to acknowledge the existence of the gender system and its impact on gender.

METHODOLOGY

The form of qualitative research chosen for this research can be seen as a story-telling case study (Bassey, 2007). The case study method is productive when the research topic relates to developing an in-depth understanding of a case or a bounded system, for example "an activity, event, process … based on extensive data collection" (Creswell, 2002, p. 485). In this study the boundaries of the anecdotes are defined as a single case of students' memories of childhood construction of gender identity. The case reflects the

participants' culture and experience, and describes relevant facts arranged in a logical order by the narrators (Guðmundsdóttir, 1996).

During autumn semester 2012 a project aimed at integrating gender issues into the teacher education programme resulted in a "one-hour talk" given to first year teacher education students. In the lecture, the first author introduced the main concepts of gender studies, followed by a group discussion about their first memories of being boys or girls. Afterwards the students wrote a short account of their memories.

Research design and data collection

Following the one-hour talk described above, the students were asked to write 300–450 words individually, about their first gendered memories and place them on the course website. They were told that this was not a compulsory assignment and they were free to submit it or not. They were asked to sign their narratives if they allowed their stories to be used as research data and all the students who submitted a narrative agreed. Most of the students are in their early twenties. Altogether 126 stories were written by 92 female and 11 male compulsory school teacher students and 21 female and 2 male preschool teacher students.

Memories relating to school organization, peer pressure and ongoing gendered, cultural messages, together with assumptions about various capacities of boys and girls were highlighted. This method of data collection acknowledges that adults can usually recall specific events from the time between 6–20 years of age, by using cue words (Janssen, Rubin, & St. Jacques, 2011), like those discussed in the one-hour talk. It is acknowledged that memory is not a restoring of original incidents or identity, but a process of reconstructing the past and present. Furthermore, identity in personal stories told in adolescence and young adulthood is raised on recalled events using sophisticated meaning-making strategies (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Updating and revisions are general features of autobiographical memory and therefore the data is expected to be influenced both by the ways the childhood memories are recalled and how the participants conceptualized gender as young adults. To a certain extent, the interpretation of the anecdotes is limited by the above concerns.

Students' narratives were transcribed in Icelandic. At later stages, the authors translated them into English. While every measure was taken to be faithful to the original Icelandic texts, some nuances and even aspects of meanings could be lost in translation. This will undoubtedly have had an impact on the translation of the interview transcripts and the reader is kindly asked to bear this in mind.

Analysis and interpretation

The data was coded and organised using the software Nvivo 2. Afterwards the texts were critically revised to develop themes, threads, and concepts resonated in the data for further interpretation (Mason, 2002). According to Pasupati, Mansour, and Brubaker (2007) personal perspectives in anecdotes of what occurred in certain situations provide a link between old experience and self-awareness. The data analysis is based upon the

process through which people make meanings out of memories and how these reflect the participants' construction of gender identity. For example, memories of being interested in dolls and other affairs seen as related to being a girl, were interpreted as a construction of femininity, whereas being interested in chasing games and similar activities seen as related to being a boy, was interpreted as a way of constructing masculinity.

Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that student identities remained anonymous their names were changed and the citations chosen carefully. While the students were encouraged to share their first experience of being girls and boys, they were told that doing so was not compulsory and the task would not be graded. They were, moreover, asked to sign with their names if they consented to their stories being used as research data.

FINDINGS

All except nine of the 126 students' narratives are fraught with descriptions of hindrances they faced while acting against essentialist, gendered expectations. The findings indicate that binary gender stereotypes are both tenacious and powerful in these childhood memories. Students' attempts to challenge gender norms were met with negative responses. Some of the students used the concept "double exclusion", referring to memories of how they were excluded twice if they did not fit into the dominant gender images of their time. These students felt they were being rejected in the beginning because of their gender and again because of acting against gendered traditions. Other students described their feelings of not belonging and feeling as if "something was wrong with me".

These memories of confrontations with the gender system were divided into the following three school categories:

- Recalls from pre-schools (year 1–6) in 22 (17%) stories, emphasised discovering genital differences along with gendered appearance, play, and behaviour.
- Recalls from elementary schools (year 6–12) in 42 (33%) accounts mainly derived from their first years, either related to school structures, specific teachers, or peer-groups.
- Recalls from lower secondary school (year 13–15) and the two first years of upper secondary schools (year 16–18) appeared in 18 (14%) narratives, describing experiences of puberty and peer pressure.

It should be noted that 60 (47%) of the narratives elaborated on experiences from sport halls either related to sport lessons or leisure time sport. Furthermore, recalls from family and homes were documented in 44 (35%) of the narratives but here the focus is on schools.

Social pressure in schools was a common thread in the three categories above, where students described their memories of embodying and negotiating femininity and masculinity in childhood. This appeared in the data as three themes: Social pressure on gender

behaviour; school culture and construction of gender identity; and sport activity, involving peers, teachers, and family pressure

Social pressure on gender behaviour

Social pressure appears as a common feature in the adjustments of these students to "appropriate" girlhood and boyhood. Most of the students' memories, or 117 out of 126, reported how they were either forced to act or directed to the "right" behaviour according to their gender and their personal longings were suppressed. One mature male student described an incident from 25th October 1975 when he was nine years old, and his mother participated in a women's demonstration against gender discrimination. He said:

> In the papers were photos of thousands of women carrying banners with texts like "I'm a woman but I'm also a human being". On television the opera singer Guðrún Á. Símonardóttir appeared with heavy make-up, dressed in a heavy mink fur, conducting an empowering singing at the meeting. That day my attitude towards women changed forever. This new word, equality, sneaked into my mind, for the long haul.

The above quotation was chosen both in order to give the more mature students a voice and because it signifies the importance of knowledge for understanding gender discrimination.

Three males mentioned how they later on learned that gender discrimination is not acceptable. One of them said: "The day the gender system collapses will be a good day". On the other hand, some female students discussed the importance of bringing the discourse of the gender system to the attention of parents; that is, in training boys to be caring and girls to be independent.

In general, the female students described their submission as "losing the battle". This, for instance, is how Joanna, one of the students, described her situation. She said: "I was 'stubborn' and decided that I was just going to be myself and nothing else, but I got tired and when I was about ten years old, I gave up."

The students' gendered experiences stemmed from various directions, but included similar conflicts between feelings, longings and expectations, like Axel wrote:

> I always saw the girls as being a completely separate group from the boys. I didn't like them, and avoided playing much with them, except of course when no one could see me. You didn't want to lose the respect of the boys.

Axel felt himself forced to follow preconceived gender roles when he had to choose between liking girls and gaining boys' respect. His response was to conceal playing with girls, which made him feel as if it was the wrong behaviour.

School culture and construction of gender identity

School culture, teachers, and peer groups played a significant role in the students' first memories of being girls or boys. The students were exposed to pressure from teachers and peers to adapt to the gendered norms. In preschools this was mainly related to the organization of gender separation, colours and ways of dressing. In her memories from preschool, Liz wrote:

> While we stood in the line we were taught to pose in a girlish way and the boys in a guys' way. Pretty often you were told to behave like a girl, especially if there was fun, but the boys could have fun, just because they were boys.

Clark also had his first gendered memories from pre-school where he learned that boys should dress in blue and girls in pink. Even so, he says: "It was easier for girls wearing blue than for boys wearing pink." He also learned gendered play patterns. Boys played football but girls played in sandpits and family corners.

Anne described the unwritten rules in her elementary school:

> It was obvious that there were different demands for boys and girls. The boys were allowed to make show-business and noise but the girls were expected to be nicely dressed, quiet and maidenly. On the other hand, the boys could do everything they wanted and this just got worse when we grew older.

Eleven male students shared memories of avoiding toys and activities related to girls because they would be teased, mobbed, or excluded from the peer group if they did not. Edward put it this way:

> When I started elementary school I quickly discovered that I needed to change my behaviour if I was going to fit in. I learned right away not to play with the girls, because both the girls and the other boys would let me know when I did something that wasn't boyish, which therefore wasn't appropriate behaviour. If I didn't understand the gender rules correctly there was constant danger, danger of being bullied, right from the very beginning of school.

Some of the students described how their teacher directly worked against them if they challenged the gender stereotypes. Beatrice said she had a strong memory from attending physics class during 10th grade:

> I remember clearly when I was in 10th grade; we had an elective and could choose either a history class or a physics class. I chose physics because it appealed to me more. Once, when I asked for help and didn't understand a problem, the teacher said to me that physics was rather for boys than girls, and then left without helping me. There were a few other comments like this made about girls. I dropped the physics class at the end of the year and signed up for the history class, because I didn't get enough support from the teacher.

Other stories captured how schoolchildren were divided into girls' and boys' groups, such as in lessons like natural science, home economics, mathematics, and languages. Several girls described their memories of disappointments when learning that boys got more opportunities to do experiments than girls, like in physics, and how they were let down, learning that the boys were getting away with not cleaning, especially in home economics lessons. On the other hand, Bill described how he avoided the danger of being rejected by the boys, by never asking girls to join his football team.

The gender differences in lower secondary schools and in the beginning of the upper secondary level are more related to puberty and sexuality like Bridget said:

> In lower secondary schools, you start to look at the guys, trying to distinguish yourself from them, by dressing differently and exaggerating your femininity.

Eight narratives talk about male friends whose interests were stigmatised as feminine. The stigmas might be interpreted as hegemonic heteronormative structures, like the following example from Eve indicates:

> Not once during my childhood was I teased or humiliated, but my best friend had very few days where he wasn't teased. He enjoyed the same games and things as I, but they were humiliating for him and not for me. Life was very difficult for him. He was called names on a daily basis, like faggot, sissy, pussy, and other horrible things.

The above example involves both heteronormativity and the idolization of hegemonic masculinity. The subordination of the girl is accepted, possibly because it is categorised as normative. The 'feminization' of the boy creates strong negative responses which reflect the importance of hegemonic masculinity for boys' gender construction. Furthermore, the boy's actions are met with antipathy, reflecting both homophobia and heteronormativity.

Sport activities and construction of gender identity

Gendered peer pressure from friends, schoolmates and coaches takes on a more determined form in the sport halls. Jacky wrote:

> During sports classes the boys got to be the leaders. They started by picking teams. The way it worked was that two boys were captains, one for each team, and then of course they picked the remaining boys for their teams, and only chose girls at the end. The teachers never questioned this arrangement.

Rose wrote:

> I liked playing football but that didn't last for long. Every now and again my brothers would come to me, you know, just to remind me that many girls who train football are lesbians or not very ladylike. Some of my classmates in 4th and 5th grade told me that football wasn't good for my thighs, that I'd get fat thighs from playing football. Eventually I stopped playing.

The above examples reflect how girls were systematically excluded from participating in football by referring to their lack of abilities, and heteronormativity and homophobia are clear in Rose's story. The sexism is conspicuous and becomes even clearer in gymnastics. Emma wrote:

> That was the year I started training gymnastics, and the groups were separated by gender. What I then noticed was that the boy groups and girl groups were not necessarily doing the same exercises. The girl groups spent a lot of time on flexibility and aesthetic movements, while the boys did not focus much on that. The girls had to do all kinds of things that showed how flexible they were, while the boys did things that were based on their strength.

There were, however, a few exceptions from this where students did not report having had to challenge gendered expectations in relation to the formation of their gender identity.

Nine students did not recall any problems in relation to the construction of gender identity in their childhood. These nine students expressed essentialist views on gender,

which explains why this minority did not feel the same pressure to act in a way deemed proper for their gender. Seven females were happy playing with dolls or playing princesses and loved to wear dresses, make-up and other feminine things. For example, Gwen wrote:

> I've always been a completely girly girl, from when I was just a little kid. I loved my Barbie dolls and Hello Kitty stickers. I only played with dolls and Barbies, and flat out refused to play with cars. I was always wearing dresses, with bows in my curls, but when I was eight years old my mother cut my hair short and I never forgave her for giving me a boy haircut.

Two boys did not mind following the gendered cultural messages and felt they were natural.

Bert wrote:

> For as long as I can remember I played with cars and toy soldiers. I could rarely play with anything other than toy soldiers and cars, so you could say that early on I had started playing with traditional boy toys.

These nine students believed that gender equality had already been achieved, arguing that nowadays people could choose their appearance and activities independent of their gender.

Summary

The above examples are descriptive of the content of the students' anecdotes. The messages are clear; 94% of the students experienced gender discrimination in their childhood. The girls received clear cultural messages of what they were not allowed to do; that is, not being too active but rather to play a passive role. The boys' descriptions are more about what they should do; that is, be good at football, not follow all the rules given at school and to avoid girlish things. Girls were urged to be good-looking, nice, and nurturing while the boys were encouraged to be independent and active. Boys were allowed to circumvent rules and were supposed to be better than girls at physics. Some boys felt threatened into avoiding everything that could be related to femininity and most of the girls found it threatening not being able to keep on doing the boyish things they loved to do.

DISCUSSION

We set out to examine how student teachers' narratives reflected their experiences of embodying and negotiating their gender construction in childhood. We also intended to highlight how students' recalled experiences could be used by teacher educators to address gender equality in the teacher education programme. With this we aspired to contribute to the practice of teachers and to theories on the construction of gender identity.

We found that many participants in this study described painful memories of gendered pressure from their childhood. Their narratives shed light on the way in which they embodied and negotiated masculinity and femininity with peers within their schools.

Developing gender identity

Students' narratives show how the process of developing gender identity followed at least three stages. They described how they enthusiastically set out to construct their identity as if they had a choice in the matter, as described by Davies and Robinson (2013), and could adopt different subject positions within the competing discourses of gender available to them.

Based on the findings, the following three stages highlight the process the students went through when developing their gender identity and capture the essence of their mindset at each stage. We see these stages, which were developed from the material, as an important contribution of this study:

- The first stage reflects the understanding that *I can be, become, and behave in whatever way I want*. The anecdotes do, however, indicate, that in practice, in real life, this proved easier said than done.
- Despite pressure from parents, teachers, or peers, some of the students kept on struggling in order to have their idea of gender identity accepted. This second stage suggests that the students had not entirely given up, as if they were saying *I can behave as I please but…*
- In the third and final stage, the students appeared to have given in to the expectations and pressures and accepted that even if they might eventually succeed, getting there would require sacrifices. In this final stage it is as if they were saying: *Yes, it is possible that I can behave in any way I want, but the price is too high*.

Almost every anecdote involves elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as strength and independence, rather than flexible masculinities and femininities, as demonstrated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). This explains why these students responded to social pressure in much the same manner as Pattman's et al. (2005) interviewees, the 14-year-old boys. These boys eventually gave up trying to gain acceptance for behaving publicly in the same way they did when they were alone and free of peer pressure to conform.

Joanna's struggle, mentioned earlier, revolved around the length of her hair; she wanted it short but her mother insisted she should let it grow, as she did and this made her mother "very happy". The above examples are just a few of those appearing in the narratives of how students changed themselves, for example their clothing and posture, into what was seen as gender appropriate behaviour. Many female students described in detail how they used to become more ladylike, for instance by letting their hair grow, or no longer wearing casual sport clothing but opting for skirts and dresses instead. Their experience describes the surrounding cultural messages of binary femininity and masculinity, meaning that the girls had to sacrifice their leanings in order to be accepted and become respectable members of home, school, and sport communities. This is also an example of how these girls interpreted their pursuit of high status in terms of imitating hegemonic masculinity which they were forced to abandon because of their situation as subordinated females, as described by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

Students' anecdotes show that they received various gendered messages from the environment as described in (Court, 1994; Martin & Ruble (2004). For instance Beatrice

described how her physics teacher suggested that physics was more for boys than girls and ignored her plea for help, causing her to swap physics for history. Bill told a similar story about how he avoided the danger of being rejected by the boys by never asking girls to join his football team. Bill's anxiety about not meeting the masculine criteria is similar to that of the 15-year old boys in Magnúsdóttir's (2005) research and the cultural messages they received from their environment about how to secure their position within the masculine hierarchy in their class.

Interestingly, none of the male students seemed to have struggled against the gender system as did the girls. Rather, they described how they adjusted to it and gave in easily, even though some of them felt the gender discrimination was unfair. This is interpreted as pressure on boys to construct hegemonic masculinity in their adaption to manhood at the school because, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue: At the local level, hegemonic patterns of masculinity are embedded in specific social environments, such as formal organizations.

It would, therefore, appear that despite the fluidity of the gender constructs, femininity, and masculinity, gender identities are "strictly regulated through disciplinary practices within schools, media and other institutions" (Martin & Ruble, 2004, p. 67). Hegemonic masculinity repeatedly appears in the data, both as highly desirable and a highly controlling factor for all students (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within gendered school structures, the girls were constantly told what they were "not allowed to do", while the boys were told "what to do".

The embodiment and negotiation of masculinity and femininity

These childhood memories of students offer an understanding of how school structures are saturated by the gender system. They clearly reinforce hegemonic masculinity at the expense of femininity and non-hegemonic masculinity. These first impressions of being girls take the forms of compliance and subordination by accommodating the interests and desires of boys and men (Bourdieu, 2001), although gender hierarchies are also affected by new configurations of women's identity and practice (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The girls considered everything labelled as masculine as more desirable than the feminine, reflecting the legitimate position of hegemonic masculinity at the top of the gender hierarchy. This is why many girls referred to themselves as tomboys or a kind of tomboy, wishing they had more freedom to construct their gender identity and thus hoping for higher status than any femininity offered (Bjarnadóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2011).

Furthermore, the students' descriptions of non-hegemonic masculinity are all about giving up power and mostly related to hateful humiliations boys who like feminine things are exposed to, as described by Connell (1995). Eve described such an incident above, by saying that things and actions judged as feminine were humiliating for her friend but not for her. Her narrative is both an example of how hegemonic masculinity does not appeal to all men and how femininity, in general, and non-hegemonic masculinities are subordinated (Connell, 1995). In several anecdotes it is made clear that if boys do not adhere to hegemonic masculinity they become marginalized and exposed to peer-harassments.

Thus hegemonic masculinity appears as a manifestation of a binary gender construction where appropriate girlhood is made the antipode of masculinities and is therefore humiliating for boys. Hence, as already pointed out, there are few indications that basic ideas about the different nature of men and women are losing ground in the Icelandic school-system (Ríkarðsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2012).

Gender equality as reflected in the anecdotes, mainly involves gendered examples of men's and women's stereotypical roles. This raises questions of how teachers can integrate equality education into their teaching in different academic fields; for example how science teachers and social studies teachers can encourage their students to be aware of gender bias in their respective disciplines.

GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR TEACHER TRAINERS

The article offers information on the process a group of university students underwent when constructing their gender identity. We argue that our formulation of stages as they go through this process highlights how their gender identity is developed. As such, the article contributes to theorizing about the process of gender identity formation. Furthermore, it highlights how teachers can take advantage of students' lived experiences in order to address issues of gender equality within a teacher education programme.

Using students' own narratives as they share and discuss their lived experiences is likely to invigorate debate on gender identity formation. While the stories told in this article could be used to draw students' attention to issues of gender equality, the stages describing the development of gender identity could be used by students and teacher educators alike to analyse students' narratives. A pressing concern in this context is whether pre-service teachers will apply their experience within the teacher education programme in their own teaching practice, once they enter the field. This remains to be seen. However, if the student group who shared the anecdotes in this article is in any way typical of undergraduate students at the School of Education in general, it would be safe to say that they are receptive and enthusiastic about issues of gender equality. The ground, therefore, seems ripe for teacher educators to create a space for addressing gender equality in the teacher education programme.

The stereotypical views in most of the anecdotes are in accordance with findings in recent research (Guðbjörnsdóttir & Lárusdóttir, 2012) where teacher educators were interviewed, revealing that their knowledge of basic concepts of gender studies was very limited. Moreover, despite describing themselves as equality oriented, many of the teachers had a tendency to either resist or ignore the issue of gender equality.

The authors agree with other scholars (Guðbjörnsdóttir & Lárusdóttir, 2012; Weiner, 2000) that basic knowledge about gender-related issues and concepts is seen as necessary in order to overcome essentialist views of gender and gender stereotypes. This lack of gender awareness and knowledge on the part of teachers, leaves the students powerless to intervene in their teaching practice when they enter the field. In order to do so, they must, firstly, be aware of gender inequalities and, secondly, they need to know what

to do about them. Knowledge about the gender system and the main gender concepts is the key to detecting gendered messages and behaviour. Without such knowledge teacher educators do not have the necessary means to teach students in the teacher education programme about gender equality and guide them as to how they can address this issue when they become certificated teachers and start practising.

The findings, therefore, have particular implications for teacher educators and their students. In Iceland this has become an increasingly pressing issue in the teacher education programme, because recent legislation places new requirements on schools to address equality in both school curricula and practice (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). It is clear from the above that the Icelandic legal framework on equality education provides a supportive environment for equality efforts at all school levels. It has, moreover, been suggested that the current student population would welcome the opportunity to address gender equality within the teacher education programme.

In terms of gender equality, considerable progress has been made since our interviewees went through their gender identity formation process. Iceland holds, for the 7th year in a row, the top spot on the overall Global Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2015). Legislation on gender quotas has facilitated the increase of women in positions higher up the hierarchy in both the public and the private arena (Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men No. 10/2008). New laws on gender equality for all school levels and in society at large have been approved and older ones revised. Literary resources on gender equality are available to teachers at all school levels, for example a handbook on the equality pillar: *Jafnrétti: Grunnþáttur í menntun á öllum skólastigum.* [Equality: Fundamental pillar at all school levels] (Dýrfjörð, Kristinsson, & Magnúsdóttir, 2013) and *Kynungabók* [The gender book: Information for young people about gender equality] (Magnúsdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, Pálsdóttir, Ástgeirsdóttir, & Jónsdóttir, 2010) on the impact of social and cultural inputs and messages on the construction of gender identity. The Iceland University of Education has issued a gender equality plan (Iceland University of Education, 2004) and the University of Iceland has published an equality plan for all its schools and faculties (University of Iceland, 2014).

This, and similar material is particularly important as a balancing element against the way in which Iceland is sometimes portrayed as an Eldorado of Equality because of its high ranking on global gender scales. To an international audience the gender report may suggest that gender equality has already been achieved in Icelandic schools.

In reality, however, despite a facilitating environment and a supportive legal framework, there is little evidence to suggest that gender equality is being addressed within education (Bjarnadóttir & Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Magnúsdóttir, 2005; Guðbjörnsdóttir & Lárusdóttir, 2012; Þórðardóttir, 2012). Thus, little seems to have changed in terms of gender education, both in schools and in the teacher education programme. This should not come as a surprise. Education systems are known to be conservative and do not always change in step with developments in society at large.

With reference to the above, the authors urge teachers and students alike to address gender equality at all school levels. Such a joint effort might put an end to the conservative role schools have played in the reproduction of gender inequality. What is needed is

for both academics and practitioners to acknowledge the implications of this and similar research on gender equality and act upon them.

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