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Respectable femininities of aspiring female teachers

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to understand how childhood experiences can influence teacher trainings students' understanding of gender equality. Court (1994, p. 5) points out "how cultural ideas, about appropriate ways to "be" feminine or masculine, are associated with beliefs about the kind of work people are most suited to". Specific gendered experiences determines how personal behaviour standards are interpreted, Martin and Ruble, 2004. This is related to teacher training students possibilities to reconstruct their understanding of gender equality by reflecting on their own experience of gender cues and its influence on their gender identity. The study rely on gender system theory to highlight dimensions which continue to cause gender inequality in society. It is driven from Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity and Martin's and Ruble's (2004) description of how gender identity develops. Anecdotes of 113 female students about their first memories of being girls were analysed qualitatively to identify the influence of their gender constructions on understanding gender equality. The student names were changed and the citations chosen carefully to protect their anonymity. Teacher educators seem to have failed to adequately address issues of gender equality in their practice. The anecdotes involve descriptions of gender identity processes that start with the perception that, I can be whoever I like, followed by a yes I can but... and ending in a resignation which they justified with the high cost of following their desires. Academics and practitioners need to acknowledge the implications of these findings and act upon them.

Keywords

teacher training education, gender construction, childhood memories, equality, professional values

Author

Þórdís Þórðardóttir | University of Iceland, Iceland

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**Respectable femininities
of aspiring female teachers**

Thordis Thordardottir
University of Iceland
School of education

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Aims and research questions

- To understand how childhood experience can influence teacher training students' understanding of gender equality
- Can teacher student reconstruct their understanding of gender equality by recalling childhood memories of negotiating gender relations?

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The background

The Center for Research on Equality, Gender and Education

The center's main role and mission is, among other, to:

- Conduct research in the field of gender studies and equality in schools and teacher education
- Promote development work in the academic field, both in teacher education, in preschools, primary and secondary schools, and in policymaking.
- Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir and Steinunn Helga Lárusdóttir (2012) findings indicate that the teachers educators' understanding of equality is broad, and they see themselves as oriented towards equality. However, they seem to lack knowledge of fundamental concepts of gender studies and tend either to ignore or show resistance to gender equality.
- Thordis Thordardottir and Steinunn Helga Lárusdóttir (in print, 2015) findings indicate that teacher student's have traumatic memories of their gender identity construction related to families -, schools - and peer pressure

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New legislation makes a new landscape for schools and teacher education in Iceland

- Recent changes in Icelandic society have increased the demands and responsibility of teachers, in adopting school activities, and to implement professionally the stipulations of education laws and policy of school practice, established in new acts and legislations
- The emphasis should be on equality, democratic cooperation.... well-being and education of each individual (The Compulsory School Act no. 91 /2008), defined in six mutual education pillars for preschools, elementary schools and upper secondary education. One of the pillars is equality.

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Theoretical framework

- The construction of gender identity refers to the ways that gender is rooted in and expressed through social systems, different responses, values, expectations, roles, and responsibilities given to individuals and groups according to gender.
- Connell's (2014) consideration of how patterns of embodiment have displaced old essentialism (nature versus nurture) in gender studies and her conceptualizing of hegemonic masculinity is a fruitful way to understand the students' experience of negotiating gender relations in childhood together with Martin's and Ruble's (2004) description of how gender identity develops as children realize that they belong to one gender group rather than another.
- Simultaneously the quote "that once children know gender stereotypes their personal preferences become more gender typed" (Martin and Ruble 2004:69) is an interesting approach in the analysis.

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Method

- The data is 126 freshman's anecdotes about their first memories of being boys and girls. 23 are training as preschool teachers and 103 as elementary teachers. 113 are females, 13 are males
- The memories were analysed qualitatively to identify the components of the student's gender relations and negotiations. The lens was upon common (and diverse) patterns of experience

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Findings

- 65% of the participants related their first memories to school experience and 35% to their homes (17% had memories from preschools).
- Social pressure was a common thread in the students' descriptions.
- Their stories indicated a step by step process:
 - *In the beginning* they believed on “free” gender identity, and they could develop every kind of gender identity in their own way
 - *Secondly* they recognized that free gender identity has its price, but it might be worth the cost
 - *Finally* they gave in, and adjusted to traditional gender relations they received through the cultural messages



Free gender identity

- I was both a girly-girl and a tomboy as a young kid. I had three 'boy' friends living in the same block as I did. We played all kind of plays, i.e. various ball-games, play house, and imagination plays. In these times we were not aware of our gender, yet it didn't matter.
- During my early childhood I walked happily around completely unaware of my gender. I had short hair and dressed in a comfortable sport clothes. My plays involved cops and robbers, gun plays and running games. I wasn't experienced as a ladylike girl but yet it didn't mean anything for me.




**Free gender identity has its price,
but it might be worth the cost**

- My mum made pretty many attempts to let my hair grow long, playing girlish toy and wore dresses, but without success. I was stubborn and hell-bent being myself and nothing else. In school, being myself became even harder because of added pressure from teachers and peers, but despite teasing and rejection I kept on being myself (Female student).
- When I started elementary school I understood early on, that I must change me actions if I wanted to fit in. The girls told me constantly if I did something inappropriate (Male student)

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**Giving in, adjusting to
traditional gender relations**

- I choose a course in physics and once, when I didn't understand a problem, I asked the teacher for help "He answered. Physics is more for boys than girls, and then he left ignoring my plea for help. After several similar gendered comments, from this teacher and others, I gave up and skipped the physic for history.
- I liked playing football, but it didn't last very long. Once in a while my brothers and their friend came, just to remind me of that many football girls are lesbians and not ladylike. Some of my schoolmates, in fourth and fifth class, told me football wasn't good for my thighs, and finally I withdraw

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The cultural messages

- I was told to behave like a girl, being maidenly and quiet.
- In sport class the boys were the leaders. The teachers always put the boys forward the girls, in their teams. They never questioned this regulation nor did the boys.
- Life was very difficult for my best friend in school. He was mobbed every day and nicknamed as faggot, sissy, pussy and more disgusting names. This friend of mine liked to play same games as I did, but it was humiliating for him but not for me.
- When I was 3-5 years old I realized gendered roles. Dad fixed the car, mum did the laundry. In family gathering the women had long hair and wore dresses but the men short hair and jeans. The women were inside preparing food while the men were chatting in the living room

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Gendered school culture

- There was always a danger. If you don't get the gendered cues right you were in risk of mobbing so it's better to get it right from the beginning.
- Waiting in a line before walking into the classroom, we the girls, were told to stand ladylike with our hands on our hips and the boys to stand like guys with their hands in their pockets.
- Several girls described their memories of boys getting more opportunities to make experiments than girls, i.e. in physics, and how they were let down experience the boys getting free of cleanings, especially in home economic lessons.

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The idolisation of hegemonic masculinity

- The boys were allowed to make show- business and noise but the girls were expected to be nicely dressed, quiet and maidenly.
- The boys could do everything they wanted and it just got worse when we grew older.
- Everything boys were supposed to do was just much more interesting and funny
- Untill I became 12 years old I liked much more to play football, climbing trees and prank than playing these silly girl games, dolls and home and such boring things
- *Why are “masculine” activities more respectable than “feminine” activities in the school system?*
- *What consequences will this have for equality education?*

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Is Iceland really an “Eldorado” of gender equality?

- The Gender gap report, 2014, ranks 136 countries on their ability to close the gender gap in four key areas: health and survival, education, politics and economic equality.
- **“Iceland** holds the top spot for the sixth consecutive year, continuing to boast the narrowest gender gap in the world. Iceland’s overall score moves up due to improvements in economic participation and opportunity, as well as political empowerment.”
- [Gender Gap 2014 report](http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/) <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/>

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Summary

- Most participants saw femininities as uninteresting, while hegemonic masculinity was interpreted as the desirable way of living
- The students' memories indicate femininities and masculinities in childhood as duplex constructions
- Girls were urged to be good-looking, nice, and nurturing while boys were encouraged to be independent and active
- Boys were allowed to circumvent rules and were supposed to be better than girls at physics
- Most of the girls found it threatening not being able to keep on doing the "boyish" things they loved to do (the dominance of hegemonic masculinity)



Implication

This findings indicate lack of gender equality in these students' education from early childhood to high school, despite countless researches on gender discrimination in education and public policy on equality in behalf of the Icelandic ministry of education and equality acts

- What can be done?
 - The knowledge is standby so now it is action time, these findings could agitate teachers to think of the consequences of the silence of gender equality in the school system

