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Sexual harassment and gender stereotypes. Teacher students' views of the importance of gender equality education.

Paper presented on the 28th EECERA Annual Conference, 29.8.2018, Budapest, Hungary.

Abstract

This paper aims at understanding preschool and elementary teacher students' emphasis on gender issues. Lahelma (2011, Weaver-Hightower, 2003, Weiner, 2000, 2002) findings indicate lack of interest in gender equality in teachers' education. It is explained by the instructors' lack of knowledge of fundamental gender concepts, overladen curriculum and super-sensitive topic. The Centre for Research on Equality, Gender and Education at the University of Iceland is conducting similar research on gender equality in teacher-education together with the students' point of view. Since 2011 equality is a fundamental pillar in the national curriculum guide for all school levels, which makes gender issues important in teacher education, as emphasized in the above cited authors. The data were collected by a questionnaire given to students attending core classes in their first year at the School of Education (N=138) and to more advanced students (N=116) in 2013. Students in teacher education were 65% (N=166). The study involves students' self-reported knowledge. Findings can't be generalized but do create understanding of these students' opinions on gender issues. The findings indicate that binary essentially views of boys and girls prevail the gender discourse in the educational system. The students are most interested in learning more about sexual harassment (59%), gender stereotypes (57%), gender and difference (55%), social media and gender (43%) and the gendered pay gap (43%). The authors point out a possible relationship between high interest of student teachers in gender issues and the recent open discussions about gender related violence which now are highlighted in #metoo debates.

Keywords

teacher students, sexual harassment, gender concepts, gender equality, gender education

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Sexual harassments and gender stereotypes: Student teachers views of the importance of gender equality education

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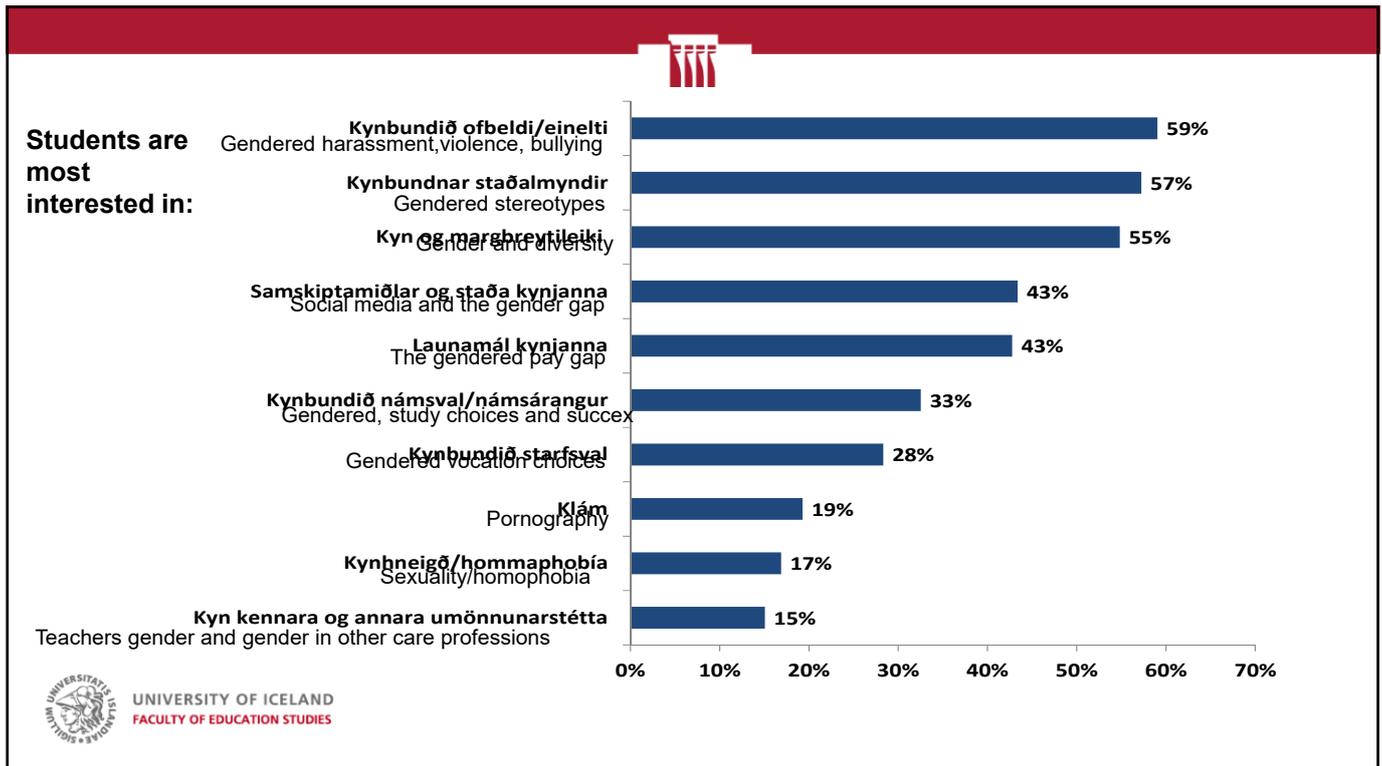
Method and main questions (phase two of three)

- This three phase investigation was conducted into the practices and resistances towards gender equality teaching, in teacher education at the University of Iceland and in schools at three school levels in Reykjavik from 2011-2018.
- The first focus was on teacher educators (phase 1), **the second focused on student teachers self reported knowledge of gender equality** and thirdly the study focused on schools in the capital area; pre-, compulsory - and upper secondary schools, primarily through the lens of their leaders.
- In phase two a questionnaire was given to students (N=254) with focus on those in teacher education (N=166), on paper to those that attended classes and online to distant students not attending classes this particular week
- **Main questions:** How well do student teachers know basic gender related concepts? Are they interested in more education on gender issues? and what issues should, in their view be prioritised?



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The contradiction; interest but lack of knowledge?

How can it be that the students are very interested in deconstructing or abolishing gender stereotypes, but seem to lack basic conceptual knowledge to do that and get rid of essentialist attitudes to gender, which is common?

The students self-reported knowledge of concepts on gender equality like *equality*, *masculinity*, *femininity*, *gender stereotypes* and *feminism* is strong

but only 50% of them claim to know the basic concept of *gender* very well or fairly well, and only 15 % the concept of the *gender system*

In all 87% of the teacher education students think that instruction on gender issues should be increased, and over 70% are very or rather interested in taking a special course on the subject.



The gender equality situation in schools

- There seem to be many reasons for a lack of focus on gender issues in teacher education:
 - Curriculum overload, gender issues are sensitive and politicized, and it is not acknowledged that this is about scientific knowledge on gender issues.
- Gender-inclusion is not part of the teacher education discourse, and binary essentialist views of boys and girls prevail the discourse
- On the other hand gender inclusion is being called for by our national curriculum guidelines, the teacher union and the student teachers
- The cultural construction of gender ideas and roles is complicate, and it can be difficult to adopt a behaviour contrary to traditional gender roles, especially where they are very strong like on the labour marked (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2017; Thordardottir & Helgadóttir 2016; Blocksgaard et al. 2015; Guðbjörnsdóttir, 2007).



victimizing

- The visibility of sexual harassment and violence in public discourse and in the media has been heightened in the past two years owing to the work of campaigners, increased government focus, and high-profile revelations about serial harassment and abuse in academia, the entertainment industry and in parliament
- The #MeToo movement is generally considered to be a ground breaking turning point in Iceland. The role of schools is suggested to be important
- However, programs to challenge violence against women have often focused on encouraging women students to minimize risk (a 'public health approach'), for example by avoiding 'risky' situations (Marine and Nicolazzo 2017), and have focused on creating change at the individual level rather than addressing cultures of misogyny and sexism





Before #metoo

- The authors point out a possible relationship between this high interest of student teachers in gender issues and the recent open discussions by young people, especially women, on social media and in the society at large, about gender related violence
- #metoo didn't come out of the blue in October 2017, sexual harassment have always been a grey zone and never been disclosed as happened through the #metoo movement so it's possible that the students' interest in learning more about sexual harassment is rooted in their knowledge of its prevalence.



A matter of grave concern

- On the other hand, the most striking findings are that while gender equality issues are considered very important, they are generally not attended to, and the students knowledge of key gender related concepts is not strong, according to self-reports of student teachers and school leaders.
- Only 28% of the students said they had some knowledge of gender studies, 3 % have had optional course in high-school and 11% learnt a little from some teachers
- However, there is a great interest in more education on gender equality, especially on gender related violence or harassment, gender stereotypes and last but not least in gendered violence and harassment in social media
- Rawlings (2017) and Mulvey & Killen (2016) have pointed out the importance of attending to gender norms stereotypes about aggressive behaviour of children in school, and that keeping quiet would not be the right thing to do.





Lack of gender issues in teacher education

- Gender-inclusion is not part of the teacher education discourse,
- Binary essentialist views of boys and girls prevail, (unless something is done) Gender inclusion is being called for both by our national curriculum guidelines, the teacher union and the student teachers
- There seem to be many reasons for a lack of focus on gender issues in teacher education:
 - Curriculum overload,
 - gender issues are sensitive and politicized, and it is not acknowledged that this is about scientific knowledge on gender issues.
 - Theories on gender and different kinds of masculinity and femininity are considered complicated and contradict traditional essentialist views on gender differences.
 - Also there is a tendency to marginalize emphasis on equality in neoliberal times, and a more general equality concept is gaining support, not least because of the situation of refugees in Europe.



Discussion

- The results of this study are a clear demand for change.
- Hopefully this demand of students will be used by the School of Education in Iceland to strengthen gender and equality education in the teacher education program
- Some practical steps are needed to improve the situation
 - special courses, preferably mandatory for student teachers on gender issues
 - having a specialized gender lecturer to work with teacher educators on integrating gender and equality issues into their courses
 - having a webpage devoted to gender and equality issues in teaching, and finally to make the policy of the university more visible through existing equality plans.

