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The hidden curriculum in boys' and girls' education. Are we really preparing 'new' citizens?

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Introduction

It is believed that schools prepare future citizens, but is this preparation equal for students of different genders? Gender stereotypes held by teachers, administrators and textbook authors might be seen as jeopardising the main goal of democratic education – preparing active, open-minded and responsible citizens. The political and economic transformation that has occurred during last fifteen years in Central Europe, and particularly in Poland, has left gender stereotypes untouched. Civil society needs an open discourse about all critical issues: ignoring gender inequality is a threat to the young democracy.

In this paper the impact of the hidden curriculum on the process of the teaching and learning of boys and girls in Polish schools will be described. Although this is not a new research approach, results of previous work in the area are not well recognised in the community of educators, and are treated as anecdotal data rather than as information about a critical process during which future citizens are prepared. There is no chance for equality and freedom if the voices of certain groups are not heard. Because in the public discourse the language of the dominant group is used, even today women participating in public life experience obstacles. Oppressed groups are not able to verbalise their ideas using language created and monopolised by the dominant group¹.

Equal opportunities are a critical issue in the process of education. Providing services in this sector is not only to secure the high quality of service, but also to ensure that all members of society have equal access to these services. Although almost nobody would question the principle of equal access to education, and although it is an educational policy priority for numerous countries and international bodies, we fail in creating the conditions necessary for equal opportunities. Many groups can be considered 'oppressed' and it seems that women's situation, thanks to legislative and institutional reforms and initiatives, has changed lately. However, law and rules are sometimes not enough to change cultural and social reality. As an element of the social and cultural order, schools operate in a similar context – legal equality is protected, but in practice it is doubtful. Although Poland is a signatory to treaties² regulating the presentation of both genders in textbooks and teaching materials, it is possible to find those which might be described as promoting stereotypes. This is true also of classrooms, the organisation of school life and of relations among people.

¹ P. Bourdieu

² For example *Convention about Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women* from the year 1980.

Stereotypes are an immanent and almost inevitable element of social reality. Schools are, to certain extent, responsible for the reproduction of social reality and prioritised social values. Teachers, administrators, textbooks and curricula all strengthen and transmit socially constructed beliefs to new generations, albeit in different ways and with different intensity. Some of those beliefs are reproduced in a very conscious style, other subconsciously – those constructs are distributed in various ways and through different means. The results of using stereotypes can be seen in teaching style, relations among people, time spent with different students, value systems, expectations or models of behaviour. In such a way stereotypes transferred into real life school situation may damage certain groups through differentiating their access to education.

Social beliefs and values, and also stereotypes, are integral elements of social life and culture. When a conviction becomes part of complicated system of social and individual beliefs, it develops an independent life³, and this creates a situation that is very hard to change. But ignoring socially constructed and owned stereotypes can threaten civil society. Such stereotypes are dangerous because they are difficult to challenge or to check objectively. The stereotype produces supporting arguments for itself – when we use stereotypes, this is what we see around us, and that verifies the stereotype. Use of stereotypes in describing, understanding and managing the social order leads to the creation of inequality, oppression and even aggression and hatred. Social structures which support a lack of equality make the process of democratisation very difficult. Participation in socially unequal structures generates a situation in which individuals and groups are convinced that this is ‘natural’ state. In Poland, there have been recent and wide-ranging social changes, but some areas have stayed untouched: an awareness of the critical meaning of equal opportunities for all existing groups in the democracy is one of them. It is impossible to build a healthy political system in which some groups are educated in a way that prevents them from speaking for themselves.

This paper reports on research on gender issues conducted in six Polish schools.

Method

Six primary and middle schools were researched in four stages.

1. an analysis of textbooks for mathematics, chemistry, biology, foreign languages and preparation for family life (a named curricular subject) used in these schools
2. classroom observation, during which the main focus was on relations and interaction between teachers and students of different gender
3. questionnaires for students and teachers which concerned their way of seeing the school reality and their beliefs about gender
4. interviews with the head teachers of the schools.

³ Ch. Stangor, M. Schaller *Stereotypy jako reprezentacje indywidualne i zbiorowe*. (In:) *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia. Najnowsze ujęcie*. (Eds.) C. N. Macrae, Ch. Stangor, M. Schaller, GWP, Gdańsk 1999.

Altogether sixteen textbooks were analysed, thirty lessons attended, 120 teachers and 120 students answered the questionnaires and six head teachers were interviewed.

As a working hypothesis the following premises were accepted:

- during the process of education in Polish schools only one perspective is used and only one language serves to communicate information, values and ideas
- those perspective and language support a difference among men and women and are used to justify different roles and position in society.

It was also expected that the difference will point at male superiority.

In this paper I focus on teachers' and students' beliefs and only briefly address the problems of textbooks and interactions in the classrooms.

Gender in textbooks and in classrooms

In general it is possible to say that Polish schools prepare future citizens according to a very traditional image of the ideal Pole – patriotic, respecting the army, with traditional views on values and social structure (hierarchical and family oriented)⁴. It is quite obvious that the content of the textbooks is regulated through the political process and could be changed accordingly to the priorities of the dominant political parties.

The textbooks we analysed largely served to create or strengthen gender stereotypes and to build mental models of male-female relationships. Some, and not always implicitly, communicated the notion at there are specific physical and psychological traits for males and females which determine their social and professional roles and behaviours.

Such messages from textbooks were strengthened by observed teacher behaviour in the classroom. Our main finding during classroom observation was that teachers had more interactions, and of different kinds, with male students than with female.

Teachers' beliefs

Teachers were asked to describe their level of agreement with statements included in the questionnaires, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). In the second part of the questionnaire they had to decide if situations described were similar to what happened in their own classrooms.

A majority of teachers saw female students as sensitive (66%) and responsible (also 66%) than boys. Girls were also considered more systematic than boys (63% agreed, 18% disagreed, and 17% thought there was no difference). A majority (40%) claimed that girls were more eager to work in groups: 31% were against this statement and 26% saw no difference.

⁴ Opinion of Magdalena Środa (Warsaw University) from discussion during the conference 'Equality and tolerance in curricula and textbooks', Warsaw 2002.

A minority of teachers were convinced that girls were talented with mathematics or were open-minded. Only 12% of teachers agreed that girls are better in mathematics and physics, while 64% thought boys were better. The remaining 24% was sure that there is no difference in those skills between genders. 11% of teachers saw their female students as more interested in the world issues, but a large majority of 60% believed that girls are not interested in what is happening around them in the world. 28% did not see a difference. Only 17% of teachers (the majority of whom were women) agreed that girls were more intelligent than boys: 38% claimed that boys were more intelligent and 43% saw no difference.

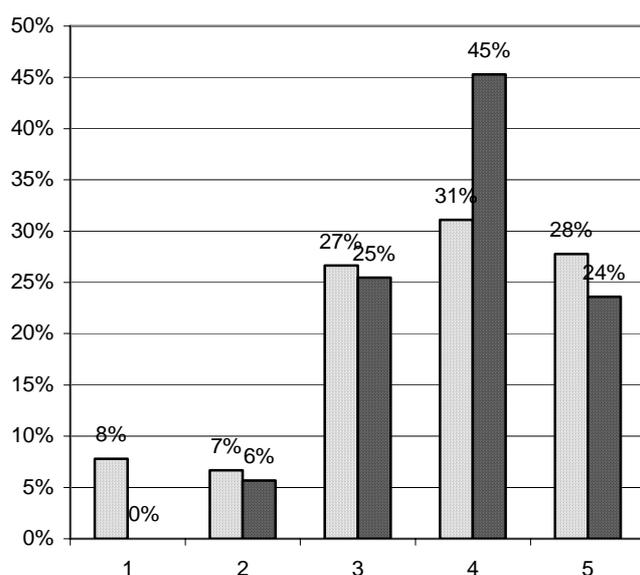
Answers to some questions were distributed almost equally: 36% of teachers agreed that girls were more creative and almost the same percentage (39%) disagreed. 26% saw no difference, which gives a near equal distribution of all possible answers. According to 32% of teachers girls were more honest, while 40% thought the opposite and 26% claimed there was no difference.

These answers to questions about teachers' beliefs were interesting, but it was more useful to compare how those beliefs connected with classroom practice. Few of the responses from the first part seemed to have much connection with those given in the second part of the questionnaire (if certain events or activities happened in their class and how often). We connected and compared

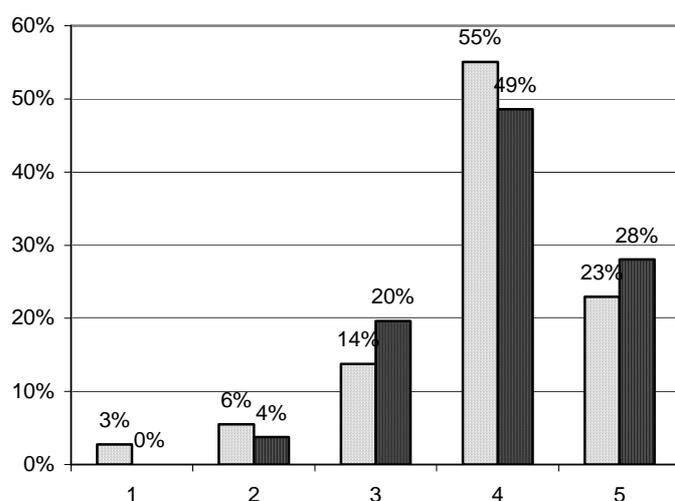
- the statement that girls are more creative than boys with the question about encouraging boys and girls to independence
- the statement that girls have more chances for future success with whether teachers encourage their students to act accordingly to their typical gender roles
- the statement that girls are more intelligent than boys with whether girls are more often asked to do maintenance jobs than boys.

Those teachers who agree that girls were more creative than boys admitted that they often encouraged girls to ask questions and in independent thinking: 69% did it often and 25% from time to time. Those who did not agree that girls are more creative also gave such encouragement, but not as frequently as those believing in girls' special creativity (59%, and 27% from time to time). The difference was not considered very significant.

It is interesting that the group of teachers who believed that girls are more creative were nonetheless more encouraging towards boys than towards girls –77% supported boys in questioning and thinking on a daily basis and 20% from time to time (Table 2). Those who did not believe that girls were more creative also spent more energy on encouraging boys than girls – 78% regularly and 14% from time to time. Although there were not big differences among those who believe in girls' creativity and those who do not, more teachers admitted that they supported boys more often.

Table 1: Girls are more creative / I encourage girls to ask questions and to think independently

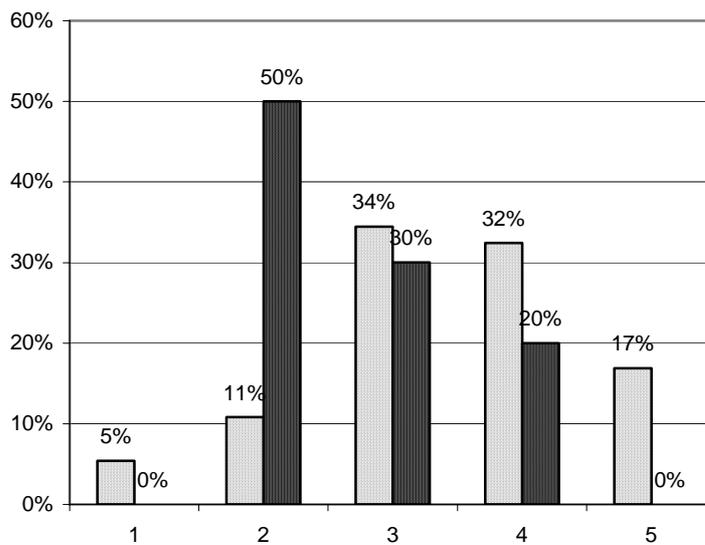
1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – from time to time, 4 – often, 5 – very often / pale grey – disagree, dark grey – agree.

Table 2: Girls are more creative / I encourage boys to ask questions and to think independently

1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – from time to time, 4 – often, 5 – very often / pale grey – disagree, dark grey – agree.

The statement that girls have more chances for future success than boys was paired with the question asking whether the teacher encouraged students to act accordingly to traditional gender roles. It appeared that those who do not agree that girls have bigger chances for future success (60% of all respondents) do promote traditional roles significantly more often – 49% did it regularly and 34% from time to time – while those who agreed with the statement promoted traditional roles much less often (20% regularly and 30% from time to time).

Table 3: Girls have bigger chance for success in future / I encourage students to act accordingly to their gender traditional role



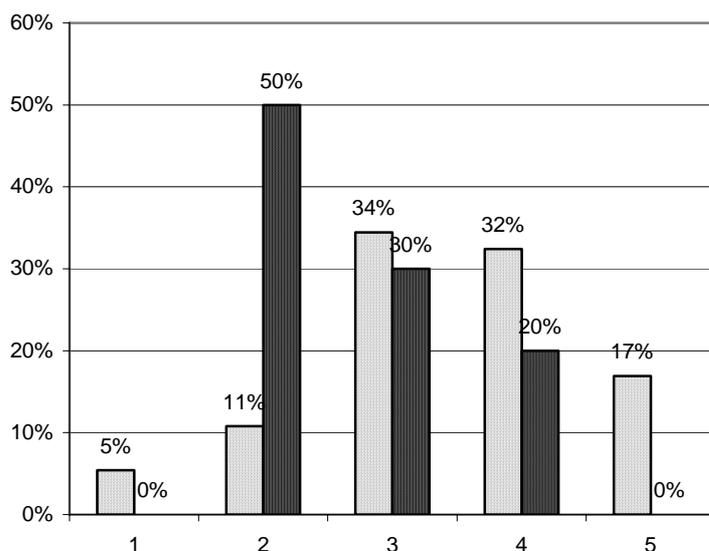
1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – from time to time, 4 – often, 5 – very often / pale grey– disagree, dark grey –agree.

A majority of the teachers thought that there was no difference in intelligence between boys and girls, but 17% agreed that girls are more intelligent and 38% did not. Among those convinced that girls are more intelligent, 20% asked girls, more often than boys, to help with small assistance or maintenance work in the classroom and 30% did so from time to time. Among those who do not agree that girls are smarter, these numbers are higher – 49% asked for help often and 34% from time to time.

Principals' perspectives

In the final stage of the research six interviews with principals (five women and one man) were conducted. Three main areas were covered: the principals' views of the world, their opinions about the role of the school in creating gender roles, and their opinions about their administrative role in this process.

All strongly believed that there are significant physical and mental differences between males and females that determine their future roles. They pointed out that there are some occupations (e.g. a coal miner) and activities (like sport) which are strictly assigned to males. Very often they stated that women have a very important life task – motherhood. The principals also claimed that the traditional division of roles and responsibilities was unfair and caused by stereotypes. They did not see this as a contradiction, but postulated that career and life choices should be free from gender stereotypes. If those choices and final destinations were a result of individual choices, this should be accepted. It seems that they saw no connections between a traditional division of male and female roles and the choices made by individuals.

Table 4: Girls are more intelligent / I ask girls for a small maintaining work often than boys

1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – from time to time, 4 – often, 5 – very often / pale grey – disagree, dark grey – agree.

With one exception all the head teachers claimed that men and women do not have equal chances for success, mainly because women are assigned to roles other than professional careers (e.g. family). Asked to evaluate the situation in the Polish labour market, they did not agree that there was 'discrimination', but they were sure that men had easier access to jobs and higher positions. A majority of the women principals claimed that they personally did not struggle against discrimination.

The head teachers did not see discrimination in their schools, although they separated the situations of teachers and students. They thought that sometimes it was possible to find examples of discrimination among teachers (hiring, career, achieving higher position), but they claimed this was not true with students.

The principals agreed that in Polish schools students were prepared to accept traditional gender roles, although it was not clear whether they saw this as a positive or negative phenomenon. Some of them said it was wrong and some saw it as an obligation, while others had doubts. It was obvious that there is a lack of this kind of discussion. Every school and every teacher dealt with the issue individually according to her/his system of values and beliefs. Forced to think about their role, they recognised that there is no clear procedure connected with gender issues in schools. There is a lack of any kind of discussion among staff. None saw it as either necessary or useful to support diversification of teaching styles according to students' gender. Asked for examples of gender-sensitive action, they cited physical education classes and sometimes technical courses.

In summary, the principals viewed the world as a dualistic kingdom of two genders with clearly defined roles for each, although they did not approve the results of this situation. At the same time, they made no reflection that might influence the reality in schools.

They regarded gender as an important factor in defining a person, but did not recognise that it had any effect on school practice.

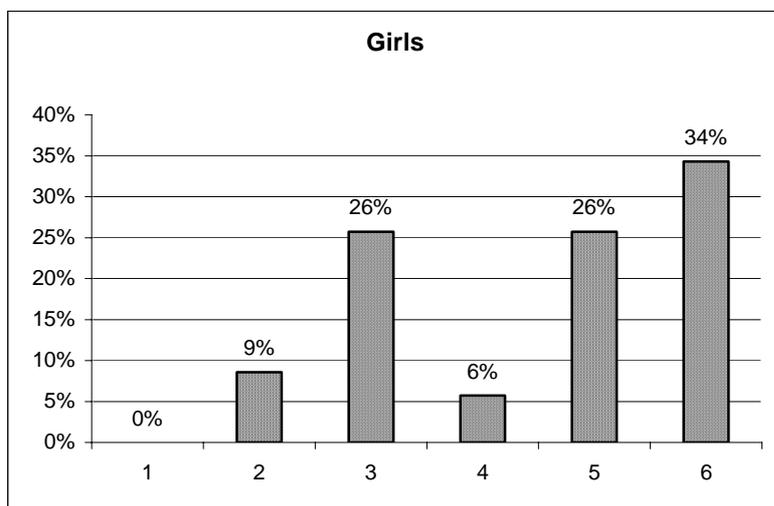
Students' voices

To check the impact of principals' and teachers' attitudes, classroom interactions and the messages coming from textbooks, students were asked to describe their level of agreement with a list of statements. Those statements referred to the general views of society, the situation in their own school and classes and to their personal beliefs about themselves. It was believed that significant difference would be found between the genders. Only one of the results is described below.

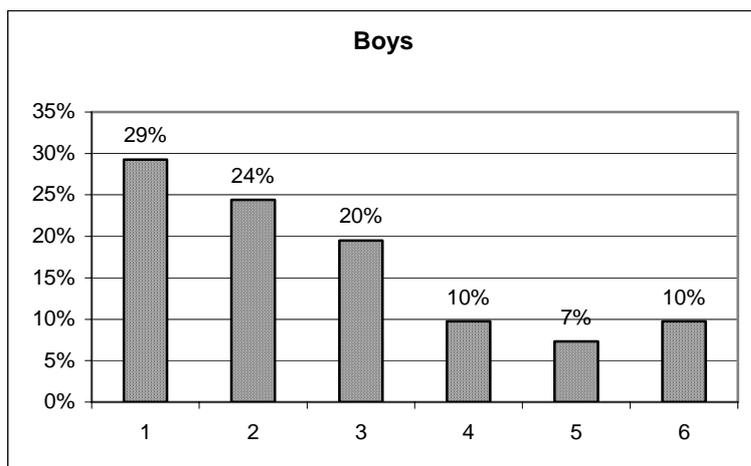
The first statement was 'Men have more important tasks in life than women' and the responses differed according to gender. On the six-point scale, 53% of boys strongly agreed, but 9% of girls also strongly agreed: however, 26% agreed partially. If we add the 20% of boys who supported the option partially it results in group of 73% of boys who were convinced that they would have to achieve bigger goals than their potential partners. 73% of male respondents were sure that they were more important because of their gender and were thus obligated to achieve higher positions than girls. 76% of girls and 27% of boys did not agree with the statement. This discrepancy creates tensions that might be resolved, hopefully for the benefit of civil society, in two ways – through negotiation and cooperation or through conflict. The critical question is which resolution are we currently courting?

Similar gender discrepancies were observed in reactions to almost all the questionnaire statements. Asked about the situation in their classrooms, boys had opinions that favoured them and girls saw themselves in a better light

Table 5. Level of agreement with statement: men have more important tasks in lives than women (according to girls)



1 – strongly agree / 6 – strongly disagree

Table 6: Level of agreement with statement: men have more important tasks in lives than women (according to boys)

1 – strongly agree / 6 – strongly disagree

Conclusion

Polish schools do not recognise the importance of the gender issue. Textbooks promote unfair images of men and women, teachers act accordingly to their convictions in the classrooms and those convictions very often prioritise one gender (more often male). Principals understand the gender issue only as a problem of the labour market and see no implications for the school world. Students create their understanding according to the educational and social context – it is probable that they already carry very strong gender stereotypes.

If we agree with the principle of equal opportunities, these findings give cause for concern. It is difficult to achieve equality in a situation in which groups receive different messages and are prepared for different goals. There is a visible signal of the need for new 'revolution' in schools.

