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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Social Inclusion and Gender

G E Lempesi¹, C. Leathwood², B. Gendron³

¹University of Patras (Greece), ²London Metropolitan University (UK), ³University of Montpellier III (France)

Abstract

The EPASI project seeks to examine educational policies designed to address social inequalities and the needs of disadvantaged groups. This symposium paper outlines initial findings in the EPASI Project (Educational Policies Addressing Social Inequalities in Europe) in relation to the issue of gender. Education is a critical component of the fundamental and universal rights of men, women and children, and consistently acknowledged as a powerful domain for self-advancement. Education policies have been considered part of a larger framework. We are searching for a methodology to analyse educational policies. We are searching for examples of gender responsive policy implementation that addresses inequalities resulting from socially and culturally constructed differences between men and women in society.

Introduction

The EPASI project seeks to examine educational policies which are designed to address social inequalities and also the needs of disadvantaged groups. The purpose of this symposium paper is to outline the initial findings of the EPASI Project (Educational Policies Addressing Social Inequalities in Europe) in relation to the issue of gender.

Few would argue against the idea that education is a critical component of the fundamental and universal rights of men, women and children.

According to Maluwa-Banda (2003: 2), education is acknowledged consistently as a powerful domain for self-advancement. Furthermore,

Education is at the heart of any national development. The countries that have made the greatest progress in reducing poverty in recent years are those that have combined effective and equitable investment in education with sound economic policies. Education enables people to use and extend their capabilities, develop skills, improve their livelihoods and increase their earning potential. And it also empowers them to participate in decision-making and in the transformation of their lives and societies. Education is central to the achievement of greater equality in society, including between men and women. Investment in education for both boys and girls has been shown consistently to be one of the most important determinants of development, with positive implications for all other measures of progress. (Ibid: 4)

Education policies have been considered part of a larger framework. In this context, we are searching for a methodology that will facilitate the analysis of educational policies.

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We are searching for examples of gender responsive policy implementation that addresses inequalities resulting from socially and culturally constructed differences between men and women in society.

A gender responsive policy is characterized by a consistent and systematic integration of gender concepts at all the stages of its design and implementation. To do this means that we must consider all stages in the process which include but are not necessarily limited to problem definition, goal and objective setting, strategy identification and monitoring. Thus we argue that gender issues are mainstreamed in the overall process.

Gender

The equality of men and women has always been a central issue of social and political discourses worldwide and in EU in particular. Frequently in legislative texts 'gender equality' is highlighted. However, men and women are not yet perceived on an equal basis. These trends mentioned above are shown in the Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on equality between women and men in February 2005 (COM (2005) 44). The overall result was that gender inequalities seem to be declining but have not cease to exist.

If we focus on the education sphere, differentiations are identified in the participation of men and women. According to the aforementioned report, 'women still outnumber men in education'. The percentage of women with a diploma in higher education increased to 58 % of the total student population in 2003. Among the younger generations women now achieve qualification levels which match or exceed those of their male peers. Yet other gender inequalities which disadvantage young women still remain. Pronounced gender segregation in education and training means young women are often over-represented in lower-paid occupations. In employment, the rate is continuing to increase and now covers 55.1 % of women. However, an average wage difference of 15 % in favour of men continues to exist. Although unemployment increased only slightly in 2004, there is still a significant gap between women (10%) and men (8.7%).

The European Union has long been committed to promoting gender equality. EU policy on gender equality has a long history, with the early introduction of legislation on equal treatment, followed by the adoption of equal opportunities legislation and positive actions. Influenced by UN developments, gender mainstreaming was introduced as the main EU policy approach from the mid 1990s onwards. For its part, the European Commission devised a Community framework strategy in 2000 founded on a dual approach: the integration of the 'gender' dimension in all Community policies and activities ('gender mainstreaming'), and setting up specific actions specifically targeting gender equality. Through this strategy, the Commission is encouraging gender equality in five areas: economic life, political and social life, civil society and, finally, the fight against stereotypes. In general, there is an obvious focus of the EC in issues concerning the incorporation of a gender dimension in the economic sphere and into policies that deal with the labour market.

Gender Mainstreaming

EU and the national governments of member states have adopted gender mainstreaming policies since middle 1990's. According to the Council of Europe (1998) the term gender mainstreaming is defined as follows:

Gender mainstreaming is the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making.

The concept of gender mainstreaming is usually conceived in relation or in contradiction with previous approaches concerning gender equality policy, such as "equal treatment" and "positive action", which were the approaches adopted during the 70's and the 80's (Sjorup, Schmitz, 2005).

According to Rees (2002), gender mainstreaming as a strategy, focuses more on the systems and structures that produce and reproduce gender inequalities and less on the individual and their rights. Gender mainstreaming policies aim to incorporate gender equality dimension inside these structures through the implementation of long term strategies and actions.

In terms of gender policies, education plays a very significant role. Education, as a multidimensional area, offers on one hand the ability to diagnose and fight against gender stereotypes and on the other hand forms a structure in which inequalities appear and are also reproduced. Leo-Rhynie (1999) refers to recent research in education and gender which point out that education plays a significant role in the reproduction of inequalities, through all its functions and aspects, such as: literacy, classroom interaction, curriculum, enrolment, attendance and achievement patterns, and teacher training.

Within the EU, the organisation of education and training systems and the content of learning programmes are the responsibility of the member states. The EU supports the national actions addressing gender issues. In general, there is an obvious focus of the EC in issues concerning the incorporation of a gender dimension in the economic sphere, into policies that deal with the labour market and on the women's improvement of science and technology skills. At the same time the EC acknowledges the importance of education both in producing and fighting against inequalities.

Gender in country reports

The EPASI project has as its objective to observe and report on educational policies to address social inequalities as well as the needs of specific minority disadvantaged groups. In order to do so, for starters, country reports and then thematic reports are to be developed. One of these reports has to do with gender issues in educational policy. The gender thematic report includes information about the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in each of the 14 countries, the level of priority given, and the policy approach

of issues related to gender and sexuality and a mapping of the previous or on going projects that deal with such matters.

In this paper we outline the first findings concerning gender policies in education, and in particular do so by analyzing the data through the following questions:

- What priority is given, what is the main policy concept?
- What are the major issues connected to gender and education in each country?
- Who implements the projects concerning gender in each country?

Findings for all countries

What priority is given?

The issue of the priority given to the issue of gender differs from country to country, with the occasional overlap. We see that in relation to gender and education the collected data indicate that in France and Luxembourg these issues hold an important place. On the other hand we have the slightly different cases of Sweden and Malta. In Sweden gender mainstreaming policies are administered centrally by the government, areas of interest in which the responsibility and initiative lies upon the communities and municipalities don't succeed to the same degree of development. Government sets the general objectives of educational policy but every community is responsible for the administration and function of the school units. Research indicates that because gender mainstreaming policies are administered centrally by the government, areas of interest in which the responsibility and initiative lies with the communities and municipalities (such as education policy) don't succeed to the same degree as development. In Malta even though there is no structured national policy for gender in education, we have the presence of many projects dealing with the subject.

Countries which do not show an overt and direct interest in dealing with gender issues in education are UK, in which an integrated policy that combines issues of gender inequality with other forms of inequality is promoted. Denmark follows a gender mainstreaming policy not directed exclusively to gender and education. Belgium and the Netherlands also tend to integrate gender mainstreaming within gender equality policies. In Ireland, there has been some attention given to gender issues but issues related to the socio-economic status are prioritized. In Spain, the attention given to gender equality in education seems to decline, particularly at national level. In Greece, even though several projects are concerned with gender in education, an EU-Driven model is followed. Greek governmental bodies began to give attention to such matters after a strict demand from the EU. In Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there is no obvious focus on gender issues in education but we can identify a growing attention given to such matters.

Major Issues

There are three major issues that we encounter related to disadvantages concerning gender in the educational environment: a) that girls seem to achieve better than boys in school (boy's underachievement), b) the career choices girls and boys make in terms of segregation, and c) fighting against stereotypes in education (including: teachers views, interactions between students, harassment, curriculum etc).

It seems that career choice issues are addressed in the majority of the countries examined. We can see that most of the projects implemented aim at career counselling activities. They are mainly concerned with encouraging girls to follow subjects such as science, engineering and technology. The projects are focused on girls because they are more likely to be in danger of gender-segregation in the employment sphere. However there is one exception that of Luxembourg in which we can identify that boys' are disadvantaged by gendered patterns in career choice. Career choice gendered patterns are seen as an important aspect of educational policy in UK, Ireland, Denmark, France, Greece, Malta, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, without it being missing from every country's agenda but to a lesser extent.

As mentioned above boy's underachievement is a topic frequently engaged in political and social discourses in most of the countries but it is not a prioritized policy implementation topic. We can find examples of national policy schemes or educational projects addressing boy's underachievement in UK, Denmark and Ireland. This is an interesting feature because according to EU reports boy's underachievement is identified, besides career choice of women, the second most important aspect of disadvantage related to gender in education.

The third issue encountered in the study is that of fighting against gender stereotypes in education in terms of teacher views, curriculum, and harassment etc. Fighting gender stereotypes is at the centre of policy implementation in most of the countries mentioned. It is an issue that concerns the policy spectrum as a whole and is not always specific to the field of education. However, in the communication from the European Commission *Towards a community framework strategy on gender equality 2001 – 2005* (COM, 2000) in which the objectives and the proposed actions are thoroughly presented, the promotion of change of gender roles and stereotypes is stated as one of the main objectives closely related to education.

The communication states, "this field of intervention addresses the need to change behaviour, attitudes, norms and values which define and influence gender roles in society through education, training, the media, arts, the culture and science".

Actions mentioned include support to strengthen efforts to eradicate stereotypical gender discrimination in education, i.e. in educational materials, developing good practice in this field and monitoring of gender perspective integration in policies to overcoming gender stereotypes.

We can find projects and policies aiming to reduce and fight against stereotypical views in France, Luxembourg, Greece, Slovakia, Ireland, UK, Sweden, Spain and Malta. In Cyprus and Czech Republic, countries where gender issues are not confronted in a similar manner as in the rest of the countries as a result of existing traditional views on gender roles, battling against stereotypes hold an important place in social discourses, even if there is no concrete policy scheme developed as yet.

Fighting against stereotypes in education is strongly connected to teacher training projects. These projects are concerned with examining teaching practises, developing new teaching methodologies, eliminating sexism in educational theory and most of all

sensitizing the teaching community and the society as a whole. Projects connected to teacher training and sensitization can be found in Greece, Sweden (gender pedagogues), Spain, Belgium, France, Ireland, Malta, Slovakia and Czech Republic.

Who implements the policy and the projects?

The EC's communication about the community framework strategy on gender equality 2001-2005 (COM, 2000), points out that even if the member states adopt policies to address gender inequalities, there are still important differences among them, with respect to issues concerning: the ways the actions are implemented, the legislation, methods, mechanisms involved and areas of initiatives. The states are affected by their history and experiences in regard to the designing, administering and implementation of equality policies.

In our review of the individual projects or programmes addressing gender related inequalities as described in EPASI Project we note that there are a variety of funding and policy implementation types utilized across the EU countries that make up the study group. We can stress that many of the projects are funded and come from European Union's initiatives, in many cases in cooperation with governmental bodies. This is especially true in Greece but also in France and Belgium we encounter educational policies especially directed to gender that are coordinated and organized through EU Social Funds.

Countries that have gender related projects that combine EU funding with other state funds are Ireland, Malta, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Netherlands. Some distinctive characteristics we can note are that Slovakia and the Czech Republic implement a joint project and that in Malta we have an international funded project by UNESCO.

Projects stemming from national policy initiatives are examples provided from Sweden and Luxembourg. A differentiated case is that of Denmark, in which we can see that all the projects are locally funded and administered.

Concluding Observations

In the present paper we tried to present the initial results of our analysis concerning the educational policies that are implemented in the 14 participant countries. It is important to stress that such an effort presupposes that all the documents are available to the researcher. For this specific study, this has not been the case. In some countries, only generalized document descriptions were available. So in many cases we had examples of policies or generalized descriptions of implemented projects which could not give us the information required to have a holistic view of the examined subject.

The analysis underlined the need to understand the context in which the policy making and implementation is developed in each country. All the data collected so far indicate that the countries conceptualize gender mainstreaming in a different way in spite of the given EU guidelines.

Some of the country reports show that there are countries in which gender issues hold an important place but are addressed differently. Others even if they comprehend the importance of the subject lack in the strategy and the implementation level, and others in the level of outcomes. There are also examples of states which consider gender issues in education as solved ones, especially when we referring to girls. The observed inconsistencies could be attributed, up to a point, to the imbalance in the development of the theory and practice of gender mainstreaming that apparently results in misunderstandings concerning its conceptualization. Many researchers argue that the evolution of gender mainstreaming concepts and theory is not actually promoted and remains at a rudimentary level (Booth & Bennett, 2002). Daly (2005) argues that the international literature focuses on gender mainstreaming as a policy or a set of tools and less on concept and theory.

We should also stress at this point that all the collected data mention a commitment of the countries to the principle of non-discrimination and the equality of sexes in general. This can be considered as a positive starting point for promoting all individuals' education and training regardless of gender and sexuality.

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