

Gender awareness of students of education¹

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Abstract

The paper presents preliminary results of a study exploring the students' experience with debunking gender stereotypes. The participants of the research are eight students of a Czech faculty of education who attended a course on gender-sensitive education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and were analysed using the Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis. The preliminary results show that debunking gender stereotypes may be empowering but also challenging. The article claims that enhancing gender awareness of future educators is crucial for promoting the value of equal opportunities.

Keywords

gender stereotypes, gender-sensitive education, teachers, students

Introduction

School plays an essential role in students' gender socialization and the development of their aspirations and images of their (future) role in society. Even though there have been attempts to promote gender-fair education for several decades, gender inequality in education is still globally prevalent. Teachers represent key actors who may foster or counteract gender inequality. Teachers tend to believe they treat children equally. However, research studies show they strengthen the stereotypical understanding of being a boy/man or a girl/woman. Teachers tend to have different expectations from male and female students, give other tasks to boys and girls and praise and discipline children for different behaviour (Kollmayer, Schober, & Spiel, 2018; Frawley, 2005; Mizala, Martínez, & Martínez, 2015). And even teachers who consider themselves liberal and open-minded or teachers who are aware of gender

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stereotypes may unconsciously perpetuate these stereotypes (Jarkovská, 2013; Gray, & Leith, 2004).

Specifically, in the Czech Republic, the education system faces several problems concerning gender equality: "horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the educational system, [...] unfair conditions and treatment of girls and boys during the process of education, insufficient acknowledgement of gender problems in curriculum and lessons, [...] sexual harassment in school facilities (The Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2014, p. 20)." Official strategic documents state that the gender-sensitive approach of teachers should be ensured. Therefore, teachers at all levels of education should be educated in the gender area and should receive methodical support. Nevertheless, many teachers and pre-service teachers lack gender awareness, and inequalities persist. No legal document regulating the education in pedagogy and teaching addresses the importance of gender awareness of (future) teachers. It means Czech universities providing teacher education are not obliged to strengthen gender competence of their students or to implement a strategy of gender mainstreaming. Provision of courses on gender-sensitive education and researching gender in education depends on the personal interest of individual scholars.

Educational and gender experts have advocated raising gender awareness of in-service and pre-service teachers and increasing their gender-sensitivity. Research demonstrates that courses in gender equity in education positively develop teacher candidates' attitudes towards gender issues (Erden, 2009). Or that a video-stimulated recall has the potential to increase teachers' self-reflection of their gendered behaviour within a classroom (Consuegra, Engels, & Willegems, 2016). However, there is a lack of understanding of how gaining a gender awareness perspective influences (future) teachers' professional and personal lives. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the process of gaining gender awareness from the perspective of eight pre-service teachers. They participated in a university elective course on gender-sensitivity within the pedagogical practice.

Research

My study draws on a three-year international project called *Towards Gender Sensitive Education* (TGSE), which aims to enhance gender sensitivity of current and future teachers. The TGSE project has been carried out by five organizations from Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Thanks to the project, I was able to establish with my colleague an elective one-term course on gender-sensitive education at my

faculty. In the autumn term, eleven students enrolled in the class. Nine of identifying themselves as women and two as men.

The course was taught following principles of feminist pedagogy and was based on group discussions, drama activities and mutual sharing. Topics such as sexual harassment, transgender, feminism, power, principles of gender-sensitive education were covered. The focus was on the development of students' self-reflection.

My study explores the students' experience with debunking gender stereotypes and gaining a gender-sensitive perspective to teaching. Therefore, I decided to apply the *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). One month after the end of the course, I conducted interviews with eight students who volunteered to participate in my research. As I am still in the process of the analysis, I can provide you only with my preliminary findings.

So far, I have identified four emergent themes which I named "Seeing the world with new eyes", "Challenges for relationships", "Experiencing resistance", "Self-control – use of language".

Seeing the world with new eyes

Participants started to see situations, which they would have overlooked before and became aware of gender inequality in different areas – in schools, leisure time activities but also in other spheres of their lives.

"For example, some advertisement or something on television. Before the course, I would not notice it, I would not care, but now, I say aha! It doesn't seem right; this is not how it should be. And I say it to people who are around me."

Some of the female students mentioned it was exciting and essential for them to have an opportunity to discuss gender topics with their male colleagues, as they did not have this opportunity before.

"Thanks to the people from the course, I found out not all men are dirty pigs. I thought my partners were the norm."...

Challenges for relationships

For some participants, the new gender perspective meant a challenge for their relationships – with father or with their partner. One participant realized she lived in a toxic relationship.

"I decided to break up with him."

"When my partner says something, he can mean it as fun, but I immediately argue – How can you say that? He is already totally allergic to this, and he always says – Come ooon, don't come to me with these genders"... "He says, since I have been attending the course, he has no more fun with me."

Other gender scholars observe a similar pattern; for example, Lahelma (2011).

Experiencing resistance

Some of the students found out how difficult it can be to counteract gender stereotypes. Even though some of the students themselves perceived notions of gender and feminism in negative connotations before the course, they were surprised how strong the resistance against this topic could be. One student described a situation when she reacted to a stereotypical statement of her friend. She wanted to say more about the course, but the friend refused to listen.

"I did not expect it, because I did not take the course personally so much... but when he refused to listen, when he said it is bullshit, I was touched, I was sad and angry, and I did not want to talk to them. I instead went to the restrooms."

Self-control – use of language

Newly gained gender awareness led to participants' self-control. They reflected not only on stereotypes created by others but also on their behaviour and especially the use of language. They found out how deep stereotypes are rooted and how it is difficult to change old habits. On the other hand, the use of language and the way they speak with their students or even friends was the first thing they tried to change.

"I pay more attention to what I say to people."

"I say something, and I realize – Wow, this was stereotypical."

"I did not think before it could harm somebody."

Discussion

A gender-sensitive approach to teaching is based on recognition of the importance of gender and awareness of the fact that our society is gender-structured, and gender order is present in the education process (Jarkovská, 2007). The critical

aspect of gender-sensitive education is self-reflection and the ability of teachers to look at their assumptions and bias regarding the gender identity of their students. Teachers should attempt to reflect on their stereotypical views (Haring & Mörth, 2009). In my opinion, teachers who can see inequality in their personal lives may be more willing to counteract stereotypes in class. Similarly, Gullberg and her colleagues argue that the way towards gender-aware or gender-sensitive teaching is represented by three necessary actions: the ability to detect gendered situation; the ability to self-reflect one's behaviour; and the ability to counteract stereotypical patterns (Gullberg, Andersson, Danielsson, Scantlebury, & Hussénus, 2018). Gender-sensitive education drawing on post-structural feminism refuse the idea of women/men as homogenous groups. It claims differences between female students can be as high as differences between female and male students. It is crucial to perceive gender in relation to other categories such as sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, or cultural and socio-economic background (Sinnes, 2006, Lahelma, 2014).

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