

GENDER IN TEXTBOOKS

© Orsolya KERESZTY
(Kaposvár University) & (University of Pécs)

keresztyorsolya@gmail.com

Scholarly works of education in Hungary usually fail to do gender-sensitive research. 'Gender studies' as a scientific field, approach or perspective is highly neglected in the field of education in Hungary. There have been several research studies focusing on gender roles in textbooks, too.

Keywords: textbook, public education, curriculum

The absence of research and available scientific data on gender issues in education, combined with a lack of gender awareness, knowledge and openness towards gender theory as a means of social criticism applicable in the fields of social sciences and pedagogy, allows actors in the field of education to claim that there are no gender inequalities and discrimination in schools and that the gender dimension is irrelevant in education. There have been several research studies focusing on gender roles in textbooks in Hungary. Researchers have shown that textbooks mostly represent the experiences of men and boys, which are considered as the norm in them. The experiences, ways of thinking and knowledge of girls mean something 'different' from that. This is problematic, because in this way very little and limited space is ascribed to women and girls, which also mean rendering invisible a large part of people's experience that is usually associated with women, though could be with both genders. My paper addresses the gendered dimension of textbooks as parts of the 'hidden' curriculum in the process of the formation of subject-specific skills and identities, focusing especially on elementary level textbooks, and particularly how the world represented in textbooks render prescribed, divided and unquestionable spheres for both boys and girls in the process of learning and knowledge production. Besides drawing on the relevant Hungarian and mostly English literature I argue that though there are some 'alternative' examples of gender representations in textbooks, which aim to differ from mainstream representations, these cannot be considered as a general and conscious practice yet. Traditional approaches of gender roles, the family and the educational situation dominate the textbooks.

Gender as a point of view and analytical category is not integrated in the pedagogical canon in the Hungarian context. My paper focuses on one field of education, namely textbooks in general, and five Hungarian grammar textbooks in particular, and addresses the question of equality/inequality of genders concerning the knowledge produced in them. The paper emphasizes the role of textbooks as parts of the 'hidden curriculum' in the process of the formation of subject-specific skills and identities, focusing especially on how education is highly gendered, and particularly how the world represented in textbooks related to subjects render prescribed, divided and unquestionable spheres for both boys and girls in the process of education.

Feminist Pedagogy

Éva Thun (2002) discusses in detail the position of Gender Studies and Women's Studies in Hungary. She finds that the integration process of Women's Studies and Gender Studies in the Hungarian higher educational system can only be described as a patchwork. There have been some courses related either to Gender Studies or to Women's Studies at some departments of the so called traditional disciplines, but their becoming an organic part of the system has not started yet. In spite of the individual efforts and initiatives of some professors, the environment of the university remains hostile towards Gender Studies and Women's Studies. Thun argues that this phenomena is due to the fact that the so called traditional environment of the university makes it difficult to discuss and construe the position of Gender Studies and Women's Studies in the academia. Presumably these circumstances contribute to the lack of source documentations and literature in these fields. Journals of different disciplines have published various papers related to Gender and Women's Studies, but these cannot be considered as continuous and repeated practices.¹

One of the main focuses of Feminist Pedagogy is how (un)equal power relations are reproduced in the classroom, and what can be done pedagogically to change it; therefore one task of Feminist Pedagogy is to problematize the processes and relations in the classroom. Feminist Pedagogy accepts and problematizes the work of power and difference in the classroom: Who speaks for whom? Who has the power and privilege to speak? In the process of knowledge production emphasis is laid on the validity of personal experiences and knowledge, since teachers and also students have texts, experiences, which might influence the transactions in the classroom, the learning-teaching process, and the construction of knowledge. Feminist Pedagogy aims to produce knowledge that does not accept the masculine subject of history as the basis of 'all truths'. Knowledge is based on diversity: the teaching-learning process is interactive, cooperative, democratic, integrates the possibilities of cognitive and affective learning, promotes activity, and accepts students as 'authors' (Thun, 1996). The realizations of the relationship between one's own point of view and the curriculum makes it possible for students to integrate different points of views, to reflect upon them, and to change them. The possible linking points between personal experiences and the curriculum is determined by the fact that the voices, experiences, and point of view of minorities, such as women are usually not included in the 'legitimate' and 'to be learnt' knowledge' in the view of the curriculum.

Feminist Pedagogy claims that in the learning and teaching process the teacher is not the neutral transmitter of knowledge, the students are not passive, and the constructed knowledge is not fixed and neutral (Weiner, 2004). Unlike Critical Pedagogies, Feminist Pedagogy does not accept the role of the teacher as an emancipator, because power - based on the definition of Michel Foucault - cannot be possessed, and therefore it is not possible to transfer; it always circulates. Every person exercises power, and at the same time undergoes power. In the classroom processes the teacher, the student, and the knowledge are inseparable; therefore the role of the teacher must be problematized too.

It is obvious that gender sensitive approaches and researches are always political, therefore always in the need of action and critical discourse. These

¹ There is only one institution, the Central European University that has established a Gender Studies department. The department offers education in English on a postgraduate level.

are not the sub-fields of pedagogical theory and practice, but should be integrated parts, which reconstruct and reinterpret existing statements, texts and results. It follows that the revision of those researches might be needed, which neglect gender as an analytical category.

The role of textbooks in the learning process

One focus of Feminist Pedagogy is the revision of existing curricula in every level of education; this includes textbook analysis, particularly focusing on gender representation, which is very stereotypical and biased. Concerning textbook analysis in the Hungarian context, it can be claimed that the pedagogical literature is gender-blind: works on education and psychology do not include gender as a point of view and analytical tool (Lassú, [2006]).

Textbooks represent the everyday life for children. They offer varieties of identities, interests, attitudes, and experiences that determine the position of the children. They represent the reading world, and are also important links between the school, parents and students. They show what it means to be a child in a particular context, which also contains learning the gender identity through socialization. In that process children learn the particular behaviors related to their genders, therefore textbooks are important in their gender socialization. Elementary level textbooks are considered as particularly important, since they contain the basic factual knowledge and skills children are supposed to acquire, which strongly influence their view of life, their gender socialization, and also the reproduction of gender inequalities and stereotypes in the society (Thun, 1996).

Textbooks are important devices in the educational process, which might instruct the teachers' work, also embody the subjects, and contain the knowledge and norms preferred by the school. The main aim of the textbooks is to form a subject-specific skill, and also as part of the 'hidden' curriculum to mediate the worldview, expectations and values of the society. The 'hidden' curriculum has an identity forming role, since it mediates the gender-specific expectations, norms and behaviors, and therefore it contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities in the society. Thus as part of the 'hidden' curriculum textbooks might transform, strengthen or diminish the developed and developing power relations both in the classroom and in the society. Apart from these another function of the textbook is to establish a general interest in the student towards the particular subject.

Textbooks embody and mark one part of the reality, and also contain patterns for arranging and selecting the infinite possible knowledge. What counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and battles among different groups with different competing interests and identities. Researches have shown that legitimate knowledge does not include the experiences and forms of expressions of those actors that have not been in powerful position throughout history, for example, women, or people of color, etc. (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991) Therefore the symbolic representations in the textbooks are connected to real power relations, and they might also represent differentiated social relations as natural and unquestionable (Sleeter & Grant, 1991).

We may raise two questions related to the above discussed problem areas. First in what way textbooks differentiate and modify the power relations in a classroom. The representations of the world in the textbooks mean particular choice of norms and expectations, and also interests, which might prefer certain form of knowledge, and render 'others' 'different'. The second

question is that if the experiences and interpretations that are constructed in these power relations provide enough identifying links and models for those students whose experiences are excluded from the 'legitimate knowledge'.

There have been several research studies focusing on gender roles in textbooks in Hungary (see for example Czachesz & Lesznyák & Molnár, 1996; Thun, 2001). Researchers have shown that textbooks mostly represent the experiences of men and boys, which are considered as the norm in them. The experiences, ways of thinking and knowledge of girls mean something 'different' from that. This is problematic, because in this way very little and limited space is ascribed to women and girls, which also mean rendering invisible a large part of people's experience that is usually associated with women, though could be with both genders (Czachesz & Lesznyák & Molnár, 1996).

The research that I present in this paper includes five elementary level textbooks, and concentrates on the analysis of gender roles in them².

- *Bacsó Mónika & Vas Zoltánné: Anyanyelvünk világa 3. I-II.* Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2002.
- *Adamikné Jászó Anna & Hangay Zoltán: Édes anyanyelvünk 4.* Dinasztia Kiadó, 1998
- *Csizmazia Sándor & Csizmazia Sándorné & Orosz Zsuzsa: Nyelvtan, helyesírás, fogalmazás 3-4.* Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2001.
- *Ketler Istvánné: Anyanyelvünk. Munkatankönyv 3.* Mozaik kiadó, Szeged, 2001.
- *Galgóczi Lászlóné: Magyar nyelv kisiskolásoknak 3.* Mozaik Oktatási Stúdió, Szeged, 1998. (G)

It can be generally said that boys outnumber girls and the genders are represented as hierarchical and stereotypical:

Textbook	Male	Female	Unknown
Ketler I.: Anyanyelvünk	68	51	6
Csizmazia et. al.: Nyelvtan, ...	87	64	2
Adamikné J. A.-Hangay: Édes...	158	49	2
Bacsó M-Vas Z.: Anyanyelvünk...	50 (47)	34 (1)	5
Galgóczi L.: Magyar nyelv...	83	20	1
Total	446 (493)	218 (219)	16

Basically due to the justification of my assumptions based on secondary literature, the general research questions were modified, and the focus was moved to the discussion and qualitative analysis of examples that did not fit the so-called mainstream representations of gender roles. Second, I also analyzed the members, activities, interactions, and surroundings of the families in textbooks. I will show the representations that attempt to present some 'alternative' approaches and definitions of the family.

Though there are some 'alternative' examples of gender representations, which aim to differ from mainstream representations, these cannot be considered as a general and conscious practice yet. 'Traditional' approaches of gender roles, the family and the educational situation dominate textbooks.

It can be generally claimed that the categories of gender and age are commonly the most important markers of a person in textbooks. In addition, the physical representation of the characters always makes the gender of the

² Soros Research Grant 819/A (2004). This paper includes a brief summary of the qualitative analysis of the research.

person evident. Boys and men are wearing trousers, have beard or moustache, and girls and women are wearing blouses and skirts, and usually have long hair. There is one example in the Bacsó-Vas textbook which can be considered as an exception. In one of the exercises students have to tell what the characters are speaking about based on a picture. No gender is marked in the picture; therefore children have to determine based on their previous experience and knowledge which gender to associate with the particular character.

In connection with the physical representations of the characters there is another example in the Bacsó-Vas textbook. On page 33 students have to collect characteristics and features of seven sporting wild boars. The representations of the wild boars are very differentiated, among which there is a so called 'too fat', 'too thin', 'too young', 'too old', 'too tall', etc. This type of varied representation does not occur in case of the representations of people, since most of the characters are one in the same height, weight, and same body shape. They are all 'white skinned', and belong to the middle class. Researches have pointed out that textbooks prefer humorous tales, and not human beings as characters, which are supposed to make the textbooks more interesting and attractive (Czachesz & Lesznyák & Molnár, 1996). This exercise is important because it may focus on the different and varied physical appearances people usually have in life. In the meantime though, it also means that less time is available for the representation of the genders in real situations.

In the Adamikné-Hangay textbook it is obvious from the first page that boys will outnumber girls, since the main characters in the textbook are six boys and their school teacher. They appear in all of the situations, represent the problematic cases, and interact with each other. The six boys are responsible for different grammatical topics in the textbook, and also are in rigid hierarchical relations with each other. For example, Péter is the director, without whom the others cannot do anything. This kind of discussion does not offer variety of identification for girls, which is crucial from the point of identity development.

Besides this, it is women who usually do the shopping, are at home doing the housework, or look after the elderly or children. Men are associated with more differentiated and varied activities. Therefore genders are ascribed strict and stereotypical spaces and activities, and are represented in a limited number of roles. The stereotypical repertoire is very problematic, since samples that represent the everyday life of children are missing from the textbooks, and therefore the textbooks cannot offer identifying and linking points for children, which can be a problem later on in their lives, for example in the choice of profession. It is also problematic that women are represented at home, since it may contradict the real-life experiences of children, which may also lead to contradictions attached to gender identity. It renders invisible the 'double burden' of women, which consists of paid labor in the public sphere and also unpaid work in the private sphere that is not considered as work. Since there are no alternative representations regarding gender roles in the employment sector, for example, the stereotypical representations that show women in the private sphere in limited situations are unquestionable and inaccessible.

Since textbooks consider the unit of the family as evident for a discussion basis of the characters, therefore it is important to discuss the different representations of the family that are present in the textbooks, and also ask the question that for whom these textbooks offer points or references of identifications. The particular representations make problematic the situation of children who cannot identify themselves with the family patterns

represented. Therefore the validity and reality of the particular family patterns are also questioned. The representations in the textbooks are centered upon the nuclear family, and in case the grandparents are shown for example, they are represented as characters that are looked after or need basic help. There are no stepmothers, stepsisters/brothers or the larger family. The family mostly consists of a father, a mother and one or two children. Each of the characters has rigid activities related to their roles in the family, for example in one activity it is said that: 'Mom has cooked delicious dinner. She asked Zita to lay the table. She put knives, forks and spoons on the table. I prepared the napkins. Our brother called daddy. The family sat around the table. Everybody liked the fried meat and the pea sauce. Then we ate some cake. I washed up after dinner. Mom took away the dishes.'

The Galgóczi textbook includes one example that might be considered as an 'alternative' approach to the family. This textbook uses two different approaches to the family. On the one hand the so called traditional appears, and on the other hand there are discussions of the family when there is a father and some children. In the second case the rigid boundaries may break up, and some other definitions or point of views might occur. For example, in one of the exercises there is a man (father), a boy and a girl in the picture. They are cooking together in the nature. Though the father does not take up the 'traditional' role of women, since his way of cooking outside and in the nature is highly exceptional in everyday life. Or in another example: 'Zsófi is playing in her room. Her sister is putting away the clothes. Daddy is preparing dinner in the kitchen.'

Conclusion

Connected to these previous examples Apple and Christian Smith have stated that nobody can be sure either that what is in the textbook is being taught in a lesson or what is being taught is actually learned in the lesson. Since based on their different identities, students have different experiences about the world, which strongly influence their interpretations, and rejections of texts, social relations and 'legitimate knowledge' (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). Therefore each student has unique interpretations about the world, texts and the classroom activities, based on their individual and collective identities. Sleeter and Grant (1991) have shown that there cannot be an 'ideal' textbook that is able to include all points of views, but the solution would be if students learned to problematize and critically interpret the world and norms in textbooks. The emphasis is on the possible plural interpretations of each text, and therefore on making sure that space is provided for interpretations based on different power relations and identities.

References

- APPLE, Michael W. & CHRISTIAN-SMITH, Linda K. (Eds) (1991): *The Politics of the Textbook*: Routledge, New York & London.
- CZACHESZ, Erzsébet & LESZNYÁK, Márta & MOLNÁR, Katalin Edit (1996): Lányok és nők a kötelező olvasmányokban, tankönyvekben. *Educatio*, 3, pp. 417-430.
- LASSÚ, Zsuzsa F. [2006]: Hagyományos és modern női szerepek az iskolában. *Szabadpart*, 9. <http://www.kodolanyi.hu/szabadpart/szam9/lassu.html> [09.12.2009]
- SLEETER, C. E. & GRANT, C. A. (1991): *Race, Class, Gender and Disability in Current Textbooks*. In: Apple, Michael W. & Christian-Smith, Linda K. (Eds.): *The Politics of the Textbook*. Routledge, New York & London, pp. 78-110.

- THUN, Éva (1996): Hagymányos Pedagógia - Feminista Pedagógia. *Educatio*, 3, pp. 404-416.
- THUN, Éva (2001): *Gender Representation in Educational Materials in the Period of Transition in Hungary*. In: Webber, S. & Liikanen, I. (Eds.): *Education and Civic Culture in Post-Communist Countries*. Houndmills, New York, pp. 124-141.
- THUN, Éva (2002): A nőtudomány és a társadalmi nemek tudománya I-II. *Magyar Felsőoktatás*, 3, pp. 50-51.; 4, pp. 47-48.
- WEINER, Gaby (2004): *Learning from Feminism: Education, Pedagogy and Practice*. In: *Beyond Access: Pedagogic Strategies for Gender Equality and Quality Basic education in Schools*. Conference, 2-3 Feb, 2004, Nairobi, Kenya.