

# Reading Gender: Cases of Social Representation and Curricular Interpretation

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## Introduction

In this article, I will focus on the concept of curriculum and especially hidden curriculum. I see the latter as a “site” where social and cultural contradictions and rigid representations are most likely to be at work. I will also touch upon the problem of research in the sphere of education and gender. Finally, I will present a section of the mapping of potentially problematic spots in primary education curricula in Slovenia<sup>1</sup> through the concept of hidden curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Slovenia is undergoing a process of school reform in which two of the most prominent features are the extension of compulsory education from 8 to 9 years and lowering the school entering age from age 7 to 6. The reform is being introduced gradually, starting in the 1999/2000 school year in a limited sample of schools. By the 2008/2009 school year, all the schools should be implementing the new 9-year compulsory education cycle. Other new features are, for instance, descriptive assessment in the three years, earlier foreign language teaching, wider opportunities for subject choice and flexible diversification in the last three-year cycle.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of curricular analysis see Vendramin, 2004a, which presents the review of general curriculum framework documents, done for International Bureau of Education (UNESCO), on behalf of the Education for All Monitoring team. In the forefront here are a hidden curriculum and conceptual work, not a comprehensive analysis of the curricula.

To start by way of anecdotal evidence: I have participated in the in-service training for pre-school teachers in Slovenia for some years, and the question of sexual difference and/or discrimination on these grounds was almost invariably received with surprise. The comments went along the following lines: in our society there is no gender discrimination; we have other (i.e. more acute and more difficult) problems to tackle; boys will be boys and girls will be girls. Similarly Eva D. Bahovec (in Bahovec and Bregar Golobič, 2004, p. 13) writes that when adopting the new preschool curriculum there were quite a few objections to the proposed mentioning of the rights of girls. The main opposing argument was that in our (Slovene) school system there is no discrimination on the basis of gender, and that boys and girls are treated equally. It is precisely this “unquestionableness”, this self-evidence, that can be very revealing.

Kodelja, for example, who is working on the concept of justice in education, says that “the discrimination of girls is taking place on the basis of the belief that differences [i.e. between boys and girls] exist and not on the basis of any actual

differences” (Kodelja, 2003, p. 77). This aspect very often seems to be brushed aside or not problematized at all.

### **Which Boys? Which Girls? Which Methods?**

Educational analyses in the field of curriculum and pedagogy, as well as the structuring of education and politics that ignore gender, leave unanswered, if not altogether hidden, some important questions (i.e. questions of authority, language, power, etc.) and work against the equality of boys and girls. On the other hand, the educational research is often interested in the (supposed) differences between the achievement of boys and the achievement of girls. Such differences are based on statistical significance and are (too) often taken as “real”, which, in turn, presents a basis for all sorts of claims (both scientific and common sense) about girls and women.

Quantitative research no doubt has its role, place and significance, and it can complement qualitative research work in the field of education and gender to a certain extent.<sup>3</sup> However, at a certain point it can grow into an inadequately reflected and somewhat ill-founded “positivism of hard fact” in contrast with “soft data” of the more interpretative tradition of the social sciences (Walkerdine, 1989, p. 12–13). The result is a reification<sup>4</sup> of the categories “girl” and “boy” that produces “explanations which favour sex-

specific characteristics, so that more complex analyses of masculinity and femininity are impossible” (ibid., p. 13).

New Zealand researchers Alton-Lee and Praat (2001, p. 11) have asked themselves the following questions regarding the differences in the performance of boys and girls: *gender gaps in achievement: which boys? which girls? which gaps?* They stress as well that it is important to remember that gender differences are usually mean differences, and therefore they do not reflect the reality for all individuals within the group of boys or group of girls studied. Besides, gender differences in achievement are generally small compared to the significant overlap in achievement between both groups.

One short and incomplete methodological bypass is in order here to shed some light on the problem of qualitative versus quantitative research and to explain why quantitative research cannot be the only legitimate method in the field of gender. One of the reasons is no doubt that differences between scores of girls and boys can be statistically significant, but not necessarily educationally significant as well (Walkerdine, 1989, pp. 15–16). That is why I have chosen the concept of hidden curriculum (to which I will return shortly) as the most indicative element of the subtle discrimination on the basis of gender, which relates primarily to qualitative research.

As suggested by one of the most important theorists in the field of epistemology and feminist theory, Donna Haraway, the “curious and inescapable term ‘objectivity’” (Haraway, 1991, p. 183) needs to be questioned. She opts for a different (feminist), embodied and accountable objectivity, because, as she says, we do not need “a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be

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<sup>3</sup> The issue of interpretation of statistical data is too large to be dealt with here and it would necessarily cause too much digression. See for example Walkerdine, 1989, and Gould, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Reification, according to Gould (1996) is a tendency to convert an abstract notion (such as intelligence) into a hard entity (such as the quantity of measurable brain matter).

held responsible to something ...” (ibid., pp. 194 and 187). This, among other things implies situated knowledge, that which reflects a perspective of the subject (partial, limited, not universal) that is aware of its own limitations. “There is no way to ‘be’ simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (subjugated) positions structured by gender, race, nation and class. And that is a short list of critical positions,” says Haraway (ibid., p. 193).

This is very much opposed to the tradition of Western science, built on positivism or the epistemology of fact. The social position is frequently deemed insignificant because all knowledge is supposed to be “out there” waiting to be discovered regardless of the social dimension. The feminist research paradigm on the other hand emphasizes the social location of the subject and the social construction of knowledge. In other words, there is no universal truth, only partial and context-bound truths (Nagy Hesse-Biber et al., in Nagy Hesse-Biber and Yaiser, p. 14 sq.).

Scientific discourse is a struggle for what will count as common knowledge. And feminism too is a struggle for common knowledge, a struggle over what will count as rational accounts<sup>5</sup> of the world, struggles over how to see (Haraway, 1991, p. 194).

## Reading the Curriculum

So, to return to the educational context, it seems that sexual difference is (outside of women’s studies and feminist theory) often conceived as something unimportant or no longer important, which is a part of the same rhetoric of omission or ignorance. This “blindness” of educational

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<sup>5</sup> “Rational knowledge is power-sensitive conversation” (King, cit. in Haraway, 1991, p. 196).

analyses need not only be supplemented by a “feminist perspective”, which can be broadly defined as a critical perspective of the gendered social space,<sup>6</sup> but also by challenging hierarchical modes of creating and distributing knowledge and critically viewing traditional knowledge-building statements that argue for “universal” truths. In the field of education this presupposes reflection on at least two levels: analyses of sexism and stereotypes in school, curricular materials, etc., and with analyses of the representation of gender in society together with the theory of how this comes into being and how it is perpetuated.

The analysis of curricular materials, which brings to the forefront the issues relevant for consideration of difference of all girls and boys in school and for the effectiveness of the learning process and performance,<sup>7</sup> can start with the following suppositions: that the materials in question are not simply “‘delivery systems’ of ‘facts’”, they show traces of political, economic and cultural activities, battles and compromises (Apple, 1992, p. 51), and that there are no neutral or disinterested educational practices; no practices are divorced from the context of power relations (ibid., p. 70). Although “ideological reading” is not simple, because “texts do not always mean or communicate what they say” (Luke, cit. in Apple, 1993, p. 67) and the readers may or may not read “against the grain”, one can develop strategies that help us to (better) understand ideological processes in which the meaning is formed and transformed.

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<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting that there might be a single feminist standpoint.

<sup>7</sup> Gender equality in education should be defined as “a basic right as well as pedagogical issue” (as e.g. said in 1994 Swedish curriculum, reported by Gray and Leith, 2004, p. 14).

The curriculum as the way to envision the possible is thus an important source of knowledge about the social world and has an impact on the individual's orientation within it, legitimizing certain values, perspectives, views of the world, etc. It defines what pupils will experience. But the strongest messages that pupils get are not the messages mediated by the "explicit" curriculum and its content matter, but the so-called hidden curriculum.

### **Gender – Hidden (in) Curriculum**

The concept of a hidden curriculum is often said to be too lax, not sufficiently defined nor easily graspable. That is precisely why its application is all the more appropriate to investigate the issue of gender in education. It allows one to cover a broad range of aspects of everyday life in kindergartens and schools. It is a concept which relates to curricular knowledge or subject content that is not solely "academic" (e.g. mathematics, history, etc.), but includes personal and social knowledge as well. The hidden curriculum is about social relations and everyday practices; the relations to what is being taught, i.e. academic knowledge, accompanied by the whole web of our assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and expectations about the world, which usually remain implicit and unexamined. All this is transmitted "invisibly", "tacitly", "unknowingly". That is why the hidden curriculum can be considered the other of the curriculum and has to do with the issues of meaning, knowledge, interpretation and truth (Bregar Golobič, in Bahovec and Bregar Golobič, 2004, p. 16 sq., p. 19).

In other words, the school (one of Althusser's ideological state apparatuses) transmits not only ideology as content, as shown in the contents of curricula and textbooks, but also ideology as form. Curriculum is, according to James Donald,

ideological, not in the sense that it "fills" our heads with different ideas, but in the sense that it establishes hierarchical relations amongst different forms of knowledge and enables such characteristics to appear as natural. It does not only discriminate among different forms of knowledge but among people as well (Donald, 1992, p. 176).

It is a contextualized social process that encompasses both subject matter and social organization and their interrelations. So social organization and patterns of interaction, and this is of particular importance here, provide a setting for academic activities that can either extend or constrain learning opportunities (see also Curriculum Approaches and Definitions).

The author who "discovered" the concept of hidden curriculum is Phillip W. Jackson; it all started with *Life in Classrooms* (first published in 1968!). Jackson speaks of several key words that help to describe "the facts of life" to which pupils must adapt and that are omnipresent in school life. These are: crowds, praise and power. So where does the hidden curriculum "show up"? Jackson gives the following example: pupils in elementary classrooms are often required to wait their turn and to delay their actions, which is one of the consequences of living in a crowd. Waiting can sometimes be beneficial, sometimes in vain, says Jackson. The raised hand is sometimes ignored, the question to the teacher sometimes brushed aside, the permission sought sometimes refused. Things often have to be this way because not everyone can be heard, not every question answered and requests granted. It is probably true that all those denials are trivial when considered individually. But if they are considered cumulatively, their significance increases regardless of whether they are justified or not.

So how does all this apply to the question of gender?

There might be no discrimination visible “at first glance”, but as a hidden curriculum there remain several mechanisms characteristic of the school as the institution of the modern age. In the organization of everyday life this means ways of communication and interaction with pupils and, for example, the use of praise and reproof: perhaps a certain kind of behaviour is seen as not becoming for girls, but tolerated in boys; perhaps girls are not expected to handle equipment or are not granted as much time with the computers, etc. as are boys.

Hand in hand with this go the notions of “activity” versus “passivity” and “true understanding” versus “rote learning”, which are being produced by psychological knowledge and educational practice “about how the lack of success of girls is a matter of deficient sense for mathematics and logical reasoning, whereas boys are the supposed holders of true understanding and mathematical knowledge” (Bahovec, 1996, p. 113). Similarly, boys’ lack of conformity is considered more interesting than girls’ concern with doing the right thing (see Gray and Leith, 2004, p. 4).

## The Case of Slovenia

The starting points for primary education curricula research and the issue of gender equality in the educational system in Slovenia were: despite declared equality there still exist subtle points of discrimination or unequal opportunities in education; beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of teachers can, together with biased curriculum, which, for instance, pictures women and girls in traditional roles with “typically” female characteristics, hinder the education of girls in

various aspects and work against gender equality. As much importance should be given to teachers’ interpretations of curricula and their interaction with pupils. Without clear guidelines teachers are left to devise strategies that can reinforce stereotypes (see also Gray and Leith, 2004, p. 13).

Such analysis can be considered the first step towards the comprehensive mapping of potentially “problematic” points in curricular materials. It goes along the following lines: if and to what extent do the curricula make a break with the traditional representations of men and women; how do they challenge “commonsensical” assumptions; to what extent can they be said to be self-critical (i.e. that they themselves envisage the possible problematic issues) and proactive, in short, how are the goals and priorities of gender equality “translated” into curricula?

I will quote some examples that have drawn my attention, either in a positive sense (self-reflexivity, “different” perspective, untraditional representations) or from the point of view of hidden curriculum and inner inconsistency of curriculum (introductory principles that are not realized explicitly in the curriculum itself, etc.) or unreflected commonsensical assumptions and official knowledge that should be surpassed.<sup>8</sup> This is consistent with Jackson’s “motto”: “Behind the ordinary lies the extraordinary,” (Jackson, 1990, p. xix) and the will to see things the other way around (cit. in Gilbert, 1989, p. 62). Let us look, for example, at the curriculum for *Home Economics*: “The family is undoubtedly a source of all human resources”, or

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<sup>8</sup> I am well aware that a critical perspective cannot only include the curriculum, but also a wider scientific field (e. g. a medical speech about menstruation or one-sided cultural-historic perspectives).

“Everybody has a home and family”.<sup>9</sup> So the principal method can be described as the juxtaposition of the official version of social reality, social and political relations, history and conceptual categories with alternative views of social, economic and political culture (Luke, 1988, p. 27).

To start with the principles determining the general theoretical framework and theoretical background, let us first take a look at *White Paper* as a basic document of education and school reform in Slovenia. *White Paper* brings important insights (only the points which are the most relevant for the issue dealt with here are presented):

- It speaks of equal opportunities and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, social and cultural background, religion, nationality, physical and psychological condition, etc. The rights of the girl child are mentioned in the context of the rights of the child. It is pointed out that the stress should shift from formal to substantive rights.
- The hidden curriculum (also defined as ideology as form), its persistence and invisibility, is referred to. Subtle power mechanisms, typical of school as an institution of the modern age (e.g. the organization of school life), teaching practices, communication, etc. are brought to the forefront.
- “[...] discussions on children’s rights should specifically refer to the *rights of girls* and the contradictory nature of the idea of equal opportunities in a system of education in which the members of one sex are

still privileged in one way or another. With the introduction of coeducation, discrimination at school level was apparently eliminated, but more subtle power mechanisms typical of school as a contemporary institution (such as the organization of school life, concrete teaching practice and styles, communication between pupils and teachers, etc.) teaching girls ‘how to lose’ are still preserved in the form of the ‘hidden curriculum’” (*White Paper*, pp. 40–41).

In principle, almost all curricula reviewed seem to adapt to gender differences and introduce equality in the context of one or more keywords: education for tolerance, intercultural education, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, social differences, human rights, solidarity, etc.

Let us list a few examples (the list is illustrative, not exhaustive):

- the school should contribute to breaking stereotypes and eliminating prejudices (*Religion and Ethics*, an optional subject);
- the pupils become aware of the problem of resistance to difference, stereotypes (*Philosophy for Children*, an optional subject);
- we will “stress human values such as tolerance to difference, equality of relationships between sexes...” (*German*, optional and compulsory subject).

It can be concluded that on the declarative or surface level the curricula do not betray any vivid preconceptions with gender roles. However, a majority of them do not provide concrete examples of how to avoid stereotyping and when it may occur. They, in fact, present some views as “natural” or common-sense. For example, in sex education, as a part of the *Biology* curriculum there is no mention of “gender” as a cultur-

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<sup>9</sup> All the translations from curricula are the author’s and unofficial.

ally or socially relevant category. The curriculum supposedly “sticks to the facts”, but the “facts” about sexuality are far from obvious and can lead to inadequate and misleading ideas and attitudes towards women’s bodies.<sup>10</sup>

Although the curricula anticipate talking about different types of families, equal participation in parliament, different types of sexual behaviour, HIV, etc., they do not specify on what level and in what kind of discourse this should be done in the classroom.

By way of another anecdotal evidence (reported in Rédai, 2003, p. 28): when adopting the curriculum for the subject *Society*, a feminist, specialised in the sociology of the family, intended to introduce the topic of divorce, which raised protests in the commission. She also wished to include the issue of sexual orientation, which caused the whole commission to turn against her. In the course of revising the draft, a petition demanding the omission of the topic of homosexuality was signed by over 30 teachers and sent to the Ministry of Education and the commission. Eventually a compromise was reached: homosexuality is included in the curriculum as an aspect of inequality between people, but not very emphatically, just as something to be either dealt with or not.

The level of the hidden curriculum reveals a slightly different image, which can be described, at least, as the absence of a proactive approach. In my view only one curriculum (for the subject *Environment and Me*) deals with the gender dimension in a distinctly proactive way, which means it includes cautions against using preconceptions such as: girls are beautiful, cry-babies; boys are strong, do not cry, etc. It also cautions

against using sexual stereotypes when discussing different professions and suggests introducing “non-typical” professions along the gender lines:

The examples of activities: [...] we present to pupils some professions (typical as well as non-typical, like my mother the researcher, the policewoman, the manager; or my father the preschool teacher, teacher, cook, pilot).

The “Recommendations in Special Didactics” for the second grade of this curriculum puts it this way:

In directive conversations and when talking about photos, attention should be given to developing a climate of cooperation between boys and girls, and not of exclusion in group work and games...

Although this is very general (not all examples can be given here), and while the curricula differ somewhat in structure at differing levels of specificity, there is a possibility to be more detailed on these issues and to avoid (inadvertent) stereotyping, as proven in the curriculum mentioned above.

## Concluding Remarks

The review showed that some subjects are more marked by socially dominant themes than others (family, body, privacy, etc.). Such content can be said to have gender potential; they have the necessary framework for implicit or explicit gender sensitivity and can be used as entry points for gender-fair politics (Miroiu, 2004, p. 86).

One of the possibilities is to develop and standardize the so called Recommendations in Special Didactics (RSD), which are a part of almost all the curricula. RSD are, for now, understood very differently. Some RSD are about learning methods, goals, use of equipment, manner of work (in groups or individually, etc.). Oth-

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<sup>10</sup> For a more thorough account of these problems, see Diorio and Munro, 2000.

ers define “sensitive” themes and advise the pedagogical staff how to deal with them in order to avoid discrimination and interference with privacy. In short, RSD by all means leave enough space for recommendations in relation to themes, such as AIDS, sexual diseases (in *Biology*) or family (in *Society, Environment and Me* and elsewhere). RSD can attend to stereotypical assumptions that are not acceptable.

The topics listed above, together with gender equality, should not (only) be dealt with separately, independently, as a theme within a subject (e. g. *Civic Education, History, Society*). Rather, they should be “part and parcel” of all themes, subjects and everyday communication because this is where ideology is the most persistent and where the influence of the hidden curriculum is most profound. That is why the recommendations on a general level (education for tolerance, respect for difference, even gender equality, etc.) are insufficient. Although an important step and found as a general introduction in nearly all curricula, they are easily relegated to a catchphrase of the reform and broader academic debates in Slovenia.

At the same time one must be aware of the fact that curricular materials can have uncertain and unpredictable effects on how pupils understand themselves and their social relations. The

pupils are not just “collectors” of social patterns encountered at home or in broader society. This, in accordance with modern conceptualizations of education<sup>11</sup> as a process full of conflicts, cannot be stressed enough. In other words, there is no clean-cut operation through which the social enters the psychic (Bahovec, 1993, p. 10); hence, “schooling cannot be adequately explained either by the psychological narrative of development or by the sociological narrative of socialization” (Donald, 1992a, p. 47).

Thus it is not a simple matter of presenting alternative versions of reality. Nonetheless, it can be claimed that “materials which are heavily invested with socially dominant themes are likely to have broadly predictable effects on the majority of pupils” (Diorio and Munro, 2000, p. 351). So, there are ways in which schools can make a positive contribution.

The potential of curricular critiques on levels of form and content lies precisely in sensitizing the educational consciousness to ideological practices: those that are hidden, not so easily detectable and extremely persistent. Where the “webs” (of prejudice, preconceptions, common sense) in which we are entangled are invisible to us, their effect is all the more powerful.

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<sup>11</sup> That is conceptualizations, based predominantly on psychoanalysis: education as one of the Freud’s “impossible professions”.

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### List of Relevant Web Pages

See:

– the list and links to all the curricula for primary school and other relevant information about the school reform (in Slovene): <http://www.mszs.si/slo/ministrstvo/organi/solstvo/viprogrami/os/default.asp>

– the list and links to all the curricula for compulsory subjects (in Slovene): [http://www.mszs.si/slo/ministrstvo/organi/solstvo/viprogrami/os/9letna/ucni\\_nacrti/skupni\\_predmeti.asp](http://www.mszs.si/slo/ministrstvo/organi/solstvo/viprogrami/os/9letna/ucni_nacrti/skupni_predmeti.asp)

– the list and links to all the curricula for optional subjects (in Slovene): [http://www.mszs.si/slo/ministrstvo/organi/solstvo/viprogrami/os/9letna/ucni\\_nacrti/izbirni\\_predmeti.asp](http://www.mszs.si/slo/ministrstvo/organi/solstvo/viprogrami/os/9letna/ucni_nacrti/izbirni_predmeti.asp)

– more information on school reform (in English): <http://www.mszs.si/eng/education/system/reforms.asp>

– The White paper (in English): <http://www.mszs.si/eng/ministry/publications/white/>

## LYČIŲ SKIRTUMAI: SOCIALINIŲ REPREZENTACIJŲ PROGRAMŲ INTERPRETACIJA

**Valerija Vendramin**

Santrauka

Straipsnyje iškeliama aktuali lyčių ugdymo problema. Autorė siekia ne tik išanalizuoti lyčių skirtumus, bet ir atskleisti jų diskriminacijos apraiškas, slypinčias Slovėnijos švietimo sistemoje, o ypač išryškinti jų atspindį Slovėnijos ugdymo turinyje. Pastebėtina, kad lyčių skirtumai aptariami vadovaujantis feministine ir pozityvistine gnoseologija. Autorė pabrėžia, kad būtent feministinė teorija leidžia nuodugniau ir objektyviau ištirti ignoruojamus edukacinius lyčių ugdymo aspektus.

Pasitelkusi šią teoriją, autorė analizuoja Slovėnijos mokyklos ugdymo turinį. Pateikdama turinio analizę lyčių skirtumų aspektu, atskleidžia nemažai lyčių diskriminacijos atvejų. V. Vendramin nuomone, nepaisant deklaruojamos lyčių lygybės, ugdymo turinyje, taip pat visoje Slovėnijos švietimo sistemoje galima aptikti lyčių nelygybės ir diskriminacijos apraiškų. Tačiau šias apraiškas ji linkusi vadinti „paslėptomis“. Antra vertus, „paslėptų“ lyčių diskriminacijos apraiškų aptinkama ne vien ugdymo turinyje, bet ir kasdienėje veikloje bei visoje pedagoginėje praktikoje.

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