

CURRICULUM AS A “SAFETY NET”? SOME INTERVENTIONS INTO REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER(S)

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Abstract

The aim of this contribution is to provide conceptual tools to challenge some of the existing frameworks of thought with regard to (re)presentations of gender(s), and to use this “challenging” approach in a curricular analysis. The basic starting point is rooted in feminist epistemology: the concept of “situated knowledges” enables us to problematize the subject and object of knowledge, and to argue for the non-innocence of all knowledge claims. This, among other things, entails, first, (self)reflexivity in the process of knowledge construction, second, importance of epistemic responsibility, and, third, the recognition of marginalized subjects. In the author’s opinion, these insights are the precondition for educational analyses where another dimension plays a role – the dimension of knowledge transmission through educational (didactic) materials – which also means taking into account the construction and transmission of official knowledge and, at the same time, the need to develop a critical stance toward “universal” truths. This involves developing awareness that a school curriculum is not neutral knowledge, but instead the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among various social groups that construct what society has acknowledged as legitimate and truthful (as stated by Michael Apple). The author then presents some findings from an analysis of a small sample of Slovenian primary school curricula. The main objectives were to reflect on the representations of gender in the field of education, to confront this “official” version with alternative views, and to ascertain where the discrepancies between the two were at their greatest. The results show that gender sensitivity in Slovenian curricula today is, in a so-called postfeminist era, lower than twenty years ago and that the dimension of gender sensitivity is on the verge of non-existence. One “safety net” against exclusions and silences should be curricula with precisely defined contents and emancipatory knowledge brought to the forefront.

Keywords: Representation of Gender, Curricular Analysis, Knowledge Transmission, Power Relations

1 INTRODUCTION

My theoretical starting point concerns the interventions of women's studies and feminist theory in the field of education. I will highlight some concepts that are, in my opinion, a prerequisite for a relevant analysis of textbooks or curricular materials in a wider sense. The fundamental – epistemological – concept proposed here is that of “situated knowledges” with the help of which I will problematize the subject and object of knowledge, and argument for the non-innocence of knowledge claims (Haraway, 1991, p. 305). In general and in connection to the theme at the forefront here, i.e. representations of gender and/or gender sensitivity in curricula, this would mean, firstly, paying attention to (self)reflexivity in the process of knowledge construction, secondly, bringing the importance of epistemic responsibility and empowerment to the fore, and, thirdly, recognizing marginalized subjects that are divested of the status of those who know, i.e. inappropriate/d others (this concept was developed by Trinh T. Minh-ha and it refers, in short, to the networks of multicultural, ethnic, racial, national, and sexual actors emerging since World War II) (Gržinić, 1998).

School curriculum does not present neutral knowledge; this knowledge is the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among various social groups (Apple, 1992, p. 70). Every selection always involves exclusion, and the blind spots can be as telling as the contents that are included, as what has been explicitly said. A curriculum is part of a selective tradition and can (and does) marginalize or

underrepresent women, or others who have no influence, and their social and cultural contributions. According to Janja Žmavc and Igor Ž. Žagar in their analysis of the concept of Europe in various Slovenian textbooks (Žmavc and Žagar, 2011, p. 12), it is precisely institutional context where language uses are going on together with the specific (i.e. educational) nature of pedagogical discourse that enable the confirmation, explanation and naturalization of ideological, “in-this-moment” valid and political or otherwise problematic thematizations.

I am approaching the subject from a wider methodological/epistemological perspective, which is at the same time focused on researching specific themes and pays attention to relevant approaches or emphases in curricular analyses.

2 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To begin with, I wish to dwell a bit more on the process of acquiring knowledge with the help of feminist epistemology and some of its postulates, especially the concept of “situated knowledges”. Research into the connections between gender-based oppression and the practices of searching for knowledge has led to the realisation that the legitimization of knowledge claims is intimately tied to the networks of domination and exclusion (Lennon and Whitford, 1994, p. 1). The purpose of the project of feminist epistemology is, in brief, to explain the connections between the construction of knowledge, and social and political interests. This approach makes the problematization of the subject and object of knowledge possible, and argues, as said before, for the non-innocence of all knowledge claims. In other words, this means thinking about a vision that initiates the problems of responsibility (Haraway, 1991, p. 190).

Here the question of ignorance inevitably comes to the fore as a prominent epistemological issue. Ignorance is not symmetrical pole of knowledge as there is asymmetry between knowledge and ignorance. Ignorance is not a lack, but rather a substantive epistemic practice (e.g. wilful ignorance or socially acceptable but faulty justificatory practices) and not a neglectful epistemic practice. As such it differentiates the dominant group (Alcoff, 2007, pp. 39-40, 47-48). It is the active exclusion of what one does not wish to know. What we do not know is not only a gap in knowledge (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007, pp. 1-2), it is often constructed, sustained and disseminated in connection with authority – the transfer of knowledge, doubt, trust, silencing and uncertainty. It appears in a variety of forms: sometimes those in the centre refuse to allow the marginalized to know, sometimes the centre is ignorant of injustice, sometimes these “unknowledges” are consciously produced, while at other times they are unconsciously generated and supported (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007, pp. 1-2). “The cognitive norms that produce ignorance as an effect of substantive epistemic practice”, as explained by Linda Martín Alcoff, are those that naturalize and dehistoricize both the process and product of knowing, such that no political reflexivity or sociological analysis is considered to be required or even allowable (Alcoff, 2007, p. 56).

This leads us to the problem of the knowing subject – who is not watching or perceiving from “nowhere”, since, in this way, the subject would be located outside of time and space; it would watch and see “from above”, while being invisible. Donna Haraway metaphorically insists, as she says herself, on the particularity and embodiment of all vision (Haraway, 1991, p. 189). As Miranda Fricker states, we cannot step off the ship onto to some neutral *terra firma* (Fricker, 1994, p. 107). We are not external observers of the world.

In other words, a knowing subject is not external to social relations but is constituted by them; knowledge is not an objective mirror of the external world, as social practices (co)construct it (Campbell, 2004, p. 14). In this conceptual framework, descriptions of the world are not based on the logic of “discovery”, i.e. simply finding what was already there, but on the power-charged social relation of “conversation” and the awareness of the interpretations and representations that form part of this (Haraway, 1991, p. 198; Šribar and Vendramin, 2012, pp. 125-126).

It therefore would appear that situated knowledges, one of the basic tenets of feminist epistemology, are a good place to begin this study. Situated knowledges are ways of knowing that are self-reflective with regard to the material, historical and social conditions under which they came into being (Prins, 1995, p. 354) (bearing in mind that there are limits to human self-reflectivity and self-critical capacity).

Partiality can therefore be understood as recognition of the essentially “situated” nature of knowledge and our epistemic limitations, where the pretension of a perfect and only one correct view is gone. This partiality (seeing things from a situated perspective) is of central importance because feminist policy can no longer be based on a central, universal and common identity as women; a different form of solidarity or affinity must replace this notion. The political and methodological imperative is therefore not to eclipse the perspectives of others (Fricker, 1994, pp. 101, 103). The nature of knowledge is no longer determined by the methodologies

and data legitimated by dominant cultures (Schutte, cit. in Code, 2000, p. 69). In other words, situatedness and partiality enable greater “objectivity”, which is not as much of a paradox as it seems at first glance. According to Shirley Pendlebury: “Objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account” (Pendlebury, 2005, p. 53) This does not mean inevitably to go down “the slippery slope of subjectivism” or relativism according to the “anything goes” principle. It means, however, transcending the story “that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something” (Haraway, 1991, p. 187).

The tendency toward universality is not only present in “traditionalist” approaches – feminist theory itself has stumbled upon the paradox of universality and rethought it in some contexts, above all issues which have been thematized by postcolonial feminist theory. Essentialisms such as the Third World woman were particularly subjected to criticism. It has been shown not only that generalizations need to be fought with, but also that these generalizations are hegemonic, i.e. they represent the problems of privileged women as being paradigmatic women’s issues (Narayan, 1998, p. 86).

The question nevertheless remains as to how fractured the image of the universalist category of “Woman” is and how, if at all, feminist theories and political agendas are responsive to the difference in women’s lives. Do they offer a reflection of “Western culture” and its various Others accordingly (Narayan, 1998, pp. 87, 88)? In other words, how (if at all) do they contribute to the de-Westernisation of the universal subject and the de-hegemonization of the knowledge produced by the privileged elites of female intellectuals (Vidmar-Horvat, 2013)?

3 CURRICULAR CONTENT ANALYSIS

All the aforementioned insights are in my opinion extremely important for educational analyses. Attention needs to be devoted to the construction and transmission of official knowledge, and, at the same time, a commitment should be made to critically evaluating “universal” truths. As far as “universal” truths and their (re)presentations in curricular materials are concerned, we do not speak here about the “delivery systems of facts”, we speak about particular ways of choosing from and organizing a vast universe of possible knowledge, and about making of what society has acknowledged as legitimate and truthful (Apple, 1992, p. 51).

For the purpose of this paper, the main objectives are to reflect on the representations of gender(s) in the field of education, to face “official” version with alternative views, and to find out where the discrepancies are the greatest. This procedure would facilitate a presentation of didactic recommendations/guidelines based on up-to-date research concepts.

On a qualitative level attention must be devoted to the categories/representations that are marked by gender bias, which are either presented as gender-neutral or circumvent gender or gendered perspective altogether. On a quantitative level, a curricular analysis must pay attention to the missing data on women (Metso and Le Feuvre, 2006, p. 12). I leave aside the dilemma concerning the primacy of qualitative or quantitative methods and their different epistemological positions, but it must be noted that (larger or smaller) quantitative data sets do not necessarily address important questions about the lives of girls or women.

Surely the methods used must be devised for a specific purpose and defined so as to meet particular research questions. It has become increasingly clear that methods themselves are a means of knowledge co-construction and that researchers can construct different ways of understanding by using different methods or can become more open to the issues that matter to participants and not just to the research project itself. The definition that methods are simply a set of techniques that are applied to the research matter has been abandoned (Smart, 2009, p. 305). This can be neatly connected to the initial epistemological stance put forward in this paper, which in educational analyses also means understanding the specificity of the context and redefinition of the “objective” system of meaning. In other words, in educational research that is based on rigid and not reflected categories and concepts, there is no acknowledgement of the power of knowledge production: the one (he or she) that has the power to name, subordinate, exclude or silence the other is of course privileged (Ramazanoğlu, 2002, p. 107; Vendramin and Šribar, 2010, pp. 166-167).

A curriculum, as said before, is not some neutral knowledge, but the result of complex power relations (Apple, 1992, p. 51): while the knowledge of certain groups hardly sees the light of day, some regard the knowledge of others as simply neutral descriptions of the world and others as elite conceptions that empower some groups while disempowering others (Apple 1993, p. 222). However, we cannot (and must not) simply presume that texts always mean or communicate what they say, that what is in the text is necessarily taught and that what is in the text is actually learned (Apple, 1992, pp. 68-69).

The following are some examples of research questions in curricular analysis where representations of gender are of interest. In which contexts do women appear and how are these contexts conceptualized? How (if at all) do they differ? Are there any systematic similarities in the representations of women, or any common characteristics in these representations? Which values, ideas, information are taken for granted? What kind of socio-cultural stereotypes are encountered?

4 SOME EXAMPLES FROM SLOVENIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULA

This analysis started as a part of the research project titled “The role of women's migrations and migrants in the construction of the Slovene national identity” where representations of migrations, migrant women and the national were at the forefront (the project leader was dr. Ksenija Vidmar Horvat, for more on the project see: <http://projektmini.wordpress.com/>). The results were, in a way, so surprising that I decided to put them in a slightly wider focus (which, unfortunately, I cannot present here in full). By surprising I mean that I detected a step back in comparison to the situation some twenty years hence, which was when school reform started in Slovenia. In those curricula the dimension of gender and the efforts made towards achieving gender equality were present at least in principle and referred to as an interdisciplinary theme.

Some examples of curricula that were reformed anew in the last few years are presented below.

A quick look into the history curriculum for Slovenian primary schools (Kunaver et al., 2011, p. 25) (these examples are illustrative and not exhaustive in any way) in one of its themes (for grade 9) with the title “Changing the everyday in the 20th century” (all translations from the curricula are mine and are unofficial) shows the use of seemingly neutral language (migrations, people, etc.), but hereby introduces the double invisibility of migrant women – as to the status and gender. Incidentally, the curriculum does not envisage, for example, a reflection on the causes of migration (economic, intellectual or political), nor on the different forms of migration; on the contrary, it is limited to the rather benign “intercultural contacts”.

Another “challenging” example is from the curriculum for Civic and Patriotic Education and Ethics (Karba, 2011, pp. 5, 6, 10), wherein it is stated that pupils are supposed to gain basic knowledge about human rights and the rights of the child. Both kinds of rights are also defined as a contribution towards the development of critical thinking, but the dimension of gender is in so important a curriculum completely left out. No mention is made of the human rights of women, neither *per se* nor perhaps in the context of a violation of rights; moreover, the words “women” and “girl” do not appear in this framework of rights (and hardly at any point in the curriculum as a whole).

Let me mention another important aspect to note is that nouns are classified by gender in Slovenian, which is not the case in English. Much has been said about the problems with forms that are supposed to be gender-neutral, but are in fact exclusionary (e.g. Vendramin, 2005). Not even the recently revised versions of curricula are capable of dealing with “girl-pupils” and include them accordingly (let us leave aside the platitude that the “boy-pupil” is used equivalently for boys and girls and the term “he-teacher” for men and women). This can be achieved, however, as demonstrated in the curriculum for “The Environment and Me” from 2002 (Krnjelj et al., 2002) where both genders are included in language use without the text becoming too muddled or too long. As far as the recently revised curriculum for “The Environment and Me” is concerned (Krnjelj et al., 2011) – and this is quite incredible and has come to my attention only recently – the two-gender forms have “disappeared”, together with the recommendations as to how to deal with sensitive themes that relate to gender, family, privacy and the like.

5 CONCLUSION

The results show that gender sensitivity in Slovene curricula is today, in a postfeminist era, lower than twenty years ago and that the dimension of gender is on a verge of non-existence – in language and in the presentation of the social and cultural accomplishments of women. Differences in conceptualizations in different school subjects are also non-existent – thematization remains on a taken-for-granted and non-questioned level.

Gender sensitivity and education for gender equality, which was relatively high on the agenda in 1996, has now disappeared altogether. The *Action Plan on Girls and Schooling* (Akcijski program, 1996, p. 117), which was cited in the *Guidelines for Curricular Commissions* (internal material) referred to, among other things, the fact that themes that deal with gender differences must be systematically incorporated into subjects, that the problem of the absence of women must be dealt with, that recommendations for the authors of textbooks, didactic materials, etc. must be provided and that a standardized procedure must ensure that those recommendations are indeed met.

Those starting points toward better practices have today, almost twenty years later, been almost completely lost. Hereby a thesis about postfeminist era is confirmed – according to this, gender equality has already been attained, feminism has achieved its goals and no further interventions are needed (Vendramin, 2014, p. 683 ff) whereby no attention is paid to various new and modified inequalities.

In the light of the theory of ignorance, naturalization and dehistoricization of both the process and the product of knowing confirmed the conviction that no reflexivity or analysis is thought to be required (Alcoff, 2007, p. 56) – which connects to the above thesis about postfeminism.

From here, a famous statement can be derived, a question of “Whose knowledge is of most worth?” formulated by Michael Apple (Apple, 2000): whose perspective, experience and history are given a privileged place in curriculum as well as in educational institutions more generally. “Vision is *always* a question of the power to see,” says Donna Haraway (Haraway, 1991, p. 192). One “safety net” against the exclusions, silences and taken-for-granted ideas that I propose here should be a curriculum with precisely defined contents and emancipatory knowledge brought to the forefront, together with the provision of tools for analysis.

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