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Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

Gender equality in education systems: curricula framework documents

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Table of Contents

1. General Introduction: The Case of Slovenia	3
2. Research Material	3
3. White Paper	4
4. Scope of Interest	6
5. Results	7
5.1. Hidden Curriculum	7
5.2. Gender-Neutral / Gender-Fair / Non-Sexist Use of Language	9
5.3. Choice of Subjects and Learning Objectives	10
5.4. A Note on Textbooks	11
5.5. Recommendations for Further Research	12
6. Conclusion	13
7. Annexes to the Report	15
List of Compulsory Subjects	15
List of Relevant Web Pages	16
Selected Bibliography	17
Illustrations From Textbooks	19

1. General Introduction: The Case of Slovenia

Slovenia is at the moment in the process of school reform that extends compulsory education from 8 years to 9 and lowers the school entering age to 6. This change is being introduced gradually, starting in the year 1999/2000 on a limited sample of schools. The last schools are supposed to enter the reform in the year 2002/2003, so that in the year 2008/2009 all the schools will be implementing 9-year compulsory education.

9-year compulsory education (consisting of three 3-year cycles) is thus replacing the previous 1-year preprimary classes and 8-year elementary school (consisting of two 4-year cycles).

According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (see website, and p. 16 of this *Report*), the new elementary school focus less on the content and more on developing cognitive and social skills. It includes new features, among others descriptive assessment in the first cycle, earlier foreign language teaching, wider opportunities of subjects and flexible diversification in the last years.

This is why we focus on the curricula for the 9-year primary school only and do not take into consideration the curricula for the 8-year primary school.

2. Research Material

The material reviewed comprises *White Paper on Education of the Republic of Slovenia* as a theoretical and principal basis of the new education system; and the primary education curricula for both compulsory and optional subjects.

The list of compulsory subjects for 9-year primary school is provided at the end of this *Report*. The number amounts to 19.

The list of optional subjects is not provided, partly due to the fact that there are different definitions of optional subjects, some of them are defined as being one subject, consisting of different themes or modules; others as different subjects within one theme. All the curricula for the optional subjects were analysed: the number amounts to at least 46 (according to the first definition, which was our starting point).

The total number of curricula that were reviewed for the purpose of this research amounts to at least 65.

References are made to the official translation of *White Paper*. All translations from the curricula are provided by the author. Since there is only one word for »sex« and »gender« in the Slovenian language, the translation was made on the basis of author's opinion on the matter.

3. White Paper

White Paper was published in 1996 by the then Ministry of Education and Sport and is described as:

»the basic document of the modernisation of the education system in Slovenia. *White Paper* established not only a policy framework but also the overall philosophy, values and principles forming the basis for the renewal and led to the establishment of a legislative framework for change« (see also web page).

»Introduction« to *White Paper* lists the principles that determine the general theoretical framework for the renewal of the public education system at the pre-university level: human rights and the notion of legal state. It gives two reasons for such a starting point:

»1. In modern pluralistic societies, where several different conceptions of the universe, value systems and a whole spectrum of various, even contradictory educational and other theories exist concurrently, it is impossible to base the unity of the education system on a common idea of a 'good system' of education, that is on an ideological, value or professional foundation accepted by everybody. Therefore a public education system should be built upon as broad a consensus on what a good kindergarten and a good school are as possible, while private kindergartens and schools should meet specific requirements of those parents who wish to educate their children in accordance with special religious and moral beliefs.

2. The rights incorporated in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of Children* and numerous international documents reflect the already achieved consensus on basic values accepted regardless of various political and value systems. Special value systems, however, cannot be regarded as generally accepted in contemporary societies. Therefore, as a framework, the most acceptable of the three types of political and ethic theories are those based on *rights*, while aims and obligations follow

from the rights (in contrast to the other two theories where the starting points are either aims or obligations). Thus it is possible to avoid the attempts to enforce the values of any value system as universal.

In the *Resolution on the European Dimension of Education*, the following is stated as the common European heritage of political, cultural and moral values on which the civilized society is based: human rights, pluralistic democracy, tolerance, solidarity and legal state.«

White Paper takes into consideration both international and national legal documents (making a break with the former system from socialist times) and contemporary theoretical work such as sociology of knowledge, cultural studies, etc. The latter introduce important concepts into the theory of education such as »official knowledge« and »hidden curriculum«.

In the context of gender equality and ideological mechanisms at work in school the following principles are exposed:

- Textbooks: described as a means of producing school knowledge that can be transferred into »canon«. Hereby the so called »official knowledge« is constructed. Reflection on teaching process is thus offered: the attention of teachers should be drawn to the forms of production, distribution and use of textbooks and to the process of textbook creation, the reasons for their publication, whose knowledge they include, how the production of the »official knowledge« is carried out, etc.
- The plurality of cultures and knowledges: differences in sexual behaviour are mentioned here among other differences. Cf.:

»Parallel learning about national and foreign cultures plays an important role:

1. in forming and disseminating the national culture and
2. in understanding the processes of European integration, migrations, political changes, etc.

A considerable part of the matter needed (in addition to the balanced study program in history and geography) is provided by anthropological and ethnographic studies pointing to great differences in evade life, bodily habits, satisfaction of the basic needs, clothing, socializing and competition, sexual behaviour, etc. Such intercultural comparisons help in broadening the spirit and making relative and loosening the ethnocentricity (Eurocentricity included)«

- Equal opportunities and non-discrimination regardless of sex, social and cultural background, religion, nationality, physical and psychological condition, etc. The rights of the girl are mentioned in the context of the rights of the child. It is pointed out that the stress should shift from formal rights to substantive ones.
- The hidden curriculum (also defined as ideology as form), its persistence and invisibility, is referred to. Subtle power mechanisms that are 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.

»[...] while discussing the rights of children, we should also speak of the rights of girls and the contradictory character of the idea of equal opportunities in an unequal system of education, in which the members of one sex are still privileged in one way or another. With the introduction of coeducation for boys and girls, the apparent discrimination at the school system level was eliminated, but more subtle power mechanisms typical of school as an institution of the contemporary period (such as the organization of school life, concrete teaching practice and styles, communication between students and teachers, etc.) teaching girls 'how to lose' are still being preserved in the form of the 'hidden curriculum'.«

4. Scope of Interest

The research was conducted in accordance with IBE guidelines. Stress was placed on qualitative and not quantitative analysis, so most examples from curricula are illustrative complementing a particular point. The following factors (although they are sometimes interconnected and cannot be separated from each other) were particularly taken into consideration when reviewing the curricula:

- hidden curriculum,
- gender-neutral / gender-fair / non-sexist use of language,
- choice of subjects and learning objectives.

5. Results

5.1. Hidden Curriculum

Hidden curriculum is the part of the curriculum knowledge or subject matter that is not solely »academic« (mathematics, history, etc.), but it includes the personal and social knowledge as well and embodies conflict over what some regard as neutral descriptions of the world and others regard as elite conceptions that empower some groups while disempowering others (Apple).

The school (according to Louis Althusser: ideological state apparatus) transmits ideology as contents, as shown in the contents of say curricula and textbooks, but ideology as form as well. Curriculum is ideological, not (only) in the sense that it »fills« our heads with different contents, but in the sense that it establishes hierarchial relations among different forms of knowledge and enables such characteristics to appear as natural (Donald).

In principle, almost all the curricula seem to adapt to gender differences and introduce equality in the context of one or more terms/keywords: education for tolerance, intercultural education, discrimination, stereotypes, prejudices, social differences, human rights, solidarity, etc. Let us list a few examples. (The list of references and quotations is illustrative, not exhaustive):

- the school should contribute to loosening the stereotypes and doing away with prejudices (*religions and ethics*, optional subject),
- the culture of sexual life is one of the cultural forms (*etnology*, optional subject),
- the students become aware of the problem of resistance to difference, stereotypes (*philosophy for children*, optional subject),
- students
 - »are becoming more and more capable of recognizing inequality in the family« (*citizenship education and ethics*, compulsory subject, p. 12)
- we will
 - »stress human values such as tolerance to difference, equality of relationships between sexes ...« (*German*, as optional, p. 30, and compulsory subject)

It can be concluded that on declarative level the curricula do not betray any preconceptions about gender roles and can be labelled »gender-neutral«; a majority of them, however, does not provide concrete examples of how to avoid stereotyping and at what points it may occur. They present some views as »natural« or common-sense.

E.g. in sexual education as a part of the *biology* curriculum there is no mentioning of »gender« as a cultural/social/etc. category. Other potentially problematic spots could be the following themes (pp. 25 and 33):

»Students: [...] get to know the hormonal changes during menstrual cycle and their influence on the physical and psychical condition of a woman.«

»Students: [...] are able to list the most common sexually transmitted diseases, what causes them [sic!], the symptoms and ways of protecting ...«

The level of hidden curriculum reveals a slightly different image which can be described as the absence of proactive approach. In our opinion, only one curriculum (*Human Environment*) deals with this in a distinctly proactive way:

- It cautions against using sexual stereotypes when discussing different professions and suggests introducing »non-typical« professions along the gender lines. Cf.:

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

- It cautions against using preconceptions such as: girls are beautiful, cry-babies; boys are strong, do not cry, etc.

The »Recommendations in Special Didactics« for the second grade of this curriculum has it this way (p. 20):

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

Although this is a very general impression and the curricula differ somewhat in structure and do not equally work out the details, there is a possibility to be more specific about these issues as proven in the above mentioned curriculum (and in some others which address differences in e.g. social, or intellectual background, but that was not of interest here).

5.2. Gender-Neutral / Gender-Fair / Non-Sexist Use of Language

The sexist or non-sexist use of language in public life was quite topical in Slovenia a couple of years ago, Slovene being a language which draws a distinction between feminine and masculine in nouns, and, unlike English, most adjectives and verbs as well. All the reasons for and against cannot be elaborated here, nevertheless it should be pointed out that there are some convincing reasons, both empirical and conceptual, for avoiding the (pseudo-)generic »he« and for creating gender balance when e.g. speaking with students and developing curriculum – such as avoiding a particular value-laden perspective or unintentionally sending a particular kind of message. It can be claimed that the sexist use of language is »non-innocent« in as far it causes »blindness«, »silence«, »distortions« and influences ordinary concepts and beliefs of our everyday language.

The curricula reviewed (sample of 65, see above in »Research Material« for the explanation about the sample) deal with this problem in the following way:

- The majority of them consistently use generic »he« when referring to students, teachers, important authors, professions, etc. Among them the curriculum for *Slovene* should perhaps be mentioned, as a lot of the experts from this field are very much in favour of generic »he«, claiming that this is a »gender-neutral« form and that inclusionary alternatives are unnecessary and superfluous.
- The rest of them predominantly use generic »he«, but either sporadically or to a certain degree introduce both genders when referring to girls and boys, or avoid this problem altogether by using infinitives as a non-gender marked means. (It should be noted here that Slovenian – unlike English – does not support well the use of the passive voice which could be a possible way to »gender-neutral« use of language.)
- Only three – *human environment*, *computer science* and *rhetorics* – use expressions for both genders to a great degree of consistency.

The last group demonstrates that it is possible to introduce inclusionary alternatives without making the the text unintelligible and that avoiding the alternatives is not grounded in »practical« or stylistic reasons as it is often claimed by the opponents of such use.

The solutions – some of them provided in the above mentioned curricula – are (examples are schematic): »boys and girls«; »boys/girls«; »both boys and girls«; »boys or girls«; »girls and boys«; »girls/boys«; etc. This in turn affects also adjectives and verbs.

It is true that inclusionary alternatives lengthen the texts somewhat (as goes one of the reasons against), but the message sent in this particular kind of documents, in curricula and other curricula-related materials, can be a valuable one as far as gender equality is concerned. It can clearly contribute a lot to the efforts to be proactive and to make the shift from formal to substantive rights of the girls. At the same time, it can help to deconstruct the common sense of the teachers and other users of these documents.

5.3. Choice of Subjects and Learning Objectives

The »commonsensical« tendency as far as the choice of subjects is concerned usually has it that girls are better in social sciences, boys in natural sciences. There are other typical dichotomies: that girls »work hard«, but boys are »intelligent«; that girls are good in following the instructions, but boys »really« understand the subject matter, etc. (Walkerline; Bahovec). Such views can and often do affect the communication between teachers and students and everyday practices in schools.

Although *White Paper* stresses the shift from formal rights to substantive ones and advocates the provision of equal opportunities at all levels of the education system, it seems that at this level (the organization of school life, concrete teaching practice and styles, etc.) there is still »a blind spot« that requires a more proactive approach.

In general there are not enough incentives to encourage greater participation by say girls in traditionally »gender-biased« subjects. One notable exception is perhaps *computer science* as an optional subject which fairly consistently addresses both boys and girls and can be in this context (this discipline as perhaps being more alluring to boys) labelled »proactive«. E.g.:

»Every girl-student and boy-student should ...«;

»Girl-students and boy-students are capable of ...«.

Only one curriculum – *home economics* – explicitly (perhaps due to its nature as traditionally more girls-oriented subject) states that the gender equality is realized by participation of both boys and girls in the compulsory subject, however, it does not give any further guidelines.

Two of them – *physical education* and *music* – state that boys and girls differ physically and have different interests.

The curriculum for physical education addresses this issue in the following way (pp. 58 and 60):

»Due to the increasingly great physical differences and differences in interests between boys and girls, it is reasonable to divide them in training according to sexes« (refers to the second cycle, i.e. grades 4, 5 and 6).

»Physical and physiological heterogeneousness between sexes, tradition, upbringing and habits and different times of sexual maturation condition the differences in capabilities and interests between boys and girls. Individuals – boys, but above all girls – have great difficulties in developing their own perceptions in prepubescent and pubescent period ...« (refers to the third cycle, i.e. grades 7, 8 and 9).

It furthermore specifies that girls are to use skipping ropes and balance beams.

The curriculum for music specifies this in the following way (p. 45):

»The students: enhance the singing skill and the skill of playing musical instruments in accordance with their interests for individual forms of performance, boys also in accordance with their individual singing abilities in phases of breaking the voice« (refers to grade 8).

Dance activities as an optional subject states that its content is suitable for boys as well as girls.

In general the curricula for optional subjects do not encourage girls to participate in more »technical« subjects (according to commonsensical point of view e.g.: *robotics*, *electrotehnics* or *astronomy*), or boys to choose a subject from the array of more »girlish« subjects (e.g. *bobbin work*).

As far as learning objectives and expected outcomes are concerned, the curricula do not make a dividing line between boys and girls.

5.4. A Note on Textbooks

All the textbooks are not yet available. The gaps to be filled are above all in the area of optional subjects which bring relatively new subject matter (e.g. *chess*). The current catalogue of textbooks is quite extensive and could not be analysed for the purpose of this research. A mere outline based on some of the researches done in the past can be given here.

A more thorough analysis would be required for a more detailed report along the quantitative lines.

The textbooks for Slovene as a mother tongue should be mentioned here as they have already been analysed along the lines of gender equality. The following factors were more or less extensively brought to the forefront: the representation of women authors, visual images, the social universe they convey, etc. (which relates well to the area of hidden curriculum).

Visual images and texts in quite a few of the textbooks for Slovene as a mother tongue show stereotypical images of man and women and very few could be said to loosen social stereotypes or balance the representation of men and women. Usually women are underrepresented or marginalized, as the researches have shown (we refer here to the researches done on the Educational Research Institute in the context of the project »Learned Women«; also Bahovec; Hrženjak; Vendramin).

The analysis of the illustrations reveals even subtler ways of stereotypical representation of men and women. The material reviewed so far shows that there is a high percentage of female characters in passive roles and, accordingly, men in active roles. The same would go for binarisms such as public/private, culture/nature, reason/emotions, etc. (Hrženjak) (see also annex, pp. 19 and 20, of the *Report*).

There is one textbook for Slovene which is especially worth mentioning here and which is often brought to the forefront in public debates (Golob and Saksida, 1992). It is notorious for its rather »unusual« structure: it is divided in two parts, one for Mojcas (Mojca being a very common Slovene female name) with the heading »I Became a Famous Princess Today«, and one for Andrejs (again, Andrej being one of the commonest male names) with the heading »A Knight Paying a Visit« (see illustrations, p. 19, of the *Report*).

There are no guidelines for the authors of textbooks that would sensitize them for the issue of gender difference and help them to balance the textbooks, didactic materials, etc. in this regard and thus help to get more balance in the structure of curriculum.

5.5. Recommendations for Further Research

To sum up, the starting point of research work in this area is that (1) the curricular material is an important source of knowledge about and orientation in the social world, and (2)

although meaning and interpretations can never be imposed, it is still possible to develop strategies that will assist us in demystification of »official knowledge« (see also Apple).

Further research work could start with the supposition that formal curriculum has an effect on hidden curriculum and with the mapping of the principles that structure the selection of the curricular contents. At the same time, theoretical framework should be developed.

To obtain a more evenly-balanced curriculum, a cross-curricular mapping of »problematic spots« would be first required. Second, strategies should be developed that would enable including the aspect of gender equality in all the subjects, not as a content of its own, but as an integral part. On the basis of that concrete recommendations can be developed as to hidden curriculum and strategies how to encourage participation of both sexes in subjects, traditionally associated with gender roles.

6. Conclusion

Although curricula anticipate talking about different types of families, equal participation in parliament, different types of sexual behaviour, HIV, democracy, etc., the majority of them is based on a definition of knowledge as »neutral«, as a result of an accidental or objective choice.

In this context curricula for *history* and *citizenship education and ethics* could shed some light as they tackle epistemological issues. They introduce themes that could help to deconstruct the conception of knowledge as neutral, but they do not elaborate on that. The former (p. 35) draws a distinction between historical facts and personal opinions or views, but does not elaborate on the problem of history as »always already mediated« (how could one account for the absence of women in say history textbooks which is an epistemological problem). The latter anticipates talking about factors of knowledge mediation, the knowledge of individual and school knowledge, but further clarification is not given in the curriculum.

Let us turn to *White Paper* once again on the matter of universality and relativity of scientific truths:

»Historical sciences introduce relativism into the unity of science based on the universality of reason, while various scientific paradigms and theoretical currents bring

diversity and variety. These principles will have to be taken into account to a greater degree in all fields of scholastic knowledge and overcome the usual notions and stereotypes of the differences between the 'hard' natural sciences and other forms of knowledge. The level of formation of scientific concepts and discourses on knowledge will need to be brought forward as well.«

It can be concluded that the principles and guidelines in *White Paper* exceed the so called traditional pedagogical/psychological paradigm and that they introduce relevant concepts of cultural studies, sociology of education, etc. But the concrete realization of principles in curricula is still missing.

The above listed topics, together with gender equality, should not be (only) dealt with separately, on their own, as a theme within a subject, e.g. *civic education, history, society*. They should be »part and parcel« of all themes, subjects and everyday communication as this is where the ideology is the most persistent and where hidden curriculum is at work. That is why the recommendations on a general level (educating for tolerance, respect for difference, even gender equality, etc.) – although an important step – which can be found almost in all the curricula as a general introduction and have become a sort of a catchword of the reform and in wider academic debates in Slovenia, are not enough and need to be surpassed.

The potential of the critiques of curricular content is precisely in sensitizing the educational consciousness to ideological practices – those that are hidden, not so easily detectable and thus extremely persistent.

7. Annexes to the Report

List of Compulsory Subjects for 9-Year Primary School

(Translations are unofficial.)

- Slovene (as a mother tongue of the majority of population, in case of the two minorities different arrangements are provided),
- English/German as the first foreign language,
- Mathematics,
- Biology,
- Physics,
- Chemistry,
- Society,
- History,
- Geography,
- Citizenship Education and Ethics,
- Music,
- Home Economics,
- Drawing,
- Science,
- Science and Tehnology,
- Human Environment,
- Physical Education,
- Technics and Tehnology.

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

- 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

- more information on school reform (in English):

<http://www.mszs.si/eng/education/system/reforms.asp>

- *White Paper* (in English):

<http://www.mszs.si/eng/ministry/publications/white/>

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Examples From Textbooks

Illustrations which introduce the two parts of the textbooks for Slovene for the third grade: one for girls and one for boys (Golob and Saksida, 1992): »I Became a Famous Princess Today« and »A Knight Paying a Visit«.

Illustrations as introductions to the four main parts of the textbook for Slovene for the fourth grade (Golob and Saksida, 1994). Starting on the top clockwise: »Everyday is a Gaily-Coloured Veil«; »On Tournaments – No Bumps«; »The Whole World is a Magnet«; »All This is Pure Truth ...«