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## Gender as a theme and a concept in teacher students' Masters' theses

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### Abstract

In this study, Master's theses from the field of teacher education have been analysed from the perspective of equality and gender aware research and education. Master's theses from the field of teacher education reveal something about the world views constructed in teacher education. This study examines which kind of 1) selected topics and themes and their justifications, 2) conceptualisation of gender and 3) educational conclusions connected to gender topics do the Master's thesis contain. The material was selected from the thesis databases of two Finnish university teacher education units. All theses from the field of education completed in 2000-2007, with names or abstracts including words referring to the sex/gender, were selected. After the selection process, 53 theses (4 %) were chosen as research material. The research material was analysed by qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The knowledge of school world phenomena and theoretical handlings that open up gender, were rarely integrated in the theses of teacher education. Sex as a background variable was a clear and familiar arrangement from method literature and questionnaires of statistical methods. The arrangement usually produces a simplified confrontation between the sexes in which case the phenomena connected to gender were explained only with the concepts of the individual level. Educational conclusions related to sex/gender themes were presented in 34 theses, out of which, only ten dealt with strengthening the equality- and gender awareness of educators. Dealing with educational gender themes in teacher education requires theoretical equipment, surpassing everyday knowledge from both the student and the supervisor.

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**Keywords:** teacher education, gender; Masters' thesis

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## **1. Introduction**

The gender-biased history and the present day of education have been studied extensively internationally and also in Finland for several decades (see Gordon, 2006; Hynninen 1987; Lahelma 2000; 2011; Sunnari 1997; 2003). Research of education from the gender perspective has made visible how the teachers', teacher trainers', teacher students' and pupils' gender is present in the practices of the school and of the teacher education and in the discourses concerning education. (among others, Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn 2008; Zittleman & Sadker 2002.) In principle, teacher education is in a central position in reforming the educational practices of teaching in schools. However, equality and gender aware research and teaching have not gained enough of a foothold in teacher education (Malmgren & Weiner 2011; Skelton 2007; Younger & Warrington 2008; Cushman 2010). As a result, teacher education reproduces the gender-biased world views and educational practices in its own operation.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In addition to being seen as products of teacher students, the Master's theses can be considered to be official texts of teacher education. They have been created inside the education with the support of the supervision process and have passed the evaluation of the scientific community. The theses not only reveal something about the thinking of individual students, but also of the world views constructed in teacher education.

## **3. Research Questions**

In this study, the following aspects are analysed: 1) what kind of sex/gender-related topics and themes are being examined in the Master's theses of teacher education, 2) how sex/gender is understood or conceptualised in Master's theses and 3) what kind of educational conclusions connected to sex/gender are presented in the Master's theses.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to make visible the gender-related meanings which are being built and reproduced in the teacher education and to examine them from the starting points of equality and gender aware education.

## **5. Research Methods**

The material was selected from the thesis databases of two Finnish university teacher education units, University of Helsinki and University of Jyväskylä. All theses from the field of education completed in 2000-2007, with names or abstracts including words referring to sex/gender (Finnish words that mean or refer to man, woman, boy, girl, mother, father, sex/gender), were selected. After the selection process, 53 theses (4 % of all Master's theses) were chosen as research material. Of these, three were written by male students and another three were joint studies by male and female students.

The thesis abstracts, tables of content, introduction, research task and analysis chapters of the theses were then analysed.

First, a table was constructed, including the following points collected from the theses: theses names, key words of the theses, justifications for the topic selected, central theoretical concepts, research tasks, the main results of the research and the conclusions. This phase already included an interpretation, which provided an understanding of the material. The defined material was first analysed qualitatively and then by creating themes based on the material, and finally on the basis of the constructed themes covering the whole material, also quantitatively by classification.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Topics and themes

The curricula of teacher education programmes contain mainly compulsory studies in Finland, so the choice of the thesis topic is one of the few possibilities for optionality in the teacher student's Master's degree. On the other hand, the supervisors' own research interests determine the choice of subjects to some extent. In the material, the writers of theses justified their topic choices by making the inequality visible, the importance of understanding the difference between girls and boys, the lack of research or their personal experiences and their need for information. Sometimes ( $n = 8$ ) the choice of the topic of the thesis was justified also by the lack of research. In addition to general viewpoints, some of the writers justified their topic choice by their own personal experiences of gender ( $n = 7$ ).

*"The birth of my youngest son was the actual initiator of my Master's thesis. (---) I was again in the situation which gave a fresh insider-view to fatherhood and to its possible connections with other aspects of man's cerebral being."*

*"My interest in the subject of girls and mathematics originates from the work as a class teacher, from the girls' attitudes towards mathematics. (---) Another point in the background is my own mathematical past. (---) What hindered me and many other young women of my age? (---) I also started to monitor my own teaching."*

The writers, as a rule, placed themselves outside the research subject, in other words outside gender. However, the previous writers described the construction of gender also personally in their writing and in this way moved away discursively for a moment from the outsider, objective researcher's positions.

About 60% of the students had limited their topic to one sex (girls, boys, women, men). These topics were placed at the transition points of the gender-biased expectations and the construction of agencies. The students of the University of Helsinki in particular were interested in the adult women's points of view ( $n = 8$ ). The citizenship of the woman, the unusual education choices, talent or striving forward as a mother on a professional career contained interesting tensions as a phenomena of education. The female teachers' experiences or life story was focused on only in two theses, even though the majority of the theses were written by female students. In a female dominated school context female teacher becomes normalized and disappears as a focus of research (see also Galman & Mallozzi 2012, 244). In addition to two male writers and several female writers ( $n = 5$ ) were interested in the male as an educator or male experiences of their own upbringing and education as a father or a teacher.

Girlhood often appeared through marginal girlhood (victim of bullying, immigrant background, ill-mannered or quiet, a girl left aside) as an interesting research subject. The thesis topics concerning boys related to encouragement for hobbies that are not typical for boys (reading and dance), school satisfaction and a boy's growing up to be a man.

The topics of the theses were surprisingly often directed not only to the adults' world but also to the life outside the school. It could be expected that the future working environment would be of more interest to the students of the teacher education, for *only a little more than half (n = 29) of the topics of theses concerned the operation of the school*. Some of these (n = 10) were connected to the continuing themes of the equality discussion, to the need for change in teaching and contents of mathematics, mother tongue and physical education. In particular, analyses focusing on the social construction of gender had their framework outside school research. The knowledge of school world phenomena and theoretical handlings that open up gender, are rarely integrated in the theses of teacher education.

Sex/gender itself or the equality between genders had been chosen as the topic of thesis in less than a third of theses (n = 15). Sex/gender, particularly in the school context was traditionally perceived from the teacher, pupil and teaching material perspectives (the teachers' or pupils' ideas of sex/gender at school, the teacher's influence on the pupils' gender roles, gender-biased teaching material and pupils' understanding of equality). Sexual harassment experienced by the female teachers by male colleagues differed from these topic choices by bringing in to the examination the internal social relations of the teacher community.

*In about half of the theses (n = 28) the themes connected to gender was justified by the phenomenon of the sex/gender inequality (favouring one sex/gender, practices which limit operation or development).* For example, gender-biased pupil evaluation for the benefit of the girls (according to the name of the thesis "murder by numbers"), the cultural restriction of the boys' dance hobby, gendered physical education teaching, teacher expectations directed at pupils and the gender-biased teaching material were presented as these unequal practices. *However, this starting point did not necessarily combine with the problematisation of sex/gender that was earlier described.*

In the justifications of the topic choice of thesis the differences between girls and boys as pupils (n = 10) was also appealed to, in which case describing these differences and pedagogisation became a study task. From the point of view of the writer of the thesis, sex as a background variable was a clear and familiar arrangement from method literature and questionnaires of statistical methods. The arrangement usually produces a simplified confrontation between the sexes in which case the phenomena connected to gender were explained only with the concepts of the individual level. Girls – boys arrangement was, on the other hand, justified gender-sensitively (in this material five theses), in which case the objective was to identify the different ways of being and learning as girls and boys, but not to reproduce them without questioning (see also Tainio, Palmu & Ikävalko 2010, 18-19).

## 6.2 Meanings and concepts of gender

In the thesis texts different meanings were given to gender but *what gender is was only seldom thought about*. It was possible to read the different levels of gender analysis in the thesis texts: was gender considered at all or only as a reference, were questions asked about gender and was there visible evidence of thinking about and analysing of gender? As in the study by Lempiäinen 2005, the quantitative classification of whole theses to the above mentioned categories was difficult because in

the same thesis the divisions could overlap, in other words the writer could present the different ways of understanding gender in the same text. This reflects the fact that gender was not considered as an especially significant subject of the theorisation. (see also Lempiäinen 2005, 214-216.)

The concepts of gender study (for example, biological, social or performative gender) were rare in the theses of the examined teacher education faculties. Biological sex as an interpretation of gender was present in most of the theses. However, opening up the concept of gender and analysing the construction of gender were executed in a logical manner in some of the theses (n = 13). Some of the authors were also moving in the middle ground between discourses related to different ways of understanding gender as in the following thesis excerpt.

*“At school is it good to also question generally all the ideas accepted as a matter of course which dominate in society and to ask ” Why?”. (---) Why should all the boys be courageous and aggressive? (---) Why should all the girls be quiet and feminine? (---) It is difficult to define what the equality is in fact at school. The girls and boys are different. They need different things. They like different things.”*

The writers of a few (n = 6) theses had left gender aside as a theme already in the first stages of the study and in about a fourth of theses the gender themes appeared in the thesis text only in the research task chapter or in the considerations. *Even though the subject of the thesis was indicated to be connected to gender, gender as a theme could thus be dismissed or it appeared only as a background variable or as a definition of the target group of the study.* According to Lempiäinen the information concerning gender is thus made referential and it is determined to be an innocent attribute or a fact that is considered natural (Lempiäinen 2005, 214).

### 6.3 Educational conclusions in Master's theses

The educational conclusions concerning gender in the theses were connected to strengthening equality and gender awareness, resistance towards sexual harassment, paying attention to the differences between sexes/genders in the educational practices of the school (for example, in the choice of approaches, in evaluation practices or in organisation of teaching groups), the choice of teaching material, functioning as a role model representing one's gender and in developing teacher education. *These educational conclusions which are connected to gender themes were presented in over half of the theses (n = 34) but only in ten theses they concerned the strengthening of educators' equality and gender awareness.* When gender was neither problematised nor conceptualised, the solution attempts connected to the educational practice and the educational conclusions remained loose didactic or administrative proposals for action.

## 7. Conclusions

The teacher education is a strong educational context where the world views and identities are constructed and reproduced. The students of the teacher education expect practicality and expert knowledge to support in meeting the demanding everyday work of a teacher. The critical analysis of the tacit practices and the ready ideas questions the world view and increases uncertainty. There is also too little time for questioning and reflecting in the studies while performing under the pressure of fragmented contents. Gender as a thesis topic can call the students for reflection of themselves and their world views. In that case the thesis topic becomes at the same time personal and political (Hollingsworth 1995; Lahelma 2011, 93; Malmgren & Weiner 2011). The tensions and negotiations

between neutral and political as well as general and personal attitude can be read in some of the thesis texts.

Implementing an equality and gender aware teacher education requires cross-disciplinary knowledge, theoretical equipment and surpassing everyday knowledge from both the student and the supervisor. The concepts of the hidden curriculum and social construction of gender would be important to bring into the use of teacher education as the tools of reflecting educational practice. The teachers and students of the teacher education committed to the study with gender perspective should be encouraged to take an interest especially in the research of education in schools.

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