

WORK WITH BOYS AND LADS IN THE COMENIUS NETWORK COUNTRIES

“SMALL HEROES IN TROUBLE” –

DESCRIPTIVE, COMPARATIVE SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

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The following descriptive, comparative summary of individual articles reveals that the Gender Mainstreaming Movement in Europe is developing in different directions, making it possible to refer to at least two “blocks of States”. One block is formed by the “new EU States”, where – if there are any signs of activities at all – they concern the equal treatment of girls and women; the second block is formed by the so-called “old EU States” where a shift from work with girls to work with boys is taking or has taken place. Spain Troubles to be given special consideration in this respect. Development trends have proceeded from deficit to resource orientation.

1. Background, methodological notes and aims of the comparative study

The COMENIUS project “Small Heroes in Trouble“ provides the opportunity to describe and compare the current position of work with boys and lads / boys’ education in selected European countries – Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Hungary, Poland and Great Britain.

In this case, gender activities constitute the basis for comparison in schools and other educational institutions by initially establishing the hypothetical common denominator that enables a comparison to be made.

The aims of the comparison are meant to identify similarities or differences in the historical development of work with boys and lads, and moreover to identify similar / different aims and the subject matter of gender-specific action in educational institutions, gender-specific aspects in the training of primary school teachers, leisure-time activities for boys and lads, specific characteristics in individual countries and to identify similar / different trends and development tendencies.

On the basis of Hörner’s typology, this analysis as a whole must be ascribed to the “evolutionist function” (search for the development trend).

The comparison is based on nine texts that have been written by specialists in a variety of fields (educational theory, psychology, German studies, English studies) with diverse professional backgrounds (university lecturers in the context of their teacher training activities, social work practitioners, professionals concerned with European issues etc).

The analysis aims to provide a comprehensive grasp of reality and ideas based on the interpretation of the texts produced in the context of the COMENIUS project.

The texts are as varied as their authors although they (should!) adhere to a structure that has been developed together¹.

It initially became apparent during research and compilation of the texts that not all countries have sufficient material and/or that even though “boys’ education” is included in “gender initiatives“, it was not possible to identify specific aims or forms of implementation (e.g. experimentally, in projects). This applies first and foremost to the article from Poland that in the absence of a basis for comparison has been excluded from the comparison, and also in part to the Czech article and – as a special case – to the article from Spain.

It is consequently not always possible to include a comparison of all the countries in the analysis of the texts.

The subject matter of the texts, which were written in the first six months of 2007, should be structured – with their focus on the aim of the comparison – so that they refer to the following aspects:

- development of work with boys and lads from a historical perspective,
- aims and subject matter of gender-specific action in educational institutions,
- gender-specific aspects in the training of primary school teachers,
- leisure-time activities for boys and lads,
- specific characteristics in individual countries,
- trends and development tendencies.

An attempt is subsequently made to identify and categorise similar or divergent trends on the basis of this structure

2. Some points about the aims of the comparison

Concerning the historical development of work with boys and lads in selected countries

“Work with boys and lads” (in the Austrian literature), or ““Work with boys“, “Boys’ education” – as this field of work and research is called in the German literature – is encountered in the narrower sense in Germany and (is beginning) in Austria. In Germany, work with boys / boys’ education seems to be an educational reflex as it were to the (social) educational work with girls in the eighties; work with boys and lads also began to generate interest in Austria

¹ Since the Polish article predominantly reported results of research originating from the early eighties and nineties and only contains very general statements, it was not possible to include this article in the comparison under discussion. The Czech and Spanish articles also failed to address all aspects. The article from Great Britain similarly focuses on figures from the second half of the nineties of the 20th century. It was, however, not possible to take the numerous examples of school activities and recommendations for teachers and schools into consideration in view of the aims of the comparison.

around 1990. It is fundamentally linked to the gender initiatives of the 90s. A similar course is noticeable in both countries: from deficit orientation to resource orientation – a line of development that is also discernible in various fields of special education.

In Great Britain a noticeable change has occurred in the prioritisation of gender mainstreaming since the mid-1990s as a result of the poorer performance of boys in the national school tests. Endeavours to increase the motivation of boys to do well at school are driven by a specific local need and integration of the relevant social and cultural environment – and the poor results achieved by boys in school tests are the subject of numerous research papers.

With respect to Belgium (Flanders) it is abundantly clear that boys in special educational institutions outnumber girls, the statements made do not, however, permit any conclusions to be drawn about specific work with boys and/or research work in the area of boys' education.

Spain undoubtedly occupies a special position among the countries analysed or among the "old EU States": as a consequence of Franco's dictatorship a gradual transformation of the gender role concepts did not take place until the sixties of the 20th century. It was the School Act of 1991 that initiated a transformation by not only codifying an education that would offer the same social opportunities to both genders, but also by setting the aim for boys and girls to develop their personality and find their identity in the course of their education.

Equality for both genders existed in principle after 1945 in the former Eastern Bloc countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Estonia in particular; the aims of education and teaching were oriented towards collectivism, towards the "socialist We". As the article from Estonia shows, the social changes that have taken place since it gained independence from the Soviet Union have had a greater impact on boys and young males than on girls. If special measures are adopted for boys, they are deficit oriented in that they segregate boys with behavioural problems in self-contained special schools for instance.

In the Czech Republic, reference cannot generally be made to measures adopted in gender issues and consequently not to "work with boys" and/or "boys' education" either.

In Hungary, gender-specific education is deemed to be a delicate subject since women have still not been granted equal status (which *de facto* also applies to all the other countries covered here). The term "boys' education" has been encountered sporadically in publications in the field of gender studies in Hungary since around 1990; there are no references in the narrower sense, however.

Aims and subject matter of gender-specific action in educational institutions

Two trends have taken hold in both Austria and Germany that have had an impact on curricular concepts: on the one hand, gender mainstreaming standards and on the other hand, other theoretical findings and practical experience from child and youth welfare and from youth organisations that impact on school initiatives. In Austria, reference is made to the

teaching principle “based on the equality of women and men” which is embodied in the curricula of all school types; and in Germany, to the experimental project “New Ways for Boys” (2005-2008) initiated nationwide.

Gender projects that focus on sex education, prevention of violence, gender, role identity etc.) tend to take place in both countries at secondary school rather than in the primary school sector.

Coeducational lessons are the norm in all the countries studied.

In Great Britain, the national curriculum generally offers boys and girls the same range of subjects and the same opportunities.

The Belgian, Estonian and Hungarian articles emphasise the basic equal opportunities for boys and girls. The subjects “physical education” and “arts and crafts” have a special status in the curricula - at least occasionally. Although the genders were taught separately in these subjects in the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 1990s, coeducation was re-introduced towards the end of the 1990s. Hungary’s “Basic National Curriculum“ takes individual, age-specific factors into consideration, but gives priority to co-education in physical education and arts and crafts. Equal treatment of all pupils, irrespective of their gender, is also sanctioned in the Estonian curriculum; the genders are taught separately in sport and arts and crafts.

Gender-specific aspects in the training of primary school teachers

Attempts to include gender-specific topics in the training and further training of teachers were made in Germany and Austria around 1995, implementation of such initiatives, commenced by the appropriate ministries in some instances, have largely been left to the personal involvement of lecturers to date.

It may be assumed that in all the countries that participated in the project, reference is made to various stages and specific characteristics of development in girls and boys during lectures on developmental psychology, although only the Czech article makes express reference to it. It is moreover assumed that it is at all events a matter of imparting “traditional“ developmental psychology although hardly from the perspective of the gender approach. Such an approach tends to come to the fore in other academic areas of the human sciences such as sociology and/or educational sciences.

Based on studies (e.g. “Violence in the school“, statistics on secondary school qualifications, etc. in Estonia, and textbook analyses in Hungary and the Czech Republic, which corroborate the impartation of traditional role models, there is a call in all countries to develop greater sensitivity, better teaching, observation of the pace of teaching and learning, of different cultures, more space for boys etc. The consequences from the studies have not been drawn in these countries, however, much less specific measures adopted to implement them in the context of teacher training.

Leisure-time activities for boys and lads

In Germany, leisure-time activities for boys have expanded considerably in recent years both in terms of quality and quantity. Leisure-time activities emphasise health care (drugs, violence, daring as an exhibition of virility etc.) and are reflected in adventure education. There are “free play areas” in Austria, some of which are supervised and have separate amenities for boys and girls; gymnastics and sports clubs provide joint activities for boys and girls (up to the ages of 10/11/12) at numerous school sites. After the age of 12, the range of activities for boys are characterised by increased orientation towards sporting achievement. The major Austrian children’s and youth organisations have incorporated elements of outdoor and adventure education in their activities. The increase in freestyle sports raises issues of risk management. It is not possible to ignore the increasing significance of public work with children and young people, particularly with respect to migrants (Turkey, countries of the former Yugoslavia etc.) in Austria.

In Belgium, more than every second child belongs to a youth organisation (“Chiro“, “Scouts en Gidsen“ ...); the favourite leisure-time activities engaged in by boys include skateboarding, football, BMX biking, and “jobbing“ to top up pocket money, as well as surfing the Internet and computer games.

Youth organisations play a significant role in Estonia; they are distinguished by their different orientations – political, religious, educationally oriented, athletic / military. The “Young Eagles” (Noored Kotkad) are for boys only and are overtly military in their aims “(Always willing for the Fatherland” – “A man belongs with other men“). The leisure-time activities at the so-called “hobby schools” (technical, sports) are more popular with girls.

In Hungary, the leisure-time activities organised at schools (after-school centre) in the afternoons (sport, music, drama, art etc.) are free of charge and are very popular and approx. half of all 15-year-olds take part – and the tendency is increasing.

Specific characteristics

Virtually all the countries that have participated in the projects refer to studies that show that more boys than girls have to repeat a year, drop out of school or attend special schools etc; PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS & Co. and the national aptitude tests in Great Britain demonstrate that – in addition to other gender-specific differences in academic performance – poorer reading ability of boys, boys with a migration background, of Turkish origin above all, are particularly affected, as the German article shows. In Austria, youths with a migration background also suffer numerous forms of discrimination in addition to their culturally strained relationship and internal and external conflicts with regard to the interpretation of masculinity. Even if it is not expressly stated, the Belgian article implies a similar set of issues with respect to migrants, in particular young males from Arab countries.

Russian-speaking children in Estonia already have identity problems at kindergarten. Lads are also more likely to take drugs and commit offences than are girls.

In Hungary and the Czech Republic, current textbook analyses corroborate the extrapolation of traditional role models and the obsession with role stereotypes in textual as well as visual presentations, but with a focus on girls and women. The analysis of textbooks and endeavours to create a gender-sensitive language have also been the subject of initiatives in Great Britain.

Trends and development tendencies

All the countries participating in the project draw attention to the predominance of female teaching staff – particularly in the primary school sector. This situation makes it more difficult for boys to identify with the male role as a consequence of the increasing number of one-parent families (children normally remain with their mother after a divorce).

Moreover, in countries or regions with a high proportion of migrants (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Great Britain), the recruitment of migrants to the teaching profession is an absolute necessity. Recruitment of more coloured men to the teaching profession in Great Britain has also met with scant success to date.

In those schools in Hungary that are involved in gender work, the emphasis tends to be on feminist aspects.

A school development project that was planned in Estonia from 2006 - 2010 attempts to solve existing problems, particularly with respect to children without school-leaving qualifications, drug addicts, offenders ...; special schools and the too expensive “hobby schools” also require a the same kind of reform.

The desiderata in Germany include considered coeducation, “Girls’ Days“ and “Boys’ Days“ as well as the careful selection of teaching matter and the establishment of a teaching culture that takes both genders into consideration. The evident departure from deficit orientation and specific gender projects have already resulted in positive changes at a variety of schools in Austria.

A range of school projects that are designed to counter the “anti-learning culture” and “inward resignation” of many boys - that already takes place at primary school - and specifically incorporate the social and cultural environment of boys in the activities, are taking place in Great Britain, in the hope that boys will not only develop their personality in the cognitive area, but in the affective area as well.

If the package of gender-specific measures in the countries studied is considered, it is Germany and Austria most of all that show similar progressive and developmental forms of boys’ / lads’ or youth education. The initial attempts tended to be a product of the behavioural area of children and young people and only then found more inspiration in international

studies (PISA, TIMSS ...). In England, specific youth work appears to have derived strong impetus from the national curriculum test results – in particular from the *bottom up*, through very specific activities at various schools.

It was not possible to ascertain comparable progressive forms in Belgium or Spain, which may be explained in Spain's case by Franco's dictatorship that did not permit a gradual transformation in the role model concepts until the sixties of the 20th century.

Even if all the countries studied are EU States whose educational policies are dictated by the educational policy of the Union, it appears that there are at least two "blocks of States" in the 12 texts analysed, which are at different stages in the gender mainstreaming movement. In Great Britain, Germany and Austria, conscious "work with boys" was added to the "work with girls" or a noticeable shift in emphasis towards "work with boys" has taken place.

In the former Eastern Bloc States (now the "new EU States") the gender mainstreaming movement is in its infancy or there are now signs of initial attempts to undertake work with girls and women, but "boys' education" and/or "work with boys" in the narrower sense is out of the question. Where similar problems with boys have been ascertained, the tendency is to make attempts to counter them with deficit oriented measures rather than with resource oriented measures.

There is scarcely any difference in the countries studied as far as the general lack of male teaching staff is concerned – in particular in primary schools – which creates an additional problem in terms of creating positive male images for boys.

The empirical study on "performance motives", "social experience" and "essential qualities of teachers and trainers" presented in the following section provides additional details about characteristics that are specific to boys and girls. It corroborates some statements made in individual articles and concurs with the studies cited in numerous studies.