

GENDER AND WALDORF EDUCATION

During the last decades it has been noted that girls perform better than boys in school and in Sweden even more so than elsewhere in the Western world. Today the difference has risen to about 10 %. This research project, supported by the Nordic Research Council, aims at comparing the results of girls and boys in Swedish Waldorf schools, which has not been previously examined, with ordinary “mainstream” schools.

The first question to be answered is if the same difference in grades exists between boys and girls in the Waldorf schools as in the mainstream educational system. Depending on the answer to this question, further research into the construction of gender in the practice of Waldorf education may be pursued.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that the difference in achievements for boys and girls in the Waldorf schools is not as great as in the mainstream school.

Among researchers there is a wide consensus regarding how to explain the girls' higher grades, referring to the construction of gender. Boys tend to cherish “macho” ideals, where good grades in school are not always the best way to establish a position in the male hierarchy.

The hypothesis proposed here also assumes that gender patterns form expectations and behavior among the pupils. While Waldorf education once was radical in promoting equal treatment of boys and girls, it may not have changed as much as mainstream society and culture. Still there ought to be a less developed “macho-ideal”, and this could explain the result *if* my hypothesis is correct – assuming that this mono-casual line of thought promoted by the researchers in mainstream education is sufficient.

Method

In a pilot study the degrees of 9th graders and upper secondary students in a number of Waldorf schools will be examined. Two cuts will be made, in 2010 and 1995, to achieve a reasonable time span for the analysis. The difference between the grades of girls and boys will be examined and tested for statistical significance and the results compared with what is known from studies of the mainstream school.

How many schools to be included in the study remains to be decided. But there must be a number great enough to provide an empirical foundation for a more full scale qualitative study of gender and the Waldorf pedagogy, in the future.

Attention will also be given to gender differences in subject preferences, compared to mainstream schools, where girls have a better understanding of and more positive attitude towards reading. Boys, on the other hand perform better and show more interest in science, while there is less difference between the sexes with regard to mathematics.

Sex and gender

When the first Waldorf schools were established it was a radical feature that boys and girls attended the same classes. Since then the mainstream culture as well as the state/communal school system in Sweden has changed profoundly, while gender may have been more or less a constant within Waldorf pedagogy.

My view on gender is based on the assumption put forward by Jane Flax, that not only is gender a social construct, but also the borderline between biological sex and cultural defined gender is defined by socio-cultural factors. How gender has developed historically within the Waldorf world may thus be within an enlarged field of research of this project. Here lies in fact an uncharted field of historical research awaiting exploration.

International context and further research

The difference between girls and boys is greater in Sweden than in any comparable country, a fact that challenges the consensual explanation argued by Swedish researchers. As the explanation refers to “macho ideals”, one may ask if these are more pronounced in Sweden than in other western and southern European countries.

This is in fact a weak point in the common explanation: if the “macho” values are the crucial factor behind the difference between boys’ and girls’ performance in school – why indeed is this difference greater in Sweden, where gender equality has become a prime social value during the postwar decades, than in other Western and even South European countries – where we tend to regard the macho values as more prevalent than here?

Most of this issue lies beyond the scope of my investigation, but deeper knowledge of the Waldorf education and gender may serve to a better understanding of these differences regarding the results achieved by boys and girls and between Sweden and other countries.

Greater knowledge of gender construction in the Waldorf education system, as compared to other schools in Sweden, may furthermore aid us in developing the Waldorf pedagogy, in theory and practice, raise its reputation and promote it as an alternative to mainstream education, as well as influence the teaching in other school systems.

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