Introduction

The goal of this presentation is to discuss the views of women primary school teachers in Iceland about gender. It is based on an interview study with 14 experienced teachers focusing on teaching boys and girls in relation to gender issues. The study is based on poststructural feminist and profeminist views, and it aims at unveiling and combating some of the persistent myths about the differences between boys and girls and men and women teachers.

One of the most surprising findings of the study was that in spite of the researcher continuously asking about gender differences—and receiving many answers about them—the interviewees contended that often times the differences between the individual children are greater than the gender differences. There is a balance in teachers' story as it relates to the children: neither gender nor individual differences come out as more important. When asked about teaching styles, the interviewees maintain that teaching styles are mostly individual rather than gendered styles. Further, the interviewees believe that most children do not mind if a man or a woman is their teacher.

Objectives and concerns

The objectives of the interview study, conducted in the period from October 2000 to May 2002, are to learn about:

* The experiences of women teachers about the differences in teaching boys and girls, as well as how they talk and think about their characteristics, prospects and possibilities in school and in the future (Jóhannesson, 2004).

* The opinions of women teachers about what is, in the research literature, called the "boys' debate" (e.g., Yates, 1997; Epstein et al., 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999), including the claim that feminism and "women's culture" in schools are affecting schools to the degree that they are not appropriately dealing with the needs of boys.

Reasons for the study/general background

* Boys and girls do not study the same subjects when they get older. Educators worry that the options that the two genders have are not the same. Some of these discussions have been focused on how girls are deprived of well-paid jobs such as in engineering and computer science.
Research indicates that science teaching methods are often not suited for girls, for instance because men teachers in the science subjects do not believe that there is any gender difference in science (Lee et al., 1996; Baily, Scantlebury & Letts, 1997; Griffin, 1997; Kaufman, Westland & Engvall, 1997, Lundeberg, 1997). Some progress has been made, for instance observable in the fact that the number of men and women medical students is now similar, but there is still much to achieve.

A growing concern is to encourage boys to enter professions that have been historically dominated by women, especially nursing jobs in hospitals. The University of Iceland has recently begun a project to encourage boys to enter those medical professions where women outnumber men.

A related concern is that boys are not well prepared for their duties in home and family life (Martin, 1995; Gíslason, 1997). This becomes even more important when fathers can have paid paternity leaves as recently is the case in Iceland.

Some critics claim that there are too many women teachers and too few men teachers in primary and lower secondary schools and that feminism and the strive for gender equality in schools is somehow scaring men away from teaching in primary and lower secondary schools (e.g., Karlsson, 1995, 1997; for a critique, see Kenway 1995; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997).

Although I do not believe that women teachers are less capable of teaching boys than men teachers, there seems to be enough evidence to support a special consideration of boys' needs related to both future home and work lives (e.g., Martin, 1995; Morgan, 1996; Jóhannesson, 1998, 1998/1998; Schreuder, 1999). It is necessary to understand what these needs are and how schools can better approach them. Interviewing experienced women teachers throws light on what these needs are, what is actually done, or not done, in schools to meet the needs of boys, as well as girls.

By considering the boys' debate and conducting the interview study from a profeminist point of view, I contribute to scholarship of men and women who use feminist approaches to understand education. The term profeminism refers to the fact that the author wants to be cautious of proclaiming himself a feminist.

Main foci

* What do Icelandic primary school women teachers believe about the prospects and possibilities for boys and girls? [The primary school is for children 6–16 years old.]
* Do men and women teach differently?
* What do Icelandic primary school women teachers say about "women's culture" in schools?
* Does the data and its profeminist interpretation give teachers and teacher educators some guidance about how better approach the needs of boys (and girls)?

The study

The interviews were semi-structured interviews with 14 Icelandic women teachers in the same number of primary schools. The study was performed in two parts: In the first part, I interviewed eight teachers twice with about 2–12 weeks in between. Immediately prior to the second interview I observed two to five lessons that they taught. The lesson observations were conducted in part to serve as a springboard to discuss particular arrangements and teaching strategies that might throw light on the subject, but they were also conducted as a rare chance for me as a teacher educator to observe good teachers in
regular teaching. In the second part of the interview study, I interviewed six teachers once without observing their teaching.

Because of the lack of funds, I limited the interviewing areas with three: North Iceland, Reykjavík and the Reykjanes Peninsula. The selection of interviewees took place in cooperation with the principals. I selected several schools and contacted the principals. In one or two of the smaller schools no teacher fulfilled the criteria of having taught for at least ten years and being willing to participate. In some cases the principal talked directly with a teacher he or she selected with my criteria in mind, but in other cases he or she provided a short list of candidates I contacted. Most of the prospective interviewees immediately agreed to participate although one or two declined.

The interviewees have 12–40 years of teaching experience, including the year when the interview took place. They are also as equally divided between the three age levels in the primary school as possible (i.e., grades 1–4, 5–7 and 8–10). The interviewees and the schools have been given pseudonyms. The interviewees were given the option of changing the interviews after they had been transcribed. Some of them used that for minor points and one of them substantially changed the transcript for the sake of anonymity.

Major themes

In this part of the paper, I report some of the major themes that I heard in the interviews. First there are the findings about what the interviewees say about the differences in teaching boys and girls. Next I report what the interviewees say about the differences in how men and women teachers approach their teaching. Finally there are notes about interviewees' responses about "women's culture" in primary schools and the possible impact of it.

Boys and girls — or simply individuals?

The interviewees were asked about how it is to teach boys and girls. My interest was in knowing what Icelandic primary school women teachers believe about the prospects and possibilities for boys and girls. I summarize here what they say, including brief translated quotes from the answers.

Girls tend to work more accurately, painstakingly and elaborately than boys. They are more concerned that they shall not miss anything from the subject matter, whether it is important or not. Boys tend to bring in their assignments in a "rougher" way than girls do; "proportionately more girls are ready to elaborate the look of their assignments" (Kristrún). On the other hand, while some boys do not work very well at all, other boys "work more rationally than girls not spending time on how their assignments look" (Gerður). Boys are reported to be more "aggressive", both negatively but also positively in that they ask more questions: "they are more open to try new methods" (Lísa). However, the girls are more industrious with completing an assignment or an experiment, for example that they "finished" the physics experiments and wrote the reports, while the boys continued experimenting with the equipment (Friður). The younger boys have more learning difficulties than the girls, according to the interviews, but as the children get older, some of the interviewees report that the gap closes and those boys who prosper get ahead of all girls. One particular issue about girls was also mentioned: if they do not succeed, they are more likely than boys to be forgotten because they are silent.
I asked about in which areas it is necessary to encourage girls and in which areas it is necessary to encourage boys. Almost an unanimous answer was that the girls need independence and self-confidence. They are also reported having much smaller interest than boys in the natural sciences and in working with computers. On the other hand, the interviewees report that boys need training in their manners and solid study habits. Furthermore, they need to be encouraged in social and domestic matters: “It is more likely that girls are given a role. They are to take care of some things … the boys are free from it, mom does everything for them … they have no responsibility, no role” (Fjóla). This may actually be the reason that girls coming from low-income homes (or homes where the parents seem to have little time for supporting their children) are reported to be better off than boys from similar homes.

While I inquired at length about gender differences, a recurrent theme in the answers is that the difference often is greatest between the individuals. "We can never generalize; first and foremost there is a difference between individuals …" (Friður). "This girl likes this … the other girl likes something else, and this can be the same with the boys" (Pála). "We have girls who do not bother [painstakingly finishing their assignments] and boys who do just that" (Kristrún).

The finding that almost all interviewees mentioned individual differences is the more interesting as I did not specifically ask about them. However, this should not have been so surprising. "The individual" is a very strong theme in the Icelandic educational discourse.

I investigated both the legislation about primary education and the policy of the Teacher Union of Iceland. In short, the primary school acts from 1947 to date include a very strong rhetoric about character and needs ("eðli og þarfir") of the students and that schools should function in accordance with the individual's development ("eftir sínum þroska") (Lög um fræðslu barna, 1947; Lög um grunnskóla, 1974; Lög um grunnskóla, 1995).

The vast majority of primary school teachers belonged to the same teacher union. In its school policy (e.g., Skólastefna, 1987; Skólastefna, 1990; Skólastefna, 1996), there is strong emphasis on individual needs and a direct reference to the language in the legislation. Furthermore, the school policy emphasizes the rights of all individuals, including those with special educational needs.

If this emphasis is compared to how equal rights between men and women are discussed in the legislation, those rights and equality education are rarely discussed. (They are, however, stipulated in the act about equal rights between men and women (Lög um jafna stöðu og jafnan rétt kvenna og karla, 2000).)

Is there a difference in how men and women teachers teach?

The second main focus in the interviews was the difference between men and women teachers. In the lowest grades (1–4), teachers usually cooperate more than in grades 8–10. However, in these grades, as well as in grades 5–7, there are currently very few men teachers except in special subjects such as physical education. In grades 8–10, there is an equal number of men and women in many schools. (For the last decade or so, men have been between 20 and 25 per cent of primary school teachers in Iceland.)

Although some of my interviewees responded that they do not know much about how other teachers teach (because teachers teach their classes without others observing their teaching), the striking answer is that individual differences in teaching methods and
approach to education are much more important than gender differences. "I do not think it matters for the students if it is a man or a woman; the teacher's personality matters most..." (Dóra). "The children are most interested in the person of the teacher" (Pála). "I do not think it is a question if the teacher is a man or a woman but his or her character" (Lisa). At least two interviewees asked students (in 2nd and 9th grade) if the teacher's gender matters, and the students responded that it does not. The individual difference theme is stronger in terms of individual teaching styles than the individual differences in learning styles. As with individual differences among children, I had not planned to ask about individual differences in teaching styles—until I realized that so many of the interviewees discussed them without being specifically asked.

This response is not a "total" response by any means; most of the interviewees also reported many kinds of differences between men and women teachers. They reported that men tend to become "friends" of students rather than some kind of overseeing mothers, as many interviewees reported women teachers to be. Men teachers, according to the interviews, do not take as much care of students (even not the boys); therefore they may not "be as ready to teach in the lowest grades" (Ósp). There are contradictory views concerning if men keep order and discipline better than women. Some believe they do, but others argue that they are just louder (have a stronger voice) and even scare the children. Furthermore, according to Ósp: "Of course, there are men who keep discipline better than women, but at the same time they may not be as attentive to the needs of boys in trouble." Órbún contends that it has no relation to gender who of the teachers can best keep discipline and that men teachers are as different as women teachers are in doing that. She says she has often heard the phrase "Is there not a man who can take this [class]?” She believes this idea comes from parents and is not sure if parents could actually name examples of men teachers' success in this matter.

It was also reported that men teachers do not decorate their classrooms as women teachers do, and that they are not as willing to adopt multiple methods. Especially, men teachers are believed to be uninterested in leaving the textbook behind and use, for instance, manipulatives in mathematics. Women teachers, on the other hand, are more pedantic than men teachers are; they tend to "lose themselves in unbelievable small matters in the subject matter, students' performance, preparation …" (Dagrún).

In beforehand I thought that the interviewees would agree that boys would need men to teach. This turned out to be wrong; most (not all) disagree with this view but believe that it is good for the whole school morale to have both men and women teachers. But in terms of teaching, "it matters more what kind of an attitude the teacher has" (Dóra), and in relation to home work, "it is more important that fathers help their sons than if it is a man or a woman who teaches them" (Fjóla). I also asked if there is a subject matter that a man should teach boys and a woman teach girls. The interviewees disagree with this, although a few mentioned the possibility of sex education for teenagers might be better placed in hands of same sex teacher.

Women's culture?

I was interested in finding out what the interviewees said about what has been named, sometimes in negative terms, "women's culture" in primary schools (see, e.g., a summary in Karlsson, 1995). Does such a phenomenon exist? If so, does it scare men away from teaching? My prior contention was that women do not listen to such criticism but that they continue to teach as they believe is best.
"Women's culture" is an essentialist and in fact unclear conception that can not be taken for granted. My concern here is not define what women's culture might be but to hear what the interviewees had to say about it and its possible impacts. Most had heard the phrase but had little to say about it. They were willing to be critical of some of the work habits of women teachers, but in general they did not think the phenomenon women's culture bothered men teachers too much. Some interviewees mentioned interesting gender patterns, for instance in where men and women sit in the teachers' lounge. Often, however, the division is not only between men and women but also between the age levels of the school (1–4, 5–7, 8–10).

But why is the proportion of men primary school teachers under one fourth of the whole profession in Iceland? Almost every single interviewee mentioned the salary, and almost none mentioned women's culture. Most of them actually refused that women's culture scares men away. Furthermore, the interviewees report that most men teachers teach more overtime teaching or work another job, whereas very few women teachers do this.

This last fact, that men teachers teach more hours or work elsewhere, brings us back to the issues reported above about gender differences in teaching: Is it possible that the professional demands of pedantic work habits, detailed preparation and school development, demands that are probably rising, are better met by women than men teachers? Is it possible that there are attitude differences, or is this very simply the question of men being breadwinners who can not afford to teach? While, of course, I do not argue that women teachers are never breadwinners (some of being the sole supporters of their homes), the attitudes in society do not necessarily expect them to be breadwinners, while this is still required of men. (It must be mentioned here that some of the very first interviews were conducted before a new salary contract that was introduced in January 2001, taking effect in August the same year. I do not see, however, that the interviewees I talked with in March to May 2002 place less emphasis on the salary issue than others.)

**Summary of findings**

Teachers certainly agree that there are clear gender patterns in how children approach learning; yet their discourse does not point to that they gear their instruction to the different genders but to the group or the individuals in the group, more or less regardless of gender. This focus on individualism was what most surprised me; teachers seem to teach without much consideration to gender. This is good and bad: good that they do not hold a child back because he or she is a boy or a girl, but it is less good if the teachers could actually use gender patterns more to analyze the particular needs of each child. This finding is in tact with the focus of the educational legislation that instruction should be geared to individuals needs. Yet most instruction occurs in classes of about 20 students. The interviewees also report very strong individualism in how teachers approach their teaching. Finally, the interviewees report that it is the salary that prevents men from teaching but not women's culture.

**Interpretive notes**

First of all, I would like to mention that I felt that the women teachers I interviewed want some guidance of how to teach boys. It is not, however, that they really think they are not doing their job of teaching boys appropriately today; rather, they are listening to what others (including university professors like me) might have to say about the matter.
I would first like to emphasize that my profeminist point of view does not allow me to say that I as a man can offer much of such guidance more than women educators can do. If equipped to say something helpful for schools and teachers about the education of boys, it would be because I am an educator. Nevertheless, I believe that some of the feminist and profeminist literature and the interview data can be integrated into helpful insights for teachers. In this paper, however, I mostly focus on policy implications; yet, this discussion also includes policy implications at the primary school and classroom levels.

In the following discussion, interpretive notes of the above findings and other findings (not reported above) are integrated in order to enter the boys' debate and discuss myths about men teachers.

A focus teaching methods and subject matter

First, teaching methods seem to be more important than who teaches, although it may matter at times. Men and women are under most circumstances equally equipped to teach the subjects, as the interviewees report (see also Mills 2000). But women teaching children and men teaching science engineering students may have to learn more how to gear their teaching not only to the different genders but to different individuals who happen to be of two genders. Most teaching methods research focuses on individual rather than social and gender differences, which means that teaching methods have been developed to gear to individual differences (see also Jóhannesson, 2004; Martino & Berrill, 2003).

I propose that we use teaching methods geared to individual differences, including cooperative group work. In that way we use what teachers believe about that children are different from each other. Nevertheless it might be necessary to support girls' confidence and interests in the natural sciences, such as the physics; in short, to encourage them to be more daring in their approach and at times less pedantic, without preventing their ambition to finish beautifully written and even decorated assignments. Similarly it might be necessary to support change in some of the boys' work habits, to teach them to be more pedantic and disciplined, at the same time as they definitively need better education for becoming future fathers (e.g., Martin, 1995; Morgan, 1996; Mills, 2000). It is also well possible that it is viable to learn from sound experiments in dividing into gendered groups in some cases to emphasize interests and weak points (e.g., Ólafsdóttir, 1998). However, we must be careful of not promoting unnecessary differences that might prevent future choices of children.

For boys specifically, we should also change the subject matter so that they get more exposed to subject matter that prepares them for a future career in nursing or teaching and in becoming fathers with a sense of domestic responsibility. This is not only because that nursing or teaching needs more men but, even more importantly, because these jobs are good jobs for men as well as women. Similarly, we need to emphasize that girls do not get behind in physics or any other subject.

A focus in socio-economic, cultural and gender differences

The finding that teachers do not focus on gender differences in the student group seems to be concurrent with other research. In an interview study conducted in 1999 with 18 primary school teachers and 16 primary school principals of both genders as well as with 12 secondary school educators and 15 other educators in Iceland there was a remarkable
silence about socio-economic differences (Mýrdal et al., 2001; Jóhannesson et al., 2002). Of course there are exceptions in the studies; for instance one of my interviewees in this study (Kristrún) mentioned how many of the children in one of the schools where she had taught were from single mother homes. This is a good example of an intersection of socio-economic and gender issues, because single mothers tend to have less income than most other groups in society.

While gender differences should not be entirely subsumed under the category of socio-economic differences, it seems to me that they are pushed aside along with them in the current education discourse. Recent focus on cultural differences due to increased immigration in what used to be a quite monocultural country may also draw attention away from the fact that the various cultural groups are also gendered (e.g., Jóhannesson et al., 2002).

The interview material indicates that teachers in general do not devote much time to discuss equality and gender differences, except in relation to particular students who may be having difficulties. But there is not necessarily a lack of interest among the teachers, but perhaps and more likely a lack of support for the teachers to consider this. Some interviewees used my research proposal, which I sent to them along with a list of themes that I would ask about, to spark some discussions among their colleagues.

Almost no interviewee could remember if continuing education courses dealt at all with gender issues. Actually I did not expect to hear that they would. Every school now has to create a plan for continuing education. Furthermore, every work place with more than 25 employees should have a gender equality strategic plan. In schools, such a plan could be a part of the continuing education plan.

Teacher education should be able to deal with gender equality, and some successful projects have been performed in Iceland to enhance their abilities (e.g., Bjarnadóttir, 1996). More is needed: it is necessary to integrate the thinking about gender equality into every aspect of school work, including as many teacher education courses as possible. Teachers need to see that children are not only individuals, as important as it is to see that, but that these individuals have needs that due to their gender, cultural background, socio-economic status of their family, rural or a town origin, etc. Jafnréttishandbókin (Karlsson & Traustadóttir, 2000) is a new book, published by the State Textbook House that helps schools to deal with at least the gender aspect. We have experimented with using the book in some courses in the Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Akureyri, and I can witness that the book is very helpful.

Do we need more men teachers?

An opinion sometimes contended in public debates and in casual conversations with teachers and parents is that men teachers keep order and discipline better than women teachers do. While this study does not measure how widespread this claim is, it confirms that many women teachers have heard this view and that most of them doubt that this is true. Miller (1997) discusses that common response to discipline problems experienced by women teachers is to find a man teacher to teach that class. She argues that it would be more appropriate to try to diminish sexist behaviors in order for women teachers to be equally capable of keeping order and discipline as their men counterparts.
A study of Guðmundsdóttir and Guðmundsdóttir (1993) confirms the findings of this study that it does not matter to a student if the teacher is a man or woman. Students in the upper grades (8–10) of the primary school said in a questionnaire study that men and women teachers are equally prepared to deal with teenagers. The teenagers argued that it is the character and performance of the teacher that matters most. Several authors in other countries also confirm this as the view of students. Lahelma (2000) points out that gender does not appear as relevant when young persons talked about teachers. Her interviewees among teenagers argue that good teachers are those who can keep control in a relaxed atmosphere. Lingard et al. (2002) in a survey of students in Australia accompanied with other methods found that when students talked about their idea of the ideal teacher, they mentioned the the importance of being able to talk with teachers about personal problems. Skelton's (2003) study of students teachers in England (men and women headed towards a career in primary teaching) showed that although most students wanted mixed-sex teaching faculty, then between one third and half of them said that teachers' gender is irrelevant in the primary school.

A historical study by Garðarsdóttir (2001) points to the fact that men taught children for decades, and during those times girls fared better than boys, just as the young girls do now. My data here points to the same thing as one interviewee emphasized: The most used methods are still the same as when the men taught, but perhaps in some cases more pedantically performed by the women teachers, at least if we believe what the interviewees said.

Some interviewees claim that parents think more about the need for a higher proportion of men teachers than the children, although other interviewees mention that the children are seek advice to men who work in the school, such as janitors. On the other hand, most interviewees find it important for the school as a work place to increase the numbers of men. They emphasize that it is better for children to see both men and women in the school (see above). Like Kristrún said: "It does not matter whether men or women produce TV sets … But we are bringing up the children for the future …" Kristrún also emphasizes that both genders should be role models for boys and for girls (see above). Other interviewees' responses suggest a work place related preference similar to that described by Lahelma (2000). She contends that adults' concern for the lack of men in primary teaching should be regarded in relation to gender segregation in working life in general, but not the problem of boys lacking male role models.

I predict that in the near future (even for some longer time), the vast majority of primary school teachers will be women, especially in the lower grades. This means that as a teacher educator I must be concerned to equip them to teach both genders. I believe that teachers of either gender who have been professionally prepared to teach children must be capable of teaching both genders. We may in fact consider the lead of the Iceland University of Education that has for years offered a specific course for men student teachers. I propose that should create a course for women student teachers where gender issues are discussed, including the best work about boys' education. Most importantly, I believe, is that any one-gender-only course would engage the students in thinking about and researching the underlying assumptions about masculinity and femininity. That we we might be able to avoid what Roulston & Mills (2000) describe in their studies of music teachers; they found the tendency that some men teachers (in an feminized area of teaching), in order to attract certain boys to music, used the types of music and practices that might reinforce homophobic forms of masculinity. One-gender-only courses must
equip men and women teachers to be critical of their own pedagogy when they are trying to attract certain groups of boys or girls.

So-called mythopoetic men theorists argue that we need stronger role models for boys (for a summary of such views, see Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The role model argument is a compelling argument yet not very useful because there are no are no particular signs that large groups of men are entering primary school level teaching (let alone the early childhood school level). Another side of the role model argument is that good male role models are also important for girls. However, we are able to study role models by using literature and psychology, both in the study of the mother tongue (Icelandic) and in the new subject lífsléikni (life adjustment education).

I wish to conclude with an example of how teachers can work with children of both genders, regardless of their own gender. One of my interviewees described what she does to connect her with boys' interests after she had told me that girls often approach her with personal issues: "I try to get closer to the boys in a different way … I familiarize myself with their hobbies such as sports or music … and I ask how it is going … and I find that this works well. I believe that it is important that the children know that the teacher cares" (Gerður). Other interviewees suggest that in fact men teachers are less likely to help students out in the personal matters. While the last observation is by no means adopted here, two things are clear: that we can equip women to deal with all aspects of boys' education, not only the subject matter, and that a man gender of a teacher is useless for a boy unless the particular teacher approaches his work in the same way as interviewee Gerður describes.

Note

This paper is an excerpt from a longer report released in Icelandic. Bits and pieces are used in other texts but this combination of arguments is prepared for the Gender and Power in the New Europe conference.

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