

Case study twenty-four: Finland: Girls, boys and 'gender play'. Gender construction in the everyday context of school art education

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Aims

To study art education from the gender perspective, focusing on the meaning of gender in the everyday processes of art lessons in school.

Project outline

A child's picture making, speech and other actions takes place in a particular cultural position, receives content from the substance offered by her/his own world of meanings, the cultural structures and the social situation at hand, and partakes in the reproduction of cultural meanings. The study approaches art education from the gender perspective, focusing particularly on the forms of cultural production and the everyday practices and processes of school art lessons. The attention was shifted from the differences between

girls' and boys' expression towards the social relations and contexts, and focused on the meaning of gender in the everyday processes of art lessons in school.

The study focuses on 'gender play' in the context of school art education, in connection to students' picture making. It brings to view, describes and interprets the dimensions and ways of constructing difference and how gender meanings are attached to interaction, picture making and the students' works, processes where mutually contesting meanings arise and are dealt with.

Gender became significant in the classroom as differences in styles of being and doing, aesthetic values, subject matter and craft of the student artwork. It became an issue when the teacher was setting tasks or giving instructions, or when the representations of men and women in the magazine pictures entered the classroom conversations.

Representations of men and women appeared in the classroom textuality and were produced in the student artwork. Gender was also constructed through gesture and repetition, by performing gender. Difference and gender boundaries were constructed in action, speech and picture making, encounters and conversations, but they were also often challenged and crossed. An art teacher who is aware of the subtle ways difference is produced could guide students to analyse them critically in visual culture and the media. Instead of the predominant styles and values the art teacher could consciously point to, and encourage, other possible styles, aesthetics, subject matter and craft, and thus support multiple ways of being a girl and being a boy.

Research methods

The written research report is published on a CD-ROM together with an interactive 'multimedia ethnography' combining image, sound and video data.

The study moves in the area of art educational research within a feminist, sociological, cultural studies approach. The data was collected and analysed using ethnographic and qualitative, interpretive methods. The main data of the study is based on a period of participant observation in the fall of 1996 during an obligatory 7th grade art course with eleven girl students, seven boy students and their art teacher.

Interview methods were the most useful.

Results

- Improves awareness of and provides new points of view into the issues of gender and difference in school art education
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- Students involved in the research said that it made art lessons feel more significant to them than before.

Main Impact

The main impacts were;

- Cultural heritage education was considered to be important and all teachers should get schooling in methodology. Also the co-operation between different

actors should be the focus when planing curriculum for schools. Information between teacher, school principals and local authorities must function.

- The attitudes and values of everyone involved became positive towards culture, history and environment.
- The local area was perceived and experienced to be more important and interesting.
- Experiences and emotions were more openly shared and teachers learned to use experiences in teaching and learning.
- Working abilities increased during the project.
- The attitudes towards schools changed positively within museum educators and artists.

Main Challenges

Student issues, teacher issues, organization and policy issues, and assessment issues were the most challenging aspect of the research. There is also a challenge to the way school curriculum, especially in the arts, can seriously take-up and address issues of gender.