

**Lucie Jarkovská, *Gender před tabulí. Etnografický výzkum genderové reprodukce v každodennosti školní třídy* [Gender at the Blackboard. An Ethnographic Study of Gender Reproduction in Everyday School Life], Praha-Brno: MUNI Press, Sociologické nakladatelství, 2013, pp. 196**

The book of the Czech sociologist Lucie Jarkovská deserves attention primarily because it is the first Czech publication that deals with studying the classroom environment from the gender perspective. For that reason, not only the study results are important. Apart from the results, the author presents her own conceptualization of gender and grounds for its application in studying a school class with the use of a very sophisticated, original methodology. She also reports the manner in which the results have been obtained and the ethical and methodological dilemmas she has encountered in the study (e.g. whether the informed consent of the pupils is necessary, how to deal with the mistrust of managing staff if it is known that a) the researcher's presence interferes with the teaching process and b) the results almost always contain criticism directed at the school). The author is a sharp observer of the school reality and a thoughtful researcher, ever con-

fronting her theoretical and methodological knowledge with the data derived from observation, i.e. from the often unpredictable situations and interactions taking place in the classroom. What is more, she also engages her moral sense, empathy and involvement to promote the so-called *gender sensitive education*.

The structure of the work appears, at the first glance, a classical one. The study consists of an introduction, followed by the theoretical part with justification of the choice of methodology. Further on, the work presents research results, conclusions and the closing part. Research results are structured by topic only, not by research procedure, which produces an original effect of actual participation in the author's research effort, very attractive for the reader. In order to deepen the interpretation but also in line with the selected paradigm of qualitative sociology and the main theoretical assumption, i.e. approaching the gender category not as a static individual feature or a feature ascribed to certain sex category but as a distinction of a social structure, the author refers to extra-class and extra-school context that offers insight in the more general manner of functioning of the gender order in the Czech Republic.

The main subject of the study is the "reproduction of gender in everyday classroom environment", but due to the socially varied personal composition of the observed class the author in her interpretations takes into account also other social categories, primarily age and ethnicity, and sporadically also social class. The overlapping categories of gender and age and gender and ethnicity are discussed in two separate sub-chapters. The work contains a colourful appendix with the drawings of male and female pupils which the author analyses in the last subchapter.

The author's narration is very smooth and fluent and the language she uses is also accessible for non-professional readers. The very nature of the study assumes reference to personal experience, which makes the narration resemble reportage, particularly in Chapter Two. And although the author does not try to conceal her personal involvement and the critical potential of her research, she meticulously observes the scientific rigors separating the research material from her own analyses, putting her own interpretations in the context of similar research conducted by other male and female researchers and in the context of wider structural determinants of functioning of the school system in the Czech Republic.

### **Why gender studies at school? (personal motivations)**

Explaining her personal motivations behind the research, the author refers to her own involvement in gender-sensitive education, asking herself the questions: what does that term actually mean? What would such an

education actually look like? In what manner could it function in a “society that is not sensitive to gender at all” (p. 12) and therefore offers no support to gender-involved educators? In this context she recalls the practice of the so-called “non-sexist education” in other countries, based on the elimination of gender stereotypes, which fails to produce the desired effects. She formulates her own definition of gender-sensitive approach at school as “a reflective attitude of striving to understand the mechanisms of gender reproduction in everyday life, continuous evaluation of one’s own impact and realizing the multi-dimensional and ambivalent nature of those issues” (p. 12). Gender-sensitive education is not only “a presentation of models of non-stereotypical behaviour” and does not have one fixed definition; instead, it appears to be a “demanding and probably never-ending path of search and reflection” (p. 13).

Many scientific studies have demonstrated that neither male nor female Czech teachers care about or deal with equality of girls and boys in the process of their education.<sup>1</sup> The desire to see and diagnose what is really going on “with gender” in the classroom was the main motivation behind the decision to undertake the research.

### **Theoretical grounds, methodology research inspirations**

In the first part of her work, entitled “How to conduct gender studies at school?” the author presents her theoretical and methodological standpoint, defines the notions of “gender,” “childhood” and “gender socialization” and cites gender research at school which she finds most inspiring. She roots her study in the paradigm of interpretative sociology that stresses the construction of meanings in the course of everyday interactions of social actors. She refers mainly to the concept of G. Simmel and ethnomethodology of E. Goffman. She identifies herself with the ethnomethodological approach to gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) that treats both gender and sex as social constructs. Ethnomethodology “emphasizes the significance of individuals’ interactions as results of the operation of the social structure, yet leaves the individuals their agency, i.e. does not define them a priori as totally determined by social structures” (p. 19). The author directs the attention of researchers to “interactions, practices within the framework of which it is

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<sup>1</sup> “The subject of gender equality in the Czech school system is relatively new. One may observe a distinct evolution in the standpoints of main political parties on the subject over the last twenty years – from the initial ignoring attitude, through underestimation to the final acceptance. However, that acceptance was imposed on the Czech political class by the EU and partly also by academic circles and NGOs, and for some politicians gender still remains the ‘necessary evil’” (Smetáčková, 2009, p. 17).

settled what is to be considered feminine or masculine and what meanings are ascribed to those categories" (p. 19).

Another theoretical perspective important for the author is the post-structural analysis of power relation, with the obvious reference to Foucault's concept of discourse and the theory of reproduction by P. Bourdieu. "From the point of view of gender reproduction the subject that I find inspiring is the positioning of a subject through discourse in which disciplinary power techniques are involved" (p. 15). The post-structural perspective allows one to see in what way the behaviour of an individual is connected with social structures and power.

The author describes her own research method as ethnographic case study focused on (re)production of gender within one school class. The constitutive feature of that method is combining data analysis (observed behaviour, interactions, utterances) with interpretation (ascribing meanings with taking the context into account).

The author decisively rejects the notion of childhood as a biological fact (growing, physical and mental development) or childhood presented in the categories of socialization understood as passive absorption of social roles (including gender roles). According to Jarkovská, childhood is a historical and social construct and the child is an individual endowed with agency and taking a considerable part in his or her own socialization.

Jarkovská also critically views the functional concepts that perceive gender as a social role. "The theory of roles is very attractive for researchers. Social representations of gender roles are easy to identify, e.g. in fairy-tales, handbooks, advertisements, etc." (p. 28), yet it cannot be used to explain the variability of individual behaviour within a single gender category or gender relations of power existing both in the classroom and in the society. It is only when one finds out how gender "is done" (i.e. how it is constructed) in everyday interactions, what it means to each of the participants, how it relates to holding power in various situations and contexts, what discourse takes part in fixing the gender standards and in which way they are related to inequalities, one has reached a starting point for reflection on new, more equality-oriented ways of organizing the lives of children and teachers in a school classroom.

As her two major sources of inspiration Jarkovská considers the works of Barrie Thorne (2004) and Bronwyn Davies (2003). She stresses that both those researchers "reject the understanding of socialization as a process during which individuals (adults) impose the society-approved forms on other individuals (children), but analyse the processes of gender reproduction in interactions (Thorne) or in discourse (Davies)" (p. 34).

The author conducted her research in the sixth grade of a primary school in one of the districts of Brno (the second largest city in the Czech

Republic). The class consisted of 10 boys and 12 girls aged 11 to 13. During one school year (2005/2006) the author witnessed, as an observer sitting in the back desk, almost 60 hours of school lessons and also participated in some school events and outings. The collected research material comprises field notes, audio recordings of lessons, artefacts created by children (drawings, short texts), interviews with children and with the teacher conducting the classes and also the material that the author herself has remembered.

### Findings

In the chapter entitled "Gender ethnography in the classroom" the author presents the results of her research. In qualitative research of that kind the results presentation assumes the form of a description and analysis at the same time. The author describes what she has observed or what is included in the text material collected by her and interprets it at the same time. However, the selection of events and utterances to be described is strictly subordinated to the main aim of the study, i.e. finding an answer to the question in what way the behaviour, statements and interactions of the education process participants create or violate the gender order in the classroom. So, interpretation also reveals "cracks" in the monolith of dichotomous, hierarchized gender relations that may be an onset of their change.

Analysing the behaviour of particular boys and girls from the gender point of view Jarkovská observes that although the existing normative division into "masculine" and "feminine" organizes children's behaviour in the classroom, "gender is not stable and does not determine the identity of children as 'girls' or 'boys' (...) Boys and girls produce an abstract continuum of traits, although even that continuum is not stable or unchanging. Gender is something that children actively work with and stress it differently in various situations" (p. 88).

Among the most interesting analyses are those which show gender as a distinction of the social structure. The author demonstrates it using the example of overlapping categories of gender and age. In the school environment, power is related to age; at the same time the age category is presented, similarly to gender, as one of the natural sources of social divisions. Adults rule (teachers, older pupils), children are bound to obey their elders. However, as the author sharply observes, "...that division may also be described as a result of gender divisions, despite the fact that we do not necessarily have to witness the relations between men (with masculine gender) and women (with feminine gender). Masculine gender in the teacher-pupil interaction is represented by teachers (although paradoxically most teachers are women) who personify rules, culture, power and authority, while feminine gender is represented by children (both boys and girls). Children

are associated with nature, and nature should be cultured by teachers (i.e. by women, in this situation with masculine gender). (...) This is the example of the way in which gender structures the power relations without a specific connection to particular individuals assigned to a given gender category but in connection with a specific situation. This means that gender appears here as a feature of the social structure, as a quality associated with individuals who hold particular positions in the social structure and not as characteristics common to [all] persons from one sex category" (p. 81).

It is probably the pressure of gendered power structure that determines much stricter judgement of misbehaving girls than misbehaving boys. In the eyes of the teacher with whom the author co-operated, improper behaviour of the boys was "something unacceptable, yet positive at the same time. The teacher associated it with fair-play, directness and being active. The fact that the girls misbehave in a different way did not make them any better. (...) She [the teacher] preferred the class to be controlled by misbehaving boys rather than by "scheming" girls, whose practices are "repellent" and "absurdly devious" (p. 168). Associating boys' active participation in lessons with their unruly behaviour and expecting the girls to be first of all polite contributes to the naturalisation of gender divisions which in the long run proves detrimental to both sexes, as it supports the passivity and invisibility of girls and leads to stigmatization and social exclusion of boys.

Analysing sexual education lessons the author points out at the surprising fact that the discourse dominant in the curriculum and handbooks and the manner of conducting the lessons by the teacher absolutely exclude girls from active, subjective participation in those lessons. Although the sexological discourse in the Czech society is free from religious restrictions (Czechs are the most secularised society in Europe), by the fact of being anchored in biological and evolutionist explanations it offers a very conservative and discriminating message. Sexual education is concentrated mainly on preventive health care and subordinated to reproductive goals (the author exemplifies it by pointing out at the all too frequent use of the euphemism "the miracle of birth" by the teacher). Girls as young as 11 and their bodies are perceived only through the perspective of their future maternity (grotesque admonitions addressed to girls, telling them not to run around without their slippers on, as this may cause "uterus cold"). Sexual autonomy and sexual activity is ascribed only to the male sex. No female desire or female sexual fulfilment is mentioned anywhere in handbook texts or in the teacher's talk.

In the part of the book devoted to analysis of children's verbal statements (what it means to be a boy/girl, what my life will be like when I am 30 years old) and drawings made after the children were read a feminist fairy-tale, one can hardly be surprised by the children's statements in which, following the existing gender stereotypes, children place men and women in

distinctly separate categories (different looks, characteristics and activities). Still, it was surprising to see that the division into masculine and feminine was not perceived by children as “natural” but as socially construed by expectations and social norms. According to the author, this is evidenced by the use of the verb “must” by children (*girls/boys must...*), not the verb “be” constitutive to one’s identity (*girls/boys are...*). What is more, children often perceive that division as unfair.

The research employed in an original manner the feminist fairy-tale (Munsch, 1980). Feminist fairy-tales have been devised as a cure-all for gender stereotypes omnipresent in classical fairy-tales. They are supposed to provide different, more equal behaviour patterns for boys and girls (Dryjańska, 2012). However, numerous studies (Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007) prove that simple reversal of roles on which those tales normally rely (it is not the prince that kills the dragon and frees the princess but the other way round) inspire “mistrust” in children and lower the effectiveness of promoting non-stereotypical behaviour. “For feminist fairy tales to meet the needs of a society of children in want of fully realized, complicated characters (regardless of gender), feminist writers need to move beyond straight role reversal. Children see through these fractured fairy tales and do not identify with their one-dimensional protagonists. Feminist fairy tales must be stories in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender” (Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007, p. 41).

Being aware of those limitations, the author did not want to impose her own interpretation of the fairy-tale on children, but she wanted to see in what way children themselves would interpret it. In many cases children’s interpretations confirmed the “category-maintenance work” (Davies, 2003), i.e. an attempt to preserve the rigorous division into “masculine” and “feminine,” although there were also interpretations which connected masculine and feminine elements in surprising combinations which the author considers to be a potential that could be used, with appropriate approach, for gender-sensitive education.

### Conclusions

Summarizing the major findings of her research, in the conclusion the author returns to the basic practical question: what should actually teachers do if they do not want to discriminate against any of the sexes? Lucie Jarbovská, well aware of the dangers of simple role reversal, but also of the ineffectiveness of the persuasive methods of traditional pedagogy, calls for deeper and more subtle reflection on the functioning of gender at school and allowing the children themselves to practice the gender versatility in a reflective manner. This should be facilitated by treating gender, similarly

to other categories dividing people such as age or ethnicity, not as „individual traits of particular male or female pupils, but as characteristics of a social structure” (p. 170). Only then would a discussion on the social origin of norms be possible, opening the way to change.

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