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## **Editorial: Gender Equality, Social Justice and Education in the Nordic Countries**

### **Introduction**

The Nordic countries, i.e., Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have long had a reputation as being among the most gender equal and socially equal countries in the world (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). A comprehensive school system and early childhood education for all children regardless of the children's social background and demographic location have characterised the Nordic educational system (Gordon, Lahelma & Beach, 2003; Odenbring, 2014; Tallberg Broman 2009, 2010).

Furthermore, in the curricula in the Nordic countries gender equality in education has been emphasised (Arnesen et al. 2014). In terms of creating and maintaining social justice in education, the importance of gender equality as well as equity in both early childhood education and higher school levels has also been shown and underlined in contemporary research (Odenbring et al., 2017; Odenbring & Lappalainen, 2013; Sernhede & Tallberg Broman, 2014; Education for tomorrow, 2018).

### **Research on Gender and Education in the Nordic Countries**

The concept and phenomena of gender have been and are being debated within gender research and the ways the concept is employed for empirical analysis in education is under constant discussion and elaboration (see e.g., Francis 2010). The Nordic gender and education studies started in Sweden, Denmark and Norway in 1970s and in Finland in 1980s (Lahelma & Öhrn, 2017). Gender as a concept is not stable or agreed upon although in mainstream research gender is and has been often perceived as a self-evident variable. Researchers have attempted to determine the differences between assumed two genders, female and male. Research in gender differences was especially prevalent in the early 20th century (Lahelma 1992) and such research is still conducted today.

However, in critical research on gender, the idea of gender as a self-evident dichotomic difference between people is being problematised and taken under analysis. Gender is rather understood as something that is produced and maintained in societies and their institutions, rather than an aspect people are born with or that is stable and 'natural'. The notion of two 'opposite' genders has been deconstructed especially in the field of queer studies (e.g., Butler 1990).

Furthermore, intersectionality as a concept has become important: originating from black feminism and introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the concept emphasises how other dimensions of difference or systems of oppression cannot be separated from gender. Thus, gender cannot be understood without elaborating it together with other social categories such as race/ethnicity, sexuality, social class or disability: pupils categorised as 'boys' or 'girls' are not uniform. Depending on theoretical take, there is a variety of ways to trouble the category of gender and research on gender and education in the Nordic countries has been diverse.

## **Gender in Education: An Introduction to Educational Research in the Nordic Countries**

Internationally, when gender in education increasingly became a research focus in the 1970s, the studies were often small scale and qualitative (Lahelma 1992). Since the 1980s, there has also been a lot of qualitative research in the Nordic countries (Öhrn, 2002). Researchers became interested in the processes of school and gender in the interaction of classrooms and the first school ethnographic studies were conducted. Statistical analysis of gendered phenomena such as segregation in education and work were also prevalent; it aimed to show gendered tendencies that were not recognised in societies (Lahelma 1992). During the 1980s, interviews became common in research and later ethnographic studies have also become increasingly frequent in research on gender in education.

Another important field in research has been text book analysis from a gender perspective, which strengthened in the 1980s (Lahelma 1992). In the vast body of Nordic research in gender and education, there has been a shift from strong state feminism towards analysis of delicate meaning making in the everyday life of school (Lahelma & Öhrn 2017). Nordic research on gender and education has achieved a quite strong position in the Nordic countries and it has become internationally more visible in recent years (Lahelma 2015).

Nevertheless, the use of the research in teacher education remains quite unexplored (Lahelma & Tainio, in press). It is our intention and hope that this collection will encourage teacher educators as well as other professionals in education and elsewhere to learn more about contemporary Nordic research on gender in the field of education. Consequently, this collection could encourage more educational professionals to use contemporary research in their teaching.

## **Nordic Educational Research Association: NERA**

Since the 1990s, a gender and education network has been active within the Nordic Educational Research Association [NERA] (Lahelma, 2015). The NERA conference is held annually in one of the Nordic countries. The gender and education network is still active and doctoral students as well as researchers have the opportunity to attend the NERA conference and present and discuss papers on gender and education with colleagues. Most participants are from the Nordic countries, but researchers from outside the Nordic countries also participate and present their research within the network and at the conference.

## **Gender in Education: A Collection of Educational Research in the Nordic Countries**

Gender in education is often a controversial topic; it is discussed at many levels in the society, but an existing body of research literature can sometimes be difficult to locate. The intention with this collection is to give a brief introduction to parts of the research that have been conducted in the field of gender and education in the Nordic countries. The target audience includes teacher educators, teachers, policy makers and practitioners interested in these issues. We hope that this collection serves as a 'first step' towards learning more about gender and education.

This collection consists of ten contributions organised into the following themes: *Early Childhood Education*, *Secondary Schooling*, *Academic Achievement*, *Educational Choices* and *Teacher Education*. Each contribution is introduced by a short text about the main content of the article. Several of the synopses include links to the full texts, but due to copyright policies, links to all contributions could not be included.

The editors hope that the synopses evoke interest and encourage further reading. Naturally, this collection does not cover all research within this field, as it is not meant to be exhaustive. It is

rather designed to be a helpful introduction to the field of gender in education in the Nordic countries. The publishers and journals publishing policies have also affected the contents of the collection and this has a great impact on the representation of contributions. Another issue that affected our selections is the representation of the countries within this particular research field: research conducted in Sweden and Finland currently dominates the field. Because of publication policies and the current dominance of Swedish and Finnish research, this collection contains contributions only from Finland and Sweden and research primarily based on research conducted by researchers affiliated with the *Nordic Centre of Excellence Justice through Education* (JustEd).

## **The GENTE Spin-off Project**

This collection has been conducted as part of the NordForsk funded spin-off project *GENTE*-Gender in Teacher Education. During 2016, researchers at the universities of Helsinki and Gothenburg joined forces to create a website that covers the main Nordic research on gender in the field of education. The research team consisted of some of the most acknowledged researchers in the field of gender in education in the Nordic countries, who have conducted studies on gender on all educational levels from early childhood education to the university level. All members have also been members of the centre of excellence *JustEd* (2013-2018).

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## **Editors**

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