



“If not school then who?” : Promoting gender equality in Greek schools via innovating programs

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Abstract

According to the contemporary theory and the latest references the rising of gender stereotypes is strongly connected with the future of education. All educational systems are reproducing the social and cultural context of the society. In this aspect school is still the main structure of reproducing gender roles but also is the mean that can help realize social change. Furthermore, teachers have a key role in this social reproduction because their experience and their ideas about gender equality influence students both boys and girls. So, teachers who are partly responsible for the prolonging of gender stereotypes is crucial to have a proper training in order to recognize and sensitize about gender equality.

During the first decade of this century (2000-2008) four European innovating programs were held in Greek secondary education with three major goals :a) the training and sensitization of teachers, so that they can identify gender inequality in the wider social environment and individual educational context, b) the creation and use of educational structures aimed at cross-sectional and longitudinal emergence of a new vision of equality and the promotion of gender relations at individual and collective, educational and professional level and c) the encouragement of female pupils to attend initial vocational training in areas where females are underrepresented(positive actions). These programs included a lot of innovating methods such as e-learning, role playing, computer interaction etc. Thousands of teachers and students attended these European programs for eight years.

The aim of this paper is to present the European programs which promoted gender equality in Greek secondary schools from 2000 until 2008 in three dimensions: a) the new methods of teacher training and innovative teaching, b) the experience of teachers who participated in these programs and c) teacher's propositions and ideas for new methods in order to promote gender equality in education. This paper is based on seven interviews of teachers (men and women)which are explored through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Teachers who joined these programs are familiar with innovating teaching methods such as new technologies, e-learning, distance education and human computer interaction and because of their training they can contribute to the future of education.

During the last decade in Greece, and mostly due to the initiative of Universities, the interest for gender equality in education is expanding. Researches, innovating programs and other practices were organized but not as a central educational policy [1]. Resent research [2] shows that future teachers although they understand that gender inequality does exist in Greek society, they can't acknowledge the social mechanisms, such as school, which create and preserve those stereotypes. One other research [3] among other results declares that teachers still have some stereotypical views both for boys and girls. Finally one last research in the same context of the previous [4] shows that there are two dimensions in teachers opinions : the first one believes that school is powerless and cannot contribute to social change and the second present the opinion that school is an institution that can help achieve social change.

It is well known that European Union through intense discussion awarded education as the ultimate institution which can spread equality principals, fight against discrimination and promote social change. So, the Council of the European Union and the European Council published resolutions which funded medium term action programs on equal opportunities for men and women. The Fifth one includes programs from 2000 until 2008 and Greek Ministry of Education participates. As it said previously before 2000 Universities and Institutions designed action programs but this project was a



complete proposal from the Ministry of Education aiming to introduce gender equality in the Greek educational system [5]. Basic goal of the European Union is gender equality in general and vocational education. The main strategic is gender mainstreaming which means that because inequality does not relate only to women, it doesn't support programs only for the empowerment of women in education and in society. [6] This is an innovating dimension that promotes new methodologies in order to achieve gender equality both in school and society.

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secondary education with two major goals :a) the training and sensitization of teachers, so that they can identify gender inequality in the wider social environment and individual educational context and b) the encouragement of female pupils to attend initial vocational training in areas where females are underrepresented[7]. These programs were designed by different Universities and Institutions. The first one was training of teachers in secondary schools on gender equality issues, so that they can locate inequality design and present intervention actions in the classroom. The second one's main goals were: a) the effacement of discrimination towards girls in the educational process and b) the introduction of gender mainstreaming in the curricula, in career guidance classes and the connection of education and labor market. The third program produced subsidiary innovating educational material (books, and cds) so that teachers can have the right tools in order to introduce gender equality affairs in school. The fourth and last program was 'positive actions for women' which aimed to the abolition of discrimination towards female students and to gender mainstreaming. The program mostly was emphasizing on the empowerment of girls in New Technologies. All of these programs educated and trained teachers in gender equality using new innovating methods such as e-learning, role playing, computer interaction etc.

On the occasion of these programs we decided to conduct a research in order to explore the experiences of teachers who participated in the programs all these years. The main aim of this research is to investigate how the programs influenced teachers educational practices, if they understand gender equality in education and if they are continuing the positive actions in classroom in order to eliminate gender discrimination. The research method we chose is the quality method 'Phenomenological Interpretive Analysis'. This was an ideal method to analyze interviews taken from teachers because it does focuses on the substance of the experience of these teachers and at the same time it brings up both the interpretations that the teachers gave and the way that the researchers understand these interpretations [8]. The first results given in this article is from the first seven interviews of both men and women.

Teachers who participated in this research talked about their beliefs about the meaning of being a teacher, their opinion about gender equality in the Greek secondary school and their experience from the European Programs. After the analysis of these interviews we can reach some basic aspects that we came across the answers given by the interviewers.

First of all the teachers who participated in the research believe that the main aspect of being a teacher is first giving values to the students and then knowledge. In other words they acknowledge the importance of school in the ethical, psychological and social development of students. That's why they embrace new more interactive methods in the classroom. Of course they believe that knowledge is still very important but the main goal of a teacher is to offer experiences, to contribute to the social development of students.

"...A teacher is a person who can give emotions to the children, who can move their imagination, who can give them experience and knowledge..."

"...first of all is shaping characters, then knowledge..."

That means that most teachers believe they hold a great responsibility for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes since they are responsible for the social development of students. In fact they believe that if teachers have stereotypical views about themselves they will influence student's beliefs. So, they have the power to change student's visual aspect about the role of women and men in society by intervening with appropriate new teaching methods.

Empowering teachers training is another topic that most of teachers agree on. Actually they believe that a sufficient teacher is a teacher that gets a proper training throughout his or her career. All of them acknowledge the fact that teachers' training is very important and they feel that every day they come across a lot of issues that they cannot always handle successfully. They need to learn about new pedagogic theories or psychology.



"...sure I believe that teachers that have a proper training will get a lot of ideas that will help them..."

"...I believe that constant and organized training is in order..."

That's why most of them participated in these programs in order to learn about gender equality in education. Most of them believe that gender equality in education should be a central theme in the basic teachers' training. They also recognize the fact that they need more training in order to achieve new practices in classroom such as role playing and other interaction methods.

Although they do believe that teachers are responsible for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, all of them acknowledge family as a key factor for the development such views. They believe that both boys and girls are more influenced by their family. So, all students enter school having settled beliefs about the social role of women and men and they get these examples from their family. Family is responsible for the creation of gender stereotypes and teachers can only try to change some of these views. This aspect exonerates school from the creation of gender stereotypes and projects the great power of family. They also believe that it is very difficult to change family values because boys and girls act according to their experiences presented by family. So, gender stereotypes created by family are so strong that cannot always change when teachers intervene. But they believe the fact that the strength of family's values is a reason why gender equality programs are so important.

"...most children have some views that they are coming from their family and they are very strong..."

"...stereotypes are strong inside their family and not in school...most of children's experiences about gender stereotypes proceeds from the family..."

When the interviewers were asked about the differences between boys and girls all of the participants answered that there are differences in two aspects: first in the discipline inside the classroom and second in their grades. Teachers believe that girls are more disciplined and organized during classes. They are polite to the teachers, they are quiet in class and they don't cause a lot of trouble. On the other hand are more outgoing and loud. Also, girls have better grades in most classes and this is not because they are smarter but because they study harder. Only one thinks that this happens because it is in the 'nature' of boys and girls.

"...I think that there is a hormone in boys that make them more outgoing..."

Most of the participants believe that for these differences responsible are society and family. They believe, in other words, that society and family urge boys to participate in more moving and loud games and actions and girls to stay more quiet and easygoing. 'Nature' has nothing to do with it because the way family and society up brings boys and girls is very determinative.

"...no, we are not born this way, this is the way they grow up and develop..."

"...we do have differences (men and women) but it is because that we are brought up this way..."

"...the fact that women are more capable in raising kids is because society still has this stereotype model..."

As for their participation in the gender equality programs most of the interviewers believe that it was a great experience which gave them the opportunity to understand how gender inequality functions in schools, how they can get rid of their own gender stereotypes and methods to decrease gender stereotypes that boys and girls might have using new innovating teaching methods. Also, most of them feel that via these programs teachers came closer with their students because they took the chance to discuss with their pupils about their emotions, beliefs, fears and opinions about gender equality. This was very important because during every day lessons both teachers and students do not have the opportunity or the time to talk and practice interactive actions.

"...because teachers should come in terms with their own stereotypes and how they deal with their own life..."

"...students have the need to talk. They need from you to give them the chance to talk. And you have to give them the chance to understand society..."

All of the participants agree to the fact that one program can make no difference. In order to achieve gender equality all teachers should get proper training regularly and should get to know the new interactive methods that these programs introduced. These programs proved that school can change gender stereotypes if teachers can intervene with the right actions, such as action research. But in order to become an everyday procedure teachers should have training in new teaching practices and procedures. These programs need to have successors. Some teachers proposed new programs, or seminars, or speed courses during school year. All of them came to the conclusion that education is a



great factor that can contribute to gender equality if teachers open their minds in new ideas. After all “if not school than who?”

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