

## **Boys or Just Children Intersectional Analysis of Ethnography Made by Trainee Teachers 2002–2007**

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This contribution analyses the ethnography by trainee teachers, in the classroom. They are to observe situations that indicate the everyday conditions among children, how difference is made, or prohibited. The trainees will return with reports and narratives of certain themes, one of which is the attention given to the boys.

My purpose is to clarify how the trainee teachers recognize and interpret how hierarchy positions of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and age meet at certain crossroads. Clashes may indicate that forces of evaluation are on the move in society.

Aspects of gender intersect in recurring themes of integration, xenophobia, any prejudice among teachers, parents, and children. Every cohort focuses one theme, in turn: the supervisor as the ideal model of a teacher, terrible parents, terrible teachers, and how roles will be assigned to children, mostly 'the naughty boy'. The ordinary children seem to be female rather than male children.

*Key words:* children, cross-pressure, cultural diversity, didactics, education, ethnicity, ethnography, ethnology, folklore studies, oral history, gender, intersectionality, narrative.

## Boys or Just Children

### Intersectional Analysis of Ethnography Made by Trainee Teachers 2002–2007

This contribution forms itself into an inquiry of how gender is being done at school by children and adults when observed by trainee teachers. While gender is being done by children, we as adults should take care not to bracket children as a collective category of 'human beings at an early stage in life', thereby disregarding sex as well as culturally constructed gender. I will consider the non-gendered word 'children' versus 'adults' of both sexes in relation to the dichotomies 'boys versus girls', and 'ordinary or problem child', as well as 'individuals versus collective' in relation to 'male or female individuals and collective'. Faced with these sets of categories, my question to myself has been: What is there to be seen here that I do not yet fully grasp? Thus the reader is asked to keep in mind that the gendering eyes belong to adult observers, ethnographers, actors and readers, as the adult trainee teachers observe children doing gender.

The observations of a bundle of stereotypies like 'the naughty boys' and 'the good girls' in the ethnography by the trainee teachers has dared me to seek more than one way to understand the reports and stories from their periods of on-the-job practise in the classrooms and schoolyards. The trainee teachers were asked to observe situations that indicated to them the everyday conditions among children, how differences were made, or prohibited. The trainee teachers returned to the Midsweden University with reports and stories of certain themes, one of which was the attention given to the boys. On their return I met them for a focus group interview for sharing experiences and further reflections.

Are boys and girls treated as individual persons of indifferent sex, i.e. 'just children' or is the tendency to regard them as 'naughty boys' and ordinary 'good girls'? But where does that leave the category of 'ordinary children', 'normal kids' the one most children can be presumed to fall within? The normative power of words like 'normal' and 'ordinary' is at stake. Here it is my suggestion that the ordinary children are likely to be the ones who do not stand out, but gladly merge into the situated mainstream group. On the other hand the children who distinguish themselves by certain behaviour may get away with the excuse that they are 'just children'. But who are then the adult teachers, men and women, those who decide which category to be 'the ordinary one'?

As the intercultural ethnology course is directed to the task of making the Swedish school safe for diversity, starting with the trainee teachers, I will in short mention the broad ethnography where the students are to open their eyes for the intersecting cross pressures of various hierarchies among which the gender order is always present. The word child/children might indicate a non-gendered, unisex category but so is hardly the case. There are certain discourses on childhood, one drawing on the philosophy of Rosseau, encouraging boys to cultivate their gifts, distracting girls from anything of the sort, in order to be prepared to instantaneously serve their male relatives.

In the Swedish language there are oldfashioned romantic words for a boy or a girl. The female word 'flickebarn', literally 'girl-child' may still be used in a tender but belittling mood. The male counterpart, 'gosse' or 'gossebarn', is no longer used in contemporary speech. How is this to be understood? Are the boys to be regarded as the peculiar category of 'The Representative Children, 'the ordinary children'? Or is it a case of 'boys will be boys', a reduction to being 'just boys', while some other group is assumed to live up to being 'the other children', the non-boys? The cleavage inherent in the application of these alternative definitions is certain to occur in the eyes of the spectator. This observer, being a participant as well, incorporates the gaze of an adult male or female spectator.

In my analysis of this set-up words and concepts will be used and defined on a common sense level, while turning this question over. I will momentarily return to the question of how

boys and girls will be regarded by their teachers, individually or as one or two gendered groups, after broadly sketching the ethnographic fieldwork.

## The Broad Ethnography

Some 5-600 stories and reports of ethnography emerged from the intercultural ethnology course during 2002-2007. It is the ethnographic field observations made by trainee teachers during their practise weeks in the classrooms I have analysed. The trainees were expected to continuously make notes of their personal experiences, day by day. In actual fact, many of them solved the task retrospectively by filing reports describing their entire five weeks spent at the school. A report is given in answer to a question while a narrative story emerges out of personal experience (cf. Polanyi 1989). Most of the related situations could have occurred anywhere. In reading this account several teachers, trainee teachers and parents can think they recognise themselves, without this being the case.

Recurrent themes appear in the relations, above all the story of 'the sad child'. It is well suited to the narrative form of a start, a turning point, and an end, followed by a coda to take the listener back to the situation where the story is told. Also, there will always be an evaluation where the teller conveys his opinion of the event (Labov 1972:354-396). Knowing how the themes are attracted to the dramaturgy of the narrative, I have learnt to ask for reports of the well-functioning schools. They do exist, although they do not cause narratives and they do not make the news. To do justice in reporting the state of harmony of a happy school situation takes some time for observation and reflection.

For the broad investigation my purpose is to clarify when and how the trainee teachers recognize that orders of domination twist and clash and how to interpret such clashes. The systems of hierarchies expose individuation or generalisation, how difference is made, levelled out, or prohibited, in order to create solidarity. The Swedish context underlines the need to make integration work, which means that the majority of the population must become willing to make the world safe for diversity; if not, we can expect a social explosion.

With limited knowledge of cultural diversity the native majority has to learn that things may be understood and handled in other ways than it is accustomed to. Not even prejudices will last. Everyone is to watch out for the human desire to categorise out of preconceived simplification. The trainees want to become good teachers, treating every child justly and as required. They would love to be told how to do it but will accept that they have to find it inside themselves.

In Swedish I use the concept of 'cross-pressure' to mark the focus of the persons who experience the order of the intersecting forces in a situation. Drawing on the gender researcher Lesley McCall it would be 'the intercategory' way to analyse intersectionality (2005:31-56). The trope of pressures from various directions and forces resisting such pressures is my way to stress the dynamics of waves of pressure. If ever in balance, they will not be static. The Swedish ethnologist Ella Johansson writes that solidarity with diversity is to be combined with recognition, empathy, and humanity. The crucial test is to respect the traits that we dislike or find disagreeable. For the scholar it is a moral obligation to call attention to the consequences of diversified cross pressure (Johansson 1998).

The hierarchy positions of gender, class, ethnic groups, religious belief, age, cohort etc., keep colliding at a variety of crossings. At school, the outcome cannot be predicted. The space is given, and the forces of the rank orders need to adjust in a given space. Aspects of gender intersect in recurring themes of integration, xenophobia, any prejudice among teachers, parents, and children. The gender order is always present, whatever additional axis of domination. Exceptions from the mainstream rule will confirm the rule. Still, any change may indicate a new basis of valuation. Justice will come out of the value of choice from

various perspectives of agency, and the systems of valuation today do not coincide with the preferences of the welfare society fifty or even thirty years ago.

## Opposing the Normative Force of the Mainstream

The native majority can still set the standard at school, but the teachers can meet every child and its parents, with or without a background abroad. Furthermore, if there are no ethnic minorities in the specific school, there will always be boys and girls present, which will be enough to start the logic of the hierarchy, increased or diminished by the space between the two (Hirdman 1988). The mechanism will be the same. Preconceived opinions on the gender order will be at work, while the native majority has the means to decide what is normal, fair and just. The mainstream standard is likely to become normative. Comparison is the worldwide way to meet the Other, realising what we are and not are. We create and recreate the opinions inside ourselves against those we call 'the Others', also considering gender, or we would not know who we are (Ehn & Löfgren 2002; Arvastson & Ehn 2007). I do not mean that the majority decides what is normal, but the Swedish native majority is likely to prefer accommodation to the mainstream standards, that is in a normative way of common sense, not to stand out.

Gender scholars know that the study of difference does not automatically create solidarity, because that would restrict what is regarded as normal. Nor does the study of sameness, Rosi Braidotti tells us (2002). There is also a fear of difference (Johansson 1998:214; Schiffauer 1996). Closing one's eyes to diversity does not create solidarity with differences but pretends they do not exist. Respecting diversity is to be combined with recognition, empathy, and humanity to create solidarity. The crucial test is to respect the traits that we dislike or find disagreeable. Narratives of difference usually end up concluding that we are all alike, and, vice versa, narratives starting from sameness conclude that we are all unique (Johansson 1998:206ff). The western listener expects this narrative structure.

In the Swedish political discourse, it is correct to stress that in a democracy we are all alike. It may be regarded as pure discrimination to talk about diversity, thereby conserving difference. To describe difference and diversity as the effects of somebody else's culture makes it worse. At times this allows us to close our eyes for social evils, which even may be contrary to the law of our country (Johansson 1998). The native majority is likely to encase any problems with the minority, pretending that the problems are programmed with their culture, which adds to a static, never-changing enclosure. On the contrary, tradition and culture are constantly on the move, continuously recreated for progressing needs.

A trainee teacher practising at a day-care centre reacted strongly against the talk of 'the culture of the others'. A little girl complained of unwelcome courting by a boy of five who kept pinching and caressing her. The pedagogues did not pay attention to her but remarked to the trainee that this was 'his culture', nothing to make a fuss of. At stake was gender and ethnicity and the remark on "another culture" as a static entity made it worse. The labelling of 'culture' allowed the pedagogues to avoid liability. In writing the student reflected on the impossibility to disclaim responsibility referring to somebody else's culture as a labelled preservative instead of situated habits in constant progress (Öhlander 2005; Quinn, Holland 1987:3ff). Nor should anyone, young or adult, be made to accept unwelcome physical courting.

The pragmatic dilemma how to work out problems related to ethnic minorities or gender is left to the teacher on the floor, as always. The teacher is supposed to be correct in every ethical aspect of politics or ideology, to follow the official directives, and still, at the same time in her own mind recognise if or when the customary patterns take over her own and her colleagues' reactions, and how it takes place.

## Boys and Girls

Solidarity will not be the given consequence of the search for sameness. Looking for diversity will increase solidarity with varieties. To be sure, there is a risk that stories of difference and stories of sameness might harden the boundaries (Johansson 1998) although the aim is to make diversity to be the general state of the intercultural school. There is the paradox that the Swedish schools are full of teachers, who struggle to ease the integration of the newcomers, and at the same time they teach the language that constantly measures the immigrant children against the standard measure of the majority population. The ethnologist Ann Runfors concludes that the school teaches these children “how to be an immigrant,” despite all the good-will (2003). The trainee teachers will be part of the problem soon enough. That is why they are asked to see how difference is made. At the same time they will see how gender is being done.

Quite a few of the students do not expect to find any discrimination for gender reason. Adult men and women may be convinced that equal rights of sexes are secured but new young persons are constantly appearing. The moment a two-year-old child becomes aware that he is a boy or she is a girl both of them will find out how to do gender. They watch the adults. The trainee teachers report from day-care centres how little girls are given opportunities to dress up as princesses. Adults will talk them into becoming a princess, the girls will make drawings of princesses and plan for a future career, just as they are told.

The boys are hardly told to be princes, there will be other stereotyped role behaviours, a few varieties of masculinity, some rendering high status, others less in the eyes of other children and adults, drawing on R.W. Connell I will follow the matter (1995). What is expected and what will be rewarded? The ethnography of the trainee teachers is filled with the general stereotypes of naughty boys and steady girls, good girls to calm down the boys and help their teachers to manage the work climate of the classroom. Year by year the students ask how this situation can go on and on, despite it is well recognised. They wonder about an event like this in a small school in Lapland where two boys had the task to exercise with their classmates how the clock measures time by questions like: “What are we to do at this hour? What is the time when we do this and that?” Only boys were asked to answer the questions. Eventually, the trainee teacher demanded that also the girls should be given the chances.

–“No”, said the boys.

–“No, we cannot do with girls!”

The children were eight years of age and quite sure that the boys were the best. The trainee was amazed. The refusal was not explained in so much detail, but the girls agreed to stay in the background until one girl argued that boys and girls could be good at different tasks. The story was told with the punch line that the children were just eight years of age. This is the general reaction from adults.

Anette Hellman, gender scholar and pre-school-teacher, investigates how children construct masculinities, how children of four or five declare boys to be: fast and strong, and wear cool clothes of dark colour, no pink clothes, not to play with girls or girls’ stuff. Hellman makes a point of how these children pay attention to the border between female and male behaviour because they realise the importance for the adults. Boys as well as girls are free to test, negotiate, dare and accept the construction of masculinities and femininities. Consequently Hellman asks the pedagogues of the pre-school to pay attention to how hierarchies of agency are being built by children (2005:149-159).

Fathers of today may personify the ideal of the so-called ‘new man’. They practise gender equality in private life; they can express their emotions and will still be supposed to face the demands of powerful agency (Nordberg 2006). Trainee teachers who have worked for years

in day-care centres remember when such a modern father comes to collect his son and finds him dressed up as a princess: “What are you wearing!” When the first shock has passed some fathers may accept the outfit. Otherwise, the boy quickly learns to change in time before his father is due to come. The outfit with shiny dress and crown is among the toys of the day-care centres. The pedagogues let the boys try as well as the girls (focus group interview 070507). It may be good for the boys, but for the girls? What does the princess role implicate for the adults doing gender, I wonder?

Sociologists in the United States, Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane, have found that adults who host the principles of gender equality quite easily can leave their principles aside when approaching children. Grandparents, especially grandfathers, make a point of teaching how to be a boy (Adams & Coltrane 230-248). There is nothing to suggest that Swedish grandparents would act otherwise. In May 2007 a newspaper headline was spread saying that a doctor in Norway should have asked a boy of seven “to be a man” (SvD 20070508). This is no more peculiar than the knowledge that adults treat newborn baby girls and baby boys in different ways, gendered ways. Do members of the elder cohort need to make sure that the children actually will turn out to be boys and girls? What else might they become? Marie Nordberg asks, ethnologist and gender researcher in Sweden (2007:27-39).

A female trainee teacher started her second training period, convinced that there would be no prejudiced discrimination in her particular school where the pedagogues were keen to stop any such tendency. Gendering was not mentioned explicitly. In her first period she worked with young children. This time the pupils were nine to eleven years of age. Once a week it was common that the children entertained the class themselves for one hour. Three popular boys were in charge of a game where the children sat in a circle, with one person standing in the middle to catch a next person. In this game, the seated children were to call the name of another to avoid being taken. This sounds fine, provided that everybody’s name is called out. In this case, the adult teachers watched from aside and found it all well and fine.

My student was disturbed. She noticed that only three girls out of ten were called. Later she learnt that they were the cool girls as seen by the leading boys. There were 15 boys and five of them were never called. Some of them had dark skin, and two were the most quiet, nicest boys, but none of them had a high status, and they were not considered cool enough. The leading boys were white and middle-class.

This trainee teacher had the courage to whisper her observation to the female instructor, who recognised the problem. A discussion took place concerning the opinions among adults about ideas of democracy among children, though their good nature was considered ingrained from birth. This trainee noticed a ranking order of sameness, which excluded persons of another sex, of another colour of skin, of low status of class. Since they intersect, we cannot know which was the worst. The trainee perceived three grounds for discrimination. The victims were caught in the middle. The perspective of cross pressure is required to see the intersecting orders of rank.

A female trainee teacher, well known in her home community as a politician, felt that the senior male instructor and other colleagues tested her attitude in an incident when a young girl had been called dirty names, “whore” for starters. The senior instructor meant that the girl had it coming to her, the way she dressed. My student, the trainee teacher, responded that no one deserved to be called such names and this girl dressed just like the other girls, no more enticing than the rest. She herself was a big woman and felt that her body was at stake more than the girl’s, again due to position, gender, and age (a student in May 2002).

Traditionally, the Swedish dirty words are religious in character. The devil would be the worst to call on. Today, the use of names of sexual character is new in Sweden. They are regarded as strange and challenging to the discursive correctness of gender equality.

One middle-aged female teacher did not come off very well, when she met a group of happy teenage boys playing around in the corridor with their coloured ink pens open. They painted each other in the face and came up to her. She tried to laugh them away but made the mistake: "I would be very angry, if you painted me." That challenge could not remain untried. She was painted. To her this was a humiliation a teacher should not have to bear. She hid in the nearest lavatory. The female trainee teacher was the only adult witness. She withdrew quietly (Cornelius n.d.). Here, the age, class, and professional position of a lone female teacher was not enough against the gender force of several young men.

The focus group interview after the practising period was the opportunity when the formation of a theme of narratives took place. The theme varied from cohort to cohort. I take it as an indication of the narrative process, a co-variation among the students, interacting when they are reunited at the university, adjusting in class. Students share and reflect according to their previous personal experience. When a student could not attend this meeting he/she handed in the observation in writing and the theme often turned out to be the same of the semester. The concordance was less dominant when I read their written issues, narratives and reports. Then I recognized stories belonging to all the themes, which have appeared during the years, and a few new topics.

The theme of the first cohort was provoked by a murder of a female student with a family background in the Middle East, presumably for reasons of family honour. Drawing on the moral obligation of society, trainee teachers must be ready to raise the dilemmas of gaps between public jurisdiction, situated customs at home and abroad, family rules, and personal views of legal matters. Young boys and girls need the support from school. Trainee teachers from abroad, who have the double hyphen-competence of situated customs, usually make a point of citizenship, domestic law, meaning that family opinions grow along with the children, constantly adjusting the situated views to new situations, and no family is like the other. When opposing the native majority they mention family-men, who fake their background thus avoiding harassment from taxi-clients in Stockholm. One student quoted a taxi-driver: "I have my own religion. Which is yours?" (a student in November 2006).

With the next cohort, the good example had taken the attention. The instructor of the local school was the ideal model. This is the time when I began to collect a bank of practicable hints on how to do it, not to expose a child, for instance.

The following year the theme was: "Terrible parents, making their children insecure, letting them have new stepsisters and stepbrothers among the classmates every second month." It is important to keep in mind that this was told collectively by disapproving trainee teachers, not by the children or their families. There is of course no evidence from the parents, no facts whatsoever. But a few years later another trainee teacher confirmed as a mother the disturbance among children caused by their parents' switch of partners in a small village (070507).

The next cohort told stories of "terrible teachers". Mistakes and slips are inevitable in pedagogical activities. Unfortunately, there are examples not to be followed, teachers making a certain child the scapegoat, for instance. One trainee teacher noticed such a boy who had given up, no use to try any more. She told her instructor who reconsidered his opinion, grateful to the trainee. Sometimes the local instructor tells the trainee too much about the children in advance, thereby deciding the reputation of a certain child. In one case the trainee could not make out which child was so pointed out, not until she learnt their names.

The focus group of May 2007 dwelt on the topic 'children in need of certain support', named by letters of abbreviation. As trainee teachers, they had practised at schools where up to a third of the children were assigned a personal assistant. There could be eight to ten adult persons in the classroom. These students were adults having worked at school for years though not yet qualified teachers. They judged from experience that the number of children in

need of certain support had increased during ten years and speculated why. Possible reasons might be actually increased numbers of children in need of support, better means to give support, refined methods of diagnose, the interests of teachers in having a diagnose for a child-acting-out as the one way to receive extra resources, i.e. more money to manage the classroom situation. Several members of the student group had personal experience of special support for children. They had brothers or sons in need of support, who were not helped by the support and others who did not get the support they might benefit from. This discussion took us back to the theme 'teachers who designates roles for certain children' when introducing trainee teachers at school.

A year before, the theme was how roles, such as "the naughty boy," are assigned to children by the teacher. Also, it was gendered: the space and time that the boys demand and get, but not the girls, and how this can be maintained, although everybody involved knows the mechanisms. The media debate pities the boys in a matrimonial environment or pities the girls being used by female teachers as bumpers to noisy, difficult boys (Kön i skolan, NIKK 2003). According to both arguments women and girls should change. The debate does not demand anything from the boys. Paradoxically, the boys turn out to be the losers, not asked to do their best, not trusted with the ability to behave, to study diligently, to relate to school mates and adults. Instead, it is the ignored girls, who develop the necessary skills for independent academic success. There are more girls than boys in higher education. At the university today 60 % are female students.

One group of students was filled with wonder at the patience of children with their disturbing mates. They simply accepted that this is the way he/she is: "Anna does it all the time." To the ordinary children there was no difference between disturbing girls or disturbing boys. When the difficult children had a calm phase they could play along with the classmates. The children accepted a high amount of disturbance by boys and girls of their own age, when the adults did not. When girls behave just as difficult as the disturbing boys it is said that they are regarded as demons by adult teachers. The stories handed in by some female trainee teachers show that the noisy, naughty boys are pointed out by the local instructors while the disturbance of a difficult girl was downplayed, although she was the real problem, according to the student.

Imagine the large number of good girls being placed as bumpers to disturbing boys, they could easily be recognised as "the ordinary people, easy to manage just like me, their female teacher". As they do not demand attention they may be overlooked, being ordinary good girls, presumably very much like their teachers once were. In the meantime, the boys are directed into the cliché of the difficult boys, which are allowed to be problematic to handle. Being ordinary does not mean being normative nor does a majority by numbers direct the gender order, so which kind will be regarded as the ordinary children? It is possible to think that the girls will be 'just children' while the boys are considered to be problem children, along with those girls who do not fit with the cliché of the nice girl. The amount of quiet, diligent boys does not affect the cliché.

At this point, I asked the trainee teachers, students of the spring semester, which kind will be allowed to be 'just children'? There was a swift answer: "The boys. Girls are helping hands" (070507). They are small issues of female teachers and mothers. The girls will be just ordinary people, females like you and me, like most teachers today. As a group they are made feminine, female gender is done to them. Individual boys are regarded as the children they are, 'just kids' and normative children. The boys are not 'ordinary people' to be overlooked. They are special, they are male children, who can break the rules made by the school and the teachers, and get away with it. The girls are like the teachers so they have to behave. The boys are allowed to defy the rules thus forming a standard of their own. The boys are allowed to be childish, non-responsible by the adults who thereby do masculinity, this is how boys will be

boys. The world will belong to them as adults, also young boys know that. In time, it will turn out all-right, the adults need not make them do their best. The ethnologist Göran Nygren shows that even the bright elite boys will act accordingly (2007:111-117). Girls are demanded to do their best, because they are like teachers. This is the paradox when the gender order takes command of our situated customs, while the unisex concept 'children' makes us lose sight of what we do.

The argument deliberately forms a circle to demonstrate that the label 'child' hides how gender is being done by adults and children. Hopefully, each individual boy or girl will be 'just a child' to its parents. Not until the collective group is labelled 'children' does the category obscure that boys and girls are constantly being gendered on a level of common sense. I could suggest a neat model where adult women would regard the girls as ordinary people, whereas the adult men would regard the boys as ordinary. As a consequence, the young people of the opposite sex would be The Children. The suggestion would be to legitimize the drive to create categories and to close my eyes for the consequence of ranking when keeping the opposites apart. On the contrary, it is important to be aware of how adults keep the boys and girls apart and expect them to do gender.

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