

Gender and equality in education. Key themes, changes and the contemporary focus on achievement

Elisabet Öhrn, University of Gothenburg

ABSTRACT

The field of gender and education historically and currently addresses a range of issues of equality in education. Key themes include power relations, curriculum and school practices, achievement patterns, and femininities and masculinities produced with/in education. This article briefly reviews key themes and changes in the field of gender of education, and then explores the prominent contemporary issues concerning gender and achievement, many of which focus on boys' said underachievement. It draws on Nordic and international research, and especially a recent Swedish research project on achievement and gender. This project, and others before it, showed a dissociation between dominant youth masculinities and study patterns, but also a widespread celebration of talent that has significant implications for the understanding of everyone's achievements. The presentation also highlights the problems of homogenising gender groups and the need to explore variation between social groups and contexts.

Keywords: Gender research, debate, achievement, celebration of talent

Research on gender and education in the Nordic countries

A recent analysis of the field known as gender and education concludes that it emerged in the 1970s, following the development of new social movements such as feminism and civil rights, which influenced both politics and attitudes towards social structures and fields of knowledge (Öhrn & Weiner, 2017). Early investigations in the field often took gender differentiation and power relations in society at large as their starting points, and asked what role schools and other institutions played in their reproduction. This often meant focusing on school structures and practices, such as gender bias in textbooks, gender differentiation in the curriculum, and gendered practices in the classroom (ibid.).

Anglophone studies have influenced both the theories and methodologies adopted and developed in Nordic research in this field since it began. Particularly notable influences include quantitative research from the USA during the 1970s and early 1980s, and British ethnography and critical theory from the 1980s onwards. Additionally, poststructuralism has become increasingly influential since the 1990s, as has Australian research.

This Anglophone influence has been important to the Nordic field because it is a valuable source of knowledge, methods, theories and empirical themes. However, it is also troublesome in some respects because it has largely been unidirectional: influence commonly extends from Anglophone countries to other parts of the world, but rarely in the other direction. Moreover, it strongly affects which issues and perspectives are considered important or central (Öhrn & Weiner, 2017). Consequently, non-Anglophone results and theories are more likely to be considered case specific, whereas Anglophone research is recognised as generalisable. This is reflected in the frequent labelling of Anglophone research as 'International' and is perpetuated by international journals and other publications that influence this field as many others (c.f. Larsson, 2006), both nationally and internationally (Öhrn & Weiner, 2009).

However, there is also a strong joint Nordic tradition in research on gender and education. This tradition dates back to the field's early days in the 1970s and thrived through a parallel developmental process, with researchers from Denmark, Norway and Sweden being especially prominent. Central to this development were joint Nordic forums such as Nordic research seminars supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers in the 1980s and the Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) from the late 1980s. These forums provided space for discussion, the development of ideas, and exchanges of research findings. Norway and Sweden have consistently

been very active in this joint development, but the Danish contribution diminished in the 1990s and Finnish involvement grew rapidly. Despite these changes over time, I would say that there is still a strong Nordic exchange and discussion in gender and education research that has been more substantial and durable than similar efforts in many other areas of education research.

From the start, Nordic research on gender and education relied heavily on sociology (not least due to the early contributions of Norwegians such as Hildur Ve, 1982) and less on the feminist teacher activism that was strongly represented in countries such as Britain (Weiner, 1994). Nordic efforts have also received substantial state support due to so called women-friendly policies (Borchorst & Siim, 2008), and in Sweden, many women who promoted these policies had previously been active feminists (Almgren, 2006). Also important for the field's development is that gender equality was and remains an issue of strong symbolic policy value in the Nordic countries. Education has been central to the development of the Nordic welfare systems, which emphasise the importance of equal educational opportunities for social cohesion. Gender equality was and still is an important dimension of equality within these efforts. For instance, the Swedish policy that schooling should promote equality, with explicit references to gender equality, dates back to the compulsory school curricula from the late 1960s (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1969). Gender equality has thus been a vital part of the democratic and democratising dimensions of schooling in Sweden for some time.

Changing themes in research on gender and education; from social power relations to (boys') individual achievements

As noted above, early research on gender and education mainly took wider social relations and power structures as points of departure and asked what role schools and other institutions played in maintaining societal gender patterns and relations. The earliest research in the field typically focused on the kind of fostering provided by institutions and its relationship to power structures, particularly female subordination. Of particular interest were knowledge content, school practices, teachers' differential treatment of students, and the kinds of power relations, femininities and masculinities that they might further. From the late 1980s theoretical and methodological changes prompted a shift in focus towards variation within gender groups and various actors' views of positionings, sexualities and performativity. As stated elsewhere (Öhrn, 2000), this meant a greater emphasis on variations, intersections,

performativity, and how various gender groups viewed schooling, gender and other social relations. Later and contemporary research places less emphasis on institutions, their messages, values, and teaching than earlier work, but issues of social (power) relations furthered by institutions and the emergence of various gendered norms and identities/subjectivities remain central.

Another prominent theme has been academic preferences and success, which have been examined in analyses of teaching methods, gendered subject constructs and content, and gendered differences in school outcome and further education. This has included research on various groups' responses to schooling, especially working class boys', whose anti-school attitudes were analysed in terms of classed resistance and the depreciation of school's bourgeois values in Paul Willis' study *Learning to Labour* (1977). This work discussed boys who distanced themselves from the classed ideals in schooling, developed anti-school attitudes and as a result of this rejection, did not achieve the requirements for admission to further education. This ultimately reproduced their class position (see also Kryger, 1990 for a Nordic analysis, and Davies (1984) for an analysis of working class girls). Later and contemporary research has often focused on boys' attitudes to schooling more generally, without targeting certain class strata or ethnicities, to analyse their achievement. It has been argued that a central contributor to boys' lower achievement as a group (compared to girls) is that studying is typically less consonant with dominant youth masculinities than youth femininities (e.g. Epstein, 1998). Accordingly, boys distance themselves from studying and behaviours indicative of a desire to perform well in school. Some, like Carolyn Jackson (2002), have conceptualised this as a 'self worth protecting strategy' with boys acting to protect their self-worth from suspicions of lack of ability. This relates to the fact that in the education system, academic ability is central and intertwined with feelings of self-worth. Many will fear failure and so will distance themselves from studying to protect their sense of self-worth; if they fail to achieve, they can attribute their failure to their lack of effort rather than to lack of intellectual capacity. Moreover, if they succeed without appearing to have studied, it is likely to be seen as a result of talent, which is greatly celebrated (e.g. Nyström, 2012). The idea that students might distance themselves from studying to protect themselves from visible failure is commonly used to explain boys' lack of studying. One remaining issue here is whether this conceptualisation plays down the importance to girls of appearing talented. I will return to this later.

In Sweden and many other countries, girls have outperformed boys academically for a long time. Since the 1960s, girls have also outscored boys in comprehensive school

by attaining higher marks than might be expected based on test results. Some have suggested that these higher marks are not based on girls' knowledge but are given because of their more docile behaviour (e.g. Emanuelsson & Fischbein, 1986), while others have emphasised that the tests in question measure a smaller range of competences than marks (e.g. Wernersson, 1988). Also, even early studies noted that girls' higher marks do not correspond to better incomes or positions in society at large (Svensson, 1971; Wernersson, 1988). Persistent gender wage gaps favouring males exist in both the Nordic countries and elsewhere, despite the higher grades generally achieved by girls (European Commission, 2014; Mukherjee, 2015).

In summary then, issues of policy, identity and achievement have all been central to the field of gender and education from its early days; analyses and discussions of achievement are not new to the field. However, the present *focus* in media and policy discussions on comparisons of gender differences in tests and marks is a rather recent phenomenon and not one furthered by research. Instead, it is a travelling discourse that has moved between countries and largely ignored national patterns and contexts (e.g. Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2008). This discourse typically emphasises binary gender differences while ignoring issues such as the impact of social background, which is more influential on marks (e.g. Bakken & Elstad, 2012; Skolverket, 2017). Also central to this discourse is an antagonistic presentation of gender relationships (girls versus boys), with one gender losing to the other's benefit.

This media and policy debate has prompted research into boys' achievement, in some countries sometimes to the extent that research on femininities and girls has been neglected. For instance, in Britain, Riddell (2007) notes that research on gender in education became narrowly synonymous with concerns about boys' 'under'achievement, and Archer & Leathwood (2003: 227) observe that "the overwhelming obsession with boys, men and masculinities has effectively silenced work on girls, women and femininities." This has not happened in the Nordic countries, but there certainly are issues of achievement and gender in Nordic school systems that need further explorations. For instance, we might conclude that there is substantial support for explanations based on differences between dominant youth masculinities and femininities, which to varying degrees are consistent with school commitment and central to boys' reluctance to (admit that they) study. However, this knowledge relies heavily on analyses of relations and hierarchies within friendship groups, for instance young persons' popularity among peers or their positioning in class (e.g. Holm, 2008), and less on whether and how issues of school achievement, grades and gender are communicated in teaching. There have been fewer studies of these aspects of classroom interactions/

teaching in contemporary Nordic research than there were in the past (e.g. Lahelma & Öhrn, 2011). Furthermore, contemporary studies have raised questions about students' future aspirations and their impact on educational efforts and achievements. For instance, girls as a group might consider themselves more in need of high grades as they are more likely to go on to higher education, partly because traditional female occupations more often require university-level qualifications than traditional male jobs in the Nordic countries (see Arnesen, Lahema & Öhrn, 2008). This also relates to questions about local labour market conditions, and the kinds of paid work and positive gender identities that they offer (see Weis, 1990). This might be expected to influence students' perceived need for educational performance and merits.

Findings from a study of gender and achievement

Building on the above discussion, I will present some results from a Swedish study of achievement and gender,¹ that took as a starting point the aforementioned research themes, as well as gender theorising by researchers as Raewyn Connell (e.g. Connell & Messersmidt, 2005), Carolyn Jackson (e.g. 2002) and Beverly Skeggs (e.g. 1997). The study's aim was to investigate understandings of gender and achievement in various secondary teaching settings and local contexts by exploring: 1) the understandings of school achievement that are communicated among various groups of young people in school and their relations to dominant femininities and masculinities in those groups: 2) the understandings of school achievement and gender that are communicated in teaching: and 3) young people's conceptions of the significance of academic achievement for their present and future lives.

The study used a compressed mode of ethnography (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004) to examine nine 9th grade classes from areas in different parts of Sweden with different socio-economic status. Four of the researched schools were located in the same large city but in different socio-economic areas, one school was located in a community outside a large city, one was in a town, and three were in small villages. The empirical study was carried out between 2011 and 2013, and its main data sources were observations of lessons and breaks (474 lessons observed), fieldwork conversations, and formal interviews with students (100 girls and 80 boys). In addition, a small sample

1 The research project 'Achievement and gender. On teaching, youth groups and local conditions', was funded by the Swedish Research Council 2011–2013 (VR 2010-4869).

of teachers were formally interviewed (28 interviews). The observations focused on student-student and student-teacher interactions, and discourses of achievement and grades in relation to gender. The interviews asked about specific incidents observed during the fieldwork as well as common themes concerning experiences/conceptions of gender and achievement in school.

Below I will discuss two central empirical themes from the study. They both map on to the above discussion about gender and achievement; one relates to discourses of performance, work and talent and the other to students' resources for handling individualised teaching. The text draws on a full Swedish report (Öhrn & Holm, 2014) and a previous English presentation (Öhrn, Asp-Onsjö & Holm, 2017).

Discourses of performance, work and talent

Like some earlier investigations, the study showed a dissociation between dominant youth masculinities and school work. Boys were generally, by themselves and others, considered and expected to study less than girls and were also deemed to have a more "relaxed" attitude towards studying and performance. The latter, however, largely appeared as a discursive presentation and was not confirmed by gender differences in students' observed classroom behaviours, which indicated that individual students were generally interested in their own study results (cf. Martino, 1999; Aasebø, 2008). Neither did it appear problematic for boys to achieve well. High-achieving students were generally found to be well positioned in their classes, and boys were no exceptions. As pointed out by Skelton & Francis (2011), there are dominant, high-achieving young masculinities, exhibiting high levels of academic knowledge and self-esteem. Central to all youth masculinities, however, is that academic achievement should appear effortless (Jackson, 2002), and this was apparent in the participating schools.

This was reflected in the tension between the statement that "everyone can succeed" and the disregard of some ways to do this. There was a common discourse that students can choose their level of performance and hence, the grades they receive. Students in every studied class claimed that everyone can succeed with sufficient willpower and hard work. However, only some forms of success were recognised. The claim that "everyone can succeed" refers to equal opportunities to study, but studying is a down-graded activity; the students expressed that educational success should be the result of talent rather than studying. Therefore, in order for achievement to be acknowledged, it should appear to result from what students called "natural talent", and being "smart"

or "intelligent." There is almost an enticing shimmer around these capacities, which can be seen in Ante's explanation of natural talent as something "you just *have*":

Ante: I mean you can have very high marks without being intelligent, actually. --- It's more difficult for some to learn, but *everyone* can achieve the highest marks, if they only make an effort. But being a natural talent then you just *have* it." (Interview). (Öhrn et al., 2017: 179).

The dissociation between studying and hegemonic youth masculinities is well known from previous research (e.g. Phoenix, 2004; Holm, 2008; Francis, 2009), but as shown in our analyses, studying is not seen as particularly desirable for or by *any* group of students. Consequently, this perception also has implications for evaluations of girls' higher grades, which are typically associated with hard work and studying, and thus devalued (Holm & Öhrn, 2014). Some boys even referred to studying as "cheating", or claimed girls' higher grades to be, as one boy put it, "undeserved", since they were not considered to reflect talent. Similar devaluations were voiced by high-performing girls themselves, such as Rosita who stated, "I don't think I'm smart, I think I'm just swotting a lot, so I never feel smart" (see Öhrn, Asp-Onsjö & Holm, 2017: 180). The students' perceptions in this respect mirrored those of their teachers, who were more likely to talk about male students as gifted or having potential irrespective of their present achievements. As pointed out elsewhere (Öhrn & Weiner, 2017), there is an ambivalence in the positioning of girls and femininities; on the one hand they are associated with success in school examinations, but on the other, they are less likely than boys to be seen as talented or intelligent.

Resources for handling individualised teaching

As demonstrated by the above discussion, the students typically understood talent or intelligence as something that is 'fixed', rather than being developed or developing through hard work (see Dweck, 2009); it is "the effortless academic achievement equated with authentic intelligence" (Jackson & Nyström, 2015: 394). Since having talent was equated with not needing to work to perform well, studying was also compromised because it could be suspected to indicate a lack of talent/intelligence. This is obviously a difficulty to manage for students in general, but posed a particularly severe problem for boys who need and want to study.

The urgency of this relates not only to ideals of masculinity, but also to present teaching practices. Contemporary Nordic research shows teaching to be highly

individual-centred. Carlgren et al (2006: 319) conclude that this stems from the adoption of a neo-liberal educational policy "with the individual self-reliant learner at the centre", and that self-regulatory individualised ways of working has been quite widely adopted in Sweden and Norway in particular. Such teaching styles are especially demanding for groups with little access to cultural capital, because they typically cannot rely on their family to compensate for a lack of support and help in school. Access to such support is further reduced in some schools if (as in the case of Sweden), there is a tendency for increased area segregation and differences between schools that make individual schools more internally homogenous (see Öhrn, 2011). Students' achievements vary with their social and ethnic background, but also with those of their class-mates. Students whose classmates have highly educated and Swedish-born parents are more likely to do well, irrespective of their individual background (Skolverket, 2012). In the schools we researched, some students mentioned attempts to compensate for a lack of tuition by getting help from others, usually their family or classmates, but many could not rely on such support. Girls seemed to manage this problem to some extent by studying on their own and also voiced various explicit strategies, which were frequently based on some form of student cooperation (see also Dalland, 2014). For boys, to whom ideals of effortless achievement appeared particularly pressing, this was less of an option because student cooperation would inevitably risk revealing that they were studying. Consequently, they found it particularly challenging to develop workable strategies.

However, school organisation can provide conditions that promote the development of such strategies. For instance, in one school we identified a group of boys with higher grades than would be expected given their migrant and working-class backgrounds (Gustafsson, 2014a). This particular school had a 'football profile' that attracted students from different backgrounds, and so had a larger socio-economic and ethnic blend than most Swedish schools. Furthermore, it explicitly sought to create cohesion between students by offering joint activities such as parties and school trips, where different groups of students met and mixed. The group of boys in question drew on the openings for mixing provided by the school and developed social networks with older schoolmates, which gave them access to knowledge about rules and routines, and to groups of girls with cultural capital who helped them with their studies. This provided them with support to act adequately within the organisation, to study and perform. For instance they worked in mixed study groups with some of the girls:

Both the boys and some of the football girls are sitting together and working with the rehearsal questions. The girls have a well-developed strategy; first they work with the

questions, after that, they begin with the timelines, mind maps and summary. Then they work with the rehearsal questions once more. A pervasive pattern between the girls is that they help each other if needed and the boys are often included in this interaction. (field notes). (Gustafsson, 2014b: 248).

The girls in question also gained from the collaboration by receiving help and support, but in general, girls were seen to collaborate in all classes and in this respect appeared less dependent on the school organisation than boys.

Concluding remarks

Much research points to the dissociation between dominant youth masculinities and school work. This is not at odds with ideals of achievement or performance; both Anglophone and Nordic research have highlighted the existence of valued masculinities characterised by high achievement, academic knowledge and self-confidence (e.g. Skelton & Francis 2011; Nyström, 2012). It is essential however, that achievement appears to be the result of 'talent' or 'intelligence', rather than hard work. This ideal of effortless achievement (e.g. Jackson & Dempster, 2009), was also highly visible in the schools examined in this article. However, as shown in our analyses, the widespread celebration of fixed intelligence has implications for the understanding of all groups' achievements. Studying is not seen as particularly desirable for *any* group of students. Consequently, it also affects the evaluation of girls' higher grades, which are typically associated with hard work and studying, and thus devalued.

This suggests that some arguments put forward to explain boys' ('under')achievement in school do not only apply to their achievement, but are central to understanding students' performances and grades more generally, albeit in somewhat different ways for the genders. Furthermore, the focus on binary gender differences and boys in achievement debates is problematic because it hides central within-group differences (such as those relating to social background) and reproduces or may even deepen the divide between groups. For instance, concern about boys' achievements prompted some teachers in the researched schools to focus more on them in class (Asp-Onsjö & Öhrn, 2015). However, rather than targeting low-achieving students, this attention led to a stronger focus on the already highly visible high-achieving boys and helped to promote their participation and good academic positioning in class. Actions based

on homogenising discourses about boys' under-achievement can thus provide already successful ones with additional help and attention.

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Professor Elisabet Öhrn
Department of Education and Special Education
University of Gothenburg
PO Box 300, SE – 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
+46 31 786 2412
elisabet.ohrn@gu.se