

Making the invisible visible Gender, migrations and educational contexts

Trasformare l'invisibile in visibile Genere, migrazioni e contesti educativi

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abstract

The general aim of this article is to provide conceptual tools for deconstructing and supplementing some of the existing frames of thought as regards (re)presentations of gender in the context of education in general and in curricular materials in particular. The author first delineates her theoretical background (feminist theory and critical pedagogy) and then proceeds to curricular analysis from the point of view of gender and migrations, which in a way equals “invisibility of women” (marked not only by gender, but also ethnicity, class and other dimensions of social inequality). A quick look into Slovenian history curriculum for elementary school is presented, together with the proposal of how to detect gaps or lacks when analysing the (re)presentations of gendered migrations. The author concludes with the final insight that curriculum practices must enable knowledge to be problematised rather than naturalised.

Key words: gender, migrations, curriculum

L'obiettivo generale di questo articolo è quello di fornire strumenti concettuali per decostruire e integrare alcune delle cornici di pensiero esistenti per quanto riguarda le rappresentazioni di genere nel contesto educativo in generale e nelle materie curriculari, in particolare. L'autrice, innanzitutto, definisce il suo quadro di riferimento teorico (teoria femminista e pedagogia critica) e poi procede all'analisi curricolare dal punto di vista del genere e delle migrazioni, che in qualche modo corrispondono a un'"invisibilità delle donne" (segnata non solo dal sesso, ma anche dall'etnia, dalla classe e altre dimensioni della disuguaglianza sociale). Viene presentata una rapida analisi del programma sloveno di storia per la scuola elementare, insieme alla proposta di come rilevare le differenze e le lacune quando si analizzano le rappresentazioni delle migrazioni in ottica di genere. L'autrice conclude con l'intuizione finale che le pratiche curriculari devono far sì che la conoscenza debba essere problematizzata piuttosto che naturalizzata.

Parole chiave: genere, migrazioni, curricolo

Making the invisible visible

Gender, migrations and educational contexts

1. Theoretical Background and Identification of the Problem

The general aim of this article is to provide conceptual tools for deconstructing and/or supplementing existing frames of thought as regards (re)presentations of gender in the context of education in general and in curricular materials in particular. The discussion will draw on feminist epistemologies and critical educational analyses and will deal with particular educational moments identified as especially relevant for the emerging image of the world, filled with borders, barriers and – hopefully – bridges.

But it is not only gender that continues to act as a profound barrier to quality education for all and globally, there are multiple crossroads such as “race”/ethnicity and gender (Zajda, 2009, p. XIII)¹. Gender is no longer recognised as a unified collective that transcends “race” and class; there are limitations to this that have been recognised in feminism for quite some time,² so a turn to so-called intersectionality is needed.³ Intersection-

- 1 Some explanation of the wording “race”/ethnicity is necessary. An ethnic group is one whose members have common origins, shared history or culture that brings them together in a shared sense of collective identity. On the other hand, there is no such thing as separate human races in a traditional biological sense. “Race” is socially constructed and understood to exist as a result of historic categorisations that continue to be reinforced in contemporary society (hence the quotation marks) (taken from the definition of ethnicity in *Gender and Education*) (see Ethnicity).
- 2 It is the postcolonial feminist theory that has shed light on the essentialist Third World Woman. As Uma Narayan puts it, “the feminist critique of gender essentialism does not merely charge that essentialist claims about “women” are overgeneralisations, but points out that these generalisations are hegemonic in that they represent the problems of privileged women [...] as paradigmatic ‘women’s issues’” (Narayan, 1998, p. 86). The question nevertheless remains of how fractured the image of the universalist category of “Woman” is, and how, if at all, feminist theories and political agendas are responsive to the difference in women’s lives.
- 3 I am well aware of the weaknesses and subsequent criticisms of this concept, but this

ality, in short, calls on scholars to be more inclusive of a broader group of women in their analysis: for many women, their feminist efforts are simultaneously embedded and woven into their efforts against racism, classism, and other threats to their access to equal opportunities and social justice (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p. 5). However, intersectionality strongly refers to gender as a generator of several horizontal and vertical dimensions of social inequality (Bürkner, 2012, p. 181).

Another phenomenon that needs to be mentioned here is “xenoracism” (as defined by A. Sivanandan). Xenoracism is the new racism that has emerged across Europe and is directed to those who, displaced and dispossessed by globalisation, are being thrown up on Europe’s shores. It is “xeno” in form in that it is directed against foreigners irrespective of colour; it is racism in substance in that it bears all the hallmarks of demonisation and exclusion of the old racism (Fekete, 2009, p. 43).

2. Curriculum, Power and (Non-)Representations

The school curriculum is not neutral knowledge. According to Michael Apple, it is the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among various social groups (Apple, 1992, p. 70). Common culture – a state to be desired – is not an extension to every social group; its precondition is the creation of the circumstances necessary for all to participate in the creation of meanings and values, i.e. circumstances that would enable reconstruction of common meanings (Apple, 1992, p. 70). The selection – which is indeed a necessary process – is always already exclusion; there are blind spots that can be as indicative as the contents included, as what has been explicitly said. The curriculum is a part of a selective tradition and can (and does) marginalise or under-represent women and others who are without influence, and also their social and cultural contributions (see also Vendramin, 2014).

In the context of migrations that is of particular interest here, Milka Metso and Nicky Le Feuvre (2006, p. 12) point out that female migrants suffer from (at least) a “double invisibility”, related to their gender and their migration status. Although human rights violations against women

is not the place to go into detail (see e.g. Salem, 2016). For the aims of this article I understand intersectionality as an attempt to contextualise feminism in terms of gender, ethnic and class divisions (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 194).

have been mentioned, insufficient attention has been paid to women's experiences as women, such as limited and poor nutrition, which is of particular concern in the case of pregnant women; a shortage of basic products, such as those for intimate hygiene; poor health care services, particularly regarding sexual and reproductive health; lack of information about the conditions of detention and legal and asylum issues. Even less attention has been paid to intersections such as those between gender, ethnicity and poverty (Morero Beltrán, Ballesteros Pena and Samaranch, 2014).

Feminist epistemologies are of help here, in that they – in short – seek to explain the connections between the construction of knowledge on one hand and social and political interests on the other. They may be understood in contrast or in opposition to Western epistemologies that have contributed to the epistemic disauthorisation of women and the majority of the non-European world (Alcoff, *Why I do ...*). A research into the connections between oppression based on gender and practices of searching for knowledge has led to the realisation that legitimisation of knowledge claims is intimately tied to the networks of domination and exclusion (Lennon and Whitford, 1994, p. 1). The nature of knowledge is in this context no longer determined by the methodologies and data legitimated by dominant cultures (Schutte, as cited in Code, 2000, p. 69).

The questions to start with in our case, at the crossroads of migration studies and feminist education studies, are perhaps: How to explain the “invisibility” of women when speaking of migrations and migrants? What kind of invisibility is this? What does it entail? How does gender interface with migration in creating inequalities in education? Most migration statistics and “mainstream” research have suffered from gender blindness. The experience of migrant women has often been subsumed under that of migrant men: the migrant experience becomes that of the principal applicant, usually male, and women are viewed primarily as part of the family unit (Singerman, 1992).

All the insights mentioned above are extremely important for educational analyses, where it is not only the construction of knowledge in curricular materials that is important, but also the transmission of knowledge through these materials. In other words, attention needs to be paid to the construction and transmission of official knowledge, while at the same time a commitment should be made to critically evaluate “universal” truths. In our case, the main objective would be to reflect on the representations of the interconnectedness of gender/migrations in the field of education and juxtapose the “official” version with alternative views.

On a qualitative level attention must be paid to the categories that are marked by gender bias, that are presented as gender-neutral or that cir-

cumvent gender or a gendered perspective altogether. On a quantitative level curricular analysis must pay attention to the missing data on women (Metso and Le Feuvre, 2006, p. 12). It has become more and more clear that methods themselves are a means of knowledge co-construction and that researchers can construct different ways of understanding by using different methods, or can become more open to the things that matter to participants and not only to the research project. While the knowledge of certain groups hardly sees the light of day, some regard the knowledge of others as simply neutral descriptions of the world and others as elite conceptions that empower some groups while disempowering others (Apple, 1993, p. 222).

A quick look at the history curriculum for elementary schools in Slovenia reveals (this example is merely illustrative, not exhaustive) that the fifth optional topic (for year 9), “Changing the everyday in the 20th century” (translations from the curriculum are mine and are unofficial), mentions “migration of people” and “migrations and intercultural contacts and contrasts” (Kunaver et al., 2011, p. 25)⁴. In terms of learning outcomes, students are expected to be able to explain the consequences of migrations of people and forms of contacts among people of different cultural habits; arrive at conclusions about the importance of migrations for intercultural contacts; give examples of contrasts, alongside examples of how intercultural dialogue can be encouraged (ibid.). The seemingly neutral use of language (migrations, people, etc.) introduces the very “double invisibility” mentioned above. The curriculum does not envisage, for example, a reflection on the causes of migrations (be they economic, intellectual or political), nor on the different forms of migrations. Quite the contrary, it is limited to rather benign-sounding “intercultural contacts”⁵.

In accordance with all of the above, I identify the following thematic clusters that seem to be approachable via discursive analysis and need to be included and dealt with in educational processes (I base my findings on Rachel Silvey’s overview analysis (Silvey, 2004)):

- mobility as a political process contrasted with the depoliticisation of migration, research of migrant patterns, social dynamics;

4 For more on migrations in general and migration-connected curricular analysis see Vidmar Horvat, 2014.

5 For a bit more on the problems of this paradigm, see Vidmar and U akar (2011, p. 155): “It is undermined by the very fundamental question of who defines a set of cultural rights that are a part of group identity; and what about those who do not recognise themselves in this identity?” (The translation is mine.)

- identity, intersections between gender and other axes of difference;
- domestic, sexual and intergenerational construction of social reproduction as “women’s work” and subsequent devaluation;
- migration processes and the production of nationalism and citizenship, mobility as a transgressive movement;
- imposition of social and spatial borders that define race and ethnicity, *space/place* and *boundaries/borders*.

3. Some Words of Conclusion

I conclude the present article in epistemological terms. The destabilisation – or at least the attempt at destabilisation – that I propose here includes the struggle for common knowledge, for what will be understood as a rational description of the world, for a way to see. “Vision is *always* a question of the power to see” (Haraway, 1991, p. 192). As far as “universal” truths and their (re)presentations in curricular materials are concerned, we are not speaking here about “delivery systems of facts” but about particular ways of choosing and organising a vast universe of possible knowledge and the creation of what society has acknowledged as legitimate and truthful (Apple, 1992, p. 51).

A number of issues exist for education policy. First of all, education policy is embedded within particular worldviews and understandings of change, development, context, responsibilities and rights (Blackmore, 2009, in Zajda and Freeman, p. 12). Secondly, the recognition of difference is not adequate in terms of underpinning education policy to produce social justice for all (Blackmore, 2009, in Zajda and Freeman, p. 16). Needless to say, the education of those who are dispossessed in various ways is particularly challenging. This is even more the case on the level of practice when we consider the inclusion of women and girls in education and educational systems. In this sense, gender, “as a vital factor of inequality and the exclusion of migrants, [must] be given more differentiated attention than in the past” (Bürkner, 2012, p. 186).

As for curricular issues, it is important, as Ravinder Sidhu and Pam Christie point out (2009, p. 14), that curriculum practices enable knowledge to be problematised rather than naturalised. An ethical approach towards the curriculum requires reflexivity and continual attentiveness to the power relations and partialities of knowledge. That is why attention needs to be given both to mainstream and feminist frames of thought and efforts must be taken to provide tools workable across struggles, marked by gender, ethnicity, class etc.

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