

Historical development and the current position of boys' education in Estonia

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This paper addresses the historical development of education over the centuries in Estonia, contemporary problems and the current position. The development of the Estonian school system under different rulers is traced using many different sources. Although traditionally male centred, the contemporary school is a stumbling block for boys on their path through life and they consequently drop out of school or are forced to attend special schools or separate classes. Numerous studies show why this is the case. It is not exactly clear how to prevent it.

This study is divided into the following sections:

1. Historical development of (boys') education in Estonia
2. Goals and contents of gender-specific action
3. Gender-specific aspects of primary school teacher training
4. Distinctive characteristics of Estonia
5. Development trends

Suggestions for further independent study of the topic

Bibliography and list of sources

1. Historical developments in (boys') education in Estonia

School and education in the Middle Ages and the beginnings of primary school

The history of education or pedagogy in Estonia can be traced back to the 13th century. Since this time, the Christian culture of the European conquerors (Teutonic Order knights) coexisted with the national pagan culture. Likewise, for many centuries the language and the education of the conquerors coexisted with the language and popular education of Estonians. Even after the actual Christianization process had set in, simple folks, farmers in rural areas, continued to live as they had been living for the past three hundred years according to age-old pagan customs and traditions, which had an impact on education and only gradually faded into the background.

The German upper class established town schools for their children and since the Middle Ages (in Estonia, the period between the crusades to the reformation are referred to as the Middle Ages), there were also monastic schools and later parish schools (*kirikukoolid*), where some Estonian boys could be instructed and learn skills. However, for a long time, the upper class was of the opinion that the Estonian people were not capable of attending school and learning anything.

Around 1600, the German pastor Georg Moller (who had a good command of the Estonian language) wrote stories, as he felt that: „a young child, let's say 10 to 12 years of age, can certainly learn and retain something.“ (Andresen I, 1997) As the Reformation in Estonia had spread quickly, intellectual texts and the Bible were translated into the Estonian language. Moller and later other pastors wanted farmers to be able to read the Biblical Scriptures. This measure also applied to girls who, according to archives, had been attending school with boys since 1604. However, that was only the case in cities. In the countryside where children were sent during the week to a far away country school, girls, in the beginning, had to stay home and were taught to read by male members of the family.

As a rule, until the 17th century, the Estonian population acquired knowledge and skills and fine-tuned practical abilities directly from within the family and the community. Here not only reading and writing was meant, but also the natural and gender-specific preparation for their future lives as community members. Males prepared for their role as farmers and husbands and females for their role as farmers and mothers. The various tasks were gender-related and children participated in them from an early age on. Fairy tales, stories, riddles and songs which in addition to work, also played an important role in popular education were available to both girls and boys, just like traditional festivities which took place according to the medieval Farmer's almanac.

School during the „Swedish era“

In the early 17th century, the Swedish King had conquered a large part of Estonia. This led to major social transformations for Estonian farmers, especially the spread of serfdom and the strengthening of the church's power. Church law in force as of 1686, stipulated that the pastor should know his community very well and that he should check to see that all children and youth were able to read Christian texts. From this time onwards, village schools were systematically built and also for the first time, Estonians were also trained to become teachers. The most well-known and important institution for the training of village teachers based on modern pedagogical approaches (Komensky) was a teacher's college established by Bengt Gottfried Forselius. The first teachers were males and the entire schooling was primarily male-oriented. However, in 1632,

the Swedish King Gustav Adolf in Tartu established a university in Tartu which was only intended for the German upper class.

Schools under the authority of the Russian Czar

A new period in the history of education began after the Great Northern War and Russia's victory over Sweden (1710). The war as well as the plague had basically fateful consequences for the entire Estonian population which in those days amounted to about 150,000. However, interest in reading had not waned and soon thereafter schools were reopened. Even in the 18th century, the men or the boys were the privileged ones who were able to read and write and given the task of teaching the female members of the family. A gender-specific approach continued to be the standard for the child-rearing practices of families in those days, relations between men and women, boys and girls and their duties and rights especially concerning household chores. Customs and traditions, spiritual values were handed down orally from one generation to the next. The sole purpose of education at that time was to teach people to read, so that they could read Christian literature. (Andresen II, 1999)

In the beginning of the 19th century, the school system was increasingly under the supervision of the state and the most important, pertinent regulation was drawn up in 1817. According to this legislation, a school was to be opened in every municipality with a population of over 75 males. School was compulsory for children from 10 to 12 years of age and parents were held responsible for compliance with this measure. Also, for the first time women took up the teaching profession (Andresen III). Documents dating back to that time, show that the number of boys and girls attending village schools was nearly the same, however the education of girls was not valued as highly as that of boys. For this reason in some village schools only boys were taught Mathematics.

In the 19th century, most of the village school teachers still did not have any professional training. Finally in 1873, a teacher training seminar for the training of village school teachers was introduced in Tartu. Interests in teaching methodology, however, continued to grow. In fact, several teaching manuals were prepared based on German models. Theorists produced a prolific amount of work during the Estonian enlightenment era and the national movement in the second half of the 19th century. However, a homogeneous school system for boys and girls, a uniform education and teaching methodology that only showed some slight differences in sports (military training for boys) and handicrafts continued to exist.

School in the days of the Estonian Republic

Estonia became an independent country at the beginning of the 20th century (1918). As early as 1919, the government of the young Republic passed a new school law extending compulsory school by four years. All children were to be educated to become tolerant, physically healthy, independent thinkers, honest and industrious citizens. Statistical data shows that in 1933/34 there were 1,218 primary schools (1,106 of them were located in the country and 112 in cities) in Estonia. Males accounted for 51.3% of the 115,291 pupils attending schools and females represented 48.7%. There were around 4,000 primary school teachers, half of whom were males. (cf. Andresen, 1995, p. 170)

Põld and Käis were two of the leading pioneers in Estonia in the development of educational theory. Still today their ideas have sparked much interest. Their key models were Rousseau, Comenius, Pestalozzi and Fröbel among others. They both stressed the unique role of schools, the importance of active, child-oriented activities and professional support for teachers. In his works (cf. Põld 1993), Põld gave a detailed account of gender-specific differences regarding vocational training such as boys having to learn wood and metal works.

Boys and girls received a similar general education. In fact, a child was to be handled and raised along standard lines. Again, gender-specific differences were observed in sports and handicrafts or manual training. Moreover, various children's organizations provided specific gender-oriented education including the development of athletic skills and a competitive spirit in boys whereas girls tended to be oriented towards domestic science activities. One such organization for boys, the *Young Eagles* organization was established in 1930, banned during the Soviet era and today is once again a viable organization.

Soviet era

Life in Estonia has gone through a complete transformation since 1940. Immediately after Estonia's annexation, the Soviet regime carried out reforms accordingly and began making changes that affected all areas of life, which, were continued after World War II with even more momentum. Subjects were taught in schools from a Marxist-Lenin ideological point of view. At that time, mention was not made of boys and girls, women and men, but of a 'genderless' Soviet citizen who behaved according to Socialist moral values. The group or society was pushed to the forefront, whereas the individual and individualism were frowned upon. As a first measure, children were obliged to wear school uniforms with the aim of reducing differences based on outward signs. They were, without any exceptions, members of the children's and youth Communist organizations whose distinctive characteristics were the emblem and the red scarf worn around the neck.

In the post-war period, the percentage of women in the school system grew considerably. Therefore, in 1976, female teachers accounted for 83.2% of the teaching staff. As previously mentioned, Soviet citizens were looked at from a ‚genderless‘ perspective, but at the same time equal rights were encouraged, as women were allowed or in fact actually had to carry out jobs traditionally done by men. Teaching aims were more male-oriented and focused on practical activities. The Socialist worker was always held up as a model and/or the Soviet soldier as a „liberator“, but seldom or even never was the farmer referred to in that way. Girls, as well, were to „become familiar with the everyday world of work“ in their work in factories. At many, especially rural schools all pupils drove tractors or trucks etc... Political propaganda was a part of everyday life- it was popularly believed that the enemy was lurking outside the borders of the Soviet fatherland. For this reason, all pupils had to participate in civil defence exercises, learn how to shoot and to partake in civil defence operations. Unfortunately, it was not always possible to achieve the educational targets outlined above. There are several (and still today), special, closed rehabilitation schools for boys with behavioural problems who had not complied with compulsory school attendance and/or were even likely to have broken a law.

The Soviet era brought fundamental changes in Estonia. The continuous *Russification* process, which was not to come to an end until the 1990s and whose aim was the replacement of the national language by the Russian language in all walks of life, was actually a gradual process. It began with Russians but also from Russian-speaking peoples from other former Soviet Union Republics settling into Estonian cities and to a lesser extent in villages. After the war and mass deportations, this process was even justified and easily rationalized as the country needed workers to reconstruct the country. The settlers were mainly soldiers and officers of the Soviet army and industrial workers who were quickly given accommodations and joined by their families. This long-term process has resulted in today’s Republic of Estonia being made up of 69% Estonians, 26% Russians and 5% for other ethnic groups.

School system after 1991

Since the independence of Estonia in 1991, the entire Estonian school system has been continuously reformed and improved. In general, school is regarded as a service and also increasingly to take over parental responsibilities. Schooling is compulsory for all children, boys and girls alike, from 7 to 17 years of age in the Estonian Republic. There is a uniform school system in the Estonian Republic: Primary school (classes 1 to 4), middle school (classes 5 to 9) and the academic secondary school or upper secondary school (classes 10 to 12). The Russian minority has their own public schools.

Unfortunately, today it is evident that the number of youth who do not graduate from middle school is dangerously rising. For example, 389 girls and 901 boys dropped out of middle school in school year 1993/94 and 343 girls and 1,051 boys in school year 1998/99 (Nassar 2002). In school year 2003/04, 74% of school dropouts were boys. This implies that a high number of male youth and men will have a considerably lower standard of living in the future. The Russian-speaking people are more frequently affected by this than Estonians. It can be observed that societal changes with the pressure to apparently achieve a richer and better life for their children has had serious consequences. Boys are more affected than girls. The study also indicates that this situation is largely due to factors such as the increasing number of divorces and single mothers, alienation from every day life (where the virtual world turns into a replacement for reality), the lack of a positive male role model, for example in schools, etc..

2. Goals and contents of gender-specifications

School curriculum goals

As previously indicated, nowadays the entire school system falls under the authority of the government and this also refers to the relevant legislation related to the national curriculum. The first part of this curriculum indicates general skills and abilities which should be acquired during primary school which is divided into three distinct stages (first to third grade, fourth to sixth grade, seventh to ninth grade). No specific mention is made of how boys should be educated and reared to become future citizens and unique individuals.

However, it is important to underline here that linguistic characteristics play an important role in the assimilation or the reception of the contents of a text written in the Estonian language i.e. a word standing alone does not have a 'gender-specific tag.' The noun pupil (*õpilane*) or teacher (*õpetaja*) refers to both males and females. If there is a need to stress a male or female pupil, then an additional noun is required such as man (*mees*) and woman (*naine*) or the masculine adjective (*meessoost*) and feminine adjective (*naissoost*). However, the national curriculum does not make use of this alternative to draw a distinction between male and female pupils, which would lead us to assume that all pupils, irrespectively of their gender are treated equally in school curriculum.

Specific exceptions exist for specialized curricula for physical education and handicrafts. In these subjects especially in physical education, it is repeatedly indicated which gender-specific activities are scheduled. Physical education classes are generally given during the lower classes (grades 1 to 3 and 1 to 4) by a female classroom teacher within the class association. All-girls and all-boys

physical education classes are held as of the fifth class according to the individual possibilities of the schools. The same situation applies to handicrafts or manual labour classes. However, here the danger exists that boys do not learn „male kinds of works“, but rather sewing and embroidery, as commonly there is a shortage of workshops, tools and also technical male teachers in order to carry out gender-specific activities.

Children's and youth organization and current leisure activities

In addition to schools, there are also many youth organizations aimed at teaching and training boys. These organizations can be roughly divided into four groups: political, church, education-oriented as well as athletic and military groups. Statistics and data from the competent authorities generally do not provide ample information to indicate the number of members of these organizations. However, most of them are youth-oriented and only some offer children eight years and older the possibility of becoming a member.

Some examples including the following:

- Eesti Evangeelse Luterliku Kiriku Laste- ja Noorsootöö Ühendus (Child and youth association of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church)
- Eesti 4H (Estonian 4-H club), an apolitical, club-type of youth association
- Eesti Skautide Ühing (Estonian Scouts)
- ELO - Eesti Laste Organisation (the Estonian organization of successful children)
- Falk Noorteklubi (Falk youth club)
- Noored Kotkad (Young Eagles, Defence League's boys' corps)
- Kodutütred (girl scouts, Defence League's girls' corps)

Most of the above-referenced list of associations and organizations are open indiscriminately to male youths or females. Accordingly, they also have laid down very general goals: the promotion of tolerant and loyal citizens and honest, intelligent and creative persons who know themselves and are capable of working in a group, to pursue meaningful leisure activities and to cultivate contact with other associations (also foreign associations). The Estonian defence guard (*Kaitseliit*) established the exclusively female organization aimed at educating girls to become useful citizens (*Kodutütred*) and the exclusively male youth organization known as *Noored Kotkad* (Young Eagles) initially in 1930. They were banned during the period from 1940 to 1989 and were reestablished in 1989).

The Young Eagles is a military-sports organization whose smallest unit is a group of six to eight, like-minded boys of the same age. As in the army, squads and companies are under the

supervision and the leadership of older comrades (16 years of age and over). The supreme leader of this organization is the Commander-in-chief of the army of the Estonian Republic. The educational aims of this organization are statutorily laid down. Accordingly, a young eagle is tidy and polite and obeys orders. He takes care of his body and is healthy, athletic and fit, he does not show any weaknesses and lends a helping hand to others. The Young Eagle applies himself at school, may not smoke nor consume any alcohol. The young eagles' slogan is: *„Be Always ready for the fatherland“* Their guiding principle is: *„A man belongs to the ranks of men!“*

Today, more than 3,000 boys and male youth are members of the Young Eagles and they are increasingly more visible in public. Each year, various military sports camps are set up by the organization. One of these is the *ERNA Raid* (one of the most difficult international military sporting events). The so-called mini-ERNAs that are carried out, have become very popular.

In addition to children and youth organizations, hobby schools, music schools, arts and sports schools offer meaningful activities. In Estonia, there are a total of 11 hobby schools, five of which are in the capital city of Tallinn. They offer very specific technical and athletic free time activities for boys. In addition, there are 80 official music schools for children in Estonia, about 20 arts schools and sports schools for children. Extracurricular educational activities are governed by relevant legislation which stipulates the educational contents, children's rights, the parents' and organizers' duties and the level of the educators. Gender-specific differences are not stressed in particular.

Many studies indicate that more girls than boys participate in the activities of hobby schools. It is commonly known that boys tend less often to „get off track“ if they can find an interesting activity outside school. There is also the awareness that not all families can afford to send their children to hobby schools, as attendees must finance these schools themselves. It should be especially noted that boys' hobbies can sometimes be more expensive than those of girls, because workshops, equipment and craft supplies are required. On a positive note, the government is aware of the shortage of leisure activities and the prohibitive costs for children and young people and is attempting to improve this situation and even to resolve this problem once and for all.

3. Gender-specific aspects of primary school teacher training

Professional standards for teachers have been in force Estonia since 2005 and require teachers to possess a battery of skills, as without these it is today no longer possible for a teacher to work at a school. This competence covers general psychology and developmental psychology, skills in

coping with children with special needs as well as a broad specialized instruction etc. Primary school teachers are trained at two universities and their branches in Estonia. To meet professional standards, teachers are obliged to successfully pass subjects such as the Principles of Pedagogy, Development Psychology and Educational Communication among others. Prospective teachers undertake teaching practice. All schools of general education are coeducational in Estonia, so that teachers must be able to equally well deal with pupils of both sexes.

In recent years, as disturbing statistics on the growing number of boys who do not complete secondary school has become generally known, academics are focusing more on examining this problem more closely. For example, there has been a study on violence in schools conducted by the child protection association, another study on health of children conducted by the University of Tartu and in addition, studies about the general school atmosphere commissioned by individual municipal administrations, etc. Another very popular area for research is textbook analysis in which primary school textbooks are commonly studied for the way sex-roles are illustrated.

Bibliographies indicated that currently, recommended literature is primarily in English. On the one hand, it is essential to become familiar with study findings from foreign scholars. On the other hand, it is important to also be knowledgeable about the current situation in one's own country. In this regard, it is noteworthy to cite the book by the Estonian psychologist and University professor Toivo Niiberger entitled „*Meheks, isaks ja härrasmeheks*“ which literally means to the man, father and master, which was published in 2006. This book provides a multitude of examples taken from everyday Estonian life making it a useful reference for students as well as parents seeking to ,correctly‘ educate youth and to recognize and to accept their gender-specific peculiarities and characteristics. This is an essential book for educators where themes such as the male psyche, aggressiveness, learning difficulties etc. are clearly analyzed.

4. Distinctive characteristics of Estonia

Russian-speaking children

A distinctive characteristic of the Estonian school system is the above-mentioned settlement of Russians and other nationalities from the area of the former Soviet Union during the period from 1940 to 1980. The social transformations which took place throughout Europe and the end of the Soviet Union have considerably changed the social status of this class of population. As shown by statistics, in comparison with the Estonian-speaking population, Russian-speaking families in Estonia have, on the average, greater financial difficulties, their unemployment rate is higher and their children get more often tangled up in the drug scene or are on the streets and/or become

delinquents. At the same time, boys are at a greater risk than girls. However, there are also considerable regional variations in the country. The north eastern areas were formerly industrial areas and settlements or cities which were 90-99% populated by Russians. Most of the difficulties today occur in that area. In other regions and cities (with the exception of Tallinn), one can actually talk about the integration of the Russian-speaking population who are concerned about the educational prospects of their children and send their children to Estonian schools. Progressive Russian-language schools are taking a number of measures such as teaching half of all subjects in the national language or in both languages. On the positive side, these children will later have better job prospects. In the public sphere, the national language is the priority. For example, children are integrated in Estonian host families for two weeks during summer holidays or summer camps are set up. Unfortunately, here there is a lack of recent statistical data to assess the participation of boys and girls. However, studies also show that 40% of Russian-speaking young people have identity problems and very often these problems already begin in pre-school.

Delinquency on the rise

In light of sinking population figures, children and youth play an important role in the future of the country, for this reason the rising delinquency among minors is causing much concern. According to national, gender-specific statistics, in 2000, police recorded 3,682 cases of minors involved in breaking regulations and committing criminal offences. 86% of the cases were boys, 45% were 15 years of age or younger. These children were summoned by the police to appear before a special commission. In Estonia, there is a commission (*alaealiste komisjon*) for the surveillance of minors, for 30 local administrations. All children (8 to 18 years of age), who have committed a criminal offence, are summoned to appear before this commission, whether it be for shoplifting or excessive truancy. It is predominantly boys who are summoned to appear before this commission. Punitive measures include a warning, socially useful community work or admission in a special school.

For youth with behavioural problems, there are special closed rehabilitation boarding schools (i.e. one Estonian and one Russian). For school year 2006-07, 72 Estonian-speaking boys aged 10 to 18 are boarding and attending fourth grade to ninth grade at the Puiatu School. The all boys' special school called Tapa caters to Russian-speaking boys aged 11-18 years of age and had an approximate enrollment of 75 boys for the same school year. The concentration of boys of different ages in the out-dated facilities of the Tapa center has resulted in an intensification of violence, drug consumption, smoking etc. Moreover, it is highly improbable to expect a positive personality modification from the group of young people at risk there. Young teachers are not keen

on teaching at these schools, as the psychological pressure and responsibility is too great. Moreover, salaries seldom compensate for the extra teaching efforts required.

Another pedagogical approach to handling behaviourally disturbed children (mostly boys) is the so-called special classes. These special classes are established within the normal secondary school or at the academic secondary school. When Leemets (2005) started his study six years ago on teaching success in such classes, there were around 30 special classes at various schools in Estonia. According to this study, the boys appreciate the small enrolment numbers, close contact with teachers, the adapted syllabus and the high level of discipline. The youth would have preferred an older, intelligent, but also strict male teacher. Unfortunately, the reality is a different story. The teachers assigned to these classes clarify: After these boys are taken out of the regular classes, the micro-atmosphere considerably improves. 86% of the teachers queried find the method of special classes as successful and very positive.

5. Development trends

In every society, the school system is a very sensitive area. Every citizen goes through the school system at one time of their life. In general, people think they know what does not work well, what should be done in another way, how children should be taught or how teachers should be trained. It is not any different in Estonia. The school system is the focus of public discussions on this subject. As previously mentioned, the study findings and the demographic development are generally accessible. There is an awareness of the causes and effects of societal developments which unfortunately, have not always been positive. Also in projects for school development 2006-2010, well-known problems will be intensely fought such as children without high school diplomas, drug addiction, expensive hobby schools, increasing delinquency, special schools in need of reform etc.

In an attempt to achieve prompt and efficient solutions, the Ministry of Culture, in addition to the Ministry of Interior, Social Affairs and the Environment are participating in various initiatives. It is important to identify educational as well as gender-related approaches and possibilities which fulfil current pedagogical requirements.

Suggestions for further independent study of the topic

1. Compare the education and school situation in medieval Estonia with the situation in your country during the same period. What similarities and differences can you observe?

2. The findings of studies carried out show that there is no gender discrimination in primary school textbooks i.e. women as well as men were just as often positively as negatively presented. In contrast, history books are completely male-oriented.
 - What distribution of roles / representation of roles can you find in primary school textbooks in your country?
 - What are the gender roles represented for example in geography books, foreign language books or mathematics books?
3. In your opinion, which subjects should be incorporated in primary school teacher training programs to enable prospective teachers to work effectively with boys?

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