Development of boys' education in Poland

Eva Bilinska-Suchanek

Pedagogical University of Slupsk, Poland

Biological gender is a determinant of human identity, as is demonstrated in numerous publications on this subject. Various aspects determine the terms of reference of the life and existence of a boy. Studies of boys in society have not been undertaken in Poland until now. Various surveys of differences between the genders have been conducted, however. The text includes an overview of the most significant Polish studies of gender differentiation with particular emphasis on studies that contribute to an understanding of the social role of the male and to the cultural image of masculinity. Objectives and tasks are specified that are a consequence of the socialisation mechanisms in the acquisition of a gender role and relate to gender differences in primary schools in Poland. Recreation and leisure-time spheres are additional elements of this text. It is shown that gender differences increase with age. This paper concludes by presenting trends and potential development prospects.

This study is divided into the following sections:

1. Historic Development of Gender Educational Theory in Poland
2. Gender-specific targets and tasks
3. Specific aspects of gender in primary school children
4. Analysis of active forms of leisure-time activities for boys
5. Trends and perspectives
Suggestions for further independent study of the topic
Bibliography and list of sources

1. Historic Development of Gender Educational Theory In Poland

In Poland there is no branch of educational theory that can be called „boys' educational theory" or „educational theory for boys". Although publications occasionally deal with boys' education they more frequently deal with the problems of gender differences that have been placed in psychological, sociological and educational contexts.

At present, the studies that have been conducted are mainly being compared with data that originate from the works of major authors.

Attempts have been made in Polish studies on genders differences with specific emphasis on boys to describe the male role in society and the stereotypical image of masculinity.

Previous studies focused on the differences between boys and girls in terms of their general intelligence and specific intellectual abilities were also studied. The results of the Polish studies (Czarnecki 1995) prove that it is not gender but individual, educational and social factors that are crucial for the intellectual development of pupils in years one to three.

The absence of distinct differences in the IQ level of both genders was called into question by the results of the studies conducted by Firkowska-Mankiewicz in 1995. The author tested 14,000 eleven-year-old children in 1974 using the Raven test, the Choynowski test (vocabulary test) and the Grzywak-Kaczyńsk arithmetic test. Differences were ascertained that called the stereotypical interpretation of gender-specific differences into question. There are no major differences, however. Nevertheless, when the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children was used on the same test persons two years later, the head start of the boys was evident in almost all the scales. This was also the case in the verbal part where the female gender invariably fares better. The author gave stratification, socialisation and individuality factors as well as genetic hormonal factors as the main reasons for the differences in the intellectual performance of the boys and girls that were studied.

The interpretation of the results was such that the fundamental importance of

- material and cultural factors (financial status, background, parents' education), style of education, quality of parental influence as well as
- the factors that constitute the socialisation process (self-confidence, motivation to learn, aspirations) for intellectual functioning vary for each gender.

The studies conducted by Mandal in 1987 and Kotlarski in 1991 on analytical abilities, analytical and abstract thought and also on performance in mathematics are among the most interesting studies on cognitive abilities.

The superiority of boys in this area diminished when they were able to select the tasks themselves. The boys chose an easier version more frequently than the girls although they had the same level of abilities. Kotlarski interprets this as follows: development of cognitive abilities and results in mathematics are most commonly connected with motivation factors that are again linked to individual experience.

However, the Polish studies corroborate the conclusions of foreign research results with respect to communication, vocabulary and reading ability of boys. Attention was drawn to difficulties in verbalising thoughts, with reading and speech impediments (stammering). All

these differences decline with increasing school attendance. At the age of 16 these differences cease to be important (Pospiszyl 1986). Nęcki (1992) confirms that boys compensate for initial deficits in the development of their reading ability and verbalisation of thoughts at school. In his opinion, these deficits are a consequence the upbringing at home, in particular of different patterns of communication with mothers who speak to their sons less. The short, laconic sentences they use fail to develop the ability to express emotions and feelings. Continuous communication with boys is very seldom the case. Mothers more commonly ask questions and repeat the statements the boys make. It is only in exception circumstances that they begin a conversation to provide assistance or exchange ideas. They more commonly give orders and express demands to channel the boy's actions and simultaneously end the conversation.

It is important at this point not to omit the results obtained by Polish pupils in the PISA study in 2000, 2003 and 2006. The performance tests were conducted on 15-year-old girls and boys and show that girls have a head start in reading comprehension. Polish girls also have fewer deficits in the mathematical competences that were tested compared to girls in other countries. The relatively good results obtained by the girls have been attributed to secondary schooling that tends to prepares pupils for university entrance. However, the majority of boys attend vocational schools where general knowledge subjects are less relevant. Boys and girls choose different schools because attitudes and beliefs about which vocational studies or field of study is right for girls and right for boys are borne out in the range of educational options available.

Aggressiveness is another trait where boys most commonly differ from girls. In 1990, Wolińska studied the aggressiveness of adolescent girls and boys that is determined by the attitudes and outlooks of their parents. The studies showed that the fundamental differences are to be found in the causes of aggression and not in the intensity of their manifestation. Physical aggression occurred more frequently in boys and they received lower marks for conduct and infringements of rules. Boys' behaviour shows less malevolence and irritability than that of girls. They also have fewer feelings of guilt than girls. Irrespective of their gender, children whose parents were close to them and allowed them a certain degree of independence were less aggressive than children whose parents distanced themselves emotionally and exercised more control.

Other authors have also pointed out that aggressive behaviour is a consequence of the influence exerted by the family. Pospiszyl and Żabczyńska (1981) emphasise family factors and emotional attachments to the parents in particular. Other factors that influence aggressive behaviour are the failure to address children's emotional needs, excessive control over and

excessive demands made of the child, use of physical punishments, and violence in marital disputes. In other studies conducted in 1986, Pospiszyl made a distinction between three levels that differentiate the aggressive behaviour of boys and girls:

- a different degree of frustration (other causes for the emergence of frustration that are linked to a different hierarchy of needs, values and objectives)
- another social area of tolerance of the aggressive behaviour of boys and girls (different response models)
- from a cultural perspective, other mechanisms that limit direct aggression (approval of certain, openly aggressive behaviour of boys at home and at school).

With respect to existing studies on self-appraisal by pupils (boys in particular), the studies conducted by Tucholska should also be cited (cf. Mandal 2000). The author emphasises the differences in self-appraisal by boys and girls who have learning difficulties for the most part. The poor self-appraisal in the case of boys applies to the appraisal of academic performance and talents. Self-appraisal in other areas is the reverse of that of girls. According to the author, the difference is largely explained by the female attributes of the pupil role, i.e. hard work, ability and obedience. Failures in this role have a different significance for boys than for girls. The male role stereotype demands a certain degree of rebellion against school by not taking lessons and marks seriously. This serves to separate success in this area from other areas. Ye failure of girls in this role requires a generalisation. It should also be noted that those individuals who allude to and judge the failures of pupils at school as such (parents, teachers and peers) adopt a more relaxed attitude towards the failures of boys than those of girls.

As the aforementioned studies conducted by Firkowska-Mankiewicz (1995) demonstrate, boys who were high achievers were less likely to have problems and difficulties and suffer from depression They also had a better self-image than girls with a similar level of cognitive skills.

2. Gender-specific targets and tasks

Experiences in the child's life that occur repeatedly in the socialisation process are of enormous relevance for the acquisition of patterns of behaviour and development of individuality and hence also for internalisation of the gender roles. Acquisition of knowledge or reflection on the genders and gender roles are very dependent on the quality of the different stages of socialisation such as family or peer groups, but above all on institutions such as the school and the church, mass media, literature and art. Acquisition and internalisation of roles are a non-reducible sub-component of the socialisation process that are influenced by regulatory and group mechanisms (Muszyński 1978; Konarzewski 1982; Pankowska 2005) and apply to the socialisation situation, gender roles in this case.

In many social situations *behaviour is conditioned by the use of incentives.* Emphasis is placed on Instrumental conditioning. This mechanism permits intervention in behaviour using rewards and punishments. This theoretical approach to learning is applied when the behaviour of girls and boys is consistent or inconsistent with cultural gender patterns. Behaviour is either disapproved of or encouraged. If a girl displays aggressive behaviour for example, disapproval might be expressed in remarks such as, „Who's ever seen a girl get herself so dirty?" or „You're behaving like a rascal!" A boy who cries might be told, „Don't cry like a girl, behave like a man!" or in a positive vein „You are a brave man!".

Children learn their gender role at school and in other institutions by *observing the behaviour of adults (learning by doing)*. They experience and learn how women and men behave in certain typical and untypical situations and activities. A female teacher usually gives children cookery lessons whereas the football trainer is generally a man. Situations also occur in which the observed individual of the same gender becomes a role mode. His or her behaviour is emulated by the child. The sporting achievements of the famous ski jumper Adam Małysz, „Malysz mania", could be cited here by way of illustration.

An important method of learning is *verbal learning*; its importance (symbolic in particular symbolic) for the acquisition of knowledge about the world and culture is undisputed. The child is told (verbally), how boys and girls should behave. Verbal communication (television programmes, computer games, films) and written communications (textbooks, literature, comics, and magazines) assist the child to acquire knowledge about the prevailing system of gender roles. The subject matter in films and books inspire children to play themed games in which they emulate popular heroes. These heroes are usually the same gender as the children who emulate them. They are generally interested in subject matter that presents gender roles in a stereotyped manner than in subject matter in which the traditional roles are reversed. The structure and vocabulary also contain information about the genders and gender roles.

Action as such also provides another opportunity to emphasise the active role played by the individual in the acquisition of cultural content. This content is also part of the socialisation process. Spontaneous action and the performance of tasks allocated by adults lay the foundation for the acquisition of specific patterns of behaviour in boys and girls. This also gives them with the opportunity to observe and emulate gender roles.

Another powerful factor is the *comparison* that forms a basis for the boy or girl to establish a sense of self-Identity. The comparison facilitates the acquisition of gender roles when children

compare their behaviour, their feelings and their individual traits with the standards that apply to their own gender and age. This also applies when they compare themselves to their peers of the same and other gender and accordingly attempt to adjust or differ as a way of gaining acceptance and respect within the group.

The group is also able to exert (excessive) pressure on the individual and hence influence by encouraging or sanctioning his or her acts using rewards and punishments. *Group pressure* can be effective at both the micro and macro level. At the micro level, pressure is exerted on children by group peers through the system of rewards and punishments so that they behave according to gender patterns. The fear of rejection, loss of friendship or aggression forces them to conform (the sissy is laughed at for example). A system of social control exists at macro level. Formal and informal sanctions are applied if individual behaviour fails to comply with group gender standards.

Finally, attention should also be drawn to the last socialisation mechanism in the acquisition of gender roles, namely *group culture*, which is also part of group actions. It is made up of group roles and norms that the group allows to exist in order to achieve its aims. The individual perceives them as the origin of structured action plans in certain situations. Group culture defines the context of behaviour and the lifestyles in which an individual is able to function according to gender in order to gain social acceptance. Deviation from the accepted patterns of behaviour, non-compliant behaviour, fulfilment of gender roles that fail to comply with general role models exposes the individual to social disapproval. Peer pressure leads children of both genders to disrupt lessons for example. Pupils in mixed groups do not work very efficiently. If they cooperate, they are ridiculed by their peers. This has a detrimental effect on the fulfilment of emotional needs or even makes it impossible.

3. Specific aspects of gender in primary school children

The academic content of the curricula is identical for both genders in Polish schools. The aim of arts and crafts before the reform of the Polish educational system was to „teach pupils the basic practical and technical skills that might be useful in daily family life and in leisure-time activities" (Program szkoły podstawowej. Technika, 1994). It was mainly about developing the skill to use technical appliances and tools to solve technical tasks and produce drawings. This was generally applicable apart from two small exceptions: year five included „sewing" as a subject of instruction and year six „food and nutrition" as subject of instruction. .A small number of so-called female subjects that were associated with housekeeping and housework were reduced even further after the reform.

In years four to six, arts and crafts lessons were increased and renamed art and technology. Although the name of the subject was widened, the teaching and learning content was confined to developing abilities to use tools and appliances in accordance with the instructions for use, taking measurements or using computers (*Reforma systemu edukacji. Projekt*. 1998). Although nothing was said about gender-specific differentiation of academic content the genders are differentiated in fact.

The situation is similar in sports lessons. There was no gender-based separation until year four (prior to the reform). This separation was negligible in the other years of primary school years. This changed after the reform. Sport is still taught in mixed classes but in practice, differentiation is much greater than is recommended in the curricula; this particularly applies to subjects such as track-and-field sports and team games (*Reforma systemu edukacji. Projekt*. 1998).

In primary school textbooks (Pankowska 2005), the world of children is differentiated with increasing age. Gender polarisation in textbooks appears to be natural and unavoidable. This feeling reinforces the emotional difference between the genders. Stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are created in reading texts and exercises through character descriptions. With respect to men, the individual differences that apply to their traits are associated with strength, courage, determination and wisdom (fathers are usually more competent and are more knowledgeable). In the case of women, the traits are empathy, care and emotions. Activity, independence, creativity, competence and assistance of weaker members of society and animals are again traits that are most frequently used to characterise male heroes. The aforementioned traits can be used to describe many male roles, girls on the other hand, are only given the role of mother. The traditional separation of social and cultural gender roles in the textbooks places greater value on the male role. A career is valued more highly than housework, activities in the public sphere more highly than activities in the private sphere.

Teachers have a significant impact on the definition of gender roles. The difference in expectations of pupils is corroborated by the Polish studies conducted by Konarzewski (1991) and Putkiewicz (1990) in the first classes at primary schools. They interpreted the results as follows: teachers give boys and girls different types of tasks. Boys are given problem-solving tasks whereas girls are given exercises. The acquisition of the skill to cope with problem-solving tasks encourages independence from the authority of the teacher and promotes independent thought. When teachers communicated with boys there was greater acceptance of themselves and of the listener. Their statements contain far less dogma which gives independence and partnership more opportunity to flourish. The model that encourages boys

to be independent and boost their self-esteem is understood as a continuation at school of the impact of the family role model.

One problem that is very typical in the first years at school is the feminisation of the school (Janicka 1995). This situation is reflected in the wider social policy in which a vicious circle is evident: the link between the feminisation of the profession and the steady decline in its social and economic status.

4. Analysis of active forms of leisure-time activities for boys

The differences in the manner in which boys and girls spend their leisure time increase as they get older. Boys are permitted to spend more time without supervision and outside the home. They are more impulsive and aggressive (Dąbrowska 1991) and this leads to increased learning difficulties and less ability to adjust to the challenges presented by adults than is the case with girls. Boys attribute all of this to sanctions on the part of adults and consequently separate their sense of self-worth from the way the judgement made by the world around them. They judge themselves on their own achievements and other criteria.

Differences between boys and girls with respect to interests and games are noted from the age of six onwards but children themselves are not aware of what is appropriate for boys and what for girls until around the age of ten. Boys in particular, according to Gurycka (1989), object to games that are regarded as those that the other gender typically plays. Studies conducted by Łaciak (1995) on interaction between children in the first three years of school demonstrate the difference in the awareness of behaviour that is appropriate for each gender as well as the diversity of interaction in playgroups. Boys more frequently play in the open air and in the playground, and in larger groups with a hierarchical structure. These are games with a competitive character which always have a winner or loser. The difference in communication is based on the fact that orders and instructions predominate, and those speaking draw attention to themselves. Conflict situations also last longer, boys are more persistent and display more physical aggression.

Sport is an ideal way for boys to spend their leisure time. It is an excellent method of developing character and displaying masculinity. Sport gives boys satisfaction and pleasure in their successes and individual physical performance. This also includes sports activities that take place for pleasure and not solely as competitions where boys pit themselves against their peers. This is the area in which that teachers and trainers play a predominant role in teaching boys how to be boys.

Concentration on professional work and on individual subjects is also part of the male role in society. Studies corroborate this focus on reality (Gurycka, 1989) as well as the role played by age in boys' interests. Boys are interested in physical activities, theoretical scientific issues, technology, politics, history and commerce.

5. Trends and perspectives

Socio-political changes, continuous reforms of the education system and other areas of society in Poland provide evidence of the following tendencies and trends respect to gender-equitable education and training:

- changes in cultural patterns and organisation of social life that facilitate the elimination of androcentricity (particular emphasis is on the male element and male values) and gender polarisation (social-cultural gender) in favour of gender neutrality;
- changes in the type of interpretation and utilisation of gender inequality in various social institutions (family, education system, labour market etc.) would allow more flexibility for individuals to choose different paths through life and to develop their talents and individuality;
- changes in the organisation of social life so that the needs of both genders are treated equally (gender equality);
- adaptation of social awareness and creation of an individual interpretation of the gender role that is consistent with personal needs and not with stereotypes;
- changes in role patterns instead of role reversal (the male role – sensitivity and the ability to express personal feelings instead of/not only aggression and restraint; the female role - independence and activity instead of/not only dependence and passivity);
- renunciation of gender typification that leads to social discrimination and has an adverse effect on mental and physical health as well as on life expectancy;
- changes in the traditional interpretation of masculinity that limits the opportunity to create the emotional ties that assist physical and mental health and also make it easier to cope with stress and problems.

Suggestions for further independent study of the topic

1. What impact do teachers have on school activities in terms of the gender role?
2. What role does the „hidden curriculum" play at school in reinforcing stereotypical developments of masculinity and femininity and in the internalisation of traditional gender roles?

3. Would changes in social and educational policy (salary increases for teachers for example) encourage men to choose the teaching profession? Might it have an impact on the socialisation of boys?
4. To what extent does textbook content in different European countries reinforce culture and the gender stereotype in the narrower sense?

Bibliography and list of sources

E. Bilińska-Suchanek, *Opór wobec szkoły. Dorastanie w perspektywie paradygmatu oporu,* Kraków 2003

M. Chomczyńska-Miliszkiewicz, *Edukacja seksualna w społeczeństwie współczesnym,* Lublin 2002

K. Czarnecki, *Szkolna wiedza pojęciowa uczniów klas początkowych,* Katowice 1995

E. Dąbrowska, *Funkcjonowanie w sytuacjach szkolnych uczniów klas I-III sprawiających trudności wychowawcze,* Lublin 1991

A. Firkowska-Mankiewicz, *Czy tak samo wychowujemy dziewczęta i chłopców,* Lublin 1995

A. Gurycka, *Rozwój i kształtowanie zainteresowań,* Warszawa 1989

K. Janicka, *Kobiety i mężczyźni w strukturze społeczno-zawodowej: podobieństwa i różnice,* Warszawa 1995

K. Konarzewski, *Podstawy teorii oddziaływań wychowawczych*, Warszawa 1982

K. Konarzewski, *Sztuka nauczania, Problemy i schematy. Pierwszy rok nauki szkolnej dziecka,* Poznań 1991

K. Kotlarski, *Płeć a uzdolnienia matematyczne*, Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny nr 1/1991

B. Łaciak, *Dziewczynki i chłopcy w relacjach społecznych,* Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny nr 1-2/1995

E. Mandal, *Psychologiczna analiza różnic płciowych,* Problemy Rodziny nr 2/1987

E. Mandal , *Podmiotowe i interpersonalne konsekwencje stereotypów związanych z płcią,* Katowice 2000

J. Miluska, *Psychologia płci jako wyzwanie dla edukacji,* Poznań-Toruń 1994

J. Mizielińska, *Czy potrzebna jest akceptacja androgynii? Rozważania o tożsamości kobiet i mężczyzn,* Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny nr 2/ 1996

H. Muszyński, *Zarys teorii wychowania*, Warszawa 1978

Z. Nęcki, *Komunikowanie interpersonalne,* Wrocław 1992

D. Pankowska, *Wychowanie a role płciowe,* Gdańsk 2005

K. Pospiszyl, *Psychologia kobiety,* Warszawa 1986

K. Pospiszyl, E. Żabczyńska, *Psychologia dziecka niedostosowanego społecznie,* Warszawa 1981

Program szkoły podstawowej. Technika. Klasy IV-VII, 1994

E. Putkiewicz, *Proces komunikowania się na lekcji: analiza wypowiedzi nauczycieli i uczniów,*
Warszawa 1990

Reforma systemu edukacji. Projekt. 1998

J. M. Wolińska, *Postawy rodzicielskie a agresywność dorastających dziewcząt i chłopców*,
Lublin 1990