
REFLECTING ON AN ACADEMIC PRACTICE TO BOOST GENDER AWARENESS IN FUTURE SCHOOLTEACHERS

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Gender mainstreaming has become an important issue in UE politics and has been included in most national educational policy. Nevertheless, its implementation is frequently more apparent than real. Here in Spain, schoolteachers are rarely prepared to overcome gender stereotypes. Moreover, university professors interested in developing gender awareness in future professionals generally face difficulties due to, on the one hand, the lack of references and models to follow and, on the other hand, young people's general resistance to feminism claims. In this article we present a specific case of action research developed in order to stimulate gender self-awareness in future schoolteachers. The aim of the text is double: firstly, to critically evaluate our teaching experience in order to improve it in the next years and, secondly, to stimulate a debate with colleagues on potentialities and pitfalls of teaching gender sensibility to future schoolteachers and other educators.

Keywords: gender awareness, schoolteachers, action research, feminisms, young people

Introduction

This article wants to present a reflection on a teaching experience realized with the aim of stimulating gender self-awareness in future schoolteachers.

Our starting point is the consideration that gender stereotypes are socially constructed and transmitted both through informal and formal education; therefore, it is indispensable work

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in those areas in order to produce change. «Gender is one of the most powerful social organizing features of the lives of teachers in schools, it is not surprising that it plays such a significant role in school change» (Hubbard & Datnow, 2000: 127). At the same time, we believe that the curriculum (Shao-Wen, 2012) is involved in gender social reproduction in the classroom; however, the hidden one is particularly influent because it allows an implicit transmission of teacher's social values (Acar, 2012), frequently without teacher awareness. Therefore, schoolteachers have an important role – recognized inclusive by Spanish law – in educating pupils to overcome gender discrimination in society. Nevertheless, unfortunately, they generally have not been prepared for that task.

Following a feminist perspective, we suggest that this preparation cannot be realized by simply learning concepts or didactic tools, but requires a personal questioning of the internalization and reproduction of gender stereotypes (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012). Schoolteachers need, therefore, a formation able to stimulate the necessary critical consciousness to promote their own awareness and commitment as active agents in social norms transformation (Rebollo-Catalán, García-Pérez, Piedra, & Vega, 2011). However, «another general problem is that teacher education students have few high-quality opportunities for guided practice in self-reflection» (Gay & Kirkland, 2003: 182).

In this paper, we are going to present our classroom experience of educative action research, realized in order to stimulate future teachers' awareness about their own gender stereotypes trough self-reflection. In the first two sections of the article, we will introduce some theoretical debates. First, we will reflect on the importance of schoolteachers' formation in order to implement a less discriminatory children education and on the relation between Spanish legislation and realities in that context. Then, we will explore the difficulties of doing so in a time in which it seems to exist a young people's disaffection to feminism and, even more important, an illusion of living in a no gender discriminatory society.

In the next two sections, we will present our experiences with an emphasis on methodology and introduce the particularity of the geo-socio-political realities in which we realized those experiences. After that, we will explain step by step our class dynamics, hoping that such a presentation structure will give account of the reflexivity involved in the spiral process of our action research. Finally, in order to stimulate further debates, we will conclude the article by presenting some threads of current discussions.

Schoolteachers' formation and roles in the transformation of heteronormative values

Feminisms have been mostly successful in achieving the recognition that *gender*¹ is socially constructed. It was a difficult task because it had to deal with both cultural/religious and scientific prejudices related to natural (hetero) sexual order.

In fact, most disciplines contribute to justify and maintain genderized social differences according to an alleged natural order: official history and anthropology reconstruct a human past where society was organized around sexual opposition without almost any exception; medicine and psychology pontificate that natural element (hormones, body structure, mind configuration...) made women and men to diverge in psychical, mental, and emotional capacities; economy and statistics insist that the sexual division of labour was fundamental to develop a modern society; formal and informal education was entrusted to reproduce that same sexist order reinforcing dichotomies and neglecting/pathologizing multiplicities and discordance from heteropatriarcal norms (Biglia & Lloret, 2010).

The strong critique and pressure of feminist social movement, however, forced the inclusion of less discriminating supranational laws/norms agreements. In that sense already in 1979, United Nations ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), that «provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life (...) as well as education, health and employment» (United Nations, n.d.: 20, 40).

Since then, gender mainstreaming policies and actions has been developed and the self-called «first world countries» declare their commitment against women discriminations. Nevertheless, following Verloo and Lombardo, we can reflect on the fact that «Gender equality can be conceptualized as a problem of achieving equality as sameness (...), or of affirming difference from the male norm (...), or of transforming all established norms and standards of what is/should be female and male» (2007: 23). In our opinion, very often it has officially been interpreted as *achieving equality as sameness* and, for that reason, it has been assumed that equal law and norm were almost enough to overcome discriminations. Instead, we agree with the third option proposed by the author, believing that equalities can only be achieved by subverting heteropatriarcal norms to allow multiplicities. «Feminist scholars have produced a large literature problematizing the unitary categories “woman” and “feminism” (...). Many of these critiques highlight the fluidity, situatedness, locality, contingency, and intersectionality that are required to theorize and understand women's experiences» (Rutherford, Capdevilla,

¹ The Real Academia Española (RAE) still does not recognize that kind of use of the word gender; in that sense, they also criticize the use of that word in the Integral Law Against Gender Violence (RAE, 2004).

Undurti, & Palmayr, 2011: 3). That requires a collective, personal, and political displacement in order to transform discriminating realities with attention to intersectionality² effects.

In this article, we want to reflect on the (im)possibilities to stimulate that transformation from formal education to make a change if not questioning formal education (McLeod, 1998). To do so, first of all we need to analyse the *state of the art* both of educative policies and teaching practices in Spanish State.

Despite the fact that educative institutions tended to compound gender stereotyping and segregation (Sarasúa, 2002), school teaching profession has been historically genderized, being, moreover, one of the few allowed to women (Ballarin, 2007). Thus, in accordance with gender division of labour, women have been in charge to transmit to young people and reproduce social mainstream values and between them, cultural patterns and roles of gender discrimination (Federici, 2004; Schwalbe et al., 2000).

The professional status of women teachers is closely tied to domestic work in the private sphere. This linking of women teachers to the private sphere remains dependent, at least in part, upon traditional distinctions within political consciousness between «public man» and «private woman». (Dillabough, 1999: 380)

In Spain, since the Educational Reform of 1990, gender mainstreaming has been included in both primary's and secondary's education curriculum (Blanco, 2004); however, schooling structure and material are still generally androcentric (Sánchez-Bello, 2002), and language is not gender neutral (Encabo & López, 2002), making it difficult for schoolteachers to develop a non-sexist practice.

As detected in recent studies, in order to overcome patriarchal dynamics in teaching practices, schoolteachers have to previously transform their gender consciousness (Colás & Jiménez, 2006; Giraldo & Colyar, 2012; García-Pérez et al., 2011). Moreover, the inclusion of gender perspective in educational center's curriculum, as proposed by the *Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* (LOGSE), requires new pedagogical models and a specific teacher's formation (Colás & Jiménez, 2006). Curriculum has to be transformed in all its aspects by giving a strong importance to experience (Shao-Wen, 2012).

That's why, as detailed in Biglia (2011), the battle for the inclusion of gender topics within Spanish Psychology, Pedagogy and Educational degrees has been a matter of extreme importance for feminist academics. Consequently, the pressure of feminist academicians and activists

² The word was used for the first time by the feminist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). A more actual definition is: «Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power» (Davis, 2008: 68).

brought to the inclusion within the Spanish Law on *Integral Protection Measures Against Gender Violence*³ (*Ley Orgánica nº 1/2004*) of the article 7 with the title «Initial and permanent teacher formation». In the mentioned article, included in the chapter 1, specifically directed to educative measures, is declared that «The education authorities will take the measures necessary to ensure that plans for initial and continuing teacher training will include a specific formation on equality» to ensure future schoolteachers to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to promote equality education between men and women.

Nevertheless, the law does not specify what kinds of measures have to been adopted and who will control their inclusions. Insofar, more than six years later since the approbation of the law, most schoolteacher university degree's curriculums are still not including any mandatory topics on neither gender nor a cross disciplinary gender perspective.

Hence, many authors believe that «Despite all these years of research and production of teaching materials and resources, (...) the introduction and implementation of gender mainstreaming in early childhood education continues to rely over the willingness of individual teachers interested» (Romero-Díaz & Abril-Morales, 2008: 42), situation that, according to Baudino (2007), is pretty similar in the Francophone area and, in our context, is reproduced at the university level, where the importance of gender is still mostly unrecognized. In fact, «the current descriptors used to identify different areas of knowledge do not explicitly include gender, so its inclusion becomes a matter of individual choice for professors» (Ferrer & Bosh, 2005: 265). That does also imply a loneliness that will affect negatively our practices. Hence, systematization analysis and debate on the inclusion of gender in our teaching become urgent. Albeit this will be our main focus, in the following section we will briefly consider the peculiarity of the relation between feminist proposals and students.

Young people and feminisms

Feminist messages have not been easily fathomed by society, due to the prevalence of heteropatriarchal codes. Several mechanisms have been enabled to overthrow proposals which were perceived as a threat to the established system (Valcárcel, 2008). Nonetheless, many scholars (Beltrán, Maquieira, Álvarez, & Sánchez, 2008; García, 2004; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005) consider that feminism has been one of the most successful Western identitarian social movement having been able to directly influence both politics and cultures. In fact,

³ It's considered as one of the most progressive laws on equality between women and men in Europe by the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2010) of the Council for Europe.

some of the most important claims of the 1970s feminisms have been assumed by the following decades' policies and, in the second half of last century with the so-called feminist third wave, seemed to have reached many people. However, we can question to which extent such inclusion led to a radical change of sexist-androcentric beliefs or rather brought to a politically correctness that depoliticized feminist claims.

Women's rights movement continue to be alive and women from different ages still define themselves as feminist (Morelli, 2011; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005). We are in a moment in which «feminism is well-known and recognized worldwide yet is deemed to be a victim of its own success and accused of having made itself irrelevant to life in the twenty-first century» (Morelli, 2011: 14). Considering that «we can see gender well-being as the outcome of (and the condition for) gendered democracy» (Woodward, Bonvin, & Renom, 2011: 271), it is quite surprising that a society which is still reproducing gender discriminations, inclusively in its institutional apparatus, would define itself in terms of gender democracy (Callaghan, Cranmer, Rowan, Siann, & Wilson, 1999; Valcárcel, 2008).

In this context, many authors report a sort of young people's disaffection toward feminism (Griffin, 1989; Miguel, 2008; Siann, Wilkinson, & Riley, 1995; Callaghan et al., 1999; Riley, 2001; Lamas, 1986; Cacace, 2006; Touraine, 2007; Simón Rodríguez, 2008; Valcárcel, 2008) that, we believe, it can be a strong obstacle to the aspiration for a free, fair and caring society. The limited involvement of girls in feminisms⁴ may have several causes as analysed by Cacace (2006). She indicates that the move from a modern society, characterized by fixed identities, to a post-modern one, where identities are fragmented, may drive off younger from a movement that seems to be based on a homogeneous subject and where intergenerational gaps are quite strong. Moreover, ethnic minority women may feel discriminated by some sector of feminisms that tends to reproduce North-South dynamics in a globalized world. Last but not least, the excessive individualization in society is considered by Cacace (2006) as another reason of youngsters' disaffection to feminism (argument shared with McRobbie, 2009). As detailed in Biglia and Luna (2012), young people, reinforced by media messages (Henry, 2004), tend to pursue their personal realization autonomously and that makes it difficult for them to perceive the genderized collective aspects of discrimination and to articulate a protest together with other women.

Moreover, many girls share the feeling that women collective struggles have been won, and we allegedly would be now living in an egalitarians society where rights and treatment are not genderized. The false illusion of equality (Asher, 2011; Valcárcel, 2008) is strong in the new generations where both girls and boys seem unable to detect sexism experienced in their

⁴ It is nonetheless important to note that different young feminist groups are active today as, for example, indicated by Morelli (2011).

daily live (Markowitz, 2005; Riera & Valenciano, 1991), probably because they are facing a «new sexism», much more naturalized and therefore invisible (Riley, 2001).

In the same line, Alberdi, Escario, and Matas (2000) report that people would start to perceive gender discrimination in their own lives when they are between 23 and 35 years old, coinciding with their entrance in the workplace, with the independence from their parents' residence⁵ and, for women, with the experience of maternity. Nevertheless, when they become aware of an unequal treatment, they generally respond with «little fight in their positions and moderation of their ambitions» (Alberdi, Escario, & Matas, 2000: 264), and do not act for a direct transformation of their daily life.

The reality we shortly presented in this section made explicit the absolute need of an in-depth work with future schoolteachers and, at the same time, shows how demanding will be that process according to the fact that most of the students are of a generation and age group that face more difficulty to recognize and work on their own gender stereotype reproduction. Therefore, it becomes urgent a collective reflexion on how we, as teachers, try to deal with such arduous task. In order to do so, in the next section we will start introducing some methodological thoughts on our research and class dynamics.

Teaching and r e s e a r c h i n g m e t h o d o l o g i e s

The experience we present was not designed, since its beginning, as a research. On the contrary, it was supposed to be simply part of a normal teaching process. Nevertheless, different elements brought about a change of perspective: the specific interest of the class teacher (B. Biglia) on feminisms and on action research; the detected need of systematize teaching experience in this area, due to the fact that there is few literature on that topic; the beginning of a PhD thesis research process on young university students and feminism perceptions (by A. Velasco); the stimulus offered by a call for papers of the 5th EDUC8 Workshop on *Why Does Gender Still Matter in Education?*

For all those reasons, we decided to transform a teaching practice into an action research process aiming to develop a gender perspective in the course for future school teachers and to improve materials and methodologies in order to do that. Because of that, as we will explain later in more detail, we won't focus our analysis on students' gender «stereotypes» as such, but rather on how these made up the material that we used in the classroom in order to stimulate students' awareness.

⁵ That in Spain, as in other Latin countries, is a quite recent experience.

Our action research (AR) experience was not methodologically pure, however, according to Christianakis (2008), the complexity of classroom dynamics made unnecessary that educational research conformed to the classic action research cycle; «teacher research reflects some of the same goals of action research, methodologically, [nonetheless] it is less formulaic than the action research cycle» (*ibidem*: 100). Following Smith (1996), that it is not really a misusing of AR; in fact, Lewin itself was more interested in offering skills to observe and problematize realities than defining a strict method of research, and the technicization of AR may degenerate and reduce its critical and liberating possibilities (Weaver-Hightower, 2010).

We cannot forget, however, that in our experience we are going to start from a feminist perspective that, by interacting with AR, brings a special focus on the consequences of power relations responsible for gender inequalities (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009). In that sense, «we must be mindful that raising questions about gender inequalities can create hostilities from those resisting change, so we must carefully consider if and how such tensions can be negotiated without endangering study participants» (*ibidem*: 16-17). Such question is extremely relevant in the classroom where is always present the power relation between teacher and students. In order to recognize that tension, we believe that we have to consider our experience as not participative, despite of the active inclusion of students in it. In fact, students' reflexivity was centred on the topics we were analysing and not on the process and dynamic we were acting while working on them. Indeed, even if we took in great consideration their opinions and feedback in order to decide how to proceed, they did not take directly part in the decision making; in other words, they were not co-researchers. That brought the teacher (B. Biglia), in the moment in which the practice was going to derive in an AR, to invite A. Velasco as external co-researcher, making it possible to redefine and articulate a more complex network of power relations in the classroom. Moreover, A. Velasco's participation was extremely important in order to «respond to the ever-shifting, contextual and relational, and language and culture-based nature of students' identities and voices» (Cook-Sather, 2007: 397). According to the author, this can be achieved by the researcher engaging in a process of translation: «Translating ourselves into different versions of researchers such that we conceptualize and collaborate with students as co-interpreters has the potential to help us resist some forms of imposition and subordination» (*ibidem*). We believe that researcher's translation and shifts are inherently limited due to the fact that our standpoint (Haraway, 1991) cannot be omitted. Collaboration between researchers, especially if they have a different background and standpoint, could improve our mobility and offer more space to students' different opinions and realities. In our case, the presence of the co-researcher was particularly relevant to reduce both an intergenerational lively gap and feminist language ones and help students to be conscious of their gender stereotype.

Nevertheless,

Awareness does not automatically produce appropriate responses for the action. That is, «awareness» easily leads to reflection without action. (...) «Critical consciousness» facilitates a contextualized analysis of problematic situations, which allows people to transform that reality. (...) Transformation, therefore, results from a critical perspective. (Colás & Jimenez, 2006: 423)

This, in our opinion, has to be directed also on ourselves.

In that sense, the commitment of feminist pedagogies with self-reflexive practices fighting against our own sexist, racist homophobic barriers (Shrewsbury, 1993) requires to stimulate students to relate curriculum with their own life (Klebesadel & Kempfert, 2004) according to a political practice that aims at producing social and educational changes (Mayberry, 2001). In order to do that and to prepare teachers on gender equalities, Freixa, Fuentes-Guerra, and Luque (2007) insisted in the need of offering students special tools to analyze their professional practices and to critically reflect in the way in which beliefs influence teaching dynamics. According to that, following Campbell (2002) suggestions, our own political commitments bring us to develop a «collective, experiential, egalitarian, interactive and empowering process that connects rational and irrational dimensions with the affective once facilitating cooperative learning» (Luxan & Biglia, 2011: 156).

In conclusion, the question would be to support future schoolteachers to become aware of their gender stereotypes and offering tools to self-reflect on the influence that such stereotypes have in their teaching practices (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012). However, as Bondi (2009) declares, is not easy to teach reflexivity, though an ongoing personal and collective work can help in order to learn how to put it in practice. According to Cook-Sather, we can try to engage with that by

creating opportunities for students to gain critical distance on their experiences and inviting them to analyze those experiences with an eye toward changing them are key components of student voice work as well. Like critical and feminist pedagogies, student voice work supports the interrogation by the oppressed of their own experiences and sees this interrogation as the means by which to come to an understanding of their power as knowers and creators of their world and, in turn, as potential transformers of their world. (2007: 395)

For that reason, as we will detail later, we developed a process starting from students' free written accounts, going through students' personal systematic and critic analysis of them to end with a collective debates to redefine categories, understanding and stereotypes in order to bring an ongoing process of both collective and self-reflexivity. Using Haraway (1997) metaphor, we can say that students' analysis is diffracted, as the class is crossed by new lights which, by working on them, will diffract them again so that each student will be affected by some of those new lights and diffract them again and so on...

Contextualizing

In order to better understand the experience, we are going to present some information on the context in which it has been developed. We will start this session with a general presentation of the *Universitat Rovira i Virgili* (URV) and of the cultural and political Catalan environment following with an introduction to the structure of the degree in Infant Education in the context of Spanish Academia. After that, we will go a bit more in depth explaining the course contents, its aims, the teaching strategies adopted and, finally, we will briefly present some of the social and personal characteristics of students that participated in the experience.

The URV was created in 1991 by the Parliament of Catalonia from the already existing university faculties and schools, restoring the 16th century Tarragona University. Among its aims is the interest in contributing to the social and economic development of the environment and in placing knowledge at the service of society. That is probably one of the reason that brought URV to create 12 centres in different cities of the area, having however most of the Faculty a central department in Tarragona. In the academic year 2009-2010, the *Rovira i Virgili* University opened in the *El Vendrell campus* the bachelor's degree in Infant Education and the one in Nursing. So, when we realized the experience we refer to, in this article, was the second one of the degree in *El Vendrell*, a campus of reduced dimension with a strong contact between student, teachers, and administrative staff. The bachelor's degree in Infant Education is offered by the Faculty of Education Sciences and Psychology, most of the teachers are from the Department of Pedagogy and some of them from the Psychology one, many also teach in other campus. It is a new degree created in 2010 in order to implement the Bologna' agreements in substitution to the pre-existent schoolteachers' ones; with 480 European credit transfer system (ECTS), it is included in the area of Juridical and Social Sciences and requires a minimum of four years to be completed. Among the competences that have to be achieved through that degree, for the importance that they can assume in the context of our practices, we can mention: i) Making a collective reflexion on the acceptance of standards and respect for others – empowering autonomy and uniqueness of each student as educational factors of emotions, feelings, and values in early childhood; ii) Act as parents' coach in relation to family education in the period 0-6 and dominate the needed social skills to relate with students' families individually or as a group; and iii) Reflecting on classroom practices, to innovate and improve teaching – develop habits and skills for independent learning and cooperative and promote it among students.

According to the URV model, the first year is common for the degree in: Primary Education, Infant Education, Pedagogies and Social Education. In those years, students have to follow the courses: Society, Family, and Education (12 ECTS), Educative Process and

Context (18 ECTS), Personality Development and Learning Process (18 ECTS), and Communicative Ability (12 ECTS).

Even if in the *El Vendrell* campus there is only one group of students, all of which are inscribed in the Infant Education degree, the courses have to be coordinated with the teachers of the other campuses: Terre de l'Ebre, with one group, and Tarragona, with four big and mixed degree groups (split in eight groups for the practices). The curriculum and evaluation have to be agreed between a team that for the course we are referring, Society, Family and Education (SFE), was composed by more than ten teachers.

The course where we realized our experience is considered within the general topic of Sociology and include a vast curriculum that goes from History of Education, passing through Anthropology of Education, Family, Gender and Feminist Theory to actual topics in education (Multiculturalism, ICTs, Citizenship, Media, Disabilities, Sustainable Development...). We had to work in all such topics in around 125 hours of classes divided between theory and practice. In the *El Vendrell campus*, SFE's classes were once a week, in four consecutive hours from September to mid of May, and B. Biglia was the teacher in charge of the entire course. First year degree students spent every day, from Monday to Thursday, in the same room for four/five hours with the same colleagues and frequently had to do group works during the afternoon or at the weekends, so they definitively got to know each other's.

The class was composed by 38 students, but just 31 were present in the session in which they have to write about a dilemma. Their average age was 23 years old⁶, being most of them (the mode) 21 years old and being distributed in a rank from 18 to 57 years olds. All students were female from the same ethnical background, but, as we learned in the debates during the session, some of their parents have been experiencing internal migration from other parts of the Spanish State⁷.

The 84.2% of the students live in the villages and little cities located nearby the university area; nevertheless, 10% live a bit more far away, in the area of Barcelona. Just a couple of them moved from their residence to come to University, one, displaced from another Catalan city, is now living with other family members during the week and another one is coming from outside of *Catalunya*. *Baix Penedès* area is economically characterized by the agriculture-industry on the interior and by tourism on the coast. In the last decades the area has experienced an increasing of incoming migration from abroad. Nowadays, the 15.96% of *Baix Penedès* population has foreign origin, with a low presence of people from EU (less of 6% of

⁶ Official data (URV, 2010).

⁷ In the *Baix Penedès* (area where is located El Vendrell), the 22.6% of the population are intern migrant (IDES-CAT, 2010).

migrant population) (Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya, 2011). Nevertheless, none of our students came from outside the Spanish State.

We do not have official statistics about participants' previous education; however, we detected that many of them have done a professional training in infant education⁸. That means they already have a basic formation in childcare but sometime a less in-depth background in general culture and are more interested in learning professional practices skills than abstract theory.

In order to finish that contextualization, we would like to say a few words in relation to the pedagogy used in the class. Since the beginning, the course teacher (B. Biglia) tried to develop a critical and participative atmosphere in the class and to stimulate an analytic attitude instead of the memorization of concepts or notions. Although she does not explicitly enter in debates on gender and feminisms before the specific module dedicate to that, she included a gender perspective in the contents of the previous class.

Working gender step by step

According to Mora and Pujal (2009), curricular competences are genderised being oriented to the logic of care or provision. In their analysis, realized in the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, they detected that more stereotypically womanized careers (like pre-schoolar teacher education) tend to stimulate caring competence and, on the opposite, stereotypically masculinized ones (like technical engineering in computer systems) direct their attention to more provisional competences. In order to overcome gender discrimination within university formation, they suggest introducing a competence in gender perspective that would agglutinate both instrumental abilities (cognitive, linguistic, technical, and practices) and personal/interpersonal ones⁹. In the experience we are going to present, we tried to stimulate this gender perspective competence in our students, combining an exercise that requires personal competences (e.g., reflexivity), interpersonal ones (e.g., understanding each other), and instrumental ones (e.g., analysing documents), etc. In doing so, we agree with Bierema (2003:

⁸ That is a course you can do without having finishing your secondary school and, once achieved the title, and gives you the option to follow studying at the university under certain condition. In the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is classified as 5b. For more information, consult the official webpage (just in Spanish): <http://www.todofp.es/todofp/formacion/que-y-como-estudiar/oferta-formativa/todos-los-estudios/servicios-socioculturales/educacion-infantil.html>.

⁹ Similarly many feminists are nowadays arguing for the importance to introduce «hard science» content (physic, engineering) within women' studies curricula (Weasel, Honrado, & Bautista, 2001).

10) that «Knowledge about gendered power relations is not enough and must be accompanied by action if change is to occur. Gender consciousness was most powerful when it was linked with action».

In order to better follow the process of our AR, we are going to present it step by step including in each of them: what do we propose to do (our proposal – OP), the timing of the action, its location within the course and characteristics of the tasks (TC), student reactions (R) and, in some cases, comment, further reflection or analysis (C).

Step 1

(OP) We asked students to elaborate an important dilemma to be faced by a 20 year-old person, and to give more details starting from basic information. The protagonist of the dilemma was a girl (Mary) for half of the class and a boy (Paul) for the other half. Students knew the name of their protagonist but ignore that some colleagues have to work with a different subject.

The protocol says: *Mary/Paul is a 20 year old person facing the most important dilemma that has never faced in his/her life. Explain the dilemma, and in doing so, answer these questions: Why is it so difficult to face? / Did (s)he ask someone to help her/him solving the dilemma? If (s)he has done it, to whom and what kind of help? / If you were a friend of Mary/Paul, what would you recommend her/him? / What is ultimately the decision of Mary/Paul? / What is gained and what lost with this decision? / What characteristics of the character of Mary/Paul will help her/him to decide? / What do you think (s)he thought? How does (s)he act? How did (s)he feel?*

(TC) We have already finished the classes on History of Education and were starting the Anthropology bloc. The task has to be realized individually in the class, in a couple of hour maximum. The accounts have to be signed with a nickname to make them anonymous.

(R) According to their portfolio accounts and our conversation in the class breaks, students didn't understand the reason why we told them to do this activity, but enjoy it as an option to express themselves. Just one of the adult students, in the next class, told me she discovered that the protagonist was not of the same gender and show that she had understood the narrow idea of the practices.

(C) That task was realized before we started to reflect on gender, because we did not want that students were influenced by the topics and tell their story less freely.

Step 2

(OP) Each student was invited to analyse someone else's dilemma and defining specific categories related to the characteristics of the story analysed.

(TC) That process was realized during the practical part of a normal class when we were at the beginning of the gender module; they had a couple of hours to do it. They were still unaware of the existence of different protagonists.

(R) Despite of teacher help, the process of categorization was experienced as rough and hard for many students, and sometimes they felt lost.

(C) Students got bored during that process especially because they were not able to understand what it was for and because they are not used to that kind of analysis. That is why, in order to repeat that experience in future occasion, we will offer a system of categories to be applied for the analysis. We have to be aware that being able to «analyse situations critically and systematically (...) to generate improvement actions and to establish preventive measures to anticipate the future (...) require high analytical skills, critical thinking, decision making, innovation and being able to solve problems» (Larrañaga, Yubero, Torralba, Gutiérrez, & Vázquez, 2010: 3), competences that we have to help student to develop.

Step 3

(OP) After the classes in Anthropology and on Families, following the curriculum program, we introduced students to the topic of gender construction and discrimination, co-education and feminist theories.

(TC) We are already more or less in the middle of our course. Students know each other better and have achieved consistence as group.

(R) They were extremely receptive with feminist proposals and firmly convinced they have to work in a co-educative way but they were not very comfortable with the use of the word feminism (Riley, 2001). Despite of that politically correctness attitude, most of them were unable to recognize gender discrimination in their own life and were extremely resistant to critically analyse their own gender role reproduction.

(C) Our experience at the beginning was really similar to the one well described by Frisby, Maguire, and Reid

When initiating discussions in the classroom or in the community, we have encountered resistance to both the terms «theory» and «feminism». Typical responses to «theory» have included: «that's what you do in universities», «theory is not relevant in the real world», «theory is just a lot of jargon», and «we want action, not more theory».

Some of the varied responses we have had in discussions about feminists or feminism are: «they hate men and promote reverse discrimination», «they did well in the past and we no longer encounter those problems», «feminism does not relate to my culture», and «feminism still has a role to play, but using the term will only hinder our cause due to backlash». (2009: 20)

Reading feminist articles and participating in the class make them more open to feminisms.

Step 4

(OP) Little groups of classmates that had analysed dilemmas with the same protagonist (Mary or Paul) were invited to put their analyses in common and to create collective categories. We shared the results of the groups' analysis in the class trying to evidence gender differences that students had reproduced in their dilemmas (many of them still didn't know that there were two different protagonists). That analysis, coordinated by the teacher with the support of the co-researcher, detected that different gender stereotypes were reproduced in the dilemmas.

(TC) That practice was realized a week after the one explained in step 2, and we dedicate a couple of hours to it. We realized that practice just after a theory class, when we introduce students to feminist debates. In that step, an external researcher (A. Velasco) was invited to participate and collaborate in the debate.

(R) The high level of participation in the debate was mostly characterized by a reaction of *deny* (Titus, 2000) of the results of their own analysis with the pretext that results were influenced by their lack of expertise in creating categories. Despite of the evidence of gender difference, many students suggested they were sure they would had written exactly the same dilemma for the other gender protagonist and they didn't want to enter in considering the possibility that even the same dilemma could have been told differently.

(C) We understand that we need to present more detailed evidence in order to try to engage students with their own personal reproduction of gender stereotypes, trying to transform their resistance as a basis for – instead of a barrier for – gender learning as suggested by Titus (*ibidem*).

Step 5

(OP) In order to provide a more detailed analysis and to show more clearly to students the characteristics of the accounts they have created, we decided that the external researcher will re-analyse the dilemmas, with the support of the software *Atlas.ti*.

(TC) That work was realized apart from the class where we follow the regular program going in depth by also presenting other contents on gender and debating and doing other practice related with the topic.

(R) Our results were more specific than the students' ones. However, they still evidenced differences between the dilemmas faced by Mary and by Paul. First of all, the character of the protagonist (Mary and Paul) was clearly influenced by gender stereotypes (Basow, 1992; Fabra, 2008); Mary was described as sweet and humble and Paul as strong, fighter, and with an adventurous spirit. Just in a few female protagonist cases and in a couple of male cases (one of them described as gay) they were breaking gender roles. Furthermore, Mary was facing personal dilemmas, and she also had many thoughts and feelings (most of them negatives), and was characterized as an emotional person, with a high level of guilt feelings when she decided to solve the dilemma in a way that favoured herself. On the other hand, Paul was represented as a strong and fighter boy who had mainly academic dilemmas. He experienced positive feelings when the problem was solved and almost any thought was described. Finally, it was shocking to discover that on Mary's dilemmas the 30% of students recommended a resolution that went in detriment of Mary's desires. On the contrary, none of our students recommended to Paul a solution against his desires.

(C) As already experienced by other feminist we found that

the opinions many students (...) hold of feminists or feminisms are often not based on any actual firsthand familiarity with the goals, histories, or accomplishments of women's movements nor firsthand reading of feminist scholarship. (...) the more students (...) read and discuss accessible articles by diverse feminists, the more open they become to revisiting their classroom practices and specific problems with gender in mind. (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009: 20)

Step 6

(OP) Anna presented a selection of the results of her analysis to the class.

(TC) We did that in one of the latest session. Here the class was much more cohesive, students seemed to express themselves completely freely (including when they were in complete disagreement with the teacher) and more inclined to reflect on themselves and recognize that sometimes our political correctness is not completely assumed on a personal level¹⁰.

¹⁰ In that context, we explained students we had decided to reflect as researchers on that experience and asked, and obtained, their permission to use the material for presentations and publications.

(R) The debate was extremely rich. Most of the girls began the discussion with a high resistance to admit they could reproduce gender stereotypes. However, some of the older students broke the «consensus» by declaring that probably they would have made a different dilemma for a boy and for a girl and that the data presented was quite self-evident showing how do we still represent people as stereotypically genderized. At that point, we also realized that one of the biggest difficulties faced by most students, especially the youngest one, was that of recognizing their own contradictions. In Titus' (2000) words, they are assuming *distance* from the gender discrimination problem. Living in a politically correctness society, they felt that having gender stereotypes makes people bad persons and found extremely complex to understand this nuance in their experience. We work collectively (Mayberry, 2001) on that and through the debate resistances where reduced; in fact, students began to recognize that our life is full of stereotypes and they become proud of their personal characteristics. Indeed, they detected the importance of a critical and open attitude in relation to personal contradictions for their professional future. Being aware, as teachers, of their own stereotypes makes them feel less vulnerable to reproduce them (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012).

(C) The overall sensation was that most students had become more aware of how much gender stereotypes become internalized in our own life and how difficult it is to recognize them and work on them. Nevertheless, we also realized that, during debates, some students felt pushed and uncomfortable, as when we said «we all reproduce stereotypes» they felt judged or dismay (Titus, 2000) with a sensation of incapacity to overcome it. We were pleased that finally that feeling had been shared and we could work on it, but we are also aware that we have to take even more care in next years experiences.

Step 7

We presented our experience in the mentioned congress, receiving interesting feedbacks and try to analyse our experience in depth. It was encouraging to see how researchers from around the world had devised different strategies to work gender stereotypes with their students. Furthermore, we decided to repeat that experience in a new academic year but implementing some changes. Among them, a simplified initial protocol, a grid of categories to analyse, compare and evaluate more easily the narrative they produce and a process of evaluation of the experience.

We also talk about the difficulty of our students to recognize gender stereotypes and to change the negative connotation attributed to feminism, on the same line we agree on the need of dedicating more time to the work on such complex reality.

Conclusion: what do we bring with us?

The space of conclusion is always somehow disquieting, and even become a little paradoxical when it is referred to a tale of an ongoing process. We probably can offer more questions than answers and we are particularly more thirsty for knowledge and desirous of comments and debate that convinced to be able to present any clear result.

However, for the sake of stimulating the debate, it is useful to shortly summarize and highlight some outcomes of the experienced, some of which we are still evaluating and some of the weakness of the kind of work we proposes here.

Firstly, we confirm, in our specific context of study, what many feminist researchers have been argued: girls tend to reproduce gender stereotypes and find extremely difficult to identify its significance in their own life. In fact, although young people generally recognize that the existence of some structural gender discrimination (salary, political recognition, etc.) and gender violence are still social problems, they tend to consider those phenomena as alien to their everyday life. Political correctness and allegedly liberating media models of masculinized femininities tend to make them consider sexism: as a legacy of the past; as a problem of «other» (inferior) cultures/religions; as something basically experienced by uneducated (again inferior) women; or, at least, as a particular experience they may face at some point of their life, but that they will have no problem to solve. Moreover, as expressed in the text, the disqualification of feminism, the ideal of being individual, the lack of a gender perspective in education play an important role in that sense...

We have also experienced that the resistance to that recognition may be particularly strong in a period of life, the entrance in the adulthood, when it is important to present ourselves as self-confident and without contradictions. That may be even stronger when you are asked to expose yourself by an adult that, formally in charge of evaluating you, in front of a group of pairs with whom you have to share many times in the next years. In our opinion, that has to be carefully taken in consideration and specifically addressed when using students' personal reflexive approach in working on gender issues.

Actually, through that analysis, we became aware of an important difference between our experience and the one explained, for example, in Naples and Bojar (2002): timing, space, and dimensions. Many doubts arise related to the extreme difficulty of fulfilling a work of that kind, with the required care and sensibility, in a class of forty people, in the context of an extremely big topic, having to follow a huge content curriculum and without the option of creating a clearly separate space from evaluation.

Therefore, despite trying to improve practical tools to be used to help students to develop a gender perspective analysis, we agree with Ana Sánchez Bello¹¹ and with McLeod (1998)

that a real politic willingness to offer structural opportunities is indispensable to make a difference in preparing future educators for the task of assuming a feminist sensibility in their profession (for a revision of gender education policies in Spanish State, see, for example, Ballarín, 2004). A law that does not take into account the needs and potentials of academia, students, and professors, that does not offer any facilities, that does not establish any mechanism of evaluation of its implementation is definitely insufficient. To be properly implemented, professors with gender formation should be contracted¹²; already employed professors should be adequately trained; gender courses should be designed and gender mainstreaming implemented in all degrees in order to prepare future professors; a concrete academic space and time should be devoted to work gender topics in Educational degrees; etc.

Unfortunately, as denounced by Verloo and Lombardo (2007), power relations still define who have voice in the design of gender policies and both technocracy and femocracy¹³ tend to depoliticize them. For instance, we think it is important to try to develop gender stereotype subverting practices in the present context while pressing for more political attention to that reality. We hope our account may stimulate the inclusion of similar experiences in education and the recognition of the need for further critical research, evaluation, debates and result sharing.

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¹¹ Personal comments during the first presentation of the paper, Oporto (June, 2011).

¹² Actually very few university professors have themselves received any specific formation on gender (in Spain does not exist any specific Gender Study Department and there are very few and quite new PhD courses). Moreover, academics that explicitly engage with feminist practices may face important difficulties to stabilize their career position.

¹³ «A “femocrata” is a feminist bureaucrat. The term is an Australian coinage minted when members of the Australian women's movement first developed the strategy of entering federal and state bureaucracies as a way of bringing feminist concerns into the public policy agenda. (...) The institutionalization of the femocracy has meant that there is a new generation of femocratas, some of them generated from the ranks of the bureaucracy, who lacks a background in feminism activism» (Eisenstein, 1995: 69-80).

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