

Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

Ireland case study report 4 Exploring Masculinities in Schools

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Exploring Masculinities in Schools

Summary

This case study examines the “Exploring Masculinities” project, an optional module, which is part of the Social, Personal and Health Education curriculum (SPHE) offered to boys in single sex schools during their transition year or senior cycle of post-primary education. The programme gives boys the opportunity to “reflect on their identity as men and to learn about gender and equality issues” (Gosine 2007). The material available consists of a teachers’ pack with student resources and a video. This case study explores the political and legislative background to the programme, the project aims and its’ implementation and outcomes.

Background

This programme was implemented in boys’ single sex post-primary schools. There is a strong tradition in Ireland of educating children in single sex schools. Mac an Ghail (2002) reported that 16 percent of boys, and 23 percent of girls were schooled in this way. As stated in the same report, the rationale for EM ‘draws upon societal changes, legislative and policy developments, and empirical studies of the school experiences of Irish teenage boys’ (23). There is a dearth of measures relating to gender focusing on boys in single-sex schools. Yet, research indicates that boys in single-sex schools pay little attention to issues of gender equality, hold more stereotyped views of gender equality than girls or boys in mixed-sex schools, express higher levels of prejudice towards specific groups (eg travellers and gay men), and are likely to consider hegemonic masculinity as superior (Mac and Ghail *et al ibid.*). There is also evidence that boys in single sex schools are offered a narrower curriculum, with less opportunity to take SPHE (*ibid.*).

Legislative background

The DES is currently focused on developing a gender mainstreaming approach for the period 2001-2006. They intend to do this by “explicitly incorporating a gender perspective into policy development and sound baseline data on the relative position of men and women, boys and girls in the education system” (DES website, accessed February 2008). In 2001 the Gender Equality Unit, which is co-funded by the EU, was also set up by the Department of Education and Science. There are also a number of pieces of legislation relating to discrimination on the grounds of gender. The Equal Status Act (2000), the Employment Equality Act (1998), the Education Act (1998) and the Education (Welfare) Act (2000) all include aspects relating to reducing gender discrimination.

Project aims and objectives

The aims of Exploring Masculinities are to:

- explore different perceptions and experiences of masculinity
- promote understanding and respect for diversity
- promote equality among and between the sexes
- provide opportunities for males to develop enhanced interpersonal and social skills
- promote healthy lifestyles
- raise awareness of life choices, changing roles in society, work (paid and non-paid), relationships, health and sexuality, violence against women, men and children, and sport (Mac an Ghail 2002:23).

The overall mission of the programme is to “promote the personal, social, education and vocational development of the students and to prepare them for their role as autonomous, participative and responsible members of society (Transition Year CSS Brochure, quoted in Mac an Ghaill 2002)”. Because certain types of masculinities may hinder academic achievements, this could potentially have positive effects on ‘boys’ under-achievement’.

The programme consists of a 420 page teachers’ pack, student resources and a video. There are 76 lesson plans in all, covering 7 broad themes: communication skills, work, power, violence, sport and health, relationships and sexuality, wrapping up and role models (Gosine 2007). The resources were written and compiled by a team of teachers. Boys, however, were not involved in the design or management of the project.

Implementation of the project

The project was implemented in four phases:

Phase 1 – The project was initially developed between 1995 and 1997 by the Ministry for Education (Department of Education and Science) and the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland, and was piloted in seven single sex boys schools (Mac an Ghaill *et al.* 2002).

Phase 2 – An additional 20 schools became involved in the project in 1998-1999, the same year that phase 1 and 2 were evaluated by a team from Limerick University.

Phase 1 and 2 Evaluation

The first two phases of the programme were the subject of a DES funded external evaluation by a team of researchers at Limerick University in 1998, which came to be known as the Limerick Evaluation. This was an implementation study which examined the delivery of the programme in four case study schools.

Key Findings of the Limerick Evaluation

The evaluation gave a positive picture of the programme. It found that in most schools the programme was delivered by a single teacher (three out of the four schools).

The full evaluation report, however, remains unpublished. Only the Executive Summary was published in 1999. This reported that the project draws on conceptions of masculinity and gender as social constructions, thus breaking away from the more essentialist approach which has long predominated, something which eventually 'became a contentious issue in the media attention to EM' (29), as mentioned in Mac an Ghaill *et al.* (*ibid.*), see below. The Limerick Mac an Ghaill *et al.* in their 2002 report noted that the full publication of the Limerick Evaluation would have helped to counter some of the controversy which was part of the press debate.

Phase 3 – Exploring Masculinities was launched in September 2000, as part of the Transition Year coordinators’ training as an in-service day.

Phase 4 - In October 2000, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment was asked by the Ministry for Education (Department for Education and Science) to undertake a review of EM.

Evaluation

This second evaluation was carried out by researchers from the University of Newcastle and University College, Cork on behalf of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). They produced a thorough evaluation of the scheme (Mac an Ghaill *et al.* 2002), which included an international comparative analysis of Exploring Masculinities materials and a study of teachers' views on implementing the programme. The review was partly fuelled by the media attention aimed at the project. Details of the methodology, key findings and recommendations of this evaluation are outlined below.

Methodology

The NCCA evaluation involved content analysis and both written and oral data. Media articles relating to the programme were examined, a census survey was conducted of boys' single sex schools, and interviews and focus groups were held with key groups, including teachers and principals. Research was conducted in both schools which had implemented the programme and those which had not.

The two main research questions of the evaluation were:

- 'What was the shape and temporal trajectory of the public debate?'
- 'What are teachers' views of implementing the Exploring Masculinities programme within the context of the public debate?' (Mac an Ghaill 2002:5)

Key findings

The review found that Exploring Masculinities was mainly taught to transition year students (although some schools taught it in senior cycle as part of the Religious Education or SPHE classes), by experienced teachers, who were primarily teachers of arts/humanities or religious education, and was more likely to be taught in schools with more than 250 students in urban areas or towns. They also noted that those schools which did deliver the programme tended to 'dip into' the programme as a resource, rather than using the full programme of all 76 lessons.

Mac an Ghaill identified that teachers were very positive about Exploring Masculinities. However, there is no study of 'impact' in the strictest sense. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that boys needed a programme giving them more opportunities to talk about a range of personal, social, health issues, even those teachers who had a negative view of the programme. In schools where Exploring Masculinities had been discontinued, this was linked to organisational constraints and changes, rather than ideological issues.

The evaluation also explored material generated by the media in response to the launch of the programme. Exploring Masculinities has attracted a lot of controversy among the media and the wider public, and has often been interpreted as a threat to boys' 'masculine' identity. The innovative nature of the programme's remit which targets boys and their conception of gender and masculinities, understood as social constructs, attracted resistance and critique from both the press and parents. This was particularly the case when the programme was launched in the Autumn of 2000.

Content analysis of media coverage undertaken by Mac an Ghaill *et al* showed that the majority of coverage came from the written press, mainly the letters pages and opinion pieces. This attention led to the programme being labelled as 'controversial'. Criticisms of the programme included accusations that it was 'reconstructing boys into girls', was overly feminist and feminised, it had an 'over-emphasis' on homosexuality, was anti-male, and gave an imbalanced portrayal of domestic

violence. For example, Damien Byrne, writing in the Irish Examiner in October 2000, spoke of a 'crusade against masculinity', and an attempt to 'extend therapy culture from cradle to grave'.

Similarly, in their review of the programme submitted to the NCCA, The National Congress of Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Association (CSPA) also took issue with the idea that students should disclose their feelings in public, writing that the 'classroom is not a therapy session'. They criticised the programme for its lack of consultation with parents and emphasised the idea that SPHE should support what is delivered in the home, which they believed was in conflict with the moral messages delivered in Exploring Masculinities.

In contrast to the public debate about the programme explored above, teachers reported responses from students which were overall positive. The review found no reports of students having had negative experiences of the programme, and few teachers reported having been approached by parents who had concerns about the programme. Teachers saw the programme "as a pathway to influence peer group norms" (Mac an Ghaill 2002:194), and felt that it had a positive impact on students. However, they were less sure regarding the programme's efficacy in relation to its goals (*ibid.* 187).

Recommendations

Mac an Ghaill and colleagues provide an exhaustive list of recommendations. In particular, they note that 'Future curricular work might usefully engage with the relationship between white masculinities and diverse representations of black men in Ireland and internationally' (68). In the current Irish context, interactions between masculinities and refugees/asylum seekers may also be a productive area of inquiry.

Although the same evaluation suggests that 'the quality of the material is excellent', lessons are consistent and the programme coherent, the authors note that 'some topics would benefit from updating, elaboration, and integration with a conceptual gender framework' (89). In particular, they recommended that the video be updated. The evaluation also recommended that schools develop enhanced mechanisms for parental involvement (208).

They also encourage the wider availability of gender studies programme in schools, more consideration/research for SPHE and for SPHE and EM to be more included in teacher training programmes, the setting up of a regional professional development support structure for teachers of SPHE and EM. They also recommend that a fund be established for the further development of materials, that information on SPHE and EM be made more accessible to parents, that the EM material be more widely disseminated, including by extending the measure to girls' and mixed-sex schools. They also wish to see the opinions of participant students included in future discussions about EM.

Project Outcomes

The project is still being delivered, but as Mac an Ghaill reported, it is difficult to gauge how many schools are still delivering the programme. While there was an attempt to disseminate the programme more widely from September 2000, no official or more recent figures as to how many schools are currently delivering it. Mac an Ghaill suggested that the adverse publicity towards EM in the press made many teachers reluctant to teach it, so it is likely that the number of schools involved did not increase massively from those involved in the evaluation. Mac an Ghaill goes on to observe: 'Although we did not ask how many students had participated in EM, we can estimate that

given the number of schools and classes in which EM has been used between 1996 and 2002, hundreds of students at least have participated in the programme' (44).

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