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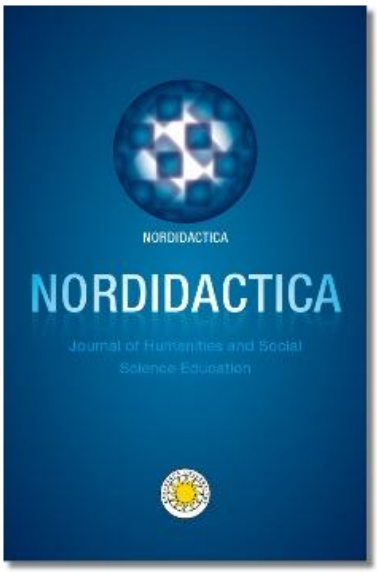

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Knowledge of Life and Death! A Classroom Study of Gender Negotiations among Pupils and Teachers in Primary School History Education

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Abstract: In this article, we analyse how gendered subject positions during the Middle Ages are talked about in the history education classroom in primary school. Discourses about gender norms in the past were followed by discourses about how to interpret these differences and injustices, where we see that: i) the interpretations are constructed as being linked to biology, ii) teacher and pupils construct a present 'us' who understand better than a past 'they', an us who have greater freedom of action to choose for ourselves how to live our lives, and where iii) this is explained by the view that mediaeval people did not understand very well. It is between these discourses that the negotiation of how to interpret gender norms and gendered positions takes place. Negotiations result in a discourse that stresses today's society as one of equality and equity. These discourses also enable various counter-discourses in which pupils challenged the constructions of women in the past offered by the teacher and textbook in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: GENDER NORMS, HISTORY EDUCATION, PRIMARY SCHOOL, SUBJECT POSITIONS, POSTFEMINISM

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Introduction

History education explores the past, but can also enable reflections upon the direction in which society is moving and shed light on our own approach to contemporary challenges (Alvén 2017; Barton and Levstik 2004; R. W. Evans 2004; Nolgård 2023; Nygren 2011). One important aspect of human societies that will be present in every history classroom is that of gender relations. Applying a gender perspective on the past, young pupils will find ample opportunities to reflect also on their own lives and experiences. Unsurprisingly, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2023) argues that contemporary ideas and practices about love, sexuality, and relationships between women and men can be understood through historical perspectives. By this, they mean that this perspective can be seen as essential due to its ability to visualise how gender norms have changed over the centuries, and how they can be changed. According to Raewyn W. Connell and Rebecca Pearse (2014), social structures condition everyday life. At the same time, they are brought into practice as social structures by human beings and are temporarily situated; hence, they can be changed. Therefore, structure and change should not be seen as dichotomies, but as integrated parts of social life.

When pupils study history in school, they may engage with different discourses about gender, sexuality, and relationships in different time periods. These discourses have different meanings in the 21st-century classroom. School as an institution is a place where sexual and gender identities are formed and developed. Year 4 of the Swedish primary school (10–11-year-olds) is the first time that pupils encounter history as an independent school subject. For this age group, the history subject has a national focus, covering the lives of women and men during the medieval and early-modern periods (Persson 2017; Sandberg 2018; Stymne 2017). According to guidelines regulating schools in Sweden, school education should strive for gender equality and to counteract gender patterns that in various ways limit pupils in their learning and development in life (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022:6; Education Act 2010:800). Thus, there is an expectation that schools should nurture informed, critical, and reflexive citizens. Then how is this done in a primary school history classroom?

The aim of this article is to reflect upon and contribute to a discussion about how teaching and learning about gender norms, equality, and injustice can be structured in a time of postfeminism. Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill write that, according to ideologies of postfeminism: '"differences" are recognized only to be emptied of their history, context, and effectivity' (2022, 5). They argue that discourses in a postfeminist society signal that society has 'developed' and is no longer limited to its 'historical power relations', and is a place where people should focus on their own psychology and mindset, rather than working for social transformation (Orgad and Gill 2022, 5). In these discourses, feminism becomes obvious and important, yet it is understood as something psychological and individual, with autonomy, choice, and empowerment being central components of the term. In this article, we examine history education and how teachers and pupils talk about gendered work, gendered subject positions, and gendered societal hierarchies in the past:

- How are historical and contemporary gendered positions negotiated in primary school history education?
- How are different meanings of injustice constructed in relation to gender in primary school history education?

Material and methods

This article is based on observations of history lessons in a fourth-grade classroom at a primary school, situated on the outskirts of a medium-sized Swedish town. The empirical materials consist of ten audio-recorded lessons of 45–75 minutes each, in which one teacher and 19 pupils were observed during one semester in 2020. The focus is on how gender norms are expressed in the conversation between teacher and pupils when they are actively engaged in history, and specifically the period of the Middle Ages; the Middle Ages make up an important part of the curriculum in year four and therefore were seen as an interesting case to study. In a Swedish primary school context, Middle Ages will be primarily about Sweden but there are also brief references to Norwegian and Danish history, thus framing it within a broader Nordic context.[1] Observations were audio-recorded and transcribed using an observation schedule designed to keep track of different activities in a transparent way. This process also facilitated the identification of speakers, who said what during the lessons. In addition, field notes helped provide a record of the most vivid impressions during and after each lesson.

The empirical material was collected as part of Pontus Larsen's dissertation project, which underwent an ethical review by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in 2020. This study aimed to understand the meaning-making processes of pupils in their social studies education, while also adhering to the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for research ethics (Swedish Research Council 2017). All pupils were informed verbally and in writing about the study and its purpose. Both the participating teacher and the pupils have provided written consent for participation, along with their legal guardians. Participation was voluntary, and all participants has been given pseudonymised names.

The researcher refrained from offering incentives to prompt specific discussions among pupils or the teacher. Given the scarcity of “naturalistic” classroom studies – those occurring without researcher intervention – in both Swedish and international research, this study has the potential to enhance our understanding of the everyday history education dealing with gender relations. The observed lessons revolve around the history textbook, used in 9 out of 10 sessions along with accompanying workbook or leaflets. While the teacher dominates the transcriptions, he frequently relates to the textbook content, either through reading aloud, explaining terms, or linking the issues to present-day contexts. These contemporary connections often originate from pupil questions or comments, evolving into discussion forums where both the teacher and

[1] The history textbook used in the observed fourth grade defines the Middle Ages as extending from the year 1100 to 1521.

pupils share experiences regarding the subject matter. These discussions are especially significant in our study and have partially served as a selection criterion for our analysis.

The collected material was analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2017), exploring how the teacher and pupils talked about gender norms, gender roles, and gendered positions in both mediaeval society and today's world, and how they navigated between the different time periods of 'now' and 'then'. The choice of thematic analysis is due to the fact that it is flexible and is open to a variety of theoretical perspectives. The material was coded by marking certain parts of the text and writing down initial thoughts and interpretations, and then categorised by looking for interactive situations in the classroom where the pupils and teacher discussed the living conditions of various historical actors and groups. The two main themes we focused on were 'Women as less valuable than men' and 'Women and men equally important'. These themes allowed us to more deeply investigate how certain norms and ideas regarding women and men in the past were both upheld, questioned and negotiated in the contemporary classroom setting. Since we wanted to study how gender norms were constructed in primary school history lessons, we were particularly interested in which subject positions could be found in the studied material and how, and with what, these subject positions were filled with content.

Subjectivity, sexuality, and gender

In feminist poststructuralist thinking, the subject can be seen as decentred, i.e. given a position in a discourse and interpellated by discourses (Mouffe 1992). In the classroom, a number of different subject positions were constructed – among others, the goodwife and the peasant, the nun and the monk, women and men, thralls, children, and the elderly. In this article, we focus mainly on lessons about farm life and the subject positions of the goodwife and the peasant because these lessons focused specifically on gendered positions and gendered work. In other words, the excerpts that were chosen focused specifically on gendered positions in the class room talk. Previous research has shown that school history can be seen as primarily about men, and it is the male experience that tends to be the norm in many history classrooms, for both teachers and pupils (Boyd 2019; Fournier and Wineburg 1997; Levstik and Groth 2002; Ludvigsson 2011; Sandberg 2019). During the overall observed history lessons, there was a strong focus on men, and the men were clearly constructed as the norm and thus also the focus of learning in the classroom. However, in this article we focus on the parts of the lessons where both women and men figure.

Based on the chosen theoretical framework of poststructuralist thinking, we understand gendered categories as socially constructed and dependent on a specific time and space. Therefore, we analyse how gendered subject positions of femininity and masculinity are practised and negotiated in different ways. Third-wave feminist and queer theoretician Judith Butler argues that we 'do' gender performatively, through repeated actions and language use (1990/1999). According to Butler, women and men are often understood as separate identities, both hierarchically ordered, where men and masculinity are understood as superior to women and femininity, and diametrically

opposed, where man and woman complement and desire each other (1990/1999). A marginalised femininity/woman complements a normative masculinity/man. Heterosexuality and its specific gender expressions of femininity and masculinity, thus becomes normative. The theory points out that societies are permeated by power structures, and in Butler's case, there is a particular interest in problematising the intertwined aspects of sex/gender/desire in the hope of creating a more equal society. Chantal Mouffe (1992) argues that it is important to study gender identities from a number of different perspectives, similar to an intersectional analysis. She discusses citizenship as a feminist project, arguing for a new understanding of citizenship in which sexual difference is irrelevant. Instead, we should focus on the social agent as 'the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions corresponding to the multiplicity of social relations in which it is inscribed' (Mouffe 1992, 376). However, contemporary post-feminist discourses can lead to a repackaging of gender norms as empowering and where feminist progress is recognised, but where contemporary patriarchal structures are neglected (McRobbie 2004). According to this postfeministic view and neoliberal ideology, women must turn inwards and 'work on themselves' in order to deal with injustice in a private, individualised, and psychologised way. In this postfeminist way of thinking, it is women's psychological blockages in the form of lack of self-esteem that hold them back in society, not societal structures (Orgad and Gill 2022). Postfeminism is used in this analysis to study how the teacher and pupils talked about women and men in relation to societal and legal rights. When we now turn to the classroom talks, we do so with Butler's idea of sex/gender/desire as socially and temporally created, as influenced by different subject positions, and that classroom talk must be contextualised by a time when post-feminist discourses have had a major impact.

Previous research

How teachers teach about women in the social studies classroom, or how pupils interact or respond to a school subject that includes women (Crocco 2008, 2018; Levstik and Groth 2002; Watson-Canning 2020), is understudied. There is a limited, yet expanding, collection of studies examining the concept of gender and how heterosexuality is viewed as the norm in social studies (Crocco 2001, 2008; Loutzenheiser 2006). According to these studies, heterosexuality is presented as the normal and standard form of sexual relationship, both in the explicit and the more implicit hidden curriculum (Mayo 2017), and teachers who try to challenge traditional gender norms in the classroom are met with resistance from pupils (Levstik and Groth 2002; Watson-Canning 2020).

On the assumption that history education textbooks are important in and for the teaching and learning of the school subject of history, we discuss some important work in relation to history education and gender norms. Various studies have shown that women are underrepresented in Swedish history and social studies textbooks (Gustafsson 2017; SOU 2010:10), and international studies have come to the same conclusion. These studies have shown that women and men are not even close to

numerically equal, whether in text or illustrations (Frederickson 2004; Schoeman 2009). Women (Frederickson 2004; Schoeman 2009) and men (Osler 1994; SOU 2010:10) have been portrayed in accordance with traditional gender norms. History about women is often conveyed through a type of supplementary history, being given space in a separate section or a fact box outside of the dominant political narrative (Crocco 2018; Scott 1986; SOU 2010:10). Changing the content of school history textbooks, and the masculine norm within them, will require more than simply including the perspectives of women (Boyd 2019; Crocco 2001) or other marginalised groups.

At the same time, previous research has shown that children tend to see history as fact and textbooks as presenting the truth (Ashby, Gordon, and Lee 2005). Gender as a category of historical analysis, such as Joan W. Scott (1986) proposes, is rarely used in textbooks, nor does it seem that a more intersectional perspective – with a focus on class, race, and other identities – has found its way into the narratives of history or social studies textbooks (Pollock and Brunet 2018). Fredrik Alvén (2021) writes about Swedish adolescents' views on equality from the perspective of history consciousness. He argues that girls (more than boys) tend to see women in the past as victims; boys, on the other hand, seem to worry about becoming victims in the future. We can see that the history education observed in this study is centred around the teacher, the textbook, and the pupils. It also reveals that the textbook is important for the structure and content of the history education. In the analysis we will see that education both relies on the textbook and takes paths away from it.

Differences and injustices as discourses related to gender and the past

In our analysis of the teacher's and pupils' talk in their history class, we can conclude that the Middle Ages are constructed as a time and place where women and men had distinct roles and tasks on the farm. In the teaching, the man is constructed as *the* peasant, while the woman was something else (mainly a goodwife or wife) (cf. Stymne 2017, 181). The peasant man is described as someone who ploughed and harrowed the fields in order to ultimately harvest crops, depicting an outdoor life of activity and labour. The peasant woman, on the other hand, is mainly portrayed in the context of the household. This is described in the Swedish Government Official Report *Women, Men, and Gender Equality in Educational Material in History* by Ann-Sofie Ohlander (SOU 2010:10). One pupil summarises the peasant women's tasks: they [goodwives] 'milked, baked bread, made cheese, cooked food, brewed beer, made clothes from linen and wool, churned butter [...]' (Lesson 5). Through the instructional language (women 'churning butter' and men 'ploughing fields'), pupils are provided with language to think about gendered divisions of labour. In the textbook, glossary terms are presented, which the teacher introduces during the teaching. However, unlike Ohlander's (SOU 2010:10) description in her textbook analysis, the woman's tasks are not presented as subordinate to the man's: what women did at home required specific knowledge – knowledge that men did not possess and, as a result, men could not perform those tasks.

This fact made the goodwife 'as important as the householder' (Lesson 3). Thus, within the sphere of domestic work, the woman is constructed as indispensable and as an expert, gaining her value through her expertise. At the same time, this significance contributes to a natural separation of women and men, as well as femininity and masculinity, whereby women's work on the farm and femininity are constructed as an important complement to the masculine norm and the peasant man. By forming a unit, the functional farm, constructions of an idealised image of heterosexual marriage are taking form during this history education.

However, in the observed teaching, gender-based injustices are discussed in relation to the distribution of resources and the law, particularly regarding inheritance rights. In the teaching, there is a discourse about men during the mediaeval period as holding authority over women since men were accustomed to 'governing and controlling' (Lesson 3). The teaching emphasises that daughters inherited less than their brothers and that a girl would never have the opportunity to utilise her share of the inheritance because, in practical terms, it would end up with the 'man who had authority over her' (Lesson 3). Through the lessons, it becomes clear that women during this historical period lacked legal rights and occupied a lower status than men in social, economic, and religious spheres and that these conditions would not change until several hundred years into the future. Pupils were encouraged to identify injustices prevalent in mediaeval society, all of which are more or less tied to gender disparities and women's marginalised role, as well as their lack of autonomy.

Due to the highlighting of women in what could be described as a discourse of injustice, the result is that the pupils in the classroom largely engage with historical female figures in relation to, and in discussion of, past inequalities and discrimination. The subject position of 'the married woman during the mediaeval period' thus holds two entirely different positions: invaluable to man, family, and estate, yet simultaneously assigned a marginalised and inferior position in mediaeval society. Pupils learn that it was only when the husband died that a woman could 'take control of her life' and engage in activities typically considered masculine, such as leading work on the estate. The teacher reads to the pupils: '...it was difficult to be a lone woman during the mediaeval period, a time when men were accustomed to governing and controlling. Therefore, widows used to remarry as soon as possible' (Lesson 3). The actual agency of widows in a patriarchal mediaeval world is not made entirely clear, and this quote can be interpreted in two ways: either as the widow choosing to remarry or as her being compelled to do so due to structural conditions. Therefore, the subject position of the woman during the mediaeval period possesses a somewhat articulatory unstable discourse structure (Mouffe 1992), where the identity is partially opened up to new meanings by acknowledging that a mediaeval woman could also be a widow and thus have more control over her life and even lead the work on the farm. The subject position of the widow could also be seen as a counter discourse to the (married) goodwife, and the discourse about the woman can be disrupted or nuanced through the widow.

In the next section, the classroom observations described above will be analysed in more detail. We demonstrate how the teacher and pupils discuss the presumed

'differences' between women and men (which are mentioned in their textbook but are not explained), and how these distinct subjects are constructed as having lived their lives on the mediaeval farm. In other words, we highlight various discourse formations about *why* the lives of women and men diverged during the mediaeval period and *how* agency and choice is discussed in the classroom by pupils and teacher.

Explaining differences and injustices: beyond and through gender

Biological difference

The pupils struggled to reconcile the dual position of women as important yet simultaneously inferior to men. They tended to explain the gendered division of labour on the farm through biology, wherein women are physically weaker than men:

> *Sara: Um, I think it's like this, that, well, the guys are stronger than girls and the girls were weaker and so, like, the girls got to do the lighter job and the guys, because, and the guys got to do the harder job because they were the strongest. I think so.*
>
> *Teacher: Okay, okay.*
>
> *Sara: Cooking and, it's easy to do. Like, you can just throw a fish on/*
>
> *Teacher: Have you ever eaten my food? No! You should be very grateful of that! […]: so no, cooking isn't all easy. [Pupils say 'yes' unanimously]*
>
> *Rob: It is for me!*
>
> *Teacher: I don't think we should rank this, because, uh, I don't think we should rank it, we shouldn't say that one is tougher than the other, or anything like that.*
>
> (Lesson 5)

According to such a division of labour, the pupils constructed femininely coded tasks, like cooking, as being so simple that they could be performed by anyone and that girls were assigned the easier tasks because they were weaker than the boys. The teacher explains that cooking is not at all 'easy' and emphasises that pupils should not rank the different tasks by saying 'one is tougher than the other'. The meanings of the words undergo a semantic shift whereby lighter jobs become understood as easier jobs. Despite the teacher's repeated attempts to discourage pupils from ranking women's and men's tasks – in other words, that churning butter is just as valuable as ploughing a field – a value hierarchy was reproduced in the pupils' speech, where masculine-coded activities were articulated as more valuable than feminine-coded ones. In this way, the pupils created a counter-discourse to the teacher's. The teacher thus found himself in a challenging situation where he tried to steer the conversation away from value and the notion that women exclusively engaged in 'easy' tasks by the stove. A consequence is that he had to overcompensate by emphasising the image of women being significant in mediaeval times.

It became evident that the teacher was dissatisfied with Sara's and Rob's biological explanation model regarding why men and women had separate tasks. This prompted

him to create space for alternative explanations from other pupils. When asked, Richard, another pupil, responded: 'It was because the boys had most of these outdoor tasks when they got older, they, like, girls were often indoors when they were older and helped with the house while the boys were outdoors taking care of the farm', and here the teacher enthusiastically exclaimed:

> *Teacher: Precisely! This, this right here. Now you all get to listen! This is the school of the Middle Ages. So, the men take care of things outdoors, take care of, well, what should we say, take care of the farming work, with ploughing and so on, while the woman takes care of the home. Why the woman takes care of the home and the man is out there, we can have different opinions about, but that's how it was! […] But this is their schooling, because when they become adults, around 10, 11 years old, they are supposed to go out and work on their own.*
>
> (Lesson 5)

Through the discourses of gendered tasks in the past, gender norms become fixed: girls and boys had different roles within the home, and these roles were articulated in relation to their adult counterparts, the woman/mother and the man/father. The teacher emphasised that the fact that women and men had different tasks during the Nordic mediaeval period comes with an implicit assumption that 'we' are likely to see this as negative – something that, today, we might have 'different opinions about', but the pupils, or today's society, need to accept that because of the historical truth of it. The teacher argued that, during the mediaeval period, it was not seen as negative that women and men had different tasks – it was simply a part of their life and education: they were trained to be a peasant or a goodwife. The teacher strove to convey historical 'facts' and emphasised that the pupils should not hierarchise the gender norms of the past: while the norms certainly *were* different back then, the distinction of good and bad arises only from the perspective of our contemporary eyes.

The teacher's explanatory model of the 'mediaeval school' could be seen as a counter-discourse to the pupils' biological explanation, with a performative possibility. The mediaeval school could work as an example of how gender is done though repetition: how girls learn and are expected to become women and work indoors, and boys learn and are expected to become men and work outdoors. However, in response to why the mediaeval division of labour was organised according to a gendered logic, the teacher's more social constructivist explanation was pushed into the background. Instead, both the pupils and the teacher inadvertently reproduced the discourse about women's and men's 'natures'. Missing a day in the (gender) school of the Middle Ages had significant consequences. The teacher further explained that, if a boy missed his education, he would not be able to provide food for his family, or if a girl did not learn to sew, she would not be able to make her husband a warm jumper:

> *Teacher: As we said, during the mediaeval period, boys helped outdoors and girls helped in the home. For example, if a girl were to weave, and someone says 'look carefully now!' [The teacher makes a funny sound and looks out the window] and she runs out to the toilet bush ten times like this, right, then she misses it, and later, when she gets married and moves, 'Oh, I need a*

> *jumper,' says the man like this. 'I was sick when I was supposed to learn how to sew...', and so she can't do it. For example, if you need to sow [seeds] and don't know how to, then you won't have any food.*
>
> (Lesson 5)

Thus, mastering the art of conforming to one's gender becomes a matter of life and death in the teacher's discourse; the woman and the man could not manage without each other's expertise. The heterosexual matrix, in the sense that there is a clear division between women and men and that this order is hierarchically arranged (Butler 1990/1999), was enacted in the classroom in a multifaceted way. The teacher attempted to provide the pupils with an historical explanation for why work was gender-divided during the mediaeval era. The woman and the man were constructed as a cohesive unit – consisting of contrasting yet complementary roles (Butler 1990/1999).

Choosing or (not) knowing better

Ideals and positions associated with femininity and masculinity can continue to change and translate between time and space, from the past to today. In the context of the teacher having to overcompensate for the undervaluation of historical women's work he argues that cooking is not easy. One pupil asked why the teacher did not just follow a recipe if he found it that difficult. The teacher replied:

> *Teacher: I could have done that! I certainly could have done that, but now the question is also this: I don't live in the Middle Ages, so I'm naturally lazy and I cook what I can and what I have time for. And I don't like to cook. My wife likes to cook. And my children have learned to like cooking too, thanks to me. They don't want Swedish Falu sausages. They cook very well, so I don't have to cook anymore. That's really good! So there was a finesse to cooking Falu-sausage three times a week!*
>
> (Lesson 5)

In the teacher's speech, he positions himself as 'lazy by nature', but in a position to choose whether he wants to cook or not. Through the teacher's example, the phenomenon of the gendered division of labour in the Middle Ages is reproduced directly in the present. Furthermore, contemporary gendered tasks within the home are neutralised by the teacher's speech about the construction of his wife and children as enjoying the work of cooking. Whereas it is presented as a structural phenomenon in the Middle Ages that girls and boys were educated in the mediaeval school to become women and men, today's gendered work is constructed as a 'choice', something you can decide based on whether you enjoy cooking or not. Thus, in the teaching, the modern human being is constructed as a person who has the power to choose their own path through life, through their own choices and actions. Mediaeval humans, and women in particular, are in some ways portrayed as the opposite of today's subjects. Namely, they were given no choice within a fixed and unchanging world. By contrast, today's gendered practices are understood through a discourse of freedom of choice and, as a result, gender no longer seems to be a deadly serious issue.

When the teacher and pupils discussed the Middle Ages, a negotiation took place about how mediaeval women should have dealt with unequal laws and social structures. Some pupils created a counter-discourse to the idea of the mediaeval woman as powerless. Olivia, for example, thought that it was unfair that a girl inherited less than her brothers and that large parts of her inheritance went to a man, and Joseph came up with a suggestion for how the woman could have solved the problem:

> *Joseph: Wouldn't it be possible for the woman in the house to kill all the boys? And so [inaudible]*
>
> *Teacher: No, because then you would be convicted of murder in court.*
>
> *Joseph: Yes, but what if you do it unnoticed? If you poison them?*
>
> *Teacher: I don't think so...*
>
> *[Pupils talk among themselves]*
>
> *Teacher: That's really stupid, because if the whole family dies, then you surely have some uncle somewhere, or a maternal uncle or something, or a third cousin or…*
>
> (Lesson 5)

This dialogue can be interpreted as the pupils understanding that women lived under different legal circumstances than men, but that the pupils did not really understand why women did not resist these laws. This can be seen as in line with today's neoliberal discourse about taking responsibility for one's life situation and women as 'agents' who can freely choose between different paths in life according to principles of rationality and agency (Orgad and Gill 2022). It is also in line with neoliberalism and postfeminism, where traditional gender roles are (highly) valued and constructed as 'freely chosen'. While the pupils ascribed individual agency to the mediaeval woman and an opportunity to literally break free from oppression, the teacher tried to challenge the pupils' views by pointing out some of the structural conditions surrounding women.

In some cases, both pupils and teacher constructed the mediaeval subject as trapped within a structure, while, simultaneously, mediaeval women were attributed significant responsibility for reshaping their life conditions. Another way for the pupils and teacher to explain the life conditions of mediaeval people and why their society was less egalitarian than the comparatively egalitarian life conditions of the present was to depict mediaeval individuals as less knowledgeable than 'us': they simply did not understand very well. At one point, the pupils were sitting in the classroom and were expected to answer study questions about the mediaeval church. The pupils were asked to explain why there were two entrances to the church building. Pupil Olivia turned to the teacher and said: 'You can't explain why there were two entrances, because there was no reason'. The study questions explain that women were required to use the northern gate, while men were allowed to use the southern gate because it was closer to the holy city of Jerusalem. The pupil wondered why the women had to go through the northern gate. The teacher pointed to the leaflet and said that there were many reasons and then left the pupil for a while to circulate in the classroom. When he came back, the same pupil said: 'I still don't understand? Why...'

Teacher: Hm? Then we check [reading from the study questions] 'There were often two doors into the church. The northern door was used by women because it was not considered very esteemed' [Swedish: inte så fint]/

Olivia: But why wasn't it considered esteemed?

Teacher: Ah, I see your point!

Olivia: Yes...

Teacher: Actually, I don't know. Because the south was closer...

Olivia: Jerusalem... and why...

Teacher: Ah, and it was nice...

Olivia: And girls can't go there? Because they're not esteemed?

Teacher: Yes, kind of, so this is the Middle Ages! They didn't understand that much.

Olivia: [inaudible]

Teacher: You could say that, but then, now we're relatively equal...

(Lesson 1)

In this example, Olivia wondered why girls were not considered *esteemed* in the Middle Ages. Through the pupils' speech, *inte så fin* [not so esteemed] is transferred from 'the gate in the north' to 'girls'. When the teacher was confronted with her question about girls not being esteemed, it seemed important for him to point out that they were talking about the Middle Ages and not today: 'they' simply did not understand any better, but 'we' understand better today and therefore we are now 'relatively equal'. Again, this interaction represents a convergence of two different positions, where the pupils were questioning the teacher from a more contemporary perspective. It seemed to be important to the teacher that the (girl) pupil was not constructed as 'not esteemed enough', leading him to shift from his historical position to a more presentism- and value-based standpoint. At the same time, this dichotomy between past and present leads to the idea of the present as advanced and a time in which we coexist in a state of relative equality, a position in line with the postfeminist perspective of society as relatively equal.

The construction of gendered tasks could be seen as something that works in different ways depending on a gendered temporality. If a woman or man lived in the past, they had to undertake gendered tasks according to the gendered work division on the farm, where goodwives, daughters and girls had certain roles and peasants and sons had others. If the gender was not done correctly, they could die. This gendered way of life was not a choice, but as in line with the teaching of the mediaeval school. On the other hand, in the present, gender and gendered tasks are constructed as a choice, the teacher did not cook food at home because his wife 'wanted to'. In other words, this example functions as an example of the (illusion of) equal and neoliberal society, where choice is the only way to live life (Orgad and Gill 2022).

Conclusion

In this study, we have identified a number of different subject positions that a teacher and pupils constructed during the teaching of history. We have analysed the 'goodwife' and the 'peasant', and how these interact with constructions of gender. The aim of these constructions seems to be to normalise and substantiate equal value between women and men through a gendered division of labour, under which the woman and the man do different things but are equally important. In such a discourse, heterosexuality becomes an important organising principle and the way in which mediaeval, and perhaps even contemporary, society is organised. The notion that women and men possess certain skillsets and perform different tasks based on their sex was naturalised through the language used by the pupils, who emphasised biological and traditional explanations for gender differences. A consequence of this was that the teacher had to overcompensate the importance of women, both in mediaeval times and today. This, in turn, leads to a construction of continuity among women and men, not only as complementary, but as entirely dependent on each other. From this perspective, the studied history education is both a product of heteronormative beliefs and tends to reproduce heteronormativity by constructing a gender dichotomy that is complementary in its nature.

As women are highlighted within a discourse of injustice, focusing on their lack of autonomy in a patriarchal mediaeval world, it becomes evident that the history classroom, on the other hand, is situated within the modern regime of a postfeminist discourse (cf. Levstik and Groth 2002). Despite the teacher emphasising the structures of the past, pupils tended to attribute personal responsibility for the challenging living conditions of mediaeval women, while the teacher legitimised contemporary societal gender differences as choices made by individuals (A. Evans and Riley 2013).

According to recent additions to the Swedish curriculum, the teaching of history in primary schools should provide a historical perspective in order to give pupils tools for understanding and changing their own time (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022:180). Although the 'present' exists in teachers' and pupils' talk about the past, it seems difficult to use this dimension as a pedagogical site for discussing and analysing today's gender norms in a critical way. Instead, the present risks becoming a place and time for acknowledging equality and a site where we are free to do whatever we choose. When pupils attempted to attribute agency to the mediaeval woman, they reproduced a modern discourse of free choice that clashed with the structural view on a relatively immovable past that was presented by the textbook and the teacher, a past where individuals had limited possibilities for choice. Because change did not seem to be possible in the distant past, there is a tendency to construct a success story, giving rise to the notion that equality is a phenomenon that happens by itself, only later (Barton 2012).

However, it can be seen that the subject position of the woman in the Middle Ages was given new meanings by the fact that the mediaeval woman could also be a widow and thus have the opportunity to make more decisions about her own life. Even though there is potential for this type of discussion, and to develop a deeper understanding of

the fact that women, today as well as in the past, are a heterogeneous group, the subject woman is (often) constructed as a victim of the patriarchal structure of the Middle Ages. However, our study shows that the observed pupils were interested in both understanding and discussing social and political inequality and understood, albeit in a narrow sense, that active subjects are needed to create (historical) change. This is a discussion that demands a lot from the teacher when it comes to both content knowledge and norm-critical thinking. The second feminist wave (Sikka 2022), during which women should be good mothers and be valued for their differences from men, resonates between the walls of history education. Third-wave feminism does make itself heard when the teacher talks about the performative making of genders, but is otherwise lost in the history subject.

This article has investigated how issues of gender are dealt with in history education, i.e. how history education takes on how gender norms have changed over time and how gender has been produced and reproduced through various societal institutions. We have shown that in the classroom studied, teaching and learning about life on the farm during the Middle Ages was connected to the subject positions of women, men, girls, and boys. While this teaching made the work of both women and men visible, it still risks reproducing a belief in 'the two sexes' and an interlocking of what these two sexes can and cannot do. This further risks reproducing the construction of the male sex as 'better' and 'stronger'. Articulating the subject positions may be necessary in a history subject that is otherwise largely structured as a political narrative. Without a gendered language in the instructional language, the classroom risks further losing its potential as an important platform for conversations about gender norms, living conditions, and equality between people.

With this study, we have demonstrated both the opportunities and challenges of history teaching. A key challenge is that teachers on the one hand must try to explain gender positions of the past, i.e. be true to people of the past, at the same time helping the pupils to interpret and negotiate gender positions in the present. Because today's norms will not fully resemble those of the past, certain tensions are unavoidable in the classroom. The comparison between the present and the past risks leading to the postfeminist conclusion that today's society is already completely equal, and that remaining challenges can be handled by individual choices. Taken together, this shows the heavy responsibility that rests on history teachers and teaching materials when they engage in these types of complex historical reasoning with younger pupils. While challenging, the great potential is that history education provides opportunities for pupils to negotiate their understanding of gendered positions and agency in past and present, something that the pupils clearly find engaging.

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