



What do you want to take with you when you grow up? Crying or courage?

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Scandinavian countries are consistently cited as the most gender equal in the world and their students among the best performing in global rankings. From the high representation of women in their parliaments, to the provision of free childcare, extended maternity and paternity leave, and the constant reference to Finland as one of the world's top performing nations in education, despite children not starting formal schooling until the age of seven, other countries are left wondering how to play catch up.

A 2017 report by the World Economic Forum places Iceland, Norway and Finland at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index, with Sweden in fifth place. New Zealand is in ninth place, with Australia languishing in 35th place behind the Philippines, Canada, South Africa and many European countries. Clearly there are multiple fronts on which action could be taken to improve gender equality, particularly in Australia, but one interesting program in Iceland, the world's gender equality leader, has recently come to attention: the Hjalli single-sex teaching model in nursery and primary schools in which girls and boys are caught separately for most of the day in order to counter stereotyped gender roles and behaviour.

The uniform is identical for boys and girls, and each practises behaviours usually associated with the other sex. As Saphora Smith writes for *NBC News*, "girls are taught to strengthen their courage and self-confidence by running barefoot in the snow without screaming" and to be direct about they feel. As Smith witnessed during her visit to a Hjalli nursery, girls having trouble climbing trees and walking along walls are ignored unless it is an actual emergency. Crying and sulking are also discouraged, she writes, "and weeping girls are promptly told to stop".

Teacher Kristín Cardew told Smith that while this may seem "a bit ruthless", the belief that crying is the "extreme weakness" of girls is a key Hjalli theory. By not stopping girls crying, explains Cardew, we are making women weaker. Fellow teacher Edda Huld agrees, telling Saphora Smith:

What I always say to them is, "What do you want to take with you when you grow up? Do you want to fill your backpacks with crying and moodiness? Or courage, being able to speak for yourself and independence?"

Meanwhile, boys take part in "structured gender compensation work" about once a week, depending on how often the teacher believes the boys need encouragement to strengthen their empathy and caring natures. During these sessions, boys practise babysitting by caring for gender-neutral dolls, or play at hairdressing by styling another boy's hair. The dolls are only for the boys, says teacher Kristín Cardew, because "girls don't need to practise this".

While the boys enjoy the compensation activities so much that Cardew says they now consider it a "treat", she also told Saphora Smith that the boys did sometimes "fall out of line", engaging in pushing and shoving. Hjalli theory espouses that just as crying is the extreme weakness of girls, kicking and hurting is the extreme weakness of boys.

Founded by feminist Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir in 1989, eight per cent of children in Iceland attend a Hjalli nursery. Even by Iceland's standards, the Hjalli model is considered progressive but Ólafsdóttir argues that "the best way to get close to equality is to admit the differences". If girls and boys only practise stereotypical behaviour, she told Smith, they risk slipping into the "blue" and "pink haze". Furthermore, Ólafsdóttir believes, encouraging girls to be girly risks tipping their sensitive and caring natures into self-pity and victimhood. Similarly, encouraging boys to be stereotypically male can tip their strength and power into aggression and violence.

By teaching in a single-sex environment, argues Ólafsdóttir, the “girly” gender stereotype goes away, as does the gender stereotype for boys who are no longer regarded “girly” or “sissy” if they want to take part in activities considered stereotypically female.

As reported by Smith, a University of Reykjavik study commissioned by Ólafsdóttir found that Hjalli primary school students demonstrate “increased gender equality awareness” compared with students at co-educational public schools and that a higher percentage of Hjalli students think that parents should be equally responsible for family and home duties.

The Hjalli model is not without its critics though. Some Icelandic academics argue that the single-sex model is not unique in considering gender issues, with well-run co-educational nursery schools effectively tackling gender stereotyping, while co-educational nursery schools which emphasise independent play also turn out students with strong imaginations and problem-solving skills.

Nevertheless, belief in the Hjalli method is strong amongst its supporters, including women who have benefited themselves from its distinctive education model. Bara Ragnhildardóttir, a financial engineer and project manager, believes that attending a Hjalli nursery school helped equip her for life and steered her towards a career in a non-stereotypical field. Now that her own daughter is attending a Hjalli nursery school, she said it is easier to identify the school’s positive impact on the education of girls.

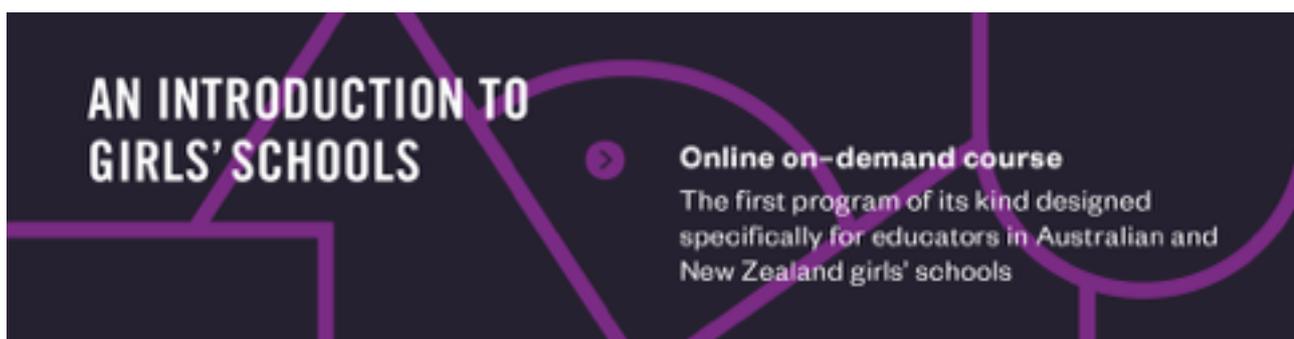
Recently, Ragnhildardóttir’s daughter declined the offer of an audiotape to help her fall asleep, saying, “No, Mommy, I’m courageous and strong and I don’t need to listen to anything”.

Ragnhildardóttir says her daughter wants to be a policewoman, not a policeman. “It’s such a powerful message,” she told Saphora Smith, “teaching her that she is a leader, that she is strong and to love herself, that she has a voice”.

References

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