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# Chapter 16

## Controversies and Challenges in the History of Gender Discourses in Education in Finland



Elina Lahelma

**Abstract** Finland is famous for high scores in PISA league tables as well as for high scores in gender equality indexes. Sometimes these two championships seem to be competing. Since the first PISA tests, an old concern for boys' underachievement has received new emphasis and the gender gap in results has detracted from national pride in the excellent overall results, as well as hiding a growing social and ethnic gap. In the 1980s concern about underachieving boys in Finland was matched by efforts towards gender equality in education following global declarations and resolutions of gender equality after the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979. Supported by the first equality projects, gender research in Finnish education took the first steps in the late 1980s. Since that time, gender researchers in education have collaborated in carrying out gender equality administration and projects. A constant task has been to challenge the simple juxtaposition of girls and boys that is sometimes evident in the concerns about boys' achievements. In this chapter, I describe and analyse the interlinked histories of gender equality work, feminist studies in education, and the boy discourse, with reflections on changes and sustainability in Finnish education policies. The bodies of data include documents associated with gender equality projects, national PISA reports, reviews of research articles and PhD studies that draw on feminist research in education. I also use my own experience as an actor in the field since the early 1980s.

In Spring 2020, Finland showed itself to be a well organised welfare country with strong women when its government, made up of five parties all with female leaders, developed comparatively successful strategies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty years earlier Finland had been celebrated as a welfare country with equal and high standards of education, following the results of the first PISA tests. A quote from the PISA report of the time provides justification for Finland's pride:

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In the light of PISA, the Finnish educational structure appears in international comparison as high standard and equal. Good learning results mean a steady background for further studies of young people and a promising future for the whole nation, the cultural originality, economic success and social justice of which are built on the know-how and willingness to study of each citizen. Finland's results in PISA clearly indicate that in an educational system it is possible to unite high standards and equality.<sup>1</sup>

This totally unexpected triumph silenced the plans of some right-wing political groups to follow the example of Sweden towards more choices and privatisation in education.<sup>2</sup> However, in the same report gender differences in achievement that were larger than in other OECD countries, were regarded as a problem, being described as "... a clear threat in guaranteeing for both genders equal educational opportunities".<sup>3</sup> This concern detracted from celebration of Finland's excellent results, because it was Finnish girls who were world champions.

The concern for boys was older, and so was gender equality politics with a focus mainly on girls. The constant flow of declarations and resolutions concerning gender equality started with United Nations' Convention 1979.<sup>4</sup> The recommendations forced even reluctant national politicians to take steps towards legislation and administrative practices, and to provide resources for supporting gender equality in the field of education as well. By 2010 almost all European countries had, or planned to have, gender equality policies in education. The primary aim has been to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Other objectives include enhancing the representation of women in decision-making bodies, countering gender-based attainment patterns and combating gender-based harassment in schools.<sup>5</sup>

In Finland, the same period witnessed, in collaboration with the equality discourse, the growth of feminist studies in education into a growing and respected field of educational research.<sup>6</sup> A constant task for both research and equality politics has been troubling the simple juxtaposition of girls and boys that sometimes is visible in the worries about boys' achievements. Ambivalence between 'equality discourse' and 'boy discourse' has prevailed in the educational politics and policies of Finland.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I will describe and analyse the interlinked histories of gender equality work, feminist studies in education, and the boy discourse, while reflecting on the changes in Finnish educational policies. I will reuse and discuss my earlier articles that drew from various bodies of data: documents associated with gender equality projects, national PISA reports, reviews of research articles and PhD studies that draw on feminist research in education.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, I will use my own reflections because since the 1980s, I have acted as a gender researcher and an active agent in equality projects in education as well as in political and media discussions concerning the boy discourse. Accordingly, I will use the method of critical discourse analysis, but also auto-ethnography, using my personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices.<sup>9</sup>

## Long-Term Persistence of Gendered Patterns

Education has a history of strict gender and class segregation. At the beginning of organised schooling, education everywhere was a privilege of upper-class boys. The question of gender equality in education has been a question of girls' right to participate, as articulated by the pioneers of the women's movement in the 1700s. Globally speaking, this aim has not been fully achieved, and still is the goal of national and international recommendations, action plans and developmental programmes. In most European countries, girls' rights to go to school are realised and European girls and women generally outnumber boys in higher and further education.

In Finland, girls have achieved well in education whenever they have had the possibility to participate. Women were a majority in academic upper secondary schools already in the 1940s and in universities in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> The comprehensive school reform that started 1972 provided practically the same curriculum for all children aged 7–15. The idea of gender-neutrality in the documents suggested a political willingness to promote equality. Following the international resolutions, obligation to promote gender equality in schools was included in school legislation in the 1980s, and the law of equal opportunities gave special responsibilities for school authorities. However, processes, contents and outcomes of schooling remained gendered in numerous ways.<sup>11</sup> In spite of decades of work towards gender equality, stubborn continuities remain.

Continuing structural patterns include subject choices with gendered effects. Early choices between textile and technical craft, with impact on the division of material cultures into technical and aesthetic, has been difficult to challenge.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, streaming conducted in maths and foreign languages was given up with legislation by early 1980s when it was realised that boys tended to choose lower streams, restraining their possibilities for academic upper secondary education. Gender segregation continues in post-compulsory education with a constant small female majority, 55–60%, in the academic route, and a wide segregation amongst the other half of the cohort that continues in vocational education. With just small changes since the 1980s, 80–90% of students in the technology sector have been male and an even larger share of students in health and social science sector have been female.<sup>13</sup> Without assessment of gender impact, gendered patterns tend to appear unnoticed with reforms. Accordingly, the possibility of parents choosing schools or classes,<sup>14</sup> as well as the possibility of schools to select pupils by emphasising particular subjects and use of various entrance criteria,<sup>15</sup> have brought as a side-effect gender-segregated classes. Gendered choices within academic upper secondary education are persistent as well; girls tend to choose Mathematics and Sciences less than boys, with impact on their future choices. Within the most current reform, these subjects have become more significant for gaining entry into higher education, but there has not been much reflection on the gender impact of this reform.

Taken-for-granted cultural images of girls, boys and gender are repeated in practices and processes of education, for example in text books<sup>16</sup> and teachers' perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Even if open stereotyping is less visible than in the 1980s, schools typically

lack active gender policies for combatting the existing stereotyping that children encounter everywhere outside of schools. It also means that sexual and gender-based harassment or heteronormativity are not actively addressed in schools.<sup>18</sup> When it comes to teacher education, it was possible to become a teacher without any studies concerning gender and equality in the 1980s, and this is still the case thirty years later.<sup>19</sup>

In 2014, some positive changes took place. Firstly, the requirement for writing an equality plan annually, in cooperation of staff and students, was extended to comprehensive schools.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, in the new curriculum framework for comprehensive schools,<sup>21</sup> equality is noted in relation to all subjects, and gender diversity as well as sexual harassment are mentioned for the first time; a discursive change in relation to the framework of 2004.<sup>22</sup> New guiding materials for teachers and teacher education are provided by administration, NGOs and projects. In the conclusion section of this chapter, the impact of such changes will be discussed.

Gender equality is a social and political term that has been actualised in the demands for social change and promoted through political struggle, legislation, research and equality training. I have shown above, that in the field of education, changes towards this aim have been slow. In the following section, I present this work in Finland until the early 2010s.

## History of Gender Equality Work in Education

Faced with the international obligations for gender equality, in 1984 the Ministry of Education founded the Commission of Equal Opportunities in Education (CEOE) in which the author worked as secretary. The 1988 report of CEOE, based on three years of research and development work in experimental schools, included dozens of recommendations pertaining to educational structures and curricula, school textbooks, counselling and teacher education.<sup>23</sup> From the 1990s on, the flow of equality projects in schools and in teacher education has been constant. The projects have repeated aims towards gender equal education and implemented experiments on curricula and practices, provided new materials and improved gender-sensitiveness among teachers and counsellors. Typically, efforts are taken to challenge gender segregation and gender stereotyped processes and contents in education as well as insufficient knowledge about gender in teacher education. By the 2000s, addressing heteronormativity and sexual and gender-based harassment have been included in gender projects, with intersectionality and diversities of gender occurring as usual concepts. Changes, however, tended not to be sustainable.<sup>24</sup>

A 2008 evaluation of CEDAW<sup>25</sup> about the gender situation in Finland was critical concerning education. Concerns were expressed about lack of gender-sensitivity in curricula and teacher training, and teaching that addresses structural and cultural causes of discrimination against women. Following this evaluation, the first Government Report on Gender Equality was given by the Ministry of Social Affairs and

Health,<sup>26</sup> presenting views on future gender equality politics. The main recommendations for education included the task of incorporating goals and actions to promote gender equality in education policy planning and development. The report noted that legislation and plans concerning education, training and research included very few gender equality goals and gender awareness was lacking. Furthermore, gender segregation in education and the labour market has remained especially strong in Finland. The main problems in education, as defined in the report, were the persistence of gender and lacking gender awareness. Gender-based harassment and women in leadership positions were mentioned in other sections of the report, carrying obligations for the educational authorities too.<sup>27</sup>

From the flow of equality work in teacher education, I will note two national projects, supported by the Ministry of Education and Culture, with acronyms TASUKO (2008–2013)<sup>28</sup> and SETSTOP (2018–2019).<sup>29</sup> The ambitious task given to the TASUKO project was to include gender awareness in curricula and practices in all teacher education institutions in Finland. I was invited as a responsible leader, and from the experience of the earlier projects, I was afraid that this would be ‘mission impossible’.<sup>30</sup> The strategy adopted was to organise workshops, research and gender courses in universities in collaboration with committed feminist activists, rather than trying to convince deans and administrators. A web page for teacher educators was provided, but no significant guiding materials. Drawing from joint discussions, gender awareness was defined as consciousness of social and cultural differences, inequalities and otherness, which are built into educational practices but can be changed. The concept includes understanding gender as intertwined with other dimensions of difference, such as ethnicity, age, sexuality, health, local and cultural opportunities.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it was a wide concept and avoided dichotomic and politically laden connotations of the concept of gender equality.

For a few years afterwards, the sustainable impact of TASUKO was analysed. The collaborators evaluated it in relatively positive terms. The project had provided more space for students, teachers and teacher educators for some agency and small steps towards gender-aware teaching. Because researchers were listened in the position of actors in a national project—rather than as feminist academics—it also had some impact on educational politics. However, gender awareness remained the responsibility of those teacher educators who were already committed to it. One step forward was sometimes followed by two steps back. When universities in the 2010s were under pressure for resources, and teacher educators under pressure for time, gender issues often were the first to be sacrificed.<sup>32</sup>

SETSTOP took place a few years after the policy requirements to provide equality plans in comprehensive schools and new emphasis on gender and equity in curriculum had affected the atmosphere in teacher education. The aim of the project, to develop contents for teacher education on gender equality planning and equality work, was now justifiable. Working in the project was research-based, phenomenon oriented and motivated by acute challenges of equality work in education. The focus was in teacher education but by the aid of students, equality work was advanced also in school environments. The list of new, easily available materials is impressive and versatile.<sup>33</sup> SETSTOP defined its mission as follows:

The main aim of this nationwide project is to realise finally our long-term dream to include themes of gender equality and non-discrimination to the curricula of all the levels of teacher education in Finland.... In spite of numerous efforts in the history of the gender equality projects this dream has not yet become true.<sup>34</sup>

Why do the same problems remain, despite decades of active equality work? First of all, gender equality is a controversial issue in other sectors of society as well, and therefore an arena of continuous negotiations and confrontations.<sup>35</sup> Struggle over the concept is an integral part of gender equality policy, and meanings ascribed to equality at any given time reorganise and transform social power relations by defining certain differences as more central for equality than others.<sup>36</sup> Gender projects are regarded as feminist issues that challenge structures and cultures. They often encounter reluctance or indifference on the part of the educational authorities and institutional administrations at the universities. Policy documents tend not to take into account the requirements in equality declarations.<sup>37</sup>

Another constant problem has been the difficult and sensitive concepts around gender. Gender goes beyond your skin. Whenever people start to see how gendered inequalities are built into the practices and processes of teaching and learning, they start to see the same patterns in society—and in their own lives and partnerships. Young people who study to become teachers, for example, are not necessarily willing to change their whole world view. The following reflections of a female teacher educator in a study conducted at the University of Lapland are very familiar in my courses as well, and reported widely in other studies too:

When discussing these themes, it is kind of experienced—the boys experience it—as if it is directed towards them as individuals, and that, kind of, men are being evaluated and criticised, and this is just the traditional, classical expectation. [Sometimes] even girls have stood up [...] to strongly defend men.<sup>38</sup>

The myth of Finland as a country where ‘we are already gender equal’ is an obstacle to long-term, efficient work. There is evidence of Finnish people’s positive attitudes to gender equality as a principle, but studies reveal counteraction and hostility towards it as actual deeds.<sup>39</sup> To proceed as if the categories do not matter because they should not matter would be to fail to show how they continue to ground social existence.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, a gender perspective sometimes means repeating existing hierarchies and essential understandings of gender. Emphasising the difficulties around the concepts is also a problem; sometimes teacher educators do not want to talk about gender because they are afraid of doing it ‘wrong’, and because the theme provokes emotions.<sup>41</sup>

Even if feminist scholars have collaborated in equality projects, perspectives have not always met. Neo-liberal tendencies in market-oriented and project-based gender equality work have been criticised by feminist activists, and queer, anti-racist and postcolonial scholars have argued that gender-equality policies are concerned more with equality between men and women than with multiple dimensions of gender and sexual diversity.<sup>42</sup> However, intersectional analysis that has developed in feminist gender studies has gradually had its impact in equality work. Diversity, non-discrimination and social justice have been paired with gender equality as a goal in

legislation, guiding documents and projects. Whilst this is a most welcome reform, it also means a challenge for gender researchers in education and other activists to keep gender in the agenda<sup>43</sup>: throughout the history of equality work internationally, there is evidence about the tendency to forget gender and focus on other dimensions.

In the following section, emergence of feminist studies in education will be described. Because of sustainable collaboration of gender research and equality work, this section also acts as a bridge to the 'boy discourse' that has constantly troubled gender equality work.

## **Feminist Research in Education, an Ally of Gender Equality Work**

Feminist gender research in education can be defined as research that draws on feminist theorisations and focuses on gendered structures, processes, practices or identities in education, predominantly in intersection with other dimensions of difference and inequalities. It encompasses a myriad of methods and methodologies, but projects share a commitment to feminist ethics and theories. Simply using gender as a category of analyses does not mean that it is feminist, even if it can be a starting point for researchers who are interested in the complex ways gender is constructed and the ways it operates in education.<sup>44</sup> Gender is both an empirical category and a theoretical conceptualisation, and the goal is to achieve greater understandings of social, cultural and educational relations and divisions, while also laying them bare through description.<sup>45</sup> Gender has in early research been analysed as socially constructed,<sup>46</sup> as performative,<sup>47</sup> and as something that we do, challenge, emphasise, ridicule, but cannot escape.<sup>48</sup>

The background is in women's studies that started in the USA and some European countries along with the second wave of the feminist and civil rights movement of the 1960s, affecting both politics and attitudes towards social structures and fields of knowledge. An aim was to criticise the tendencies in human sciences for conclusions drawing on research that is limited to men and boys. Gender and education research flourished in the UK from the 1970s, and had 'a flying start' in Sweden, Norway and Denmark as well.<sup>49</sup> It reached Finland in the late 1980s predominantly through two routes. First, contact with strong Nordic research was influential after one of the tasks given to the CEOE was to write a review on gender and education research in the other Nordic countries.<sup>50</sup> Second, Tuula Gordon, a Finnish scholar who had conducted her PhD and worked with feminist researchers in the sociology of education in London, returned to Finland.

In 1987 we established with Tuula Gordon and other colleagues a national Gender and Education research network related to, and with the resources of, the CEOE. This kind of start gives an example of alliance between the feminist movement, state feminist equality officers and gender researchers which was distinctive to Nordic feminist research. Regular national workshops and seminars were organised, in the

beginning mostly outside the mainstream educational fora. Because of the twofold origins in Nordic and UK research, the network had strong international links from the beginning. Feminist ethnography in education in Finland started in this network. By the early 2000s, Finnish gender and education research had achieved a stable, internationally recognised position in the fields of education, sociology of education and youth research.<sup>51</sup>

In the early gender studies internationally, the focus was typically on girls, often issues of voice (or lack thereof) and of ‘quiet’ girls.<sup>52</sup> Rather than research on girls, Nordic researchers explored the role that schools and other institutions play in social inequalities, focusing on school structures, practices and processes, including gender bias in textbooks, gender differentiation in the curriculum, and gendered practices in the classroom.<sup>53</sup> Whilst starting from gender, feminist researchers in Finland also paid attention to other dimensions of difference. In PhD studies informed by this networking, there are several with focus on gender, but in several others age, ethnicity, class, sexuality or disability<sup>54</sup> have been analysed in intersection with gender. This was when we were not yet familiar with the concept of intersectionality: understanding that oppression operates via multiple categories and lead to different lived experiences.<sup>55</sup>

Post-structuralism was already in the 1990s addressed by Finnish feminist researchers also in the field of education,<sup>56</sup> but during the 2000s neo-material and post-human perspectives achieved a more central position.<sup>57</sup> Theoretical analyses were developed that trouble the position of the researcher, widen the idea of the ethnographic field and problematise the early feminist stance of ‘giving the voice’ to the powerless.<sup>58</sup> Gender is not any more the main concern of feminist researchers. However, the alliance with equality politics has remained and researchers keep on participating in equality projects and act as experts in administration and media. One of the constant joint tasks is in troubling the dichotomic understanding of gender in the ‘boy discourse’.

## **The ‘Boy Discourse’ in Education**

Boy discourse is fed by concerns about boys’ school achievement, attainment and behaviour. It has its background in statistics and achievement tests instituted by restructuring policies, with a neo-liberal focus on standards and competition and a neo-conservative focus on basic skills. Measurable results are regarded as school outcomes, and categories on which comparisons are made are regarded as the essential ones. The discourse overwhelms statistics about more substantial variation within each gender than between genders, as well as findings that boys who have problems are typically working-class boys. It also surpasses statistics concerning the impact of school achievement to further routes and possibilities of men and women.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that girls’ educational achievement is, on average, better than that of boys, has been known for a long time. It has not always been regarded as a problem but as a self-evident gender pattern that does not destabilise the power position of

men in any society.<sup>60</sup> However, since the 1980s, a ‘travelling discourse’<sup>61</sup> because of boys’ poor achievement has run in time and space without a clear view what ‘underachievement’ means in specific contexts. Behind the concern are structural changes in many Western countries, in which direct routes from school to manual work are limited, and the futures of working-class boys have been challenged. Boys from higher socio-economic backgrounds have also experienced difficulties, because more and more girls are applying for the same fields of education with better grades.<sup>62</sup>

In Finland, the first round of discussion on boys’ underachievement started after the first cohort finished comprehensive school in 1982 and the new application system to upper secondary schools provided nationwide statistics. As a planner in the National Board of Education, I did an investigation into the routes to upper secondary education. I was astonished by the finding that girls were accepted into their fields of choice in upper secondary education less often than boys, even if they achieved more highly on average. Yet the media picked the finding concerning boys’ weaker marks. “School oppresses boys!” shouted a title in a professional journal. An equality officer answered: “School betrays girls!” This was a step towards the juxtaposition of girls and boys which has continued during the following decades.<sup>63</sup>

PISA results have given new openings to the boy discourse every three years. Girls’ better results in reading tests are rather universal in European countries, whilst the situation has varied in mathematics and sciences.<sup>64</sup> In almost all tests, gender differences have been larger in Finland than in other OECD countries, even if the results of Finnish boys have been excellent in relation to results in other countries. Social and cultural differences, measured with variables based on socio-economic background, and between students of Finnish and immigrant origin, have been larger than gender differences. After being minor in the first tests, by the 2018 test social differences have been reaching the average of the OECD.<sup>65</sup>

With colleagues, I have analysed how gender difference in reading is presented in Finland’s PISA reports 2000–18, focusing on the first official report of each test.<sup>66</sup> We noticed that statistical tables and comments in texts about gender differences in achievement were presented more often than those that measure social and cultural differences. Moreover, words like ‘worry’, ‘threat’ and ‘need of action’ were used in relation to gender differences, but rarely in relation to other differences. In the reports of the latest tests, the text included some information about variation on gender difference in relation to area and school, but the statistical tables depicted comparisons of gender differences between countries rather than intersections of social or cultural background and gender. We argued that gender is presented as a “super-variable”,<sup>67</sup> that distracts attention from economical and racialised inequalities to boys’ school achievement, thus strengthening and maintaining the gendered discourse of worry.

PISA researchers have presented warnings concerning simplified interpretations from averages,<sup>68</sup> but some media and politicians tend to read the results their own ways. For example, the 2015 PISA report expressed concerns about growing socio-economic and regional inequalities, but the Minister of Education invited researchers to find solutions to the achievement of boys, “this pain point of our educational structure”,<sup>69</sup> resulting to a research review and a report on challenges and solutions to boys’ learning.<sup>70</sup> Interestingly, better practices and processes in education for all

students were suggested in these publications, instead of solutions with a focus only on boys. This is also my general finding concerning several national or international projects that have started with worries about boys' achievements but ended up without any specific ideas of 'pedagogy for boys'.<sup>71</sup> Solutions are not easily found if the starting point is a normative understanding of gender and the belief that all boys (but not girls) have problems in school. Every now and then, however, pedagogic projects with stereotypically male contents and with more men in schools are promoted.<sup>72</sup>

Why is the 'boy discourse' so powerful? Fundamental in this discourse are taken-for-granted assumptions about differences between boys and girls. Arguments of gender differences, for example slower development of boys, are regularly presented in media, also as opinions of some well-known psychiatrists. For example, gender differences in development of brains have lately been suggested as a cause of achievement gaps.<sup>73</sup> Even some important policy documents include understanding of essential gender differences.<sup>74</sup>

'Gender difference' research has a long history. It flourished, especially in psychology, in the USA after the Second World War. A meta-analysis<sup>75</sup> showed that researchers, and especially media, tend to emphasise gender differences that are found in some studies and pay less attention to much stronger evidence from studies in which differences are not found. It was argued that this tendency was motivated by political aims to prove profound gender differences and female inferiority during the era when the Women's movement took its first steps. R.W. Connell<sup>76</sup> suggested back in the 1980s, that without the cultural bias of both writers and readers, we might actually talk about 'sex similarity' research. More recently, some brain researchers have used similar arguments as the critical research in the 1970s: studies where gender differences in brains are found get more easily publicised than studies in which no difference is found. This has been coined 'neurosexism'.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, whilst the early gender difference researchers argued, for example, that girls need not get equal teaching in Mathematics because their limited capacities, the alleged slower development of boys' brains is used for arguments about changes in schools and pedagogy.

Another reason for the popularity of the boy discourse is that it is based on quantitative research. Numbers are acts of governance through which power and policy can be executed, and politics can be obscured by the policy of numbers.<sup>78</sup> Statistics do not easily grasp complicated societal phenomena. In PISA, gender is easily presented as a dichotomy in a statistical table, unlike social and cultural background. Gender-responsible qualitative researchers have constantly presented intersectional analysis, showing varying positions and representations of boys and masculinities and suggested solutions for the problems of some of the boys, including gender sensitiveness, for example through artistic work, and problematising the prevailing masculine cultures of competitiveness and aggression.<sup>79</sup> But this research has never been as easy to access as the quantitative analyses that respond to the stereotypical understanding of gender and the desire to maintain gendered hierarchies.

## Conclusion: Looking to the Future of Interlinked Gender Discourses

In this chapter, I have described and analysed the long history of interlinked gender discourses in education: the troubling discourses of gender equality and boy discourse, and feminist research on gender in education. In this conclusion I reflect on continuities, progress and challenges.

There are lots of continuities in these discourses, as I have shown. Gender equality work in education started almost 40 years ago, but many of the propositions of the early declarations are still relevant. For example, gender segregation in post-compulsory education is still acute, and it has considerable impact on labour markets, gendered wages and the whole of society. Both recent and older studies suggest gendered and heteronormative processes, contents and materials, and teachers lacking gender awareness. Sexual and gender-based harassment are not necessarily addressed in schools.<sup>80</sup> In teacher education, courses on gender are still rare and are often based on extra work by active teacher educators.<sup>81</sup> Individual commitment is too often a means for organisations not to distribute commitment.<sup>82</sup>

I have also described in this chapter valued changes and positive signs, such as the growth and widening perspectives of feminist research in education in Finnish universities. I have suggested that there is increasing gender awareness in the policy level, such as the requirement to write equality plans in all educational institutions and the discursive change in the curriculum frameworks. There are active working groups on equality and social justice in teacher education units and more and more students who require teaching on the theme, as well as committed teacher educators who keep on including themes related to gender and equality in their teaching. There are new materials for schools and teacher education, provided by administration, NGOs and projects such as SETSTOP. Understanding of diversities of gender and intersectionality challenge dichotomic understanding of gender that contributes to the 'boy discourse'. The objective of the current government's Action Plan for Gender Equality 2020–2023 is to make Finland a leading country in gender equality.<sup>83</sup>

There are also challenges. I am afraid that still today, as after the TASUKO project, feminist teacher educators still have to renegotiate small steps forward every academic year and gender courses are not necessarily accepted as part of their teaching responsibilities.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, small steps taken in the administration do not easily have impact in the field. A review of schools' equality plans<sup>85</sup> shows that gender equality is often regarded as a widespread value but concrete measures are missing. Equality planning may turn equality work into managerialist practices, which produce a quantified, statistically controllable and instrumentalised understanding of equality.<sup>86</sup> Equality as a self-evident, achieved or narrative of advancement tends to bypass equality as deeds and action.<sup>87</sup> There is evidence of steps towards more social justice and gender awareness, but the process can stop or be reversed.

I have lived almost four decades as a feminist researcher, participating in gender equality work and trying to analyse the boy discourse. This work would never have

been possible without the networks of feminist gender researchers in education that started in the late 1980s. As Sandra Acker and Anne Wagner pointed out in 2019, senior feminist scholars in the neoliberal Academia in various national contexts use a range of strategies that enable them to maintain their critical focus despite increasing pressures to conform. This is very much the experience of myself and colleagues in Finland too, as shown in interviews with teacher educators.<sup>88</sup>

The history of equality work in education suggests that there always have been possibilities. As explicated in the mission of the SETSTOP project, new and old actors hope for the dream of equal and socially just education to become true but understand that only small steps will ever be taken.

## Notes

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