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The long mission towards gender equality in teacher education: Reflections from a national project in Finland

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, gender equality has been an aim in international educational politics and policies. Finland has also evidenced a history of hundreds of projects and reports that have repeated the same aims, ideas, and practical innovations for promoting equality; many of them have teacher education as one of the foci. However, the actual pace of change has been very slow. In this paper, we focus on the sustainable impact of a national project on gender awareness in teacher education (2008-2011). We analyze changes in cultures and curricula in relation to gender awareness in teacher education.

The data includes documents of the project, curricula of teacher education, responses of the former activists of the project and interviews with teachers in one teacher education unit. We also use auto-ethnographic methodology. We suggest that the mission of gender awareness is difficult, but not a mission impossible.

Keywords: teacher education, gender, gender awareness, gender equality in education, Finland

Introduction: Following the long mission

The need to promote gender equality within and through education has been a worldwide mission since the 1970s. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a global women's rights treaty in 1979, and the aim to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women included education. During recent decades, work towards gender equality in education has been repeatedly conducted in various networks and projects. The important role of educators in promoting gender equality has been repeatedly underlined in United Nations' statements. European collaboration in promoting gender equality in teacher education began in the 1980s, in the context of the Association of Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE) (e.g., Arnesen & Ní Chártheigh, 1992). With resources from the Nordic Council of Ministers, a Nordic project on gender equality in teacher education began in the late 1980s (e.g., Arnesen, 1995) with some Nordic actors of ATEE (Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012).

The ideas of gender equality in education arrived in Finland in the 1980s. Elina Lahelma then acted as secretary to the Commission of Gender Equality in Education, the task of which was to explore the changes required by the legislation on gender equality, which had placed new obligations on education. The Commission also worked with teacher educators. Among them,

Lahelma found feminists who were eager to collaborate and some who were actively resistant or hostile. But the majority admitted that gender equality is important but not the most acute problem in teacher education. The report of the Commission included a suggestion for teacher educators to provide a gender perspective in teaching, with the following requirement: “Initial teacher education should provide the prospective teachers with readiness to promote gender equality in their profession” (Ministry of Education, 1988). It also included a framework for a basic course in gender studies for teacher education. The report of the Commission received a very positive evaluation, but the recommendations were not adapted among teacher educators; for example, we have never seen evidence that the framework for a basic course has ever been used.

During the following decades, and especially after Finland joined the European Union in 1995, hundreds of temporary gender equality projects have been undertaken in Finland, many of which also focused on teacher education (Brunila, 2009). However, the actual pace of change has been very slow and the findings are rarely implemented in mandatory documents (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2010). In 2007, the Ministry of Education invited Lahelma to build a national project on gender equality in teacher education and Liisa Tainio was elected to the position of research coordinator of the project.¹ We gave the project the acronym, TASUKO, which draws from its name in Finnish; the project name was translated in English as Gender Awareness in Teacher Education.

In this article, we will discuss the sustainable impact of the TASUKO project in promoting gender equality and gender awareness in the Finnish teacher education. Therefore, some years after the project, Lahelma asked the former activists of the project their opinions with a brief open-ended questionnaire and Tainio (with Venla Toivonen) carried out a questionnaire survey and some interviews with teachers at the largest teacher education unit. We were interested in discovering whether the new action strategies that were adopted in TASUKO were successful, and whether the small changes that took place during the project turned out to be sustainable. Thus, the data for our analysis includes project documents, teacher education curricula, and responses to the questionnaires as well as interviews. An auto-ethnographic methodology was also used; Lahelma through her long experience as a researcher, teacher, and activist in gender equality issues, and Tainio through her ten years’ experience as a teacher educator in Finland’s largest teacher education unit. We also drew from our experiences in the TASUKO project.

In TASUKO, we have recognized patterns that are well known in earlier gender equality projects as well, but it has not been very typical to analyze their long-term impact. Therefore our aim is to use TASUKO as a case through which we analyze the possibilities and challenges for sustainable change through a short-time national project (Hansen 2016).

Gender equality and gender awareness: troubling with the concepts

The important role of educators in promoting gender equality has again and again been underlined in statements of UN, OECD and EU as well as in the national level. According to an overview of EU (EURYDICE, 2010), in the early 2000s most European countries had gender equality policies in education with the primary aim to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. At the same time in Finland, the first Government Report on Gender Equality was given (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2010). The main problems in education, as defined in the Report, were the

¹ Jukka Lehtonen acted as the research coordinator later, and Pirkko Hynninen became the coordinator.

remaining of gender segregation which is especially poignant in Finland both in the labour market and in education, and that gender awareness is lacking.

UNESCO has recently provided an open-access guide for gender equality in teacher education (UNESCO, 2015). According to the guide, working with gender equality in education should include gender-responsive policies, plans, institutional cultures and teacher attitudes, and gender sensitive materials and pedagogy. The analysis conducted in the guide revealed grave shortcomings in these aspects in teacher education institutions around the world.

Why is it so difficult to include gender perspective in teacher education? The mandatory responsibility to promote gender equality should be known to teacher educators. Moreover, the powerful media discourse about boys' underachievement, sometimes called 'boy crisis' (Kimmel 2010) or 'moral panic' (Epstein et al 1998) suggests that teachers are alert about gendered patterns in education. This generalizing discourse, however, seems to neglect research on gender in education and repeats dichotomies; it acts as an opposite to the gender equality discourse rather than benefitting from it (Lahelma, 2014). Gaby Weiner (2000) suggested in her critical review on gender in European teacher education that there was in the 1990s a 'fear of feminism' in teacher education. Focusing on gender was interpreted as anti-male and divisive, despite the evident influence of gender factors in school and university classrooms (Weiner 2000, 11). There is not much evidence about changes during the new millennium in this respect, for example in Finland. As Vidén and Naskali (2010) suggested in their study, talking about gender is regarded as prejudiced, keeping quiet as objective.

The difficult concepts around gender equality contribute to the problems of equality work. First of all, gender equality has often been defined from an understanding of gender as a dichotomy. For example, in a relatively recent definition of the Council of Europe the complementarity of women and men and their diverse roles in society is mentioned (see more details in Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012). A different problem is the experience from earlier gender equality projects that activities, ideas, and innovations have tended to be repeated with some variation nationally and internationally in new projects, without sustainable results (e.g. Brunila 2009; Lahelma, 2011). We are also aware of the critics to equality work that suggests how this work might actually strengthen inequalities, for example when writing equality documents may in itself become regarded as a proof of equality as achieved (see e.g. Ahmed 2012; Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017).

Even if changing terms does not necessary change the problems, instead of gender equality, we adopted the term gender awareness. It is also an old term that was defined, for example by the European Commission, as awareness of an understanding that there are socially determined differences between women and men based on learned behavior, which affect their ability to access and control resources (https://definedterm.com/gender_awareness). In educational contexts a requirement has been presented for teachers to become consciously aware of the educational experiences of girls and boys and of any gender stereotypes they may hold (e.g. Sikes, 1991). In TASUKO we defined gender awareness as consciousness of social and cultural differences, inequalities and otherness, all of which are built into educational practices, as well as a belief that these practices can be changed. It also includes understanding gender as being intertwined with other categories: ethnicity, age, sexuality and health, as well as with local and cultural opportunities and differences (Lahelma and Hynninen, 2012).

The latter sentence added the principle of intersectionality into the definition. Originally Crenshaw (e.g. 1991) used this concept arguing that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black and of being a woman considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other (see also e.g. Yuval-Davies, 2006). Intersectionality in educational contexts means that students are not just two oppositional groups—girls and boys—but gender is interlinked and must be analyzed in relation to other dimensions of difference.

Other concepts are used as well, for example in the UNESCO guide above. On the structural level, gender awareness is a prerequisite to gender-responsive politics and policies. In schools gender awareness is a prerequisite to gender inclusive pedagogy and practices. As Susanne Kreitz-Sandberg (2013) defines it, gender inclusion integrates ideas of gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity into university teaching.

TASUKO project: Trying to act differently

The Ministry of Education provided resources for the TASUKO project because the program of a conservative government quite unexpectedly included an aim to promote gender equality through teacher education (Hansen, 2016). Obviously, the project was political and the aim of the Ministry was to provide a publicly visible example of the Government's political will to promote gender equality. Officially, the Ministry expected working at the faculty level and a profound change within each program in teacher education at all the nine universities in Finland – with rather modest resources of 600 000 euros.

Our expectations about the leeway for change were more limited. As a long-time gender activist and participant in some of the earlier projects, Lahelma was aware of the difficulties of project-based equality work, as described above. Her position as the leader of the project was problematic as well, because she is a sociologist, not a teacher and not trained as one, nor worked at a unit of initial teacher education; researchers have suggested that institutions of teacher education are not very open to changes initiated from outside the profession or above (e.g., Erixon Arreman & Weiner, 2007). The history of gender projects in education shows that support offered from outside has not necessarily been met with enthusiasm by the institutions. Even free-of-charge training in equality has been hardly utilized (Lahelma & Hynninen 2012). Moreover, gender awareness is a theme that deserves theoretical and critical reflection, such as a deconstruction of unquestioned expectations that are embedded in cultural understandings of gender. Marie Carlson has claimed that it is not easy to integrate theoretical and critical analysis into teacher education (Carlson, 2008; see also, Erixon Arreman & Weiner, 2007).

It has been argued that gender awareness goes beneath a person's skin. The studies conducted during TASUKO confirmed some earlier findings that whenever student teachers begin to see how gender difference and gendered inequalities are built into the practices and processes of teaching and learning, they also see the same patterns in society and in their own lives. Students who take part in voluntary courses in gender studies, especially men, often feel obliged to explain their participation to their friends. Adopting a gender perspective or feminist stance will sometimes cause embarrassment about one's surroundings and negative feelings of being responsible and even guilty for the current state of affairs, which sometimes can also lead to problems in personal relationships (Lahelma, 2011; Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012; Lehtonen, 2011; Vidén & Naskali, 2010). However, starting from the early equality projects there is evidence that those who have attended classes on gender issues report their usefulness at work (Lahelma & Ruotonen, 1992; Vidén & Naskali 2010). The need for knowledge of how to promote gender equality in schools' every day practices, pedagogies or learning contents seems to be understood only when one has faced inequality at the personal level or, as often happens, being informed by change about issues of inequality.

Knowing the challenges that equality projects must combat, we planned a new strategy. The ambition in TASUKO was to do something different from what had been carried out in earlier projects. There was the hope that the mission of twenty years and more would, step by step, turn into normal conduct in teacher education. We did not try to act as experts with a mandate of the Ministry of Education and entitled by the Gender Equality Act, who come to persuade the deans, teacher educators and administrators for changes towards gender-aware teaching. Instead, the idea was that each department would and could engage in the development work and carry out the

project by drawing from its own expertise on its own terms. We drew from the feminist networks that have existed at the universities for decades. We addressed teacher educators who were already engaged in gender equality work, organized an unofficial group of feminist teacher educators from different universities and developed the project plan collaboratively. The theoretical starting points were built jointly and we also defined jointly what we mean by gender awareness. Our way of working was inspired by feminist pedagogies (e.g., hooks, 1994; in Finland Saarinen, Ojala & Palmu, 2014) in trying to dismantle power relations and trusting in social action as a basis for learning together.

The TASUKO project began by examining the curricula in teacher education units in Finland to obtain a picture of where things stood regarding materials and courses on gender issues. The examination suggested that in most institutions curricula included only a few gender courses, textbooks, or other materials that drew on the theoretical and empirical results of Finnish and international gender studies. Knowledge of good teaching practices available in numerous projects on equality (Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen, 2005) had not been incorporated into teacher education. Small-scale studies suggested that stereotypical dichotomous understandings of gender were repeated in courses and course materials (e.g., Vidén & Naskali, 2010; Norema, Pietilä & Purhonen, 2011; Lehtonen, 2011; Jauhiainen, Laiho & Kovalainen, 2014). It was obvious that it was not only possible, but even usual, to qualify as a teacher without ever having heard of the requirements of the Act on Equality between Women and Men (1986/2005), not to mention learning what those requirements would mean in terms of pedagogy or school practices and processes (Lahelma, 2011). The (mandatory) action plans of the universities for promoting gender equality were revealed to be relatively superficial (Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012).

However, at some universities, there were lectures and course literature offered that provided gender perspectives and courses. These cases were typically the result of persistent efforts of feminist teacher educators, who often organized these courses as extra work, and the achievements were constantly challenged; the small steps forward have had to be renegotiated every academic year (Lehtonen, 2011). Using the term of Ahmed (2012) universities had ‘equity champions’.

In the project, we built a national network and organized local, national, and international workshops and conferences. Several small-scale studies and innovations for new courses took place in the institutions of teacher education. We received some feedback and support from student organizations that also organized some seminars, and members of the network in all universities received requests for help from students who had been inspired to explore the issue of gender in their Master’s theses. Publications and a webpage for schools and teacher education were provided. TASUKO members gave talks and presentations in the media and acted in expert positions in high-status fora. We have impressive numbers for each activity that suggest that we did what the projects were supposed to do in the era of market orientation (Brunila, 2009) in terms of ‘technical goals,’ ‘measurable objectives,’ ‘productiveness,’ ‘competitiveness,’ ‘digitalization,’ and ‘efficiency.’

The question remains: did any sustainable changes take place in teacher education? In the following we will discuss this, drawing first from the comments of TASUKO activists in 2014, and, second, from the study conducted at the University of Helsinki in 2016, some years after the project had finished.

After TASUKO: Activists’ reflections

As is characteristic of projects after they are over, no resources are available for following up on the subsequent developments (e.g., Brunila, 2009; see also e.g. Kenway & *al* 1998; Lahelma, 2011). Four years after the project had ended, Lahelma conducted a small questionnaire study among the former activists of TASUKO. She asked, what was best in the project, what should have been done differently, what changes took place and do they have turned out to be sustainable. She encouraged

the activists in each unit to discuss the questions together and send a joint answer. Feedback was received from activists from each University, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and two NGOs; altogether, 19 responses were received, several of which based on joint reflections. In general, the feedback was very positive and critical comments were rare. The overall positive tone of the responses can be because the names of the respondents were not hidden and the questionnaire was sent by the leader of the project, who is a respected person in the field. However, the issues that were discussed in the responses were important and call for analysis.

Networking and its impact on the personal level

The general feedback was positive on the personal level. The importance of being able to gather at TASUKO meetings, meet others and share experiences, and participate in seminars and conferences was repeated in many answers. Almost all replies included some positive comments on networking.

The activity inspired new connections, and the network provided support for agency in the work place and among researchers.

The project gave some national recognition to continue the work. To talk about gender is easier today with colleagues and students.

Words like inspiration, encouragement, empowerment, and confirmation were connected to the activity in the network. The TASUKO group seems to have acted as a feminist group of consciousness raising; the implicit involvement in feminist pedagogy must have had its impact here. The responses above suggest that the activists also used the network as a foundation for working in their own institutions. The impact on the professional development of participants was also mentioned.

I feel that TASUKO has given me much in terms of personal and professional development: my own awareness about equality issues and interest in them has grown. I have become inspired to follow the research in the field and to study a bit and possibly do my own research.

We had a good time together and the project empowered participants to take a more active position in their own institutions. The positive feeling of working together is strong within the ethos of the Nordic equality work (Ikävalko 2016). It seems that after the project there was some more space for at least some agency and taking small steps towards gender-aware teaching. Some participants received resources for small scale studies and support for publishing texts. This, however, certainly is not enough for a sustainable impact, because we were not able to continue the active networking. In a country like Finland where the distance between the most Southern and most Northern University is almost 1,000 km, getting together for network meetings is not easy without the extra resources that TASUKO provided.

Changes in teacher education in the participant units

The task that was given to TASUKO was to implement the ideas of gender-aware and equal education in the structures, curricula, and teaching in all teacher education units. The responses suggest that here the project has had some impact. In all universities, new courses have been included in the curricula, new content has been incorporated into courses, and some pedagogical innovations have remained. Some participants reported that more students have taken gender as a theme in their Master's theses. The importance of the TASUKO web page was mentioned in several

replies, as were the study materials that were provided during the project. The awareness of the participants and new knowledge had helped them to pay attention to and participate in their institution's curricular work.

When it has fitted the theme, I have reported on the project and helped the students to find the TASUKO webpage. It is also easy to help the students who conduct their thesis on a theme related to the web pages to find the important literature.

The interview study for the teachers gave knowledge about the situation in the field and feedback for us as teachers, and emphasized the usefulness of the knowledge that we provided in practical work life.

I will always remember, when I organized a one-day seminar about gender-aware equality education, and the lecture hall was full of people. Many students came later to tell me that it was fine that this kind of an occasion was organized.

Accordingly, there was impact on the participants' own teaching, but what was the impact of the project at the institutions on a general level? Here the replies were rather modest, suggesting small changes and some critical points. There was criticism about too much work at the grass roots level with too much focus on working with the people that were already committed:

On the national level, it would have been good to activate/challenge the responsible leaders of teacher education into open discussion, because the attitude of the high-powered is important when developing the contents.

The results in the curricular work of teacher education units and teachers' in-service education remained modest. Knowledge about the project was limited to a relatively small group of actors. Therefore, the visibility of the project was minor.

On the other hand, there were also some comments about working too much from above, which was a challenge of which we were very much aware already when beginning the project.

There was a bit of the feeling that "outsiders" suggested some hints to the actors of the teacher education unit, or the "most enlightened" were busy with a gender course, but sustainable change that permeates the machinery did not necessarily take place.

The ambivalence between strategies starting from the leaders or from the grass root level seem to be some of the repeating problems in equality work (see e.g. Ahmed 2012). We did not succeed to achieve committed leadership, nor translate individual commitment into collective commitment. As Ahmed (2012, 135) writes, the commitment of individuals can also be a means for the organization not to distribute commitment.

We have seen some positive changes, but as gender activists know, there are always challenges against the small steps. Moreover, in the current political atmosphere in Finland as in the world generally, there are new trends of hostility towards women. In the universities, cuts of resources and organizational changes have also had an impact on teacher education, as shall be described in more detail further on. Now two years has passed since this questionnaire was administered, and we already have heard that some of the new courses have been reduced.

After TASUKO: Changes in one teacher education unit

We will now examine the changes teacher education has experienced during and after TASUKO by taking a closer look at the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki. This analysis is based on Tainio's experiences as a teacher educator and gender equality activist at this unit² as well as the results of two questionnaires: an equality questionnaire addressed in 2012 to students of teacher education (Knuutila, 2012) and a questionnaire for teacher educators conducted by a Nordic project, GENTE (2016, to be presented later on). In addition, Tainio interviewed 14 teacher educators in 2016 to gather more information about the practices of promoting gender equality in teacher education. As is common, busy academic people are not eager to answer web-based questionnaires on gender equality or other subjects during their hectic work days. However, when approached by a colleague for a quick interview, people are willing to give a lot of more information about their practices as teacher educators.

Students' responses

The report of students' equality questionnaire at the departmental level showed that students were reasonably content with teacher educators' practices of teaching, training and supervising about various aspects of equality (Knuutila, 2012). However, particularly in certain programs such as early childhood education and primary teacher education, some students reported that male students get much more positive attention than their female colleagues. For example, one respondent noted, "During the lecture, a male teacher educator wanted to bring the male students in front of the classroom because he was so proud of all of them."

Favoring male students in the processes of application to teacher education, during the education, in applying for jobs, and in the staff rooms has been argued in research conducted in the 1990s (Sunnari, 1997; Lahelma et al., 2000; see also, Lahelma, 2006), but it is discouraging to still hear about such behavior after the TASUKO project. These actions draw from the persistent discourse about the lack of male teachers, which has repeatedly been challenged by research (e.g., Lahelma et al., 2000; Skelton, 2011).

Approximately half the student respondents said that issues on gender and sexuality were not visible in the content of teaching to the extent they should be. While asked about the discussions about gender and sexuality, half of them saw them as carried out in a gender stereotypical and heteronormative ways. One student said, "The teacher education unit seems only to strengthen the sex role stereotypes," while another noted, "As a student belonging to a sexual minority, I feel that the diversity of sexualities is almost a taboo, that this kind of diversity does not exist."

What should be considered while examining these results is that only approximately 10 per cent of the students responded to the questionnaire. This obvious lack of interest in a reply may in itself be interpreted as evidence of the disregard for gender questions in the curricula; it may be difficult to answer if the issue seems not to be relevant in the teacher education program. In an interview conducted by Hinkkanen (2015), a teacher student agreed having heard about gender equality during the studies, but added that 'a panic button does not yell inside of me when I hear someone talking about girls and boys or asking during the lesson for a man's perspective.' It can still be argued that these numbers and quotations suggest that education on gender issues is not sufficient. A small-scale ethnographic study of some students during their own courses was also conducted in TASUKO and includes examples that suggest the same (Norema, Pietilä & Purtonen, 2010). Further evidence was gained from an extensive data of 300 hours of video recordings where the discourses on the first-year primary teacher students were observed between 2011 and 2012.

2 Formerly called the Department of Teacher Education.

During the teaching hours, gender was addressed quite seldom, and when approached, it was almost always handled in ways that supported traditional gender roles (Karvonen, Pietilä & Tainio, 2018).

Teacher educators answering to the challenge

These results were taken seriously at least to some extent at the teacher education unit at the University of Helsinki. Inspired by TASUKO and startled by the results of the student survey, educators at a primary teacher program planned a new course on Education and Social Justice. In this course gender and sexuality issues as well as the perspective of intersectionality were included in the topics. This course was compulsory for all primary teacher students. Gender issues were also taken more seriously in some other courses, and according to discussions around this and other courses, several teacher educators seemed to acknowledge and pay more attention to gender issues in their teaching.

Some years after the promotion of these new courses, we conducted a survey about a new project called GENTE (Gender in Nordic Teacher Education, 2015-2017). The aim of this project was to offer resources for teacher educators in the Nordic countries by providing a web-page with a bibliography, literature, and other information about gender in education (see <https://nordgente.org/>). The survey was conducted to take into account teacher educators' own ideas and needs while building the web page. We found that teacher educators brought up gender issues in their teaching to some extent, but there were also educators that did not consider gender as an important topic for teaching, and some were even hostile towards this topic. Because only very few teacher educators answered the questionnaire, Tainio decided to conduct short interviews with those teachers that she, according to her experience as their colleague, knew to be interested at least to some extent on reflecting on gender issues in their teaching.

The result of Tainio's interviews with 14 teacher educators was somewhat encouraging. She found that there are at least five compulsory courses with gender issues as one of the main topics. In addition, teacher educators brought up issues on sex, gender and sexuality in several other courses from physics education to literacy classes. Some active teacher educators even reported organizing regular one-day seminars where gender issues were included in the program. Teaching methods on these courses varied greatly from lecturing to small written assignments, from small group discussion to whole class reflections. However, there were no courses that focused only on gender and sexuality in education, albeit one seminar day in autumn 2016. In addition, some interviewees stated that they had received written or spoken comments from students for not taking gender and sexuality into account in proper ways. Typically, these teachers were grateful for the student comments and were ready to develop their teaching.

We found it alarming that one of Tainio's interviewees confessed that she actually avoided talking about gender in her teaching since she did not know how to approach gender issues. She thought that she might unintentionally strengthen the dichotomy and stereotypical images of sexes while she did not know the "right" way to talk about gender issues. Her attitude might reflect the ideal of gender neutrality which has long been prevailing in the discourses on gender in education in Finland (Lahelma, 2011). The idea behind gender neutral discourse, realized in language use, is the belief that avoiding talk about sex and gender makes them invisible and disappear. While Finnish language with its genderless grammar can easily be adopted into the seemingly gender-neutral discourses, the research on language use shows that the result is the opposite: avoiding talk about sex and gender makes discourses vulnerable for covert sexism and hidden male bias (Tainio, 2006; Engelberg, 2016). As Ahmed (2012, 182) has argued, 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. On the other side, some critics of gender equality work also suggest that gender perspective sometimes means repeating existing hierarchies and essential understandings of gender (e.g. Ylöstalo 2013). The studies of Lahelma (e.g. 2011, 2014) include evidence of this in teachers'

talk and policy documents; an example is an argument that attention should be given to the different needs of girls and boys – as if they were two different categories. Therefore, the above comment of the interviewee can also be interpreted as awareness of the difficulties in the concepts around gender. Whatever is behind this specific comment, it demonstrates the need to know and understand more about gendered processes in education.

In sum, in the interviews conducted in the beginning of the year 2016 many teacher educators were positive and optimistic towards education on gender issues, although we also found that some hesitated or even feared to talk about gender, not to mention those that were nonchalant or hostile towards these issues. We could conclude that we evidenced quite a positive, even if not very extensive, development concerning education of gender equality issues in teacher education programs.

However, after the interviews there have been dramatic changes at the University of Helsinki. The Finnish government has made substantial reductions of the finances for universities with many unwanted consequences that also affected teacher education. Those new courses that included gender issues as one of their main topics, have been either reduced and filled with additional new topics or offered only as voluntary courses. In the new neoliberal era, the centralized organization of the university and marketized aims (Komulainen et al 2014) issues like digitalization, entrepreneurship and leadership are taking space from basic knowledge on gender, sexuality, and social justice in teacher education.

Conclusions: small steps forward

In this article, we have analyzed the problems of project-based gender equality work, drawing from data of one specific project on gender awareness in teacher education, reflections of its sustainable impact after a few years and our own experiences. In the conclusion, we will discuss the project from a wider perspective and reflect on the impact of the project in educational policies in broader terms.

Kristiina Brunila (2009) has analyzed Finnish equality projects from the 1970s until the early 2000s, using the concept of projectization. As a result of decentralization and marketisation of the public sector, which is a well-known tendency in current neo-liberal policies also in the Nordic countries (e.g., Arnesen et al 2014) ‘technical goals’, ‘measurable objectives’, ‘productiveness’, ‘competitiveness’, ‘digitalisation’, and ‘efficiency’ have also become part of the equality project discourse that is used in project planning, activities, and organisation. The progress of projects has been measured through economic indicators. When gender equality work is conducted in projects, sustainable change is difficult, because the results and enthusiasm achieved during projects tend to vanish after the extra resources have been used. The same aims have to be repeated in the next project application in order to provide possibilities to get further funding (Brunila 2009). During the project, we realized that face-to-face meetings are the most inspiring and effective ways to develop collaboration, and that they cannot be replaced by meetings conducted through digital resources. Meetings need resources – and new projects.

Accordingly, it was not surprising that our first conclusion from this project is rather discouraging: we argue that without sustainable resources it is difficult to get sustainable results. The ideas and activities that have been shared within the project typically did not reach all members of the staff and the main persons in charge of teacher education seldom took responsibility. Gender awareness remained the responsibility of those teacher educators who already were committed to it. A step forward might be followed by two steps back, at least if you are not alert. When universities are under pressure about resources and teacher educators under pressure of time, gender issues are the first to be sacrificed. This is especially the case during the neoliberal turn at the universities.

However, there seems to be space for small agency (Honkasalo 2009; Honkasalo, Ketokivi & Leppo 2014) that is realized in every day repetitive activities. During the years of TASUKO project

feminist teacher educators were empowered with somewhat more leeway, legitimacy and resources to act and new colleagues joined in. This experience had more sustainable impact not only on their own professional development but also to the whole atmosphere in the institutions where gender issues now were easier to talk about.

The existence of a national project also had some impact on educational politics and policies and political decisions. In TASUKO we did not only collaborate with teacher educators. During and after the project the actors were regularly invited to give lectures in seminars and conferences organized by educational and equality administration, acting as experts or members in working groups of administrative bodies in Finland and abroad. We realized that responsibility in a development project of the Ministry of Education seems to give more authority than leadership in highly competitive research projects.

It is difficult to say how much the TASUKO project has had impact on educational policies in general, but gender awareness and equality are more visible in the latest curricula documents than in the earlier ones; also diversity of genders is mentioned for the first time. In 2015, the National Board of Education provided a guide for teachers on gender equality, partly because of the new requirement for writing an equality plan in all educational units, including comprehensive schools (Jääskeläinen et al. 2015). It remains to be seen whether this guide and the requirement for writing an equality plan make a difference in everyday discourses at schools. The study of Elina Ikävalko (2016) suggests that equality planning may turn equality work into managerialist practices, which produce a quantified, statistically controllable and instrumentalized understanding of equality (see also Ahmed 2012). But the history of equality work shows that there always have been possibilities to do it differently.

In the current action plan for gender equality, teacher education has been mentioned as one of the contexts where gender equality should be promoted (STM 2016, p. 13-14). In addition, Council for Gender Equality has published an extensive study package for students, teachers and other actors in early childhood education, primary education and lower secondary education. It includes pedagogical material, interviews and texts, for self-studies and to be used in different learning environments (see <http://www.tasa-arvokasvatuksessa.fi/>). Even if we cannot claim that this all is a consequence of TASUKO project, we consider TASUKO as one of those activities that has had an impact on these developments.

Also internationally TASUKO also has had some impact. During the TASUKO project we organized a Nordic conference and symposia and workshops in various international contexts. The need to work for gender awareness in teacher education was generally regarded as important. Within a Nordic Centre of Excellence JustEd (Justice Through Education in the Nordic Countries, see <http://www.justed.org/organisation/>) we started a small project Gender in the Nordic Teacher Education (GENTE) 2015-2017 (see <https://nordgente.org/>). The ideas for building a web page for Nordic teacher educators and to have workshop and seminars came from the TASUKO project. GENTE has also benefitted from the networks created during TASUKO.

During TASUKO project we wondered whether drawing from the feminist teacher educators and building the project from below was an efficient method or whether we should have used more efforts for trying to persuade deans and other actors in powerful positions. This question remains open. In a new national project aimed on promoting gender equality particularly in teacher education (SetSTOP, 2018-2019; <https://setstop.wordpress.com/>) it is possible for the actors to take a step into this direction.

The aim of the TASUKO project was based on the idea that it should not be 'an impossible mission' (Lahelma 2011) but instead, 'difficult but doable' (Brunila, Heikkinen & Hynninen 2005). There should be space for at least some agency and small steps towards gender-aware teaching within teacher educational institutions. We would argue that this aim to provide possibilities for small agency was achieved, and is possible to achieve in the on-going and future projects.

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