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Depoliticized and decontextualized equality promotion in the gender equality planning of Finnish comprehensive schools

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines gender equality planning (GEP), which has been obligatory in all Finnish comprehensive schools since 2015. GEP has been welcomed as a promising method of systemizing perspectives on gender in Finnish basic education. A regionally representative, discretionary sample of gender equality plans ($N = 140$) was analysed using a critical discourse approach to examine how these plans discursively bent, stretched, fixed or shrank the meaning of gender equality along with the consequences of these approaches for equality promotion. The analysis shows that the GE plans constantly bent and stretched equality to separate it from gender and fixed it to free-floating gender equality measures, which left gendered power relations undisturbed. Consequently, equality promotion was represented as depoliticized. However, through the shrinking, the contextual construction of gendered power relations was recognized, and GEP exhibited the potential to politicize gender equality. In this paper, we argue that GEP has potential in gender equality promotion if the planning processes recognize contextual construction of gendered power relations and if equality promotion is not reduced to technical measures. Otherwise, the tool might actually impede equality rather than promoting it.

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Introduction

Finland is famous for being a top-performing country in terms of gender equality. There is a widely shared perception that gender equality has been achieved and settled. Simultaneously, Finnish educational policies have consistently emphasized gender-neutral discourse and avoided challenging gendered power relations (Edström & Brunila, 2016).

In the field of education, state-led gender equality work began in Finland as early as the 1980s, reflecting similar trends in other Nordic countries (Lahelma, 2023). Throughout its history, gender equality promotion in Finnish educational institutions has been pursued through short-term projects (Brunila, 2009; Lahelma, 2023; Lahelma et al., 2021). Partially due to the short-term and consensus-seeking nature of equality promotion, educational equality policies have failed to challenge the binary understanding of gender and the idea that gender equality has already been achieved at the state level (Brunila, 2009; Edström & Brunila, 2016; see also Myyry, 2022). In this study, we investigate a new gender equality tool adopted in Finnish basic education: gender equality planning (GEP¹). We focus on the discursive practices of gender equality present in 140 gender equality plans from Finnish comprehensive schools.

Following numerous short-term projects, systemizing gender equality promotion in Finnish basic education became a common goal in 2014, when the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986, Amendment 1329/2014) was reformed. Alongside this reform, there has been a fundamental discursive shift in Finnish national educational policies from subtly maintaining the binary understanding of gender to raising awareness of gendered power relations (Myyry, 2020). At the local level, the amendment to the Act on Equality (1329/2014) extended the obligation to implement gender equality planning from secondary and higher education to basic education (grades 1–9, ages 7–15 years). Under obligatory GEP, all comprehensive schools are mandated to draft gender equality policies by assessing their gender equality status and defining the measures necessary to promote equality. Other Nordic countries have also adopted educational equality promotion obligations. Icelandic and Norwegian public authorities, including educational institutions, are required to issue statements on gender equality. In addition, other Nordic countries have considered compulsory GEP in basic education (Heikkinen, 2016; IGLYO, 2022). This paper examines GEP in a novel context: Finnish basic education. This is crucial since studies on GEP in secondary and higher education and the workplace have questioned the ability of equality tools to improve gender equality.

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Feminist researchers have welcomed the GEP obligation in basic education, hoping that the tool will raise awareness of gendered power relations and deeming it a promising Nordic practice in educational equality promotion (Heikkinen, 2016; Myyry, 2020). Equality tools, such as GEP, can potentially challenge ‘old networks of power’ and hegemonies, which have so far kept feminist approaches on the margins (Davies, 2003, p. 3). However, despite the potential of GEP for systemizing gender equality in education, critical studies on equality and equity planning in higher education (Ahmed, 2012; Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Rezai -Rashti et al., 2021), secondary education (Ikävalko, 2016; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011) and the workplace (Ylöstalo, 2012) have claimed that GEP lacks transformative potential. The tool is said to focus only on the tip of the iceberg of gendered power relations (Clavero & Galligan, 2021), create an impression that equality is achieved and managed (Ahmed, 2012), pay attention to individuals rather than structures (Rezai -Rashti et al., 2021) and simplify and condense the meaning of gender equality (Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011). Therefore, it seems that GEP is not a self-evidently promising practice in equality promotion. Because of the novelty of the GEP obligation in Finnish basic education, little is known about what happens to gender equality when it is promoted via this equality tool in comprehensive schools. This study aims to fill this gap in the gender equality policy literature in the context of basic education.

According to the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986: 5a§), GEP must be drafted in cooperation with school personnel and pupils, and it ‘must include: 1) an assessment of the gender equality situation within the institution’ (e.g. by using surveys), ‘2) the necessary measures to promote gender equality’ and ‘3) a review of the extent to which measures previously included in [the plan] have been implemented and of the results achieved’. The GEP is to be updated at least every three years and can be combined with a school’s non-discrimination plan.

In the context of Finnish basic education, however, very few resources have been reserved for GEP by the national or local educational authorities. The Finnish National Agency of Education (FNAE) has published a GEP guidebook for basic education which deals with gender segregation, gender-based harassment and gender diversity. Additionally, FNAE has funded some in-service training on GEP. Some schools have also voluntarily invested in expert consultations. Despite these initiatives, comprehensive school staff lack comprehensive training in gender equality. Finnish teacher education does not systematically raise gender awareness of teacher students (e.g. Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). Instead, GEP is seen as

a part of normal schoolwork that requires no extra resources. As proclaimed by the Finnish government, it is expected to be integrated with the drafting of other documents, such as non-discrimination plans. Thus, it seems that GEP is expected to address structural inequalities systematically and effectively with minimal resources and effort (see Ball, 2008). In this situation, it is no surprise that a report by the FNAE (2020) showed that many Finnish comprehensive schools are not familiar with the GEP instructions.

In this article, we aim to highlight the discursive practices of gender equality specified in the GE plans ($N=140$) of Finnish comprehensive schools. Lombardo et al. (2009) classified the discursive practices of gender equality using four metaphors, which illustrate how equality policies *bend* the meaning of gender equality to fit other policy goals than gender equality, *stretch* it towards other social differences, *fix* it to depoliticized measures as well as *shrink* unequal power relations to a particular issue or measure. Informed by Lombardo et al. (2009), we pose two research questions: 1) How do GE plans discursively bend, stretch, fix and shrink the meaning of gender equality? 2) How does this affect the way gender equality is represented in the GE plans? Based on our analysis, we argue that GEP has potential in gender equality promotion if the planning processes recognize the contextual construction of gendered power relations and if equality promotion is not reduced to technical measures. We claim that GEP should provoke a contextual discussion of the state of equality and articulate gender in terms of power relations. Otherwise, the tool might impede the quest for equality rather than promoting it.

This article contributes to the ongoing discussion on educational equality policy in several ways. First, the paper makes an empirical contribution by providing a new understanding of Nordic educational equality policies in the context of Finnish comprehensive schools (e.g. Edström & Brunila, 2016; Lahelma, 2023) and feminist research on equality promotion via GEP (e.g. Ahmed, 2012; Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Ikävalko, 2016; Rezai -Rashti et al., 2021). Second, the paper makes a methodological contribution to discursive practices of gender equality (Einarsdóttir, 2020; Lombardo et al., 2009; Stierncreutz & Tienari, 2023) by examining how GE plans discursively shape the meaning of gender equality and the subsequent effects on equality promotion. Third, the paper continues an ongoing discussion of the depoliticization of managerialist equality promotion strategies (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011; Prügl, 2011; Rönnblom, 2017) in the decontextualized Finnish education policies and discourses (Säntti et al., 2023; Simola, 2014, 2021; Väisänen & Lanas, 2021). In doing so, the paper evaluates the potential of GEP to promote gender

equality at the level of school-based education policies.

We first introduce the processes of depoliticization and decontextualization as well as the four discursive practices of gender equality policies, which are applied as analytical concepts. We then examine how the discursive practices of bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking construct gender equality in the decontextualized field of Finnish education. Finally, we explore the potential of GEP for promoting equality in basic education in Finland and elsewhere.

Depoliticization and decontextualization of equality promotion

Feminist policy researchers have stressed the importance of the politicization of gender in increasing ‘the transformative potential of gender equality policy’ (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021, p. 745; see also Ikävalko, 2016; Lombardo et al., 2009; Prügl, 2011; Rönnblom, 2017). Following the distinction made by Rönnblom (2017) and Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2021), we approach (de)politicization from two angles. The first view of politicization concerns ‘articulating gender in terms of conflicting interests’ (Rönnblom, 2017, p. 162), which means that depoliticization evaporates political tensions and conflicting ideologies and interests surrounding the topic of gender equality (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021; see also Ikävalko, 2016; Lombardo et al., 2009, pp. 2–4). The second strand of politicization emerges from articulating gender ‘in terms of societal power relations’ (Rönnblom, 2017, p. 162). Here, depoliticization is interpreted as a process that marginalizes the examination of gendered power relations (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021, p. 758).

It has been proposed that equality tools, such as GEP, depoliticize gender equality promotion. That is, they steer equality work towards a technical and rational approach, which normalizes consensus-based understanding and silences dissent (Ahmed, 2012; Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021). Drafting a GE plan and fulfilling policy requirements may play a greater role in equality promotion than discussions of conflicting interests and ideologies surrounding the topic of gendered power relations (Ahmed, 2007; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011).

The equality tools – GEPs, gender mainstreaming and audits – are examples of managerialist policy strategies, which encourage institutions to take over and manage equality promotion strategically and efficiently (Ikävalko, 2016; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011; Prügl, 2011). Ball (2008) states that these kinds of managerialist top-down techniques are ‘one-size-fits-all’ models that lead institutions to agilely embrace policy procedures mandated by the state to solve societal problems. Consequently, national policy

initiatives address institutional performance gaps in issues such as gender equality by justifying and applying simple solutions and procedures that can resolve these specific gaps locally in a decentralized manner (see Kantola & Seeck, 2011). Simola (2014) posits that educational policy reforms have been ‘firmly bolted into air’, meaning that these initiatives emphasize the rationality and consistency of fixed goals while failing to acknowledge the complex reality of the school context. Consequently, the obligations placed on schools have made teachers recipients and flexible implementers of diverse state-led policy procedures (Davies, 2003; Sääntti et al., 2023; Simola, 2014).

Equality promotion via managerialist tools may face challenges in the field of education, at least in Finland, because the educational sciences have been described as decontextualized – which neglects the societal and historical frames of the schools (Simola, 2021). Finnish education sociologists have argued that educational discourses have focused more on individuals, learning and skills, and thus paid little attention to societal contexts and social power relations (Sääntti et al., 2023; Simola, 2021). For instance, Finnish teacher education does not systemically educate teacher students on how to acknowledge and challenge gendered power relations (Kasa et al., 2024; Lahelma & Tainio, 2019; Naskali & Kari, 2020). The decontextualization of education can be observed, for instance, in education policies (Simola, 2014), teacher education (Sääntti et al., 2023; Simola, 2021) and the literature on bullying (Väisänen & Lanas, 2021). decontextualization and individualization make it difficult to approach matters of power in education – in cases of bullying, for example – in terms of gendered power relations or racism (Väisänen & Lanas, 2021). Therefore, it seems that the technical procedures of GEP and the decontextualization of the educational sciences may jointly create a challenging context for the politicization of gender and transformative policies in GEP.

This paper continues the discussion of the (de)politicization of equality promotion strategies and the (de)contextualization of educational discourses in GEP, which has been identified as managerialist in nature (e.g. Ikävalko, 2016). In the following section, we discuss the discursive practices introduced by Lombardo et al. (2009), which make visible the discursive processes operative in gender equality policies, including GEP.

Bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking the meaning of gender equality

Previous studies of discursive gender equality practices have demonstrated how policy measures and resistance shape the meaning of equality so that the concept of equality serves goals other than establishing actual gender equality (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2020; Stierncreutz & Tienari, 2023). In this study, we use

the metaphors of bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking to make visible discursive practices that offer insight into the potential of GEP to challenge gendered power relations.

Bending describes a discursive practice in which equality goals are redirected towards alternative ends (e.g. fostering economic growth or national branding) and no longer promote gender equality (Einarsdóttir, 2020; Lombardo et al., 2009, p. 5). In contrast to bending, in the discursive practices of stretching, fixing and shrinking, gender equality, or at least equality, remains the firm focus.

Gender equality consists of two concepts: gender and equality. The latter is often used in relation to other inequalities, whether regional or racial. Discursive *stretching* broadens and expands the meaning of gender equality to encompass these intersectional differences, but gender equality is still salient. Lombardo et al. (2009) note that gender equality is a ‘family member’ of other equity approaches; therefore, understanding that different inequalities intersect can enhance struggles to reshape social power relations. However, this kind of intersectional approach ‘often dilutes or blurs the previous meaning of gender equality’ (Lombardo et al., 2009, p. 5).

Fixing means that equality has an established and admitted meaning; therefore, the meaning of the concept is no longer contested or politicized. These depoliticized meanings silence conflicting interests and ideologies related to gender equality (see Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021). Fixing creates possibilities for equality promotion by keeping gender equality on the agenda but does not necessarily articulate it in terms of gendered power relations (see Rönnblom, 2017). Nevertheless, because of its stagnant nature, fixing reduces the reflexivity and vigour of the meaning of gender equality (Lombardo et al., 2009, pp. 2–4).

Fixing is closely linked to the discursive practice of *shrinking*, which both simplifies and narrows social problems and their solutions. What is unique to shrinking is that it pays attention to gendered power relations. However, it shrinks equality to a limited interpretation of a particular problem in some specific policy area, such as quotas in the labour market, to challenge gendered power relations. In this paper, we understand fixing as a discursive practice in which equality is attached to some specific decontextualized meaning or measure and not to the construction of power relations. In fixing, the relation between policy measures and the inequalities they originally challenged has become vague. Consequently, gender equality has become depoliticized. In contrast, in shrinking, inequalities are contextualized, but eventually, these inequalities are addressed via narrow measures, which simplifies gendered power relations.

The data

The data analysed for the study consisted of 140 school-based GE plans drafted in comprehensive schools in all parts of Finland. The GE plans were collected from six municipalities representing all regional state administration areas of Finland: 1) Eastern Finland, 2) Northern Finland, 3) Southern Finland, 4) Lapland, 5) Western and Inland Finland and 6) Southwestern Finland. The municipalities were selected on the basis that all their Finnish-speaking schools had drafted GE plans. All 140 GE plans, called either ‘*tasa-arvo- ja yhdenvertaisuussuunnitelma*’² (equality and equity plan) or ‘*yhdenvertaisuussuunnitelma*’ (equity plan), were created to respond to both the planning obligations of the Act on Equality between Women and Men (906/1986, 5a§) and Non-discrimination Act (1325/2014, 6§). In this article, we refer to these documents with the general term ‘GE plan’ because we focus on the concept of gender equality, and the documents aim to respond to the obligations established by the Act on Equality between Women and Men.

Each GE plan included a school-based section in which the schools described their equality status, equality measures and evaluations of the implemented measures. Additionally, four of the municipalities (A, B, D, E) had drafted municipal-specific sections in which the GEP obligation and the key concepts of equality and equity were introduced. The shortest plan contributed by the school comprised five rows of text, and the longest included six pages of text. The structures of the GE plans varied; some plans presented specific illustrations of an equality planning process and tables of goals, measures and evaluation periods, while some merely described the values and general principles of the school. In the analysis, we focused only on the school-based functional sections, as they embody and construct the conceptions of equality and equality promotion in these schools.

Methods of analysis

We approach the school-based GE plans as policy texts that represent local policymaking and construct an understanding of equality promotion together with national legislation and basic education’s core curricula. We apply a critical discourse approach (Fairclough, 1992) and reflect on the potential of discursive practices (Lombardo et al., 2009) to challenge gendered power relations. In the analysis of the GE plans, we treat the discourse as three-dimensional, i.e. constructed through texts, discursive practices and social practices (Fairclough, 1992). Following Fairclough, we treat texts as events linked to social practices via discursive practices. In turn, discursive practices are processes of textual

production and interpretation that leave traces in writing (Fairclough, 1992), such as the GE plans. Discursive practices are constructed in relation to social practices and their institutional realities, such as managerialist policy strategies. The discursive practices of bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking, which we identify in GE plans, are thus one dimension of discourse that reflects and constructs the social practices of gender equality promotion (see Lombardo et al., 2009). Instead of reading ‘documents as doing what they say’ (Ahmed, 2007, p. 607), we read the GE plans as documents that reflect and construct different discursive practices on equality.

In the analysis, we examine the discursive bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking of the meaning of gender equality by the GE plans (Lombardo et al., 2009). We were not interested in how aspirational the equality policies were or in how schools reviewed the implementation of previous measures; instead, we were interested in how gender equality was bent, stretched, fixed or shrunk in the GE plans in the space between the 1) state of equality represented 2) equality measures defined.

First, we analysed the representations of each school’s equality status in the sections in which the GE plans described the school culture and equality targets or reported the survey results. After scrutinizing these representations, we analysed how the measures constructed equality. GE plans that did not mention any equality measures were excluded from the analysis, as they only described the schools at a general level and indicated that school-based policies were not drafted. We paid special attention to the relation between the represented state of equality and the response measures. We were interested in how gender equality was constructed when the equality situation was or was not contextualized in relation to gendered power relations and when the measures were or were not defined in relation to the represented equality situation.

On this basis, we examined how gender equality is 1) bent to fit a variety of other goals, 2) stretched towards wider meanings or 3) fixed in different concepts and depoliticized goals as well as how 4) the inequalities represented can be shrunk to a particular issue or measure in the schools’ equality policies. In

the analysis of discursive practices, we highlighted the consequences for equality promotion when it is enhanced via GEP in basic education.

Bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking gender equality in GE plans

The GE plans were composed to address gender equality and fulfil the non-discrimination planning obligation. Thus, the plans were required to assess school culture from the perspectives of gender and other social differences. However, gender was only mentioned in about half of the plans (Table 1), and it was interpreted as a binary. The plans, which did not mention gender, did not construct *gender* equality discourses; thus, they do not meet Lombardo et al. (2009) criteria for discursive practices of *gender* equality policies. However, we feel that it is important to make visible the processes in which gender is bypassed and the meaning of equality is bent and stretched in new directions. Therefore, in this dataset, bending and stretching were understood to exclude gender from the local equality policies.

The Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986, 5a§) requires each school to assess the status of gender equality at the school. However, only 48 of the 140 plans reported asking about pupils’ experiences with inequalities (Table 1). In cases in which schools did not survey pupils about their experiences of inequality, teachers drafted general descriptions of the school’s values, organization of teaching or accessibility. When surveys had been conducted, the questions did not necessarily deal with gender equality, and the teachers did not always manage to interpret the results from the perspective of gendered power relations.

In what follows, we describe the discursive practices of gender equality in GE plans. We reprint illustrative excerpts that best describe the discursive practices of bending, stretching, fixing and shrinking.

Decontextualizing gender equality by bending, stretching and fixing

Bending (observed in 54% of the plans) was a major discursive practice in the GE plans. In these cases, equality was not articulated in terms of gender at all

Table 1. GE plans in numbers ($N = 140$ documents).

Municipality	Data collected from pupils	Gender mentioned	Discursive practices				No measures mentioned (excluded from analysis)
			Bending	Stretching	Fixing	Shrinking	
A	11/24	9/24	10	2	13	1	6
B	7/13	12/13	10	1	9	2	0
C	1/23	11/23	9	3	12	0	8
D	0/23	9/23	0	0	5	0	18
E	7/28	15/28	26	8	14	2	1
F	22/29	18/29	21	8	17	5	3
Total	48/140	74/140	76	22	70	10	36

and was instead bent to serve other premises. Bending was especially apparent in the GE plans when the gender equality situation of the school was not surveyed or the survey used dealt with gender-neutral approaches, such as preventing bullying, increasing participation, supporting learning and assessing all pupils equally. For instance, at School F121, the aim of equality and equity policies was to ‘improve pupils’ opportunities to influence and participate in issues related to their schooling’, which was achieved through the ‘activities of an active pupils’ council’ and ‘discussions of common topics in class lessons’.

In many bending cases, as mentioned above, equality and social justice were not central components of the aims and remedies of the GEP. In contrast, some bending cases placed topics related to equality on the agenda but bent them towards gender-neutral goals in which equality was not treated as a matter of social power relations. GE plan B30 exemplifies a bending case in which the equality goals or measures are not articulated in terms of gender:

The school’s priority: Physical integrity was selected as a priority in the 2019 survey. The school organised a learning module on good manners in fall 2019, and physical integrity was one part of it. For the 2020–2021 school year, the aim is to deepen what has been learned in the past.

How will this be taken into account in teaching?

Due to the prevailing corona situation, special attention will be paid to all everyday situations to ensure that students understand their right to their own physical integrity and their obligation to respect the physical integrity of others and maintain social distancing. Interpersonal and emotional skills are practised throughout the school year in different subjects and teaching situations. Particular attention is also paid to group cohesion in the classroom. (B30)

In this case, equality was represented in terms of the pupils’ right to their own physical integrity and their obligation to respect the physical integrity of fellow pupils, especially in the form of good manners and social distancing. Physical integrity is, indeed, a matter of gendered power relations in the sense that sexual harassment and violence are gendered. Nonetheless, as the above case illustrates, physical integrity was represented as an interactive situation in which pupils’ behaviour is to be controlled by rights and responsibilities. In addition, the pupils’ lack of social and emotional skills and inadequate knowledge related to physical integrity were represented as problems. Rather than disrupting the schooling culture and the power relations associated with it, the GE plan bent the meaning of equality, recasting it in terms of the good manners of individuals in the context of COVID-19. This shows how

schools have not necessarily perceived GEP (in Finnish *tasa-arvosuunnittelu*, equality planning) as related to gender and bent it towards other topics instead, such as social distancing. Through this bending, the GE plan portrayed the school as committed to equality and equity despite the fact that the meaning of ‘equality’ no longer pertained to gender (see Lombardo et al., 2009, p. 5).

In the previous example, the GE plan did not address the status of gender equality at the school. This evasion was common in the plans, as pupils’ experiences of equality were solicited in only 48 of 140 cases. Although most cases of bending did not represent the status of gender equality at the school, there were some cases in which the status was represented and articulated as a contextual construction of power relations, as in Case C54:

Pupils’ perceptions of equality and equity at their school

- There is discrimination between people of different ethnic backgrounds.
- There are prejudices related to the colour of people’s skin.
- Pupils with special needs are shouted at.
- Teachers treat girls and boys differently; boys are more likely than girls to be pointed out for different purposes.
- There should be no girl – boy divide in PE [physical education] classes.

Areas for improvement

- Language and respectful behaviour
- Respect for others
- Low-threshold interventions
- Interpersonal skills

Means and measures

During the 2021–2022 school year, the school will offer emotional and interaction lessons. Attention will be paid to pupils’ participation and dialogue skills. (C54)

In this case, the pupils indicated that the school culture perpetuated racialized, gendered and ableist practices, stating that discrimination, prejudice, unequal treatment and unnecessarily gendered groupings were present at school. The equality situation portrayed the contextual construction of gendered power relations in the school’s culture. This representation of the state of equality shows that GEP has the potential to politicize gender in local equality policies when it succeeds in articulating the gender inequalities of a school culture in terms of power relations (see Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021; Rönblom, 2017).

However, at the level of the measures, gender vanished, and it was no longer articulated in terms of power relations. The meaning of equality then was bent away from gendered, ableist and racial power relations and towards gender-neutral individuals and their social and emotional skills. Consequently, the measures required no changes in the current school

culture, and the school was represented as a neutral promoter of equality that fosters pupils' social and emotional skills, not having a role in upholding inequality. This shows how, on one hand, the bypassing of social power relations in bending cases reflects the decontextualization and individualization of the educational sciences (see Simola, 2021; Väisänen & Lanas, 2021). On the other hand, gender-neutral, consensus-seeking policies and the presumption of achieved equality may be the reasons behind the failure to address gender in contexts related to power, such as bullying and physical integrity (e.g. Edström & Brunila, 2016; Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021).

Stretching (observed in 16% of the plans) turned out to be quite similar to bending because it was used to represent equality promotion as the maintenance of ostensibly gender-neutral practices instead of as a practice that disrupts the current school culture. Both bending and stretching constructed a discourse of genderless equality. Lombardo et al. (2009) identified the stretching of gender equality with intersectionality, which proposes that gender is intertwined with diverse social differences. However, in the GE plans we analysed, equality was not approached in an intersectional manner. Instead, social differences were discussed separately and with no link to gender. Equality was then stretched beyond gender to subsume other social differences, such as differences in Finnish language skills, as in the following cases:

The school maintains the following equality and equity practices:

Language and culture:

- Assistants and language trainers who speak pupils' home languages
 - Cultural interpreters
 - Use of interpreting services at meetings with families
 - Internationalisation: trainees, twinning schools (C48)
- Integration of pupils from different linguistic and cultural groups by guiding them to interact with other pupils through school activities and by encouraging the leisure activities of migrant pupils through school activities and the Finnish model. (B26)

In these GE plans, stretching represents equality promotion as the maintenance of already adopted equity-promoting practices that do not disrupt the current school culture. In this case equality promotion is represented as a distribution of educational resources to accommodate linguistic and cultural minorities. The measures do not pay attention to intersecting differences or power relations. We found that stretching was a discursive practice used to promote equality via isolated, stagnant measures and support particular groups of pupils without conceptualizing equality as a matter of gender and gendered power relations. It was obvious when schools were stretching the meaning of gender equality to other social differences because they integrated both

gender equality and antidiscrimination policies in the same document; thus, the combined obligations covered multiple inequalities. However, such stretching embodies the drawback of combining gender equality and antidiscrimination: GE plans approach equality and equity artificially and mechanically, and the plurality of social differences silences gender. The gender-neutral tradition of Finnish education policies might partly explain the frequency of gender-neutral stretching (see Edström & Brunila, 2016).

In the GE plans, **fixing** was used to attach gender equality to specific measures that brought gender onto the agenda but did not contextualize it within the actual state of equality at the school. Fixing was recognized in half of the GE plans; it was especially common when the equality status of the school was not specified, but (gender) equality was mentioned in the measures. Without contextualization, this discursive practice did not define the equality being promoted or what power relations were being challenged, as the following measures exemplify:

Every year: Organisation of a value day, acknowledging Minna Canth's Day in classrooms; every day: paying attention to the theme constantly in all education and teaching. (A7)

Gender-role-free mentoring attitudes among teachers. (B29)

Equal assessment of learning outcomes. Teaching arrangements are suitable for both sexes. (D82)

Students are given identical tasks and tests. Pupils are guided to choose their optional subjects according to their own preferences and interests. (E96)

The choice of teaching materials takes into account the presence of equality and equity. (F120)

These excerpts illustrate how GE plans fix the meaning of equality to doable measures which can potentially make changes in schooling practices. However, it is unclear what the inequalities are that they aim to challenge. For instance, promoting gender-role-free mentoring attitudes among teachers is a progressive measure, but it is represented in the plan without contextualization to school's equality problems. Thus, such fixing did not specify what and whose equality was to be promoted because it stressed single measures over the inequalities constructed in the mundane schooling practices. In the GE plans, these decontextualized measures, such as offering equal opportunities to individuals or treating them similarly, are presented as neutral, rational solutions, which promote equality for all. By listing measures without context, the fixed measures instated equality promotion as a technical, measure-oriented practice. Such measures illustrate that fixing the meaning of equality to ostensibly neutral measures obscures

conflicting interests and ideologies (Lombardo et al., 2009, pp. 2–4). Thus, the above excerpts from the GE plans seem to embody the tendency of managerialist policies to manage equality promotion technically and efficiently without considering the complexity of gendered power relations.

In the GE plans we examined, the discursive practice of fixing was not able to politicize gender equality, as it decontextualized equality from the contextual construction of gendered power relations – even though the fixed measures originally had the potential to challenge the status quo. We identified co-educational groups as an example of the depoliticization of a transformative measure. In Finnish comprehensive schools, all school subjects are taught in co-educational groups, except PE, in which co-educational groups are optional but common. Indeed, co-educational grouping is recognized as an inclusive practice because it disrupts normative, binarily gendered school practices (e.g. Berg & Kokkonen, 2022). In the GE plans, co-educational grouping was represented as a fixed – self-evident and consensus-based solution – without any reflections on equality problems, such as gender segregation in education or misrecognition of trans-gender pupils. None of the plans introduced co-educational groups as a result of the gender equality planning process. Instead, they were represented as an already adopted practice which is to be continued.

Equality in practice is maintained through seating arrangements, mixed groupwork groups and coeducational craft and PE groups. (A2)

The teaching of crafts and PE will continue in mixed groups or in class groups. (B27)

Classes are coeducational groups. In PE, pupils are not divided into groups on the basis of gender. In handicrafts as well, all students study both textiles and technical work in coeducational groups. (C42)

In the GE plans, co-educational groups were not discussed in relation to the equality status of the school, which sidelined discussions of conflicting interests and the ideologies surrounding them. In these cases, when equality was fixed to specific measures without a consideration of the gendered power relations constructed at the school, equality promotion was managed through such free-floating solutions without politicizing gender (see Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011). According to our document analysis, it seems that GEP as a strategy might encourage these types of fixed ‘tick-box measures’ (Ahmed, 2012), which superficially appear to be ‘right’ kinds of equality promotion (Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011). However, tick-box measures do not reveal the nature of the inequality to which they are aiming to respond. Fixing equality mechanically to ‘right’ measures

without articulating gender equality in terms of power relations might silence conflicting views of experienced equalities.

Fixing, stretching and bending reflect the technical management of gender equality, as they all represent equality promotion in terms of simple solutions decontextualized from social power relations. These discursive practices represent an image of institutional progressiveness and commitment to equality promotion instead of actively challenging the school culture. This commitment produces ‘a kind of marshmallow feeling’ with regard to equality promotion, that is, ‘a feeling that we are doing enough, or doing well enough, or even that there is nothing left to do’ (Ahmed, 2007, p. 599). This feeling is produced because bending, stretching and fixing construct the image of the school as an equality promoter by misrecognizing the gendered power relations that the school culture maintains. Thus, this image of gender-equal education might actually bolster problematic power relations instead of challenging them.

Contextualizing the construction of gendered power relations via shrinking

When they adopted the practice of *shrinking* (observed in 10 equality plans), GE plans made the construction of gendered power relations visible in the institutional context and contextualized measures within the school’s equality status. Equality goals and measures were defined in relation to the concrete school context, but the measures shrank and thereby limited the meaning of equality. Shrinking was a rare discursive practice in the data of this study because schools’ equality situations were not often assessed in the GE plans; thus, there was a lack of inequalities to be shrunk. Case A11, however, represents the equality situation of the school in quantitative terms:

The state of equality: The survey shows that students feel that they can be themselves and express their gender in the way they want quite well (85.9%). Students’ gender is not perceived to have a significant impact on their assessment (84.1%). However, almost a third of respondents feel that their gender has an impact on the way they are treated in class (26.1%), although the majority feel otherwise. The majority of pupils feel that gender is irrelevant when teachers encourage their pupils in lessons (84.1%). With regard to examples of teaching materials, pupils’ opinions are divided. Moreover, 51.4% of pupils have noticed references to gender and sexual minorities. Sexual and gender-based harassment at the level of unpleasant remarks and speech has been experienced by about a third of respondents (30%).

The goals: The aim is to build a fair learning pathway without gendered role models in each subject and to identify and address discrimination.

The measures: The student council student tutors organise theme days to raise awareness of the different forms of discrimination and to identify ways to address and prevent them. The staff are an example. (A11)

Case A11 presents the status of equality at the school from a majority viewpoint. The majority viewpoint is constructed with expressions such as ‘quite well’, ‘is not perceived to have a significant impact on’, ‘although the majority feel otherwise’ and ‘the majority of pupils feel’; elsewhere, there are simply no comments on the percentages. Even though the results of the survey indicate different experiences of gendered practices, this significant portion of experiences is silenced by appealing to the experiences of the majority. The majority viewpoint fails to recognize and name discrimination and gendered practices, which are not necessarily issues for the majority. This avoidance of articulating equality problems potentially illustrates an unwillingness to represent the school culture as unequal or the lack of ability to do so.

Although Plan A11 avoids articulating equality problems, the inequalities reported in the survey results are recognized somewhat in the equality goals and measures. Thus, this case reflects the potential of the GEP process to make visible the contextual construction of gendered power relations and to keep power relations on the agenda when discussing goals and measures. However, the meaning of equality was shrunk step by step into depoliticized approaches – e.g. discrimination theme days – that sideline the complexity of the inequalities. In Case A11, defining solutions played a greater role than the articulation and politicization of equality problems. This emphasizes the managerialist tendency to address complicated social issues with simple solutions (see Ball, 2008).

In the following data, excerpted from Plan F128, the state of gender equality at the school is portrayed in terms of the contextual construction of gendered power relations in a statement by the student council:

Statement by the student council:

- Gender-related assumptions, attitudes and unequal treatment
- Teachers’ generalizations about gender-related characteristics and interests
- Division into groups according to presumed gender
- The ‘boys will be boys’ attitude is alive and well
- Inappropriate language is not sufficiently addressed (labelling a girl a ‘prostitute’, use of homophobic name-calling)

The measures:

Inappropriate behaviour is addressed in a number of ways:

- (1) In particular, teachers address the following: ‘homophobic name-calling’, ‘labelling a girl a “prostitute” and gender-related name-calling.
- (2) Inappropriate language and behaviour can be addressed in class as actions with consequences and effects. Prejudicial language is not ‘just a joke’.
- (3) The school can organize a theme week on social skills, breaking down prejudices and the culture of friendly dialogue. (F128)

The situation presented in Case F128 resembles the bending observed in Case C54, where inequalities were recognized in the school culture based on the pupils’ experiences of power relations. Both cases show that GEP can offer pupils an opportunity to politicize gender in schooling practices, but only through shrinking were gender and power relations reflected in the measures. In contrast to the bending case, C54, in which equality was bent towards individualized and decontextualized meanings at the level of the measures, the measures in Plan F128 problematize gendered power relations constructed in language usage practices, such as homophobic name-calling and catcalling. Thus, in shrinking – unlike in bending – the measures are defined in relation to recognized gendered inequality practices, although the individualization fluctuates when focusing on the social skills of the individuals.

This analysis of discursive practices has showed that, when the contextual construction of gendered power relations is addressed, GEP has the potential to politicize gender in the school context. In the shrinking cases, the gendered power relations acknowledged were reflected in response measures, which increased the GEP’s potential to politicize gender equality. However, despite this potential, the managerialist tendency to manage equality with measures that shrink equality into simple, manageable meanings sidelines the complexity of gendered power relations.

Concluding discussion

In this study, we have examined the consequences for equality promotion when it is enhanced and systemized via GEP in the context of Finnish basic education. The national drafting of GE plans is a major administrative undertaking that requires the time, effort and resources of thousands of comprehensive school staff and local educational authorities. Additionally, it has been considered a promising practice in work on Nordic educational equality (Heikkinen, 2016; Myyry, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that GEP has the potential to challenge gendered power relations. However, gender was often not even mentioned when the meaning of equality was bent and stretched in the GE plans. Additionally, as the methodological contribution of this paper shows – particularly in fixing cases – gendered power relations were often not disrupted

through the discursive practices (see also Einarsdóttir, 2020; Lombardo et al., 2009; Stierncreutz & Tienari, 2023). When equality was not contextualized in relation to gendered power relations, the technicality of GEP invited schools to fix it to simple, free-floating measures, which represented the promotion of gender equality as a depoliticized practice. However, despite these shortcomings, in shrinking cases, the contextual construction of gendered power relations was represented, and GEP had the potential to politicize gender in the school context, even if the measures shrank equality into simplified solutions. We argue that GEP has potential in gender equality promotion if the planning processes recognize contextual construction of gendered power relations and if equality promotion is not reduced to technical and rational measures (see also Ahmed, 2012; Ikävalko, 2016).

At the moment, GEP seems to be reduced to a type of managerialist technique in Finnish comprehensive schools, which leaves no room for the struggle of interests or discussions of gendered power relations. As the fixing cases illustrate, GE plans emphasized a fulfilment of rote requirements or a promotion of equality 'by the book' rather than encouraging a deeper understanding of power relations and the politicization of these relations. Following Rönnblom's (2017, p. 162) argument, the measures of equality policies 'turn out to be different forms of administrative techniques, unrelated to a political problem'. Thus, it seems that GEP turns out to be the mechanic mainstreaming of equality measures potentially because of missing resources on GEP processes and lacking gender awareness of teachers. The mechanic adoption of equality measures might not be enough to change schooling culture.

Equality promotion via GEP in Finnish basic education perpetuates a vicious cycle because of the decontextualization of education. To be transformative, GEP should make the contextual construction of gendered power relations visible and politicize gender equality; however, as long as schools fail to recognize the gendered societal and historical context of schooling, GEP will fail to challenge gendered practices and remain an empty signifier. In the worst case, GEP maintains the status quo and reinforces the school's image of itself as an equitable domain.

We stress that the problems with existing equality promotion methods do not merely concern the inadequate implementation of equality tools or their inability to challenge gendered power relations. The question more broadly concerns the decontextualized field of education and minimal resources targeted at schools which turn GEP to be a managerialist technique. Currently GEP is assumed to create structural changes in schooling practices systemically and effectively but with minimal resources and effort (see Ball, 2008). Simola (2014) suggested that these managerialist reforms

are 'firmly bolted into air', meaning that policy initiatives do not acknowledge the social context of schooling. Regarding the GE plans of comprehensive schools, this means that the lack of gender awareness in schools and teacher education (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019) and the individualization of the educational sciences (Simola, 2021; Väisänen & Lanås, 2021) should be acknowledged and taken into account in the enforcement of the GEP obligation. Without an awareness of the societal context of power relations, the state of equality cannot be critically challenged at any school.

Managerialist policies aim to address complicated societal problems via simple policy procedures, which typically fail to disrupt complex social power relations. Instead of providing an easy, effective way to systemize equality promotion in basic education, the implementation of GEP requires time and resources as well as a clarification of the obligation. GEP policy should more strongly emphasize the concept of *gender*, which is not mentioned in the name of the mandate (or 'equality planning obligation'), even though the obligation refers to the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986). Additionally, the implementation should require that resources be used to raise awareness of societal power relations in the school if the aim is to articulate gender in terms of gendered power relations and provoke discussion rather than merely implementing the obligation well or drafting a document that fulfils the requirements.

Following the example of Prügl (2011), we provide two paths for GEP to follow in the future. The first is to criticize and resist the dominant managerialist framework of equality planning and focus on the challenges inherent to gender norms and practices without systemizing equality promotion. The second is to admit the deficiencies and limitations of GEP, such as its rigidity and technicality, and 'to counter processes that normalize feminism into governmental rationalities' (see Prügl, 2011, p. 86). In the context of equality planning in Finnish basic education, we suggest choosing the latter option and paying attention to the avoidance of the depoliticization of gender equality. We suggest that the GEP obligation can be a useful reference point to appeal to in the equality work (Ahmed, 2012), provided that it does not convert political problems into neutral procedures of equality strategies (Rönnblom, 2017) or simplify complex power relations to protect the image of a gender-equal school (e.g. Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021). The implementation of GEP should approach equality work as a pedagogical practice that raises awareness and discussions of conflicting experiences of inequal school culture and avoids managing equality promotion with simple, individual-centred solutions (see Ylöstalo & Brunila, 2018). GE plans could

thereby politicize gender equality and, crucially, challenge the idea that gender equality has already been achieved.

In the Finnish case, the GEP obligation has potentially failed to politicize gender equality at schools and instead constructed the idea that schools are adequately upholding equality (see Ahmed, 2007). However, this study was limited to the analysis of documents; thus, the discussions and negotiations that preceded or followed the drafted GE plans were not considered. Although this study argues that GE plans represent equality promotion in a depoliticized manner, the planning process may have involved negotiations on the meaning of equality that were not reflected in the documents. However, we find that the discursive practices found in GE plans illustrate the tendency to fulfil managerialist obligations by constructing consensus policies and an image of gender-equal school by silencing dissent with easily manageable solutions rather than highlighting contradicting ideologies and interests (see Davies, 2003; Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2021; Ikävalko & Brunila, 2011). We recommend that future studies on school-specific equality policies enter comprehensive schools using GEP as a reference point and examine how the GEP process could politicize the construction of gendered power relations at these schools.

Notes

1. In this paper we use the concept 'gender equality planning, GEP' although the Finnish term *tasa-arvosuunnittelu* 'equality planning' does not include the term gender. In Finnish language the word 'equality act' refers to Act on Equality between Women and Men. By mentioning gender, we want to highlight that the equality planning obligation refers specifically to *gender* equality.
2. In Finnish legislation, the term '*yhdenvertaisuus*' (equity) refers to non-discrimination on the basis of age, origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, political activity, trade union activity, family relationships, state of health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics (Non-discrimination Act, 1325/2014). The term '*tasa-arvo*' (equality) refers to gender equality (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 609/1986).

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