



Global Demands – Local Practices: Working towards Including Gender Equality in Teacher Education in Finland and Sweden

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Abstract

Gender equality is a global aim that has been presented in numerous documents. However, teacher education programs in many countries still lack sustainable strategies for working towards gender equality in education. Working successfully in this area may promote more sustainable practices in schools to reach gender-fair societies. The Nordic countries are known for pro-active gender policies and they provide interesting cases for investigating achievements and struggles in the field. The purpose of this article is, from an international comparative perspective, to explore the rationales and practices when working with issues of gender equality in Finnish and Swedish teacher education and to reflect on related concepts. We describe, analyse and compare local practices, theoretical frameworks and challenges by revisiting gender and teacher education research and equality projects from the 1980s up to today. The comparative methodology chosen facilitates understanding examples from two neighbouring countries, illustrating different ways to develop policies and strategies. Local actors not only follow global claims to work with gender and equality in teacher education but also play an active role and contribute to these discourses. Our study suggests that gender equality cannot be achieved overnight; appropriate strategies need to be negotiated constantly in specific national and institutional contexts at universities and teacher education institutions.

Keywords: gender equality, gender awareness, gender inclusion, teacher education, comparative case studies, Finland, Sweden

Introduction

This article addresses rationales and practices used in work with gender equality in Finnish and Swedish teacher education (TE) from an international comparative education perspective. Working with issues of gender equality in higher education and TE can be seen as a policy demand, a normative position and a general goal, formulated globally and

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realised locally. There are regular conferences on the topic; national higher education agencies advocate its need; progressive, liberal, and conservative party programs include commitments to gender equality; even neoliberal policies strive for gender equality. Yet there are few fields where experiences and opinions lie so far apart when discussions get deeper, feelings emerge and practical solutions are sought.

TE is a special case in higher education because teachers educate the next generation to adopt or change gender patterns in society. Although the need to take gender into account has been reflected broadly in education and comparative education research (e.g. Unterhalter, 2014), in the context of different TE programs it has not been studied sufficiently, as suggested in the UNESCO guide (2015). The guide states: “A quick look at the curricula set by many TE institutions around the world [...] reveals a grave shortcoming regarding issues of gender equality” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 60). This “problem of omission” needs to be addressed by TE curriculum designers. Stromquist and Fischman (2009) have argued for the need to train teachers and school administrators to deal with conflict, misunderstanding and miscommunication regarding gender issues. They suggest that educational actors should learn to understand school culture from a gender perspective and to cope with particular gender situations instead of avoiding or ignoring them.

The Nordic countries are known for pro-active gender policies and are regarded as leaders in gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). Sweden and Finland provide interesting cases for investigating achievements and struggles in the field as both scores high in indexes of gender equality. Both have become known for their state feminist collaboration (Hernes, 1987; Lahelma & al., forthcoming). However, as we will argue below, recent research also reminds us that concepts around gender and gender equality are problematic. Feminist, queer, anti-racist and postcolonial scholars problematise what they call a “Myth of Gender Equality” (Martinsson et al., 2016). Gender-equality policies have been concerned more with equality between men and women than with multiple dimensions – or intersections – of gender and sexual diversity (Naskali & Kari, 2020).

The purpose of this article is, from an international comparative perspective, to explore the rationales and practices used when working with issues of gender equality in Finnish and Swedish teacher education and to reflect on related concepts. Our primary research question focuses on how gender equality goals are being realized in TE in Finland and Sweden. With the background of a joint Nordic history, we introduce the concept of state feminism and describe initiatives, projects and policies during the past few decades. In these descriptive result sections on the situations in Finland and Sweden, we also analyse how theoretical concepts interact with practices in gender equality work in the respective TE programs. Understanding practical and theoretical approaches to work with gender equality in TE can help develop appropriate strategies. The results are discussed with a focus on horizontal, vertical and transversal dimensions of comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017a). This comparative analysis illustrates how and why an international comparison of different national contexts adds to our analytical understanding of challenges

in the field. Finally, we shed light on the specific relation between global demands to work actively with gender equality in TE and local practices in different TE programs.

Methodological and theoretical considerations

In this article, we are inspired by Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017a) comparative case study (CCS) approach. Our chosen comparative methodology builds on observations in TE, experience in projects, analyses of reports and research literature about working with gender in TE. The predominant material consists of research publications and official reports that describe policies, projects and the work of teacher educators with gender and equality in teacher education institutions in Finland and Sweden.

The authors have both worked in the field for several decades and have often been inspired by both similarities and differences between gender policies and approaches in education in the two countries. For that reason, methodologically we also draw on auto-ethnography and use our personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs and practices (Holman Jones et al., 2013). We refer to the literature when available and make our sources clear for the reader. We are also transparent when adding our interpretations. Cohen et al. (2018) have described the importance of understanding the researcher as part of the researched world, and the clearness of descriptive data and transparency as important criteria of validity in qualitative research. We follow these thoughts when taking our own experiences and knowledge as a starting point for the following argument on concepts of gender equality in TE in a comparative perspective. It will be clear in the result chapters that we were active in the discourses and that part of the literature was authored or co-authored by ourselves, at the same time as we refer to the broader discourse in the field.

We follow roughly what Bartlett and Vavrus (2017a, 2017b) have described as the comparative case study approach; CCSs focus on three dimensions: horizontal, vertical and transversal comparison. We compare TE in Finland and Sweden on a horizontal level, but we also take vertical and transversal elements into account by considering historical and sociocultural contexts. "Context is not a primordial or autonomous place; it is constituted by social interactions, political processes and economic developments across scales and across time" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017b, p. 13). In CCS research, it is important to analyse the interlinked actions in different scales. That is why we analyse the work towards gender equality in TE, describing its development over decades in various educational contexts and networks in both countries. This contributes to our understanding of how the efforts and outcomes are connected with trends, initiatives, projects and research on local, national, international and global levels.

Analysing local practices under the regime of global demands has been discussed animatedly in international and comparative education (Robertson, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Verger et al., 2012; Parish, 2019). With a comparative approach, in line with Verger (2014), we investigate how similar education aims (such as working towards gender equality in TE) spread globally but are 'translated' into local policies. Thematising the

global/local nexus contributes to our analysis of issues of gender equality in TE; it also helps us to understand that sustainable strategies include top-down but also bottom-up measures. Moreover, we argue that we also need to discuss the influence of local trends on global policies. In this way, analyses of the recursive discussion on gender in TE in Finland and Sweden can contribute to a better understanding of the importance of the local context for international and global discussions, not only vice-versa.

Joint Nordic history: State feminist collaboration

The international declarations and agreements concerning gender equality in education were defined by the United Nations in 1979 in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and were underlined again and again in statements by the UN, OECD and EU (e.g. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995; EU, 2010; UN, 2014). Governments and education authorities have been obliged to act, which typically has meant legislation and resources for gender equality work, research and projects. TE has been regarded as an important venue. The Nordic countries have lived up to the recommendations with varied speed. In Sweden, even before CEDAW, the 1969 curriculum for the comprehensive school (Lgr69) was the first to mention '*jämställdhet*' (gender equality), which was radical; teachers should encourage students to debate and question the present (gender) situation. Finland was slower; gender equality was mentioned in school legislation in 1983, and the Act of Equality between Men and Women (609/1986) included some obligations. These were diffuse; in early documents concerning TE, gender equality was regarded as a quality of a good teacher without reference to what teachers should learn (Lahelma, 2006).

For almost four decades there has been a sustainable collaboration between the Nordic countries regarding gender equality. Research on gender and education has gradually become a strong and respected field of education research with active collaboration in Nordic networks and beyond (Lahelma et al., forthcoming). A special feature in Nordic history is "State feminism" (cf. Hernes, 1987), a strong alliance between the feminist movement, feminist equality officers and gender researchers. Already in the 1980s, the Nordic initiative was strong in a network in the Association of Teacher Education in Europe that worked towards gender equality, providing, for example, a curriculum framework on gender equality (see Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). The Nordic Council of Ministers provided resources for a large project, Nord-Lilia (1992–1994), with the specific goal of introducing gender equality into TE, with sub-projects in every Nordic country (Arnesen, 1995).

After Nord-Lilia, Nordic collaboration in gender and education research has continued, providing resources for joint projects by the Nordic Council of Ministers. Networking that is especially focussed on gender in TE has been more sporadic. One example, however, is a webpage on gender research in the Nordic countries for teacher educators

(NordGente.org). Finland and Sweden have earlier been critically investigated as examples of “Nordic Gender Equality” in education (Brunila & Edström, 2013; Odenbring & Lappalainen, 2013). In this article, we will develop this discussion by focusing on gender equality in TE.

The situation in Finland

In Finland, responsibility for providing education for teachers in primary and secondary schools was transferred to the universities as early as 1971, with a Master’s degree as the basic qualification. Finnish TE received international renown after the first PISA tests in 2000, in which Finland’s scores were both high and equal (Jakku-Sihvonen & Niemi, 2006; Simola, 2005). TE is provided at nine universities in Finland and is constantly one of the programs with high access requirements. However, there are constantly blind spots in the famous and celebrated Finnish TE, and gender is one of them (Lahelma, 2006).

Early steps: History marked out by projects

In Finland, ideas for gender reform in schools and TE were initiated from outside the field rather than by professionals. Faced with the international declarations for gender equality, the Ministry of Education founded a Commission of Equal Opportunities in Education (1984–1988). There was, at that time, practically no feminist teacher activism in schools or feminist research on gender and education. The Commission received resources for research, development projects and Nordic collaboration. The first gender projects and national network for research on gender and education started in the context of the Commission: feminist researchers collaborated with feminist equality officers in a State feminist coalition (Lahelma, 2019). Joint Nordic forums in the 1980s, such as research seminars and gender equality projects funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, were influential in the early work in Finland.

The importance of TE was already highlighted by the Commission in the 1980s (ME, 1988), but the first large projects were supported by Nordic collaboration and resources in the context of Nord-Lilia (1992–1994) mentioned above. Interestingly, however, in Finland, not a single teacher education institution (TEI) formally accepted the invitation to join the project. This suggests that gender equality was not regarded as an important issue by those who were responsible for TE. The project was implemented, instead, in several schools and one kindergarten, by a few teacher educators and researchers at some universities. The Nord-Lilia project strengthened Nordic co-operation among gender researchers perhaps more than among teacher educators (Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012).

In 1995, when Finland – together with Sweden – became a member of the European Union, the number of equality projects increased, but they tended to repeat the same aims and innovations with little change (Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012; Edström & Brunila, 2016). Whilst national, Nordic and EU resources were important for large projects, committed feminist teacher educators and researchers kept on including gender and equality

in the curricula of many TEIs. This was persistent, even though the activists experienced that they had to renegotiate small steps forward every academic year and that gender courses were not necessarily accepted as part of their teaching responsibilities (Lehtonen, 2011). This work would not have been possible without the networks of feminist gender researchers in education that started in the late 1980s (Lahelma, 2019).

One of the first sustained courses of gender equality based on feminist studies was organised at the University of Oulu, in the context of an EU project (Brunila et al., 2005). At the University of Lapland, a few teacher educators have been teaching courses on gender year after year, persistently arguing for the importance of this work (Vidén & Naskali, 2010). At the University of Helsinki, gender courses in education were organised by feminist researchers, but not at the Department of Teacher Education (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). Most TEIs did not provide gender courses or material that drew on gender studies or knowledge gained through equality projects (Lahelma & Hynninen, 2012). Although committed teacher educators worked hard, they often faced indifference, even hostility, from certain colleagues and heads of departments.

The TASUKO project and after

This was the situation in 2007 when the Ministry of Education and Culture asked researchers at the University of Helsinki to create and coordinate a national project, with relatively modest resources. This project, with the acronym TASUKO (2008–2013), was to include gender awareness in curricula and practices in all TE institutions in Finland. From the experience of the history of projects, it was evident from the start that this was mission impossible (Lahelma, 2011). But drawing on the existing networks, possibilities for an agency and small steps towards gender-awareness teaching were expected. At this time, collaboration and networking among feminist gender researchers in education were strong and there was a commitment for joint theoretical understanding. Gradually, post-structural perspectives and critical reflection of neo-liberal tendencies in gender equality projects strengthened among activists (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017; see also Lahelma, 2019).

The concept chosen in TASUKO was gender awareness, which was defined as the 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 & Hynninen, 2012). Thus it was a wide concept that included the idea of intersectionality and did not have the dichotomic and politically-loaded connotations of the concept of gender equality.

The strategy adopted was to work with committed feminist activists rather than with deans and administrators. The group of around 50 teacher educators and researchers met regularly in inspiring workshops at which concepts and strategies were also negotiated.

Courses, seminars and small-scale studies were conducted at TEIs (e.g. Lehtonen, 2011; Norema et al., 2010; Vidén & Naskali, 2012; Jauhiainen et al., 2012). Actors were invited to give talks to large audiences in Finland and other countries and to take part in high-status political workgroups. A questionnaire sent to TASUKO activists a few years after the project suggested the importance of this work for their own professional development and their institutions (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). New courses were included in the curricula. Many reported that students, but also some colleagues, realised that learning about gendering processes in education was an eye-opener. However, responsibility for gender courses remained with the activists, who were left alone when the resources ran out and possibilities to meet colleagues from other TEIs decreased. The strategy of starting with the grassroots meant that TASUKO did not manage to achieve committed leadership or translate individual commitment into collective commitment. This is one of the recurrent problems of equality work in general. As Ahmed (2012) writes, individual commitment can also be a means for the organization not to distribute commitment.

During and after the TASUKO project, important changes took place in the field of education politics. The first Government report on gender equality was published (MSH, 2010) with specific requirements concerning TE. In the revision of the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) in 2014, comprehensive schools were included in the obligation for educational institutions to produce gender equality plans. The core curriculum for basic education included a diversity of genders for the first time, and the term ‘equality’ was mentioned 50 times (NBE, 2014). Gender mainstreaming became obvious, and the National Board of Education provided a guide for teachers on gender equality (Jääskeläinen et al., 2015).

Even if the work in TASUKO may have had some impact on these changes, it would be more accurate to say that there was, at last, some political will to act in this direction among committed agents in administration (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). Whatever the background, the obligation for teacher educators to include gender awareness in their teaching is more explicitly mandatory than it was ten years earlier. There also seems to be more openness and less hostility towards the issue. However, the situation may also change suddenly. At the University of Helsinki, one of the consequences of the substantial reductions in university financing in the 2010s made by the Conservative government was to challenge the new gender courses that had been developed in the context of TASUKO (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). Again, teacher educators who found gender issues important were expected to include extra courses along with other responsibilities. The general conclusion after TASUKO is that teacher educators continue to take small steps forward. Again, there are new projects. The SETSTOP project (Developing contents for TE in Finland related to gender equality planning and equality work 2018–2019) defined its mission as follow:

The main aim of this nationwide project is to realize finally our long term dream to include themes of gender equality and non-discrimination to the curricula of all levels of teacher education in Finland [...]. In spite of numerous efforts in the history of the gender equality projects [the] dream has not yet come true. (SETSTOP, 2018)

It seems that in project after project, new and old actors hope the dream will come true but understand that only small steps will be taken; these might often be towards more equality and integrating more gender awareness, but sometimes the process could also stop or even be reversed.

The situation in Sweden

TE is taught at 28 institutions of higher education, 21 of which examined between 100 and 1200 students each during 2019 (UKÄ, n.d.) TE has been reformed several times during the past few decades (in 1988, 2001 and 2011). Now there are four different programs for educating and training teachers: preschool teacher education, primary teacher education (including education of teachers in after-school centres), subject teacher education for secondary and upper-secondary education and teacher education for vocational education. Thanks to all these reforms, perspectives on gender, ethnicity and social class have been integrated into TE. The quality of and commitment to addressing questions of social justice, equality and diversity tend to shift and are overshadowed by and are in conflict with other trends such as strengthened marketisation and liberalisation of the education sector since the 1990s (Carlson & Rabo, 2008).

Early steps: Commitment at the policy level and in schools

Gender equality in schools has been in focus in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory schools since the late 1960s (Lgr 69). The National School Board investigated and questioned rigid gender roles (Skolöverstyrelse, 1975/1978) in the 1970s. Gender differentiation was described as a relevant feature in primary schools (Wernersson, 1977). Sweden, together with Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland, participated in the Nord-Lilia project (1992–94). Only seven of the numerous Nord-Lilia projects came from Sweden, and there are only a few traces left of them (Berge, 1995). The coordinator of the Swedish projects mentioned that resources for the Nord-Lilia projects needed to be found elsewhere (Hultinger, 1995). At the same time, the National Agency for Education was very committed to gender equality, initiating many projects, follow-ups and evaluations (Bill 1994/95:164 in Hultinger, 1995, p. 94–96).

Gender-sensitive education became prominent from the 1980s in early years of schooling, specifically in day care and preschools. Preschool teachers conducted projects and filmed their own pedagogical work with children. The focus was on understanding and discussing how preschool teachers meet children (Wahlström, 2003) and “do gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In primary schools, “*genuspedagogik*” [gender pedagogy] (Svaleryd, 2003) was popular, used both by teachers and in TE programs. Gender-sensitive teaching became an important part of university teaching (Bondestam, 2004).

Although such trends can be identified, they were not necessarily mainstream. Erixon Arreman and Weiner (2007) described TE as a gendered workplace. Weiner wrote:

Swedish education policy making seems stronger on rhetoric than on practice, such that gender and *jämställdhet* have a high visibility in documentation and guidelines, but are less evident in the curricula or practices of schools or teacher education. Consequently, although there is much discussion of *jämställdhet* at various political and policy levels—for example, every party leader but one now describes him/herself as a feminist—this might be better understood as a means of reinforcing the status quo and/or of neutralizing feminist action, than of encouraging change (Weiner, 2004, p. 35).

In other words, in Sweden there was an early strong commitment to gender equality in policy documents and consensus on feminist values. Realizing these ideas in pedagogical reality has, however, been much more complex. There are ongoing negotiations about the curriculum in various TEIs.

Research-based innovations or locally varied conceptualisations?

A variety of ways to address gender-equality issues became evident in the practical work and research in TE from the 1990s and onwards. ‘Gender pedagogy’ was criticised. Instead of challenging norms and finding new pedagogical strategies, this approach risks strengthening gender stereotypes in the minds of some students, preschool teachers and teacher educators (see Karlson & Simonsson, 2011; Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013). While some people were critical because of the hetero-normative focus on girls and boys, others argued for a need to ‘complicate’ understandings of gender constructions. Around the millennium Lenz Taguchi worked with gender projects in preschool TE, drawing on post-structural feminist thinking (Lenz Taguchi, 2003; 2005). This trend entered “Pink pedagogy”, influential in preschools and preschool TE (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2011).

A report by Maria Hedlin (2010) provided a good overview of gender and equality in schools and was used in TE. Still, there is a wide range of understandings of gender and equality and its relevance among teacher educators (Hedlin & Åberg, 2011). Despite a long tradition of working for gender equality in pre-school TE, old-fashioned notions of women and girls persist in Swedish preschool TE (Hedlin & Åberg, 2018). In the views of students, there is no consensus on the content or applicability of gender perspectives in TE (Carlson, 2008; Hedlin, 2016). The different perspectives of university-bound TE and mentors in the field became evident when student teachers wanted to work with aspects of gender and sexuality in school for discussing concepts of norms, norm conflicts and power (Zackariasson, 2015).

In Sweden, norm-critical positions that problematise hetero-normativity and intersectional approaches and that take multiple dimensions of difference into account have become influential in gender discourses in higher education and TE since the early 2000s (Lundgren, 2008; Kalonaityte, 2014; Bromseth & Sörensdotter, 2012; Lykke, 2012). In (preschool) TE, norm-critical positions on gender directed attention to understanding intersections of gender with other norms in sexuality, nationality and ethnicity (Martinson & Reimers, 2020; Reimers, 2006; 2008). Some of the actors from this decade continue to reflect and provide relevant updates on the situation, for example on the role of norms in TE (Reimers, 2019).

Gender lecturers were introduced for systematic work with gender equality issues in different departments of HE, in TE since 2005. This work is practical, close to the management and research-based. The term “gender inclusion” has been used to describe it (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013). It builds on the integration of “gender as a content”, the knowledge dimension and “gender as a form” (Fogelberg Eriksson & Karlson, 2006), which applies gender-sensitive strategies and gender awareness. Gender inclusion can be systematically planned for (pre)school TE programs (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2016), provided there are both enthusiastic teacher educators and support from the management. Teacher educators play a central role in highlighting and choosing specific orientations: norm-critical, post-colonial or more mainstream equity perspectives in different TE programs (e.g. Kreitz-Sandberg, 2019a).

To conclude, different approaches can be traced back to actors in different TE programs in Sweden. Debates on gender in TE were also related to other dimensions of diversity (cf. Carlson & Rabo, 2008) and were most lively between 2000 and 2010. Although all the actors knew each other’s approaches and regularly met each other and colleagues from other Nordic Countries, including Finland, none of the approaches became mainstream. This is reminiscent of “parallel monologues” (Lindberg, 2003) in Swedish TE: research should support pedagogical development, but researchers rarely refer to each other’s studies. The decentralised TE system allows different foci in TE courses at the local universities — also regarding the way gender equality issues are addressed.

Recent trends: Mainstreaming gender equality in teacher education

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) continuously evaluates the quality of higher education programs, and gender equality is an important quality criterion. In the 2016 evaluation of TE programs, the Swedish Higher Education Authority chose a gender-equality perspective as one of the goals to be communicated and anchored in the content, design and implementation of education (UKÄ, 2016). The existence of this goal is not new, but its position at the centre of evaluation is. Among the evaluation reports of 20 TE programs for primary school teachers (Grades 4–6), only a few described systematic work for gender equality. Some gave almost anecdotal examples. Problematising dichotomous and hetero-normative understanding was obvious in very few evaluations (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2019b). Knowledge concerning gender research has not reached the majority of TE programs.

While this evaluation was being carried out, the amendment of the national curriculum for schools (Lgr11, revised 2018) took a step towards overcoming the dichotomous view of genders. Instead of talking about boys and girls, a more inclusive formulation “regardless of gender” was chosen throughout the curriculum. This can be regarded as an answer to national and international discussions on gender and sexuality and criticism of hetero-normative views. The TE evaluation with its top-down, mainstreaming goals towards

equality between men and women seems to be a step behind the seemingly more feminist-oriented school policies.

Discussion – horizontal, vertical, and transversal dimensions of comparison

By reviewing related studies on working with gender in TE, we have described and scrutinised how TE in Finland and Sweden has promoted gender equality. In the following, the results will be analysed with the focus on horizontal, vertical and transversal dimensions of comparison. From the perspective of policy development, the Nordic countries were pioneers in formulating gender-equality goals. Explicit work for gender equality in and through TE started in Sweden earlier than in Finland, but resistance was experienced in both countries. However, until today there have been only a few systematic approaches to thoroughly integrating a gender perspective into TE (Hedlin & Åberg, 2011; Kreitz-Sandberg, 2016; Lahelma & Tainio, 2019; López et al., 2017; Naskali & Kari, 2020). The horizontal comparison between the two cases showed similarities but also relevant differences in working with gender equality in TE. To compare the two cases, we needed to understand their backgrounds and histories.

In Finland, even if gender research in education has been strong since the early 2000s and researchers have collaborated in projects focusing on equality (Lahelma, 2019), earlier analyses suggest that research on gender in TE has been limited (Lehtonen, 2011). After the national project TASUKO, it proved difficult to maintain the newly found practices when the resources vanished and the commitment of institutions remained vague. The gap between highly engaged and indifferent university teachers has remained. And again, a new project has tried to “realize finally our long-term dream” (SETSTOP, 2018).

In Sweden, the importance of gender equality has broadly been accepted, but without consensus on meaningful practices in TE. A large amount of research and project work has been conducted on gender and equality in education, by both researchers and state agencies (e.g. SOU, 2010:36). Teacher educators and gender researchers have entered into communication slowly but decisively. Gender mainstreaming programs are promoted in all universities. The autonomy of universities has allowed different strategies, and in only a few cases have administrative decisions provided possibilities for long-term work (Lahelma, 2019). During the past decade, however, some follow-up research has been published. The Swedish Higher Education Authority recently required all teacher educators to present how they work with gender equality. This is an example of a top-down policy of quality control. The importance of transversal dimensions of comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017a) became obvious since gender-equality strategies in TE cannot be understood without touching on gender mainstreaming in higher education or without relating to policies and research on gender in pre-school and school education.

After reviewing the situation in the two countries, we suggest some general features that can probably be recognised and challenged in other countries as well when trying to introduce gender equality into TE. These features deal with some of the areas that Bartlett

and Vavrus (2017a) have discussed in relation to vertical dimensions of comparison. They connect closely to social structures, dimensions of difference, hegemonic language, discourses and change over time.

Firstly, there are – and need to be – recurrent debates on concepts around gender issues. Gender equality between men and women is used as an aim in important political documents. That is why it is a necessary concept in many contexts for initiating structural changes and sustainable practices, as well as for developing contents of education. This conceptualisation was typical in early gender-equality projects. However, there are setbacks when clinging to dichotomising understanding of gender. Intersectional understandings which focus on multiple inequalities and also address gender and sexual diversities in norm-critical traditions have lately become self-evident for gender researchers but have not necessarily reached gender mainstreaming in TE and HE.

In Finland, because of collaboration in the national project, the terminology and theoretical understanding among activists were relatively well shared. Lately, gender awareness was defined as a goal for TE, whilst gender sensitivity and gender responsibility are other terms used (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019; Huuki et al., 2018). There have been varied views among feminist researchers concerning equality work (e.g. Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017), which need to be reflected in TE. Theoretical discussions about the concepts used suggest that it is not easy to achieve consensus.

In Sweden, many different approaches were taken in different universities. Research on gender in TE has often been theoretically informed, but with a wide variety of underlying theoretical assumptions. Concepts such as gender inclusion (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013) and norm-critical teaching (Martinsson & Reimers, 2020) were used after earlier gender-sensitive projects. Many pedagogical strategies have been formulated during the last three or four decades such as gender pedagogy, equity work, queer or norm-critical pedagogy or feminist and post-human pedagogy (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2011). All these parallel discourses have protagonists and opponents. There is some consensus on the need both to provide knowledge and to include pedagogical strategies for gender-equality work, but the ways to do this and how strongly gender perspective should be prioritised in TE are issues that have not been settled.

The second challenge is that the history of gender-equality work in TE is a history of one new project after the other (Brunila & Edström, 2013; Lahelma, 2011), with very slow steps towards mainstreaming. In the context of a state-feminist alliance, feminist activists in the field have repeatedly built new projects with some funding from equality authorities. Gender projects are regularly under-financed and constrained. Gender-equality work takes place under the regime of the neo-liberal university reforms in which marketing, testing, competition and technical goals override thorough theoretical or pedagogical reflection. Feminist scholars in the neoliberal Academia in various national contexts maintain, however, their critical focus with a range of strategies, despite increasing pressures to conform (Acker & Wagner, 2019).

In this article we have also shown that the alliance of State feminism and feminist researchers has developed differently in Sweden and Finland, countries with a joint history and close collaboration, known for their gender-equal policies. Drawing from this experience, we suggest that each country needs to work according to the immanent logic of their university systems, without direct copying from other countries.

Comparisons on the horizontal level illustrated shared and diverging realities in HE that caught our attention. The CCS approach by Bartlett & Vavrus (2017a) allowed us also to shed light on the way vertical and transversal dimensions like histories and social institutions shape the context for gender-equality work and the roughly interwoven local, national and Nordic networks of actors in the field. Policies for gender equality in TE are dominated more by initiatives and time-limited projects than by a systematic and fore-sighted process. Constant efforts to build consensus and inspire discussions regarding the importance of and strategies for gender equality seem to be inevitable.

Thirdly, gender projects often encounter reluctance or indifference on the part of the institutional administrations at the universities. Sometimes it seems that strong gender awareness in the form of ‘we are already gender equal’ can be an obstacle to long-term, efficient work. Gender is a difficult and sensitive concept. Studies in Finland (Lahelma & Tainio, 2019; Vidén & Naskali, 2010) suggest that some teacher educators do not want to talk about gender because they are afraid of doing it ‘wrong’ and because the theme provokes emotions. In Sweden, some examples of student teachers being drawn in between positions were reported (Zackariasson, 2015). Our analysis that recalls precisely these elements in Finland or Sweden is, however, not necessarily related to the specific situation in the national TE system. On the contrary, we might have been able to find similar tendencies if a comparable study had been conducted in both contexts. The positioning of student teachers, for example, needs to be investigated more closely since we know that student organisations have also had an important influence on triggering gender-equality discussions. Recently, trends can be seen where gender researchers are ridiculed and institutions are closed and reopened, sometimes in line with political shifts in government. This is also a topic that needs more attention in future international comparative research.

Conclusion: Global Demands and Local Practices

Over the years, the importance of working with gender and equality has been emphasised again and again in national and international resolutions and declarations, but shortcomings of working with the theme in TE have been reported (e.g. UNESCO, 2015). We aimed to shed light on the specific relation between global demands to work actively with gender equality in TE and local practices in different TE programs. Our study shows how researchers and teacher educators in Finland and Sweden have worked with these questions. Our study, with its focus on the literature in the field, suggests that these actors not only follow global claims to work with gender and equality in TE but have also played an active role and contributed to these discourses.

Global policy ideas are constantly and actively reinterpreted and modified by a range of actors on the national and local levels “according to their own symbolic frames and institutional settings” (Verger, 2014, p. 15). However, the global demands have an impact not only on local policies; the influence also goes in the other direction. Drawing from auto-ethnographic analyses, embracing and foregrounding our own subjectivity rather than attempting to limit it (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008), we suggest that steps taken in Finland and Sweden are being observed and followed internationally. Both countries have a reputation for gender equality. In the field of education, Finnish and Swedish feminist researchers are often invited to be key-note speakers and participants in projects and workshops of international organs such as UNESCO and EU, as well as in other countries (Lahelma et al., forthcoming). That means local cultures of working with gender and equality in the Academia in Finland and Sweden are often used by international colleagues to argue for the need to develop strategies further in their own university contexts. That creates a responsibility to continue working with these issues locally without pretending that all problems are already solved. Extending comparisons to countries that at first sight may seem to be less similar could be a next step to developing our understanding of gender equality work, and also of comparative methodologies.

To summarise, we want to share the experience that gender equality cannot be achieved overnight; appropriate strategies need to be negotiated and interpreted constantly in specific national and institutional contexts in universities and TEIs. A combination of top-down mainstreaming initiatives and grassroots activism seems to promise at least some success in facilitating gender equality in and through education – although the work will never be easy or completed. The work needs sustainable financing as a form of recognition, networking between actors and theorising, so that strategies do not become instrumental. An analysis of the theoretical foundations of the reinvestigated studies indicates that local practices are influenced not only by policymakers or context factors but also by the theoretical prioritizations of stakeholders in the field. We also want to highlight that challenges are to be expected and that actors in the field need to be prepared to meet resistance. This work depends on constantly ongoing negotiation, engagement for appropriate interpretations and a continuous struggle.

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