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Taking action to make gender equality reality – Causes and backgrounds of the differences in learning outcomes between and within genders in basic education

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In the National Education Evaluation Plan for the period 2020–2024, one of the tasks given to the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is to examine what factors are linked to the differences in learning outcomes within and between the genders. The aim is to examine how the different, often unidentified norms related to gender and gender equality create, repeat and strengthen the existing structures and stereotypical views and assumptions. In addition, the report looks at how and from what kind of points of view efforts have been made to promote gender equality and non-discrimination in education in different development and research projects. Attention is paid to the different ways gender differences and other differences are understood and what may have followed from the points of view that have been chosen.

The material used in the report consists of evaluations, studies and reports as well as documents from the steering of education, which concern gender equality, non-discrimination, learning outcomes and gendered and cultural practices in education and training. The examination focuses on government programmes, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, gender equality projects in basic education, national learning outcomes evaluations, international assessments of learning outcomes, and reports and studies conducted on wellbeing since the beginning of the millennium. The material is examined from the points of view of theoretical approaches related to gender and gender equality.

The report looks at and describes the differences and similarities of different thinking models, structures and practices. In addition, it has been investigated how different approaches define the genders and produce differences in education and training and what kind of consequences they may have for learning. In the report, the perspective has been shifted from examining the background factors that explain the learning outcomes of an individual to looking at education and training practices, learning contexts, interaction and different structural factors. This report shows how the structures and practices in society, training, education and everyday schoolwork

produce different kinds of agency and distinctions. They build and maintain different assumptions and, consequently, agencies, treatment and hierarchies for the different genders and for children and young people coming from different backgrounds.

The basic premise in education is gender equality and non-discrimination. The national assessments of learning outcomes as well as international and Finnish studies of learning outcomes have been used as indicators of gender equality in education. Learning outcomes are evaluated in FINEEC's assessments of learning outcomes and in international studies (e.g., PISA, PIRLS and TIMMS). According to the results of these evaluations and studies, Finnish children and young people continue to do well in them. On the other hand, learning outcomes have become polarised between pupils with poor competence and pupils with good competence in the past few years. There are pupils with good and poor competence among both girls and boys. For a good reason, attention has been paid to the weaker competence of boys in the learning outcome differences. However, less attention has been paid to the fact that the differences in learning outcomes have also increased between girls. Links have been observed between the differences in learning outcomes and the socioeconomic background factors of children and young people, segregation within cities, motivation and attitudes to learning. Inequality in education and training should be discussed in relation to the inequalities in society. Increasing social inequality weakens equal opportunities to do well in the educational path. It is important to pay attention to how education repeats both inequalities and privileges and how these practices, treatment and assumptions can be changed.

The aim is to provide all children with a safe place to study and equal opportunities to act and fulfil themselves. Gender equality is taken for granted and considered to be generally accepted attitudes and ways of speaking, which teachers also contribute to by talking about gender equality themselves. However, research on education and training has shown that the Finnish education system contributes to producing, maintaining and renewing gendered agency and structures. When discussing gender equality in basic education, we should look at the practices at schools and how teachers act in education and teaching tasks. Everyone working in education and training should identify the ways their own actions maintain and strengthen the norms and differences affecting pupils.

Based on the results of the report, the group of experts proposes the following measures:

1. Developing the school culture to promote gender awareness.

Gender awareness will be brought into the school culture of every school as part of valuing diversity. The gender awareness of activities begins with becoming aware of the phenomenon. Therefore, the concepts of gender equality, non-discrimination and diversity will be discussed and explained in schools between the staff and together with the pupils. The school must see to it that gender aware activities are implemented in different situations and learning environments. Special attention will be focused on how learning and teaching situations produce gendered expectations and agency and how these can be dismantled.

The school culture will actively support diversity and concrete measures will be taken to implement the diversity objectives in the curriculum. It must be ensured that no one is offended or ignored because of their gender expression, cultural or language background, state of health, sexual orientation, disability or some other reason related to their person. The aim will be a school environment that is safe for everyone.

2. Functional equality and non-discrimination plans to be used as genuine tools at school.

A gender aware school culture is based on jointly drawn up equality and non-discrimination plans. Under the Act on Equality between Women and Men, education providers and schools are responsible for preparing school-specific functional gender equality plans in cooperation with staff, pupils, students and guardians. The plans are aimed at promoting gender equality and non-discrimination in everyday school activities. Schools' gender equality plans must contain concrete tools for gender aware activities. A functional plan is a practical one. It is anchored to everyday school activities, for example, as part of the curriculum, and to the annual schedule. The plans will be based on the initial situation in the school.

Equality plans will be built communally, with an emphasis on concrete operating models. It is advisable for the school to set up a working group consisting of both staff members and pupils to be responsible for equality planning. The working group will be sensitive to power relationships and make sure its members are equal in the group. It will identify different norms, prejudices and stereotypes linked to differences based on how society is built, such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, health, wealth and language skills. At the same time, the group will seek ways of overcoming inequalities in the practices of the school, teaching practices and mutual interaction between everyone. In equality planning, the working group will propose concrete ways of preventing different kinds of discrimination and harassment. It will also be responsible for ensuring that equality plans become established practices in all of the school's activities and will also be known outside the school. Families will be invited to join the activities and cooperation will also be carried out at the level of the entire municipality so that the conducted work will become visible and will be documented, and the ideas can also be adopted by other schools. Gender quality planning will be understood as continuous activity, not only as filling in documents. The working group will be responsible for ensuring that equality issues are paid attention to regularly. Its members must keep bringing the matter up with both the staff and the pupils. The school must name equality agents, whose task will be to follow the current debate on equality and bring equality issues regularly into discussion at school.

3. Norm-critical pedagogy will promote gender equality and non-discrimination at school.

In basic education, equality and non-discrimination will be promoted by mainstreaming gender awareness, meaning that the gender perspective will be taken into account in all of the school's activities.

It will be essential to develop the school culture into a learning environment that takes into account all pupils and adults and encourages every member of the community to think and do things together. In addition, attention will be paid to teacher-pupil interaction so that it will not renew inequalities and prejudices related to matters such as gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, language or wealth. The sense of being heard and being treated equally will also strengthen pupils' positive experiences of learning at school. It will also strengthen their understanding of different life situations and resources and, at best, strengthen mutual caring and solidarity.

Pupils will commit themselves to the activities better when there is a suitable level of coherence between their personal characteristics, values and needs and the teaching practices. Together, these will improve pupils' academic performance and belief that school is important and increase their positive experiences of school and general wellbeing. A warm atmosphere, supportive of learning and created by the teacher and the whole class together, will enhance pupils' engagement in the school community. Schools must invest in interaction between pupils and in cooperation with homes.

A norm-critical approach is one way of making schools, school practices and school culture more equal and non-discriminatory for all. A norm-critical approach also includes an understanding of gender and gendered practices, and identifying and overcoming such practices will give all pupils and teachers significantly more leeway and opportunities to act. The change begins from becoming aware of one's own thinking and actions.

4. Guidance counselling practices will promote gender awareness.

Guidance counselling will be developed and made gender aware so that it will encourage all young people to look at their opportunities for further studies from a broader perspective. Guidance counsellors should be aware of and identify the stereotypical views and assumptions related to gender and consider what could be done to dismantle them in guidance counselling. It would be important for guidance counsellors to identify the influence of culture on pupils as well as on themselves. Guidance counselling will also be partly the responsibility of every teacher. Teachers can pay attention to gender aware guidance counselling in their own subject, for example, by explaining in what kind of work the school subject concerned is useful and what kind of job opportunities studying it may open up. Pupils' working life periods must be developed so that they will promote gender awareness better and will not renew gendered educational choices and careers.

5. Paying attention to how teaching groups are formed.

Attention must be paid to how classes are formed, to class sizes and to the diversity of groups of pupils because the achievement level of the teaching group affects the pupil's achievement. For example, it has been observed that the pupil's competence and skills improve if the achievement level of the class is high. Every class should have students with both weaker and better competence and skills. It is also important to discuss teaching pupils in small groups receiving support and how these groups are formed. By paying attention to how the

class is formed, opportunities to interact with one another will be created for people with different backgrounds. This way they will learn mutual caring and getting on with many kinds of people and gain an understanding of different life situations, backgrounds and diversity. This will also strengthen the sense of community and the perception of group phenomena in all equal activities.

6. Learners' confidence in their own competence and skills will be strengthened and made visible.

Teaching will be developed to make it more goal-oriented, and self-assessment of how the objectives have been achieved will be increased. The teacher will prepare clear, concrete objectives for the study unit. Teaching will be developed and made more reciprocal by enabling pupils to also set their own goals and commit themselves to studying according to them. The pupil will receive feedback that promotes learning and will also give feedback to the teacher. The pupil will know what kind of competence is being assessed at any given time and how the competence can be demonstrated. During the learning process, the teacher will give continuous and encouraging feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in the pupil's competence and skills. Competence can also be diversely demonstrated in ways other than in writing. This kind of assessment could help young people with weaker competence and skills. Pupils must be encouraged to do exercises regularly at home. Teaching should be made more concrete, diverse and systematic to enable pupils to understand things.

7. The importance of reading will be emphasised to pupils and new methods will be used to make reading interesting.

The importance of reading must be further emphasised and every pupil must be encouraged to read. Teachers should set an example and with their actions inspire each other and children and young people to read different kinds of texts. For example, the diversity of both the themes and the authors will be paid attention to when books are chosen. It will be understood that books are a window to the world and to understanding diversity. Schools will use different communal ways of reading and writing and book campaigns. They will also invite writers as guests. Books become a part of the living practice of schools.

Study skills are largely linguistic and require practising. Pupil-centred assignments that include problem-solving, varying working methods and communal reading and writing methods must be increasingly used at school. Furthermore, teachers can take advantage of pupils' free-time text practices in the instruction. Every teacher will also be a teacher of tongue in their own field of science.

Reading will be supported among children and young people by paying attention to their interests and resources and, for example, the strengthening of their own identity and language skills. This should be valued and made visible in the school community. In addition, the studying of mother tongue must be enhanced throughout comprehensive school so that studies in upper secondary education are realistic.

8. Wellbeing competence to be made part of everyday school activities.

Wellbeing will be understood broadly, especially as a communal issue, so that everyone working or studying in the school will experience a sense of belonging, have an opportunity to feel well and fulfil himself or herself, help and support others, and contribute to the development of the school culture and practices. When examining the differences in wellbeing between and within the genders, it can be seen that the wellbeing issues related to the differences extend to socially and culturally produced practices, norms and attitudes. For example, pupils belonging to different minorities cannot find a safe place in the school community because of racism or bullying. To influence these practices, norms and attitudes, the whole society needs to have a more strategic approach, make them more widely visible, debate, change attitudes and do things differently.

9. Children and young people in a vulnerable position – the school’s ability to handle inequality.

Making gender equality and non-discrimination a living practice in all activities of the school will strengthen the transformation of the entire school, teaching, mutual interaction, treatment and assumptions in a more diverse direction. As a result, more attention will be paid to different backgrounds, resources, needs and wishes. Children and young people will not become labelled or marginalised because of their gender or different background factors such as their socioeconomic status, immigration background, regional segregation or segregation within cities. Positive special treatment can be used as a way of improving pupils’ equal opportunities when the starting points for learning are different.

10. The education provider will monitor the implementation of gender equality and non-discrimination and how attention is paid to gender awareness in basic education.

The education provider will regularly evaluate and monitor the implementation of gender equality and non-discrimination in its activities and take the necessary measures to promote their implementation. The promotion measures must be efficient, appropriate and correctly timed considering the operating environment, resources and other circumstances. In addition, the education provider will work in cooperation with the different administrative sectors to promote gender equality and non-discrimination.

11. Promoting gender equality and gender awareness in teacher and guidance counsellor education.

In teacher education, the themes of equality and non-discrimination will be included in all teaching and other activities, in strengthening the personnel’s expertise and in the studies of all students in teacher and guidance counsellor education.

To promote gender equality and non-discrimination, gendered practices and education and training practices related to other differences that create inequality must be identified in a research-based manner in teacher education. The objectives the National Core Curriculum

for Basic Education sets for gender awareness in teaching will be paid attention to in the education. This requires that gender and other concepts creating differences be explained and the structures maintaining them be dismantled during the studies. Conceptual understanding will be strengthened in a way that will help future teachers and guidance counsellors in all their activities to identify and overcome structures and practices that create inequality. This is because the issues cannot be identified and gender equality and non-discrimination cannot be promoted without an understanding of the concepts. Research literature on gender equality and non-discrimination will be included in the course literature and teaching modules in teacher education. Separate study units on the theme will be required and the theme must be paid attention to in the contents of the teaching practice and different school subjects.

Teacher education that promotes gender equality and non-discrimination requires training and in-service training to be provided to the entire teacher education staff. The best and most efficient method would be to strengthen the research-based approach and require the staff in teacher education to have expertise in gender equality and non-discrimination.

Gender equality and non-discrimination are essentially linked to societal literacy, understanding that school and teaching are part of societal activities related to power and part of the prevailing social orders, but that they can also dismantle the prevailing social orders. To explain how pupils' learning is linked to their background and the surrounding socioeconomic and cultural community, an approach based on sociology and social sciences will be required alongside knowledge of psychology and subject didactics. Teacher education will strengthen both the staff's and the student's wider understanding of the mechanisms and issues of inequality.

12. Gender equality and gender awareness to be made part of further education and in-service training.

Sufficient earmarked funding and resources will be reserved for further education and in-service training. Teachers' in-service training and further education should focus on a community-based school culture and gender aware teaching. Education that promotes gender equality and gender awareness will be made systematic, binding and accessible and it will be adopted in the whole country. Training will be required for all actors in the steering of education at both the national and the municipal level, and for policymakers. The themes of gender diversity, gender equality and non-discrimination will be paid attention to in teachers' personal development plans.

The themes of gender equality and gender awareness should also be included in the education and training management studies and in the studies required of principals. This is because management is in a key position in the work carried out to change and develop school in a more equal and non-discriminatory direction. The development of principals' management skills will support the reform of the school culture in schools. A shared vision that everyone will strive for, and objectives and concrete plans for gender equality and non-discrimination will be essential in pedagogical management.

13. Gender equality and particularly the mainstreaming of the gender perspective will be implemented in all political steering of education.

A national and concrete gender equality programme will be integrated into the political steering of education. Its implementation will be monitored and evaluated systematically across government terms. The gender equality programme will take into account and use the initiatives and objectives of gender equality policy in the promotion of gender equality.

Quantitative and qualitative research data on gender equality and non-discrimination will be used in all political steering of education. Focusing merely on qualitative data is not enough to increase the understanding of factors that produce and renew inequality, which is why the position of qualitative research will be strengthened. Qualitative research data will be needed in political steering, among other things. The problem with qualitative data and the idea of background factors may be that they strengthen categorical thinking and do not provide better understanding of the structures, ideologies or stereotypical views that renew these matters. Qualitative research and an understanding of the practices used in education and training will therefore be needed. If we want to bring about a change in gender equality and non-discrimination, the only way to do it is to influence education and training practices. However, trying to identify the problems is not enough. What is needed is identification of and research on existing and new inequality issues.

More concrete, measurable objectives the implementation of which can be systematically monitored across government terms must be drawn up for policy programmes, especially for the gender equality programme. It must be considered how the initiatives and objectives of gender equality policy could be made better use of in education policy to promote equality and non-discrimination. However, achieving this requires sufficient resources. The Government and the Ministry of Education and Culture must ensure that long-term funding will be provided to research on gender equality and non-discrimination. All other funding programmes also require attention to be paid to gender equality and non-discrimination.

14. Paying attention to gender equality and genders in learning material.

Gender equality issues and non-discrimination issues will be taken into account in the planning of school books and online material. Special attention will be paid to themes that go beyond gender and binary gender and to gender sensitivity in learning material. The norm-critical approach can be used as one starting point in them when looking at the diversity of genders and the various differences. Gender-aware content and concrete tools will support teachers in discussing themes in which gender equality is taken into account.

Keywords: basic education, equality, non-discrimination, teaching, differences in learning outcomes, gender, gender awareness, teacher training, inequality