Designing the Finnish basic education core curriculum: the issue of gender binarism

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a novel process perspective on educational equality policies by examining the relationship between gender equality discourses and gender binary inequalities in the deliberative design process of the Finnish Basic Education Core Curriculum 2014. The analysis applies Nancy Fraser’s theory of three-dimensional justice to feedback comments (n = 73) and the equality statements included in the draft and final core curricula. The study demonstrates how gender equality discourses affirm or transform gender binary inequalities and how they changed statements between curriculum versions. The findings show that transforming gender binarism was possibly a challenge to promoting equality in the curriculum design process: No discourse alone was able to transform binarism, and only discourses affirming binarism changed the final curriculum. This paper argues that a combination of redistributive and recognitive equality discourses can contribute to the transformation of gender binarism to make it a core element of educational equality discourses.

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Introduction

Gender binarism has been a perpetual obstacle to gender equality in education policies in Western societies (Keddie and Ollis 2019; Paechter 2021), including Finland (Brunila and Kallioniemi 2018; Lahelma and Tainio 2019). Binarism is problematic because it constitutes a status hierarchy which prioritises heteronormative practices and misrecognises the diversity of individuals and the fluidity of gender (Butler 1990; Ilkävalko and Brunila 2019; Paechter 2021). This article presents a novel process perspective on Finnish educational equality policies by examining the relationship between gender equality discourses and gender binary inequalities in the deliberative design process of the Finnish National Basic Education Core Curriculum 2014 (FNCC2014).

Previous curriculum analyses on gender and equality have focused on published curriculum documents (e.g. Lappalainen and Lahelma 2016; Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019; Ziliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017; Myyry 2020), but the debates that
preceded the final documents have remained unexamined. This paper extends the policy analysis of a curriculum document to the discourses emerging from the feedback comments collected during the design phase of the curriculum. Like Ball (2015), I approach the FNCC2014 both as a policy text and as a social discourse emerging from policy debates that reflect and construct a social reality and an understanding of gender equality (Fairclough 1992, 2013). The study illustrates the possibilities offered by a relatively open curriculum design process for promoting feminist demands in education policy debates.

Previous studies have demonstrated that, like other Nordic countries, Finland pictures itself as a model of equality in which gender equality is an achieved state of affairs (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2015; Edström and Brunila 2016; Nygren, Martinsson, and Muliniari 2018). From this perspective, Finnish basic education constitutes a cornerstone of equality by providing free nine-year comprehensive education. Finnish education policies have been framed within the liberal socio-democratic idea of equality and have taken a neutral stance on social differences, such as gender. These gender-neutral policies have normalised and depoliticised gendered structures and norms (Lappalainen and Lahelma 2016; Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019; Ikävalko and Brunila 2019).

Since the 1980s, a neoliberal ethos has become more prominent in Nordic policy space alongside a socio-democratic model (Nygren, Martinsson, and Muliniari 2018; Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019). Neoliberalism emphasises individual freedom, efficiency, and measurability in equality approaches and is hostile to aspirations to dismantle binary inequalities, such as gender segregation and discrimination against non-binary identities (Brunila and Rossi 2018; Ikävalko and Kantola 2017). Although feminist scholars (e.g. Edström and Brunila 2016; Ikävalko and Brunila 2019) have criticised these gender-neutral policies for decades, neutrality has framed the understanding of equality, and the transformation of gender binarism has not been adopted as an educational policy goal in Finland. For instance, the FNCCs (educational administrative guiding documents) of 1970, 1985, 1994, and 2004 have emphasised gender-neutral policies and taken gender binarism for granted (Myyry 2020; Riitaoja 2013). Gender-neutral curricula are problematic because they naturalise a binary gender order and leave social binary inequalities unquestioned (Lahelma and Tainio 2019; Lappalainen and Lahelma 2016; Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017).

Gender-neutral curricula show that educational equality policies have poorly adopted feminist scholars’ tenets to challenge gender binarism. Scholars have rightfully demanded post-modern equality approaches (Ollis 2017) that emphasise ‘heteroglossic’ gender diversity and challenge binary gendered practices instead of obscuring and eliminating gender ‘monoglossia’ (Francis and Paechter 2015), which is characteristic of liberal education policies (Edström and Brunila 2016; Ollis 2017). These post-modern approaches avoid the reification of gender binarism and essentialism and view gendered patterns as ‘socially constructed, rather than innate’ (Francis and Paechter 2015, 777). However, post-modern approaches have been criticised for their excessively theoretical deconstruction of truth and knowledge (Ollis 2017). Moreover, to raise awareness of binary inequalities, it is crucial for school community members to self-reflectively recognise gender norms and structures. However, the implementation of post-modern approaches is often inadequately resourced or based on short-term projects (Ollis 2017; Lahelma and Tainio 2019). Therefore, it has been challenging to adopt such approaches in educational practices (Ollis 2017) and reconcile them with education policies (Brunila and Ylöstalo...
2015), even though feminist scholars have considered them superior to other equality approaches for decades.

Nonetheless, public discourse, statistics, and legislation in Western societies increasingly recognise gender diversity and non-binary identities (Paechter 2021), reflecting post-modern questioning of normative gender binarism. Accordingly, the 2015 Amendment of the Act of Equality between Women and Men (609/1986) in Finland obligated primary schools (grades 1–9) to recognise gender diversity and to systemically challenge binary gender patterns. These obligations challenge the gender-neutral ideal of education practices and follow decades of struggle by feminist scholars for post-modern approaches. Such equality approaches have gained visibility in the FNCC2014, which refers to a gender-aware school culture and awareness of gender diversity (Kjaran and Lehtonen 2018; Lahelma and Tainio 2019; Myyry 2020; Naskali and Kari 2020; Zilliacus, Paulsrud, and Holm 2017). However, despite the visibility of post-modern approaches, gender neutrality and gender binarism are deeply rooted in the equality discourses of the FNCC2014, which embodies an ongoing transition in educational equality policies (Myyry 2020).

The core curriculum is a normative and guiding document that includes obligatory elements to be followed in local curricula but also requires amendments based on local needs. FNCC versions were released in 1970, 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2014. Finnish curriculum design has not been dependent on party politics because the Finnish National Agency of Education (FNAE), an educational expert organisation, has coordinated and written all core curricula except the first in 1970 (Halinen 2018). The FNAE launched the latest curriculum design process in autumn 2012, and the FNCC2014 was published in late 2014 (Halinen 2018, 77–78). The Finnish curriculum design process is deliberative and inclusive by nature. During the design process, the FNAE prepared FNCC2014 drafts in collaboration with hundreds of education experts and the drafts were open to public discussion. Private individuals, NGOs and other stakeholders, and teachers and other experts were offered the opportunity to provide feedback on the drafts. (Halinen 2018; Säily et al. 2021)

My aim is to examine how educational gender equality discourses affirm or transform gender binary inequalities and how they changed gender equality statements between a draft and a final curriculum document. To do this, I apply Nancy Fraser’s theory of three-dimensional justice and transformative policies, acknowledging that ‘(in)justice is not equal to (in)equality’ (Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019, 338; also Keddie and Ollis 2019). In the next section, using Fraser’s conceptualisation, I illustrate how transformative three-dimensional equality approaches can challenge gender neutrality and gender binary inequalities.

**Three-dimensional gender equality**

In this study, I approach equality from the perspective of participatory parity, which requires social arrangements that allow all people to participate as peers. According to this perspective, institutionalised obstacles to equality need to be defined and dismantled three-dimensionally. (Fraser 2005.)

Equality can be considered to consist of three dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser 2005). The *redistributive dimension* focuses on class-like
inequalities and the maldistribution of resources constructed by social structures, which can be remedied through the reallocation of material and human resources (Fraser 2005; also Keddie 2012). Class-related injustices, such as poverty, social dysfunction, school abandonment, and underachievement in the field of education, have been remedied with extra funding or through the reorganisation of resources (Fraser 2005; Power 2012).

The **recognitive dimension** focuses on misrecognised institutionalised practices and values which maintain cultural domination, non-recognition of, and disrespect for social groups (Fraser 2005, 2007; Power 2012). To overcome misrecognition, equality policies are required to revaluate marginal identities, raise awareness of multiple identities or cultural diversity, and transform institutionalised norms and practices.

The recognitive dimension is divided into identity and status politics. Identity politics make the existence of monolithic identity groups visible, whereas status politics question structural and institutionalised status hierarchies (Fraser 2000, 2007). Collective engagement with identity politics enables resistance against subordination, makes the existence of marginalised groups visible, and gives voice to the silenced (Keddie 2020, 2012; Fraser 2000; 2007). However, identity politics oversimplify ‘matters of equity and homogenized and binarized gender’ (Keddie 2020, 522) and depoliticise institutionalised inequalities by ignoring the structural, political, and cultural aspects of gender equality (Keddie 2020, 2012; Fraser 2007). In contrast, status politics aim to challenge the status subordination of groups and individuals and reform the cultural norms, values, and practices that maintain social inequalities (Fraser 2000, 2007). These norms, values, and practices govern the gender performativity and subjectivity of all gendered individuals.

The **representation dimension**, the discursive framing of an equality policy subject, determines who is included in or excluded from equality policies, such as curricula. Policy framing is embedded in redistributive and recognitive approaches while setting ‘the stage on which struggles for justice are played out’ (Fraser 2005, 74, 76). This framing can be either affirmative or transformative. Affirmative framing is based on normative taken-for-granted assumptions which maintain social inequalities. By contrast, transformative framing aims to change the deeply rooted rhetoric of equality policies by critically reviewing representations of policy subjects (Fraser 2005). In this study, I approach gender binarism as a form of Fraserian affirmative framing that maintains the present gender equality problems. The policies framed within binarism subtly affirm the taken-for-granted nature of binarism and exclude the diversity of gender from the equality approaches. As stated above, binarism appears to be the most persistent obstacle to gender equality in education (e.g. Brunila and Kallioniemi 2018; Paechter 2021).

Previous studies have traced Fraserian justice dimensions in education policies and practices (e.g. Power 2012; Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019) and illuminated the affirmative and transformative potential of implemented policies (Keddie and Ollis 2019; Lappalainen and Lahelma 2016; Ollis 2017). My study intertwines these two viewpoints, by examining the redistributive and recognitive dimensions, but also the affirmative and transformative framing of the equality discourses. I combine these two viewpoints because policies that try to transform gender binarism require, first, a critical stance towards the discursive framing of policy representation and, second, the reconciliation of the redistributive and recognitive dimensions of justice. Thus, this study contributes to the discourse on the challenge of deconstructing gender binarism in Nordic education policies.
Text data

The primary data used in this study consisted of feedback comments collected as part of the curriculum design process launched by the FNAE, which asked for the opinions of the public on the FNCC2014 draft in spring 2014. These feedback comments were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992).

The secondary data comprised the draft (511 pages) and final versions (549 pages) of the FNCC2014. Both documents comprised two main sections: general curriculum principles (e.g. aims, concept of learning, and assessment) and the curriculum of each subject (Halinen 2018). I examined the differences in gender equality statements between the draft and the final curriculum, and analysed how the gender equality discourses emerging from the feedback comments potentially led to changes between the two curriculum versions. The comparative analysis of the two versions focused only on statements that attracted feedback comments.

Feedback comments on the 511-page curriculum draft were collected on the FNAE website and by means of an electronic survey conducted in April and May 2014. The FNAE website, which was accessible to anyone, received 2,517 feedback comments. The electronic survey was sent to the local education authority, municipalities (n = 298), who forwarded it to their schools. The questionnaire was then completed by teaching professionals on a voluntary basis. Seventy-eight of 298 teaching professionals (teacher groups, individual teachers, municipalities, or schools) responded to the survey (in Finnish). I retrieved all the feedback from the FNAE’s archives. For the analysis, I traced the comments on gender and equality from all the feedback.

A word search revealed that ‘gender’ or ‘equality’ was mentioned in 168 feedback comments, 117 of which focused on gender equality (Table 1). I filtered the text data to include only feedback that represented an understanding of gender equality, such as gender equality measures or problems (Bacchi 2009). The final data consisted of 73 comments, 16 of which were made by teaching professionals participating in the electronic survey, and 57 were posted to the FNAE website by private persons, such as parents and higher education students or teachers, but also by NGOs, especially equality and education organisations. The comments ranged in length from 8 to 121 words. The cumulative number of comments by subject are shown in Table 1.

Methods

Analysis: phase one

In the first phase of the analysis, I focused on the curriculum design process and analysed the discourses emerging from the feedback comments. I examined how educational gender equality discourses affirm or transform gender binary inequalities. I found that the relationship between discourses and policies was reciprocal (Anderson and Holloway 2020): feedback comments constructed discourses that shaped policies; in turn, policy processes, such as curriculum design, offered a platform for discourses related to gender equality. I used Bacchi’s (2009) ‘what’s the problem represented to be’ approach, which allowed me to focus on representations of equality problems, the gender and equality assumptions behind these representations, and the silences involved in them. My analysis was methodologically based on Fairclough’s (1992, 2013) critical
**Table 1.** Primary dataset: feedback on the Finnish national basic education core curriculum 2014 draft.

| Data                                      | G   | L   | Ma  | P/C | HEd | B   | C   | HEc | PE  | Mu  | E/R | H/SS | SC  | Total |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-----|-------|
| Gender or equality mentioned              | 92  | 15  | 3   | 6   | 15  | 2   | 14  | 1   | 14  | 1   | 3 / 1| 0 / 2 | 2   | 168   |
| Focus on gender equality                  | 49  | 14  | 2   | 4   | 11  | 2   | 10  | 1   | 14  | 1   | 3 / 1| 0 / 2 | 3   | 117   |
| Gender equality problems represented      | 21  | 11  | 2   | 0   | 10  | 1   | 6   | 1   | 14  | 1   | 3 / 1| 0 / 2 | 0   | 73    |
| Cumulative number of data excerpts        | G1  | L22 | Ma33| –   | HEd35| B45 | C46 | HEc52| PE53| Mu67| R68, E69| H/SS72–H/ | – |
|                                           | G21 | L32 | Ma34| –   | HEd44| C51 | PE66| E71 | S573|     |       |      |       |

G: general principles; L: languages; Ma: mathematics; P/C: physics or chemistry; HEd: health education; B: biology; C: crafts; HEc: home economics; PE: physical education; Mu: music; E/R: ethics or religion; H/SS: history or social sciences; SC: study counselling.
understanding of discourses and aimed to identify different discourses and particular gender equality interpretations based on Fraser’s three-dimensional justice model. Thus, I viewed policy problem representations as socially mediated language use that reflects and constructs an understanding of inequalities as preconditioned by the social state of affairs.

I closely examined the vocabulary used in the feedback comments and focused on different expressions, word choices, and silences that implicitly or explicitly represented gender equality problems, as well as remedies constructed in relation to them (Fairclough 1992; Bacchi 2009). I formulated three main problem representations, which constituted the basis for the analysis of equality discourses: 1) binary structures, 2) binary norms, and 3) no gender equality problems. I then analysed comments from the feedback about how the represented problems were to be remedied in relation to the redistributive and cognitive dimensions of justice. After focusing on the two dimensions of justice, I analysed the third dimension, the framing of the problem-remedy representations, by asking who was included in or excluded from educational gender equality discourses (Fraser 2005). I defined discourse as a ‘mode of representation’ that is related to a ‘mode of action’ (Fairclough 1992). On this basis, I identified three discourses that approached and framed gender and equality differently. To understand the relationship between gender equality discourses and binary inequalities, I applied Fraser’s (2005) theory of redistributive, cognitive, and representation dimensions of justice and pondered how educational gender equality discourses affirm or transform gender binary inequalities.

Analysis: phase two

In the second phase of the analysis, I focused on the publication process of the FNCC2014 by comparing gender and equality statements of the draft and final curriculum. The comparison of the curriculum statements was limited to the statements that were discussed in the feedback comments. I analysed the gender equality statements in Finnish and translated them into English. In the content analysis of the draft and final curriculum versions, I examined how the discourses changed the gender equality statements between the draft and final curriculum documents. Finally, I pondered how the changes reflected the three discourses identified in the first phase of the analysis.

Affirmative and transformative discourses in the curriculum design process

The feedback comments on the draft curriculum reflected three gender equality discourses based on Fraser’s theory of justice: 1) affirmative individual redistribution (AIR), 2) transformative diversity recognition (TDR), and 3) affirmative diversity misrecognition (ADM). The AIR discourse emerged from the feedback on the draft’s general curriculum principles and the language, physical education (PE), and crafts curricula (Table 2). The TDR and ADM discourses mainly emerged from the feedback on the draft’s general principles and the PE and health education curricula. The discourses are presented in Table 2.
affirmative individual redistribution discourse

The AIR discourse represented gender-segregated resource distribution and an emphasis on gender differences as problems that should be dispelled by obscuring gender binarism. The following comments aimed to avoid the use of gender categories and propose inequality remedies by shifting policies from gender differentiation to ignoring differences: ‘The difference between boys and girls is overemphasised; individual treatment is the issue, which helps’ (G2). ‘Is it equality when boys are highlighted in the curriculum? Not sexes but different learners’ (G19). The redistributive discourse problematised gendered practices by describing gender differences as ‘overemphasised’ and
highlighted’. By taking binarism for granted, this discourse focused on the equality between individuals who were self-evidently either girls or boys.

Some feedback questioned the monolithic nature of gender groups: ‘Highlighting gender equality in the selection of texts and tasks is a bit strange, as if all boys would want different kinds of tasks than girls. It is more about the different needs of all learners’ (L25). ‘All girls and boys do not necessarily develop at different paces; the word formula could be mitigated’ (G20). The feedback emphasised avoiding binarism and highlighting the individuality as a remedy for inequality. This individualisation of the policy subjects and the aim to obscure gender binarism can be seen to counter the binary opposition of ‘successful girls’ and ‘failing boys’. This binary opposition has dominated education policy discussions and approaches in Finland and other Western societies for decades (Ikonen 2019; Keddie 2020; Lahelma 2014).

Lahelma (2014), an acknowledged Finnish gender researcher, warns that the contrast between successful girls and failing boys categorially problematises boys’ underachievement and represents girls and boys as essentially different. Attempts to remedy the imbalance between boys and girls – for instance, boy-friendly pedagogy – have reified the understanding of gender groups and failed to recognise the diversity of gendered individuals (Lahelma 2014; Pietilä et al. 2020). Thus, the AIR discourse aimed to avoid this reification and emphasise individuality by obscuring, or even ignoring, the social differences in schooling resource distribution. However, this type of neoliberal individualism is an empty signifier that fails to problematise institutionalised inequalities and question the discursive framing of policy subjects (Fraser 2007). Moreover, neoliberalism is hostile to gender equality approaches because it naturalises social differences and depoliticises the inequal state of affairs (Brunila and Rossi 2018; Ikävalko and Kantola 2017). Accordingly, the AIR discourse misrecognised gender norms and mis-framed individuals or groups in its neoliberal approaches (Fraser 2005, 2007). Nonetheless, it questioned the monolithic nature of gender groups in resource distribution.

PE and crafts have traditionally been gendered school subjects in Finland (Berg and Kokkonen 2021; Kokko 2012). This might explain the active debate on gender equality emerging from the data, even though equality was seldom mentioned in the draft PE and craft curricula (Table 2). In Finland, crafts have traditionally been divided into textile and technical, with girls normatively choosing textile and boys choosing technical classes (Kokko 2012). The textile and technical classes were united in the 2014 curriculum reform. Although many experts have recommended coeducational groups for PE as well, gender-segregated groups are common, and group unification remains optional for schools (Berg and Kokkonen 2021).

In the AIR discourse, single-sex groups were treated as problematic for several reasons. The binary gendered nature of a school subject was represented as artificial: ‘There should not be separate girls’ and boys’ groups in PE for grades 3–6. There is no rational justification for this’ (PE60). Gendered practices were viewed as exclusive and as something that should be replaced with individuals’ right to select the subject that they preferred: ‘Additionally, in grades 7–9, PE groups could be differentiated not by gender but, for example, by offering pupils the possibility of choosing between two options. This way, girls who prefer ball games or boys who prefer dance won’t be deprived of motivating exercises because of their gender’ (PE61). This comment advocated for the gender-neutral organisation of teaching and presented ‘choice’ between two craft classes as a
remedy for inequality. The feedback also problematised gender segregation in PE (Berg and Kokkonen 2021) but presented choice as a remedy, which might unintentionally guide individuals to culturally normative gendered choices, thereby affirming gender-segregated structures.

The AIR discourse problematised binary gender segregation and gendered practices, reflecting aspirations to transform socio-economic injustices between two gender majorities (Fraser 2005). However, redistributive remedies fail to challenge the historically formulated ‘monoglossic’ gender norms and practices that govern everyday actions and gender performativity and neglect recognitive remedies, such as awareness of gender norms (Paechter 2018). Therefore, redistributive remedies alone – freedom of choice, avoidance of gendered practices, and emphasis on individuality – do not seem to resolve equality problems, as the gender-neutral crafts classes have shown (Kokko 2012). The discourse framed a neoliberal individual with the taken-for-granted nature of gender binarism and did not set the stage for a non-binary agenda (Fraser 2005).

**Transformative diversity recognition discourse**

The TDR discourse focused on cultural injustices and represented the normativity of gender binarism as an equality problem encompassing the diversity of all individuals, gender minorities, and majorities in the post-modern sense. In the feedback, binary gender norms were problematised when basic education was considered to misrecognise gender diversity: ‘It is great that gender diversity is regarded as a mission of basic education. Hopefully, it follows that more and more young people can and will be allowed to be just like they are’ (G12). This comment illustrates the notion that narrow gender norms keep all young people from being themselves. In the feedback, awareness of gender diversity was seen as a recognitive remedy for the binary norms that limited individuals’ gender performativity (Butler 1990; Paechter 2018).

The following comment constructed tensions between the existing and desired school culture: ‘Nowadays, we should talk about a spectrum of gender and sexuality, not about two opposites. Unfortunately, many teachers’ perceptions of gender and sexuality are from last century’ (G10). This comment represented the gender dichotomy as an obstacle to equality; and recognition of the misrecognised members of the community is seen as a remedy which challenges this dichotomy. Binary gender norms were thought to subject all gendered individuals to narrow gender dichotomy. The recognition of gender norms reflects the tenets of the status politics that Fraser (2005) endorses. These tenets, aimed at raising awareness of gender diversity, are a way of challenging the ‘hegemonic gender performances’ preserved by gender binary norms (Paechter 2018).

In most recognitive feedback, gender norms were considered oppressive, especially from the perspective of gender minorities, as in the following excerpt: ‘The spectrum of gender identities – transgender, intersexual, gender-non-confirming people, etc. – are intertwined with health and well-being. Addressing these issues objectively and as a natural part of humanity while teaching other subjects supports the development of all young people and provides space for gender-diverse people’ (HEd38). ‘Provides space’ illustrates the notion that binary norms restrict the agency of all gendered individuals, but especially agency of ‘gender-diverse people’, who are represented as an unrecognised group of people in the school practices (Fraser 2005). In the feedback, gender
binary norms were viewed as governing non-binary pupils’ identities and gender performativity. The TDR discourse problematised gender-segregated spaces and practices because they forced pupils to hide their identities (HEd37) and excluded gender minorities (PE56). Pupils were described as being forced to follow gendered practices and reconcile their individual gender performativity with hegemonic institutionalised binarism (Paechter 2018), which is embedded in school spaces (Kjaran 2017). In the recognitive feedback, binary teaching and changing room practices were presented as categorically exclusive of non-binary pupils, who were represented as suffering from non-recognition as a monolithic group. This reification of group identities and displacement of institutionalised inequalities is part of the identity politics that Fraser (2000) criticises. However strategically and temporarily pursued identity policies guarantee the representation of misrecognised groups and enable the recognition, challenge, and transformation of unequal social practices and structures (Spivak 1987). Moreover, the recognition of the marginalised group identities ‘brings new meanings to normative identity construction’ (Atkinson and DePalma 2009, 17).

Nonetheless, essentialist identity politics are not a long-lasting strategy or gender theory for equality promotion because the aim is not to reify group identities (Spivak 1987) but to address institutionalised structures and resource maldistribution (Fraser 2000). Therefore, strategically used identity politics and a multi-categorically framed TDR discourse can potentially transform the deeply rooted rhetoric of binary framing (Fraser 2005). However, to dismantle the three dimensions of institutionalised obstacles to equality, the recognitive approach should be accompanied by resource redistribution (Fraser 2000, 2005).

The TDR discourse aimed to promote parity for misrecognised members of a community. However, it also constructed equality problems as a misrecognition of girls and women, who are already recognised as members of the community (Fraser 2005). The feedback on mathematics (MA33, MA34) and music (Ma33, Ma34 Mu67) problematised the misrepresentation and misrecognition of women in the study materials. Teaching resources were interpreted as benefiting boys; therefore, the suggested remedies were targeted at girls. The remedies would give girls positive female role models and raise awareness of the dominance of male representation in music teaching. However, although this recognition of misrecognised feminine agency is aimed at a gender balance, it affirms a polarised gender dichotomy when it fails to challenge culturally constructed hierarchies of masculinity and femininity (Keddie and Ollis 2019). The positive representation of girls affirms binary stereotypes and frames equality within a gender dichotomy. The relationship between the discourse and inequalities is tense because discourse aims to problematise binary gender norms, but simultaneously it stresses the norms. With binary framing and identity politics, the discourse raises awareness of binary gender segregation but at the same time takes the gender dichotomy for granted and excludes gender diversity from policy approaches.

**Affirmative diversity misrecognition discourse**

In feedback from private commentators, gender diversity statements provoked resistance to feminist aspirations, which has been common in different policy fields (Ikävalko and Kantola 2017). In this case, resisting feedback constructed the ADM discourse, which
denied the existence of gender diversity as contrary to religious beliefs. The ADM discourse reflected no gender equality problems, thus cancelling gender equality approaches. Instead, it valued gender-neutral policies that did not problematise any binary inequalities.

Gender binarism was not conceptualised but constructed as an unnamed and normative opposite of gender diversity. Gender diversity was represented as ‘fashionable, [something] tooted by the media’ (G9) and frequently written inside quotation marks, as “diversity of gender and sexuality” (G1, E70) and “diversity of gender identity” (HE70). Moreover, diversity was represented as ‘harmful to the primary school child’s development and identity’ (E70) and was situated as belonging in the sphere of adults. The recognition of non-binary identities was viewed as injurious to all individuals because it was considered a potential threat to the identity of the majority (Naskali and Kari 2020, 4).

The ADM discourse represented gender diversity as an ‘issue of conscience’ (G9), and teachers were entitled to determine which genders should be recognised in school practices and which should not: ‘In my opinion, “understanding gender diversity” as a goal is not part of primary school teachers’ job. For example, an ordinary teacher cannot be obligated to understand a pupil’s transsexual orientation’ (G6). This feedback misrecognised the diversity between and within gender categories and allowed teachers to draw the boundaries between right and wrong kinds of gender according to their conscience. Simultaneously, the feedback permitted the exclusion of pupils who did not identify themselves according to the heteronormative gender order (Naskali and Kari 2020). Reflecting the non-recognition of minority identity groups, expressions such as ‘transsexual orientation’ represented gender identity and sexual orientation as one issue. The ADM discourse affirmed gender binarism by framing gender-neutral equality approaches with the taken-for-granted nature of binarism, refusing to recognise gender binary–non-conforming individuals in the physical and symbolic spaces of basic education.

**Differences in gender equality statements between the draft and final versions of the curriculum**

A comparison of the gender equality statements between the draft and final versions of the FNCC2014 revealed how the discourses potentially changed gender equality statements between curriculum versions (Table 2). The gender equality statements of the curriculum draft, which were not commented on in the feedback, did not change in the final version and were thus not included in the analysis.

The AIR discourse, which problematised the gender-segregated distribution of resources but aimed to promote gender equality by obscuring gender behind individuality, seems to have influenced the general curriculum principles and the language curriculum (Table 2, 1G–3G and 1L–3L). The mention of ‘developmental differences between sexes’ in the draft was replaced with genderless expressions, such as ‘individual and developmental differences between pupils’, in the final FNCC2014 (Table 2, 1G). Perhaps because of the AIR discourse, the categorial gender dichotomy was mitigated – for instance, using the word ‘often’ when mentioning developmental pace differences between girls and boys (Table 2, 2G–3G). Thus, the FNCC2014 presented gender as a two-category distinction – girls and boys – while questioning the dichotomous essence of
gender, which was typical of the AIR discourse. Moreover, it emphasised gender-neutral individuality and choice ‘regardless of gender’ in the language curriculum (Table 2, 3L). This revision can be considered a tenet to obscure gender binarism from policies instead of transforming binarism, which is a shortcoming of the AIR discourse.

The statements in the general curriculum principles and the health education and PE curricula provoked discourses that both recognised and misrecognised gender diversity. The recognitive discourse problematised the gender binary norms from the viewpoint of all gendered individuals, especially from the perspective of gender minorities or majorities. Simultaneously, the misrecognition discourse misrecognised the existence of gender minorities and aimed to invalidate gender equality approaches. Even though the TDR discourse was prominent in the feedback comments, it did not reach its transformative potential because it did not modify the curriculum statements. Although neither the TDR nor the ADM discourse changed the general curriculum principles, mentions of gender diversity were deleted from the health education curriculum in the final FNCC2014 (1Hed), which may have been an attempt to avoid discourse conflicts by highlighting gender neutrality.

One feedback comment highlighted the need to recognise gendered patterns in music education (Table 2, 1Mu). This is the only case in which the TDR discourse may have changed the final FNCC2014 text. The new wording emphasised identity politics and constructed a subject of equality in a binary frame – as self-evidently a girl or a boy. Besides this, only the binary-framed equality discourses seem to have changed the equality statements in the final document. This suggests that it may be challenging for education policies to adopt recognitive approaches framed with gender diversity. These challenges may have weakened the promotion of equality in the FNCC design process.

**Concluding discussion**

In this study, I examined the relationship between gender equality discourses and gender binary inequalities in the deliberative design process of the Finnish National Basic Education Core Curriculum (FNCC2014). To that end, I extended the educational policy analysis from the final curriculum to the design phase of the document. The analysis shows that a relatively open curriculum design process offered a platform for post-modern feminist demands, as well as for neoliberalism and resistance to feminism, to debate the meaning of equality. Finland seems to be transitioning towards transformative education policies, as suggested by the prominence of the TDR discourse in the curriculum design process. However, the process perspective reveals that transforming gender binarism was possibly an overwhelming challenge to the promotion of equality in the curriculum design process: firstly, because only the AIR and ADM discourses, which affirmed binarism, led to changes in the final curriculum, and secondly because the redistributive and recognitive gender equality discourses – AIR and TDR – were constructed separately and no discourse alone was able to transform binarism.

The failure to transform binarism is problematic because it may jeopardise the promotion of equality (e.g. Edström and Brunila 2016; Ikävalko and Brunila 2019). The long-standing gender-neutral tradition of education polices (Nygren, Martinsson, and Mulinari 2018; Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019; Myyry 2020) might explain why only discourses which framed policy approaches through binarism were adopted in the
final curriculum. The TDR discourse may be difficult to operationalise because of its excessively theoretical approaches (Ollis 2017) and requirement for self-reflective gender awareness (Lahelma and Tainio 2019) in emphasising ‘heteroglossic’ gender diversity and challenging binary gender norms (Francis and Paechter 2015). Perhaps for this reason, the transformative discourse did not lead to changes in the final FNCC2014.

According to Fraser (2005, 86), gender equality requires approaching equality three-dimensionally because there is ‘no redistribution or recognition without representation’. However, the feedback on the curriculum draft mainly constructed redistributive and recognitive discourses separately. This is problematic because no discourse can remedy binary inequalities on its own. A shortcoming of the AIR discourse is that it misrecognised the existence of cultural norms and did not acknowledge the diversity of gender identities. Instead, it focused on ideal neoliberal individuals with equal shares of resources. Conversely, the TDR discourse recognised gender diversity but failed to problematise unequal socio-economic structures and educational resource maldistribution.

Together, the two equality discourses can contribute to the transformation of gender binarism to make it a core element of educational equality discourses, which has been on feminist scholars’ agenda for decades (see also Edström and Brunila 2016). The reconciliation of the discourses could concretise the recognition of non-binary identities and challenge gender neutrality in resource distribution. This would be a step towards embracing individual diversity and gender fluidity and transforming the deeply rooted rhetoric of binary framing in Finnish educational equality policies. These two discursive approaches combined could complement the equality agenda to transform binary structures, norms, and policy approaches and take advantage of neoliberalism, as Fraser (2007, 32) proposes.

In the feedback comments, the ADM discourse, which misrecognised gender minorities and emphasised gender-neutral policies, resisted feminist demands to recognise gender diversity. This shows that education policies, including curricula, should pay close attention to the strategic recognition of non-binary identities. This approach can make the existence of marginalised groups visible and give voice to the silenced (Fraser 2000, 2007; Atkinson and DePalma 2009). However, to avoid the reification of group identities and the obscuration of gendered inequalities, identity politics should be used only temporarily (Fraser 2007; Atkinson and DePalma 2009) and should eventually be replaced with status politics, which Fraser (2005, 2007) prefers.

The comments analysed in this study did not cover the entire curriculum process because the material included only one of the feedback rounds and two versions of the FNCC2014. Moreover, I did not take into account aspects such as media discussions or political pressure, which may have also influenced the final version. However, as in previous curriculum analyses (e.g. Myyry 2020), the findings indicate that Finnish educational equality policies, such as the FNCC2014, are transitioning towards transformative approaches. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that a relatively open curriculum design process can offer a platform for different discourses to debate the meaning of equality but also shows that their adoption is not a straightforward process.

The discursive struggles in the Finnish curriculum design process suggest that public feedback needs to be interpreted in a coordinated manner, especially when dealing with such a major and contested notion as gender equality. A critical review of diverse equality interpretations can crystallise our understanding of equality problems and the necessary remedies. However, education policies, as described in official documents such as the
FNCC2014 and discourses on the curriculum design process may have unpredictable consequences when implemented (Ball 2015). For instance, Ollis (2017) demonstrates that affirmative approaches may have greater potential to raise awareness of inequalities in educational practices if the members of a school community are not sufficiently mature to accept difficult transformative post-modern approaches and status politics (Fraser 2005, 2007). Thus, research on the curriculum implementation phase could deepen our understanding of diverse equality approaches and curriculum design processes. Fraser’s three-dimensional justice model can enrich not only the coordinated interpretation of feedback but also ethnographic analyses of curriculum implementation in everyday school practices.

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