Gender and Education

ISSN: 0954-0253 (Print) 1360-0516 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgee20

A complex problem with a one-sided solution? Exploring a Swedish municipality's work with gender-based grade differences

Ida Johansson, Britt-Inger Keisu & Magnus Larsson

To cite this article: Ida Johansson, Britt-Inger Keisu & Magnus Larsson (2025) A complex problem with a one-sided solution? Exploring a Swedish municipality's work with gender-based grade differences, Gender and Education, 37:8, 864-880, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2025.2568431

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568431

Published online: 07 Oct 2025.

GENDER AND EDUCATION
2025, VOL. 37, NO. 8, 864–880
https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2025.2568431

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A complex problem with a one-sided solution? Exploring a Swedish municipality's work with gender-based grade differences

Ida Johansson [a,b], Britt-Inger Keisu [a] and Magnus Larsson [b]

[a]Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden; [b]Centre for Principal Development, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on interviews to problematize perceptions among principals and civil servants within a local collaboration aiming to reduce the gender gap in academic results (or 'grades'). Inspired by the 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach, five problem representations about boys' lower grades are constructed: *The problem of gender norms; The problem of teaching; The problem of the students' background; The problem of the (grading) system;* and *The problem of teachers' (lack of) awareness*. We analyse underlying assumptions of these problem representations and discuss the possible effects that school leaders' perceptions of the 'problem' of the gender gap in grades might have for schools, teachers and students. The results show significant differences between what was said to be most important: changing gender norms, and the actual measures planned: changing teaching practices. This risks certain measures not being implemented and inequalities not being challenged despite the efforts for change.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 February 2024
Accepted 22 September 2025

KEYWORDS
Gender-based grade differences; WPR; principals; school leaders; equity

Introduction

In this paper, we apply a critical feminist perspective on school leaders' work to reduce the gender gap in academic results (or 'grades'). Inspired by the 'What's the problem represented to be?' analytical framework (Bacchi 2009), we problematize ideas and perceptions within a local collaboration in a Swedish municipality aiming to improve boys' results. Our aim is to make visible how this ambition involves different types of problem representations and discuss the implications these may have.

The pattern of boys' underachievement has been recognized in many regions internationally (UNESCO 2015), and for decades girls have achieved higher overall grades than boys when graduating from compulsory school in Sweden (Skolverket 2024). After years of debate in both research and the wider society (Connell 1996; Jonsson 2014; Pietilä et al. 2021; Zyngier 2009), the gender gap is still perceived as a 'problem' in

CONTACT Ida Johansson ida.johansson@umu.se Department of Sociology, Umeå University, 901 87, Umeå, Sweden; Centre for Principal Development, Umeå University, 901 87, Umeå, Sweden

schools and extensive resources are devoted to remedying it. Although numerous studies have focused on the importance of school leaders to racial or cultural equity in educational outcomes, less attention has been paid to school leaders' work in relation to gender equity with respect to grades (Leithwood 2021). In addition, since ideas and perceptions about a problem have consequences for the solutions and measures applied (Bacchi 2009), we argue that it is important to examine beliefs about the causes of these grade differences and how they are constructed as 'problems' among those who hold positions of influence over school governance.

In Sweden, a significant proportion of the responsibility for reducing the gender gap in grades can be said to lie with the principal, who is responsible for the school's internal organization, pedagogical leadership, and activities directed towards national goals. Principals are also responsible for ensuring that their school's education is characterized by an equality perspective, that the education is adapted to students' needs, and that the school's results are followed up and evaluated. A further responsibility is to ensure that teachers receive the necessary skills development to enable them to perform their tasks professionally (Skolverket 2022).

In addition to the requirements stipulated in legislation, research has shown the importance of principals to students' learning. School leaders have been found to influence students' learning indirectly; for example, through distributed leadership (Heck and Hallinger 2009), influencing teaching strategies (Heck and Hallinger 2014), school, classroom and family variables (Sun and Leithwood 2017) and principal outcome expectations (Schrik and Wasonga 2019). Similarly, research has shown that school leaders can indirectly influence equity of outcomes for all students, for example by transforming teachers' beliefs about equity and improving their technical skills (Ross and Berger 2009).

Our study takes its point of departure in a new collaboration initiated by a group of school and preschool principals, supported by civil servants within a small municipality in Sweden. The collaboration was initially formed with the aim of improving boys' grades, but soon grew to include the ambition of improving conditions for both boys and girls[1] at school. The case therefore provides a unique opportunity to investigate an ongoing school-leader-driven collaboration aiming to promote gender equality in students' outcomes where both boys' and girls' conditions are emphasized. In the decentralized Swedish school system, municipal civil servants play a central role in guiding principals (Johansson and Ärlestig 2022). Their views on grade differences and how these can be reduced are therefore important for the support and conditions they provide to principals. Thus, we address the gender gap issue by focusing on perceptions among both principals and civil servants within the local school administration.

Inspired by Bacchi (2009; 2018), the purpose of our study is to investigate different perceptions of the causes of gender-based grade differences and solutions to reduce the gap among principals and civil servants, and to highlight the potential effects these perceptions might have. The study is guided by the following research questions (RQ):

(1) What problem representations of gender-based grade differences in compulsory school are found among school principals, preschool principals and civil servants?
(2) What assumptions underlie these problem representations?
(3) What discursive, subjectification and lived effects are produced by these problem representations?

Most studies related to school leaders' impact on student outcomes have been conducted in an Anglo-Saxon context, while the limited research examining boys' underachievement in Sweden has explored the perceptions of students (Zimmerman 2018) and teachers (Åhslund 2019). Furthermore, Swedish research on school leadership often lacks a critical perspective (Norqvist and Isling 2020). Applying critical feminist theory, our study will enhance both theoretical and empirical knowledge, contributing to the international discussion on the complex challenges facing school leaders regarding gender-based differences. Additionally, the study will enhance practical knowledge about school leaders' efforts to achieve gender equity in student outcomes and how this is related to the discourses in circulation within the context.

Previous research

Öhrn and Weiner (2017) highlighted 'Boys' underachievement' as a travelling discourse influencing policies and research in different countries, regardless of actual national patterns and contexts, or intersecting factors such as social background. This discourse has been widely adopted, although statistical data show that variables like parental education and migration background significantly affect students' academic outcomes. At the same time, in Sweden, boys consistently perform worse than girls, with a higher proportion failing to qualify for upper secondary school (Skolverket 2024). In a system where ninth-grade results determine access to further education, low or incomplete grades can limit students' future opportunities. Thus, although the concept of boys' underachievement is shaped by discourse, it also reflects a tangible issue in the Swedish context.

Despite extensive research on gendered educational outcomes, there remains little consensus on the underlying cause (Salisbury, Rees, and Gorard 1999; SOU 2010:51, 2010). Several scholars have emphasized that conditions in schools favour girls over boys. These conditions have been attributed either to biological differences (Åhslund 2018), or to prevailing masculinity norms that may foster an anti-study and anti-effort culture – where appearing to succeed without trying is valued more than genuine learning, due to the risk of failure (Zimmerman 2018). While many studies have focused on the negative effects of boys' underachievement, concerns have also been raised that this focus risks rendering other inequities in schools invisible, as well as girls' needs being overlooked (Cobbett and Younger 2012; Mills and Keddie 2007).

Another body of research highlights disadvantages for girls in school, as related to absenteeism due to violence and harassment (Gillander Gådin, Dahlström, and Dahlqvist 2024) and issues of subjective well-being (Kessels and Van Houtte 2022). Furthermore, the responsibility for dealing with girls' reported lower well-being is often placed on the girls themselves (Lenz Taguchi and Palmer 2013), which aligns with an understanding of schools as neoliberal institutions (Connell 2013).

In addition to knowledge about gender and context, a more nuanced picture of 'which boys' and 'which girls' are disadvantaged and need to improve their results is also required, as well as a transformation of wider social systems and structures, rather than purely compensatory or programmatic measures (Zyngier 2009). As boys are not a homogeneous group, knowledge about how masculinities vary and change is needed (Connell 1996). To challenge boys' narrow gender constructions, Keddie (2006) argues that, rather

than normalize and reproduce them, teachers need to employ contextualized and productive pedagogical practices informed by feminist understandings of masculinity. However, in a discursive context where teachers are held responsible for boys' underachievement and boys are assumed to require a particular kind of teaching, it becomes difficult for teachers to move beyond essentialized views of boys without being accused of ignoring their special needs (Hodgetts 2010).

Regardless of whether or not teachers should be held accountable for boys' results, it is known that teachers have a significant impact on student outcomes (Heck and Hallinger 2014). Less well-researched is the work of school leaders in relation to grade differences and what effects their perceptions of this 'problem' have in schools. In the next section, we present the theoretical and analytical framework we have used to shed light on this issue.

Theoretical and analytical framework

Our theoretical and analytical framework is inspired by Bacchi's (2018) poststructural 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach. As our study examines how gendered problem representations are constructed, we draw on perspectives that conceptualize gender as socially and discursively produced. Gender, as a fundamental social construct, is embedded in all social processes and shaped by time and context (West and Zimmerman 1987).

The WPR approach provides a specific way of thinking about 'problems'. Bacchi (2009) argues that we need to focus on 'problem representations' (PRs), rather than the problems themselves, because it is the understanding of a problem (i.e. how it is represented) that influences what solutions will be proposed. Thus, our intention is not to investigate the gender gap itself (i.e. the 'problem'), or to measure the 'success' of actions and strategies to 'solve' it, but rather to explore and problematize the assumptions that underpin the PRs, as well as their implications.

The WPR approach provides seven analytical questions and steps, the first of which is about identifying the PRs within a policy or proposal, and working backwards to uncover how 'problems' are understood through that policy or proposal. In other words, the proposals for what should be done reveal what is thought of as needing to change, i.e. what is conceived as problematic. These implied 'problems' are conceptualized as *problem representations* and are central to the succeeding analysis. It is notable that sometimes there is not only *one* PR to be found, but rather, several may be nested within one another (Bacchi 2009, 2018).

Bacchi (2009) relates the importance of focusing on PRs rather than 'societal problems' to the Foucauldian term 'governmentality', emphasizing that it is in fact the PRs that rule or govern us, since they will lead to certain measures being taken, causing harm or benefits to the people affected by them. A crucial part of the WPR approach is hence to analyse three overlapping types of effect produced by the PRs. *Discursive effects* concern the understanding of what solutions or proposals appear reasonable based on how the problem(s) is/are represented. *Subjectification effects* concern the subject positions and social relationships that are created on the basis of the PRs and what consequences these have for how people perceive themselves and others. Finally, *lived effects* relate to the concrete impact and material effects to which the PRs can lead.

Materials and methods

This paper draws on interviews from an ongoing dissertation project, approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-00833-01), in which the change work undertaken by a group of school and preschool principals is followed over time. Against the background of the persistent gender gap in grades, the principals in this study have initiated a collaboration, funded by the municipality, to increase equality between boys' and girls' grades and to create learning environments that contribute to equality. The principals all work in the same school district in a small but dynamic municipality in Sweden, characterized by a small town, diverse industries, and rural areas. In this district, most of the children at the different preschools continue on to one of the three schools (preschool class to grade 6, ages 6–12) in the district, and then finish their compulsory education at the same high school (grades 7–9, ages 13–15). The idea of the collaboration is to work together all the way from preschool through the various stages of compulsory school to find common solutions to improve the boys' results.

For this paper we interviewed five principals and three preschool principals from the school district, along with six civil servants in the municipal administration supporting the principals. The officials worked as managers in education administration, or as municipal development leaders and strategists. In total, eleven women and three men were interviewed. The interview guide was constructed to cover four themes: Background and context (e.g. school context and the participants' roles and assignments); Situation description and problem statements (e.g. perceptions of learning and grade differences in relation to gender, migration background and parents' level of education, and causes of these differences); Strategies and measures (e.g. measures taken or planned to reduce the grade gap) and Prerequisites and conditions (e.g. questions about power structures and resistance, and conditions for the change work).

Data were collected in two stages in 2023, with interviews recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded and analysed using MAXQDA 2022. Verbal informed consent from all participants was also recorded. In stage one, eleven individual interviews were conducted, each lasting between one and two hours. One of the authors also participated in a meeting where an interim report on the work was presented to the management group of the local education administration. Inspired by Bacchi (2018), the interview material was examined to identify different PRs (Keisu and Ahlström 2020; Stark 2019). With the starting point of considering the agenda to improve boys' grades as a form of policy (Keisu, Abrahamsson, and Rönnblom 2015), different types of questions were used to identify PRs within the ambition to improve boys' results. While one question was explicit – what the participants considered to be the cause of the gender difference in grades – questions about strategies and measures pointed more indirectly to ideas about what must be changed, i.e. what was thought to be problematic (Bacchi 2009). After the first stage of data collection, a concise list of PRs, or 'explanations' for the gender-based grade differences, was constructed.

During the second stage of data collection, four focus-group interviews were conducted with a total of twelve participants, of whom nine participated in stage one. One group only included school principals while the other three were mixed, with two or three participant groups (school principals, preschool principals, civil servants) represented. The purpose of these interviews was to give participants the opportunity to

reflect upon and contribute to the results during the analysis process. Hence, stage two provided structured forums for 'giving something back' to the participants as well as generating more empirical material. During the focus-group interviews, participants discussed the PRs constructed after stage one, both agreeing upon and nuancing parts of the explanations for the gender-based grade differences, as well as suggesting an additional PR that was later added to the findings. Hence, after the second stage of data collection, in response to RQ1, a revised list of five PRs was constructed. These representations were then used in the further analysis when addressing the remaining RQs. In other words, RQ1 formed the empirical basis for the further analysis concerning RQs 2 and 3. For that process, the following analytical questions, inspired by Bacchi (2018), were used: What presuppositions or assumptions underlie these representations? In what context(s) have these representations arisen? What is left unproblematic, or silenced, in these representations? What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by these representations of the 'problem'? In the following sections, we present the results of our analysis.

Five problem representations of gender-based grade differences

In this section, we present the empirical findings of the study and address RQ1: What PRs of gender-based grade differences are found among the principals and civil servants? The interview excerpts are numbered and marked with W or M to indicate whether the participant is a woman or man. The analysis shows that several different PRs existed simultaneously among the participants. Although PRs are always nested and partially overlapping (Bacchi 2009), five main PRs were constructed that could be analytically separated: The problem of gender norms; The problem of teaching; The problem of the students' background; The problem of the (grading) system; and The problem of teachers' (lack of) awareness.

Although all participants emphasized the importance of working to reduce the gender gap, their perceptions of the PRs varied. While some had strong ideas about the reasons behind the differences, others were more cautious. Their understandings were often specifically informed by a lecture given by an invited researcher, organized by the municipality prior to the principals' collaboration. However, most participants were unsure how to improve boys' results and expressed a desire to learn more.

The problem of gender norms

The first PR concerned gender norms and how these are considered to affect students in different ways. This involves both how norms influence the behaviour of adults towards boys and girls, and how the students view themselves and act accordingly. Participants expressed the view that societal norms create different expectations of girls and boys regarding how they should behave and perform in school, which in turn leads to adults treating girls and boys differently. For example, one perception was that girls are expected to sit still and 'behave', while boys are expected to have a greater need for movement and hence are allowed to 'rush around' more. Lower expectations and demands from teachers and other adults in schools were thus perceived as contributing to boys' poorer performance compared to girls.

In the focus-group interviews, all participants agreed on the relevance of this PR, although in the individual interviews this was most clearly expressed by the civil servants:

> In my mind, it's a continuation of the fact that you have higher expectations of girls, in how they should both behave and perform, than boys. Most definitely. And that can be extended to how pupils are supposed to perform, but also connected to the norms that apply and affect the pupils. It's connected! And I think those are very important. Because, as I said, in my mind it has nothing to do with their ability, so it must be something else. (Civil servant 3W)

Gendered norms and perceptions of how to behave were also perceived as influencing the students' self-image, and by extension their actions and how they tackle schoolwork. Participants noted both an anti-study culture and an anti-effort culture influencing boys negatively in school.

One principal emphasized the anti-effort culture, explaining that this mainly affects boys who are content with the lowest passing grade, and those who do not even try due to lack of understanding, and fear of admitting it. In contrast, another principal noted a positive study culture driven by boys in one student group, but could not explain this deviation from the general pattern.

Putting norms on the agenda early on and questioning them was perceived to potentially affect the study results. However, the clearest effort linked to norms and school culture was to introduce a ban on prank fights in the schools' rules of order. Both civil servants and preschool principals emphasized schools' and preschools' mission to be norm-breaking and compensatory, but also stated that this is not an easy task. As one participant reflected, school does not compensate for gender norms, but rather contributes to conserving them. However, the preschool principals stated that certain norms are indeed changing in preschools, and exemplified that girls are no longer used as buffers between rowdy boys.

During the focus-group interviews, norms were described as a central explanation for gender-based grade differences and perceived as connected to and influencing other PRs:

> I think the fact that norms lead adults to treat boys and girls differently is quite central, because that's probably why boys and girls act differently. Because if we didn't treat them differently, they wouldn't feel this and wouldn't act differently. Then I also think, and it's probably in this way that we often create [the problem of teaching], that boys have different needs than girls and so on. (Civil servant 1W)

Participants repeatedly emphasized that grade differences between girls and boys are a complex issue requiring complex solutions. Simply making teaching interesting for boys was not considered sufficient; rather, participants stressed that teachers need to understand that their behaviour is based on norms that need to change.

The problem of teaching

In the interviews, teaching practices were primarily discussed in terms of instructions, and the second PR reflects participants' perceptions that teaching in general are based on girls' learning styles, suggesting that boys need different types of teaching methods in compulsory school. The participants' assumption was that boys mature later, and hence have a greater need for clarity and structure than girls. Participants explained

this either in terms of biological differences in development and language ability, or socialization differences. Regardless, it was considered that boys and girls have different learning needs and that schools have not succeeded in compensating for this:

> Boys don't have the same opportunities as girls in this, that's why it looks the way it does, in a sense. And should it be that boys are immature or whatever, well, then that needs to be compensated for. (Civil servant 3W)

While girls were perceived as having a biological advantage regarding language, boys were generally perceived as maturing later, needing more physical activity, struggling in groups, and having more difficulty with deferred reward. Boys were also perceived as lacking the will to perform a task properly, and more prone to taking shortcuts or merely doing the necessary minimum. While girls were perceived as more able to force themselves to do 'uninteresting' tasks, boys as a group were described as more interest-driven. Several participants emphasized that these examples are group-level generalizations but argued that generalizing is necessary for discussing gender-based grade differences at all.

A recurring theme linked to boys' poorer circumstances was the perception that they have different abilities around structures, with a greater need for clarity and frameworks than girls in general. However, participants emphasized that teaching practices better adapted to boys would also benefit girls. Although the starting point was the ambition to improve boys' results, changes in teaching were also expected to benefit girls through an improved study climate in the classroom. Several participants repeated that clearer instructions are beneficial to both boys and girls, although from different perspectives. Increased clarity about expectations was perceived as helping boys understand what to do, and hence enable them to complete the tasks at all, while the same clarity was perceived as helping girls to limit their ambitions:

> This thing about structure, clarity, matrices and how boys in particular need it, but to some extent girls too so they don't end up doing big tasks that mean you sit for ten hours on Saturday and ten hours on Sunday to hand it in on Monday, when it would have been enough to write two pages, even though you've written ten pages. (Principal 3W)

Participants believed that clearer guidelines could reduce the school-related stress among girls revealed in both national surveys and those conducted in the municipality.

Other desirable, and partially initiated, measures related to the problem of teaching were early interventions and an increased focus on reading at younger ages. This was expected to help boys, who are described as falling behind in reading from the start, and was related to the participants' observation that failing in Swedish often means failing in other subjects as well.

The problem of the students' background

In the third PR, the students' background is thought of as the problem. During the interviews, we asked questions relating to students' migration background and the educational background of their parents, as these factors also influence grades at the national level and boys at national level achieve lower grades than girls even within these groups. However, participants did not attribute the grade differences between boys and girls to class (parents' educational background/socio-economic status) or

migration background alone; rather, these factors only became important in combination with gender norms. This was explained by the fact that boys who already have poorer conditions from the start because they come from homes where school may not be a priority, where caregivers read less with their children and so on, find it even more difficult when they meet the school's lower expectations based on their gender:

> If you now belong to a group that has various forms of challenges in the basic situation, if you also meet lower expectations and demands and so on, then it should be quite obvious that, that it continues. (Civil servant 3W)

Participants proposed explanations related to class more frequently than explanations related to migration background. One principal who worked in a school with many students from households with low socio-economic status explicitly mentioned that immigration background was not perceived as a problem in relation to grades:

> I'm back to this socio-economic part and how boys are brought up at home, and those boys here don't have the right conditions, they don't get the right conditions because … They didn't get it from home, and we must give them the right conditions to succeed at school, and that's difficult. (Principal 2W)

Class was also perceived as interacting with gender norms in relation to parents' attitudes towards school. While some participants identified mothers as more interested in their children's education, poorly educated fathers were perceived as potentially negative role models for their sons. One participant said that this was most frequently noticed among poorly educated people in rural areas, where not caring about school becomes a self-fulfilling norm.

This PR was described as particularly problematic to address and compensate for due to, e.g. limited resources and difficulties in identifying the need. Another aspect emphasized by some participants was that, although there is knowledge that class influences grades, it is only used as a justification and not as a tool for thinking about how to compensate for the poorer conditions.

The problem of the (grading) system

The fourth PR was added after the focus-group interviews, in which the grading system and grading criteria themselves were presented as a problem. One aspect was the perception that schools and teachers focus too much on grading criteria and what students are expected to know at the end when designing teaching, rather than the central content students should learn. This was perceived as killing teachers' creativity and leading schools to test maturity-based abilities such as discussing, analysing and drawing conclusions, rather than actual learning. This approach was thought to lead to teaching practices that primarily disadvantage boys who, due to immaturity, have not yet developed these abilities:

> The grading criteria state that you must, well, with fairly well-grounded reasoning discuss this phenomenon connected to that phenomenon, so it's really university level (…) it gets even worse in high school and then in upper secondary. It doesn't benefit the boys, I can safely say. (Principal 4M)

One participant emphasized that the teacher and content should guide teaching, rather than placing the responsibility for learning on students, to avoid cementing fundamental differences in students' circumstances, such as gender and class.

Another concern expressed by participants was the risk of excluding students who receive a grade F (fail). Comparisons with an older grading system, where you could not fail, were repeatedly made. Under the old system, students could still apply to upper secondary school even with the lowest grades, unlike today when too many Fs make you ineligible. The current grading system was perceived as contributing to negative levels of stress among teachers, as well as students and guardians. Participants also stressed that a student receiving an F often feels like a failure when their work is labelled as 'failed', which was considered negative for the student's motivation to continue learning. However, teachers passing students who haven't fully met the criteria, was also problematized:

> The problem is that the incentives to put an F versus an E [pass], the only incentives that exist for F, they're moral. I'm making a mistake as an official [i.e. a teacher] (…) in the sense that you're exercising authority, then I'm making a mistake if I really think an F but put an E. But all the other incentives say E. I don't get an angry student. I don't get an angry parent. I might not get an angry principal. I don't have to do follow-up work. I look good in front of colleagues. (Principal 4M)

The grading system was also perceived to favour girls if teachers consider boys' behaviour when grading. Participants highlighted that girls often receive higher grades in relation to their national test results than boys, which was understood as indicating that teachers consider factors beyond knowledge, disadvantaging boys.

The problem of teachers' (lack of) awareness and willingness to change

The last PR reflects participants' perception of a lack of knowledge, willingness and ability among school staff. These shortcomings were perceived as related both to how norms affect adults' expectations and treatment of students, and how teaching can be adapted to better suit the supposed special needs of boys. Some participants noted resistance to changing working methods and complaints among some teachers about lacking time to address the grade differences. One participant also stressed that some teachers might assign too much responsibility to the boys themselves:

> And you're perhaps a bit, not satisfied, that's the wrong word, comfortable with saying 'No, but the boys probably don't want more.' (…) Or that it's, not as a conscious attitude, not like that, but that it takes too much, it requires too much energy and time to hunt them and be on them all the time and so on. Could probably be a bit of that too. That they think perhaps to a slightly too great extent … there are perhaps thoughts that they [the boys] should be able to take responsibility themselves. (Principal 4M)

Another perception was that teachers' lack of confidence in achieving change leads to resistance on their part to making changes themselves.

There were some disagreements among the participants regarding this PR. While some stated clearly that teachers' lack of knowledge and awareness contributes to grade differences, others asserted that their staff do have insights into the issues and want to change. At the time of the interviews, some education initiatives had been offered at the municipal level; however, several participants emphasized the need for more education for staff to reduce the grade differences:

> So the educational issue around this, that is, that you know more, what is it that … what is it that contributes to the differences? I think everyone in school, teachers, principals, everyone

> needs to learn more about and talk more about this. Problematise. And seek solutions together. That's what I think. More of this continuing education that has been now. It has reached a number of educators, but it must reach more people. (Civil servant 4W)

The awareness and willingness of every single teacher to work with these issues was emphasized as critical for achieving change. However, although the need for staff training was a recurring theme among participants, it was perceived as difficult to raise awareness about all the aspects deemed necessary to effect change:

> Those things, the awareness, I think it's, it's easier to say that now, when you're presenting a new subject area, then you really must be clear about limiting. That's easy, it's just to remember those bits, or that we're aiming for everyone to read at least 15 min every day, that's easy. But that you must talk more, be more verbal with the boys, that's much more difficult. (Civil servant 2M)

In particular, challenging gender norms in teachers' treatment of students was recognized as problematic because this was perceived as originating in conservative images of gender differences and what it means to be a boy or a girl. Nevertheless, although participants articulated the importance of teachers being aware of how gender norms influence their behaviour, when asked about concrete measures aimed at the teachers planned for the collaborative work, the focus on education about teaching practices, such as instructions, and study techniques was overwhelming.

Assumptions underlying the problem representations

In this section, we address RQ2: What assumptions underlie the PRs? By analysing assumptions and presuppositions underlying the PRs, along with the context in which they have arisen, we identified four simultaneously existing, and to some extent competing, discourses that are needed for the PRs to be comprehensible in the current context (Bacchi 2009). Below, we present descriptive conceptualizations of each discourse.

Firstly, *the discourse of equity and gender equality* can be related to the PRs 'the problem of gender norms' and 'the problem of the students' background'. In a Swedish school context, equity can be said to include three aspects: all students must have equal access to education; the education that the students receive must be of equal quality; and all students must be given the same opportunities to succeed in their studies. In addition, schools are expected to compensate for students' different circumstances, such as class and migration background (SOU 2020:28 2020). The discourse of equity and gender equality in the governance of Swedish schools is well integrated into legislation such as the anti-discrimination act and the curriculum, which explicitly states that schools have 'a responsibility to make visible and counteract gender patterns that limit students' learning, choices and development' (Skolverket 2022). The participants' descriptions of how gender norms influence the ways in which adults in school treat girls and boys differently can easily be related to the curriculum's description of how students' ideas about what is feminine or masculine are shaped by how schools organize their education, including how the students are treated. The participants' discussions regarding difficulties in compensating for students' backgrounds also conform with results from government investigations (SOU 2020:28 2020).

Secondly, *the discourse of essentialism* provides a context for the PR 'the problem of teaching'. This can be related to longstanding Swedish and international discussions

about boys needing different educational methods than girls (Cobbett and Younger 2012; Jonsson 2014) and reveals the underlying assumption that boys and girls are essentially different. In a report from the Swedish Delegation for Gender Equality in School (SOU 2010:52, 2010), biological differences between girls and boys are highlighted as contributing to the gender differences in grades. Although this discourse is challenged by a constructionist view, the emphasis on biological differences, not least regarding maturity and language ability, recurs both in research on boys in school (Åhslund 2018) and in the participants' discussions about the reasons for the grade differences.

Thirdly, *the discourse of new public management (NPM) critique* relates to the PR 'the problem of the (grading) system'. Neoliberal ideology has had a powerful impact on education systems worldwide over the last few decades (Connell 2013) and, since the late 1980s, NPM has been the prevailing governance model in Swedish public administration. NPM as a management model has been extensively criticized, with reference to the fact that management by objectives leads to a focus on aspects that can be easily measured, instead of what is most important (Schmauch, Ahlström, and Keisu 2021). This criticism also emerged among the participants in this study, who stated that the constant testing of students and the focus on academic objectives risks contributing to a loss of the central content of what students are supposed to learn.

Finally, *the discourse of principals' pedagogical leadership versus teachers' autonomy* can be described as tension between the expectations of principals as pedagogical leaders and what Berg (2011, 147, our translation) refers to as the 'invisible contract', whereby 'administration and management is left to school leaders on the condition that they do not interfere with the content and form of the teaching'. This tension, visualized in the PR 'the problem of teachers' (lack of) awareness and willingness to change' enables principals to talk about their teachers as already enlightened, while simultaneously stressing that more training is needed to enable teachers to contribute to change regarding the gender differences in grades.

Competing problem representations and effects

In this section, we address RQ3 and discuss the discursive, subjectification and lived effects produced by the PRs (Bacchi 2009). One key finding illuminated in the analysis is that, although participants described the grade differences as a complex problem requiring complex solutions, most of the measures proposed to address the 'problems' are weighted towards one of them, i.e. 'the problem of teaching'. A discursive effect of the focus on this PR is that, despite the participants' awareness of this bias, it is presented as easier to take concrete measures regarding teaching than to change societal norms or compensate for the students' backgrounds. The observation that 'the problem of gender norms' was weakest among principals is significant, given their responsibility for schools' internal organization and teachers' professional development.

A recurring theme across the PRs was the risk that schools contribute to preserving students' different circumstances, instead of compensating for them. In relation to this, and in line with previous research (Hodgetts 2010; Zyngier 2009), the PRs produce teachers as the ones who must bring about change and hence must be educated and made aware of the issues for this to happen. Although principals are seen as responsible for providing access to knowledge and training to bring about change, great responsibility is placed

on teachers to change their attitudes towards and treatment of their students, to change their teaching methods, and compensate for students' different backgrounds. Taken together, these different expectations highlight the tension between conflicting logics – one grounded in a social constructivist perspective, the other in an essentialist one – which imply fundamentally different approaches to educational change. Although the changed teaching is expected to help students understand how to act to tackle their school tasks in a different way, the teaching must change first, before students can change. Thus students, and primarily boys, are produced as passive recipients of a changed teaching practice.

Altogether, the different PRs produce three 'subjectification pairs of opposites': the compensatory/preservative school; the conscious/unconscious teacher; and the underachieving boy/the overachieving girl. While the compensatory school and the conscious teacher appear to be desirable subject positions, both the underachieving boy and the overachieving girl can be understood as undesirable students. By stressing the need to change teaching to make it clearer, with more structure, which is expected to benefit boys by making them understand that they should do more and encourage girls to limit the time they spend on schoolwork to avoid diminished well-being due to school-related stress, an image of a desired (but absent) 'other' student appears. Unlike research showing that the responsibility for girls' school-related stress is often placed on the girls themselves (Lenz Taguchi and Palmer 2013), the schools in our study try to take responsibility for reducing school stress by creating structures to prevent it. Considering boys and girls respectively as homogeneous groups is problematic, however (Keddie 2006), and the antagonistic relationship between boys and girls in the discourse about boys' underachievement (Öhrn and Weiner 2017) still seems to be an obstacle to a more nuanced picture of which boys and girls it is actually about, despite schools' efforts to improve conditions for 'all'.

The lived or material effects produced by the dominant PRs might affect students in teaching situations through various concrete changes in the classroom. If the ban on prank fights, the most concrete effort linked to norms and school culture, takes effect, this may contribute to a calmer school climate beneficial to all students. At the same time, a focus on addressing symptoms (e.g. prank fights) might well run the risk that measures aimed at fundamentally changing norms are not implemented, and thus that inequalities are not challenged after all (Keddie 2006; Zyngier 2009).

Finally, linking back to the question of silences in the PRs, and the possible effects these may have in the form of missing action proposals, we also highlight the relatively weak intersectional ambition reflected in the interviews. Rather than using the awareness of how different background factors interact as a tool to compensate for poorer conditions, the study shows that this knowledge instead risks being used as a legitimization of the lower grades of boys and other disadvantaged groups. By accepting the status quo, possible measures to bring about change risks being overlooked.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have shown that the gender gap in grades, despite being considered a complex problem and thus perceived by principals, preschool principals, and civil servants as requiring complex solutions, largely attracts a one-sided focus in terms of

measures. Despite the ambition to promote better conditions for both boys and girls at school, the study shows significant differences between what is said to be most important for bringing about change – changing the gender norms – and the actual measures that are planned – changing the teaching practices. Together with an underdeveloped intersectional ambition, this has consequences both for the teachers who are expected to bring about the change, and for the students who are ultimately affected. Following Zyngier (2009) and Keddie (2006), we emphasize that focusing exclusively on programmatic measures, rather than transforming gender norms and broader social systems, processes and structures, risks perpetuating and exacerbating gender inequalities over time. Similarly, a singular focus on the 'underachieving boy' or the 'overachieving girl', as well as talking about 'girls' and 'boys' as distinct, homogeneous groups, without considering factors other than gender, can lead to inappropriate measures and negative consequences, further reproducing or even deepening these inequalities.

Although the case study design and the limitation to the Swedish context reduces the possibilities to generalize, this study provides insights that can contribute to the international discussion in research about the complex challenges facing school leaders seeking to ensure inclusive, equitable and high-quality education for all students (Leithwood 2021).

We have discussed the possible effects that school leaders' perceptions of the 'problem' of the gender gap in grades might have in schools, and argued that, if school leaders do not critically address the gender gap and problematize their own perceptions, the status quo may persist, leaving gender norms unchallenged and teachers lacking the tools to address the issue comprehensively. The study shows that collaborating around equality work, which necessarily includes power relations, means that intentions, ambitions and the work itself may fluctuate in intensity, progress and consensus about the ends and means. This, in turn, calls for more studies that follow equality work over time. To conclude, we emphasize the importance of school leaders problematizing the 'problem' of boys' underachievement and the measures undertaken in the work to bring about change.

Note

1. We acknowledge that gender is a non-binary construct, and that binary understandings can have serious implications for students in school contexts (Ingrey 2018). However, as policy definitions are based on a binary framework, we use the terms 'boys' and 'girls' in this paper.

Acknowledgements

Microsoft 365 Copilot Chat was used as language support as English is not the authors first language.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by J C Kempe Memorial Scholarship Foundation.

Notes on contributors

Ida Johansson is a doctoral student at the Department of Sociology and the Centre for Principal Development at Umeå University. Her PhD research explores principals' work in relation to gender-based grade differences in compulsory school.

Britt-Inger Keisu is an associate professor in Sociology and work as a lecturer. Her research interests are organizational sociology with a focus on gender, ethnicity/race, and indigenous feminist research.

Magnus Larsson is a senior lecturer in educational leadership at Umeå University. He holds a PhD in Sociology, and his primary research interest is evaluation and principals' professional development.

ORCID

Ida Johansson http://orcid.org/0009-0004-1198-6124
Britt-Inger Keisu http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9627-4625
Magnus Larsson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4636-1886

References

Bacchi, Carol. 2009. *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson.

Bacchi, Carol. 2018. "Drug Problematizations and Politics." *Contemporary Drug Problems* 45 (1): 3–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091450917748760.

Berg, Gunnar. 2011. *Skolledarskap och Skolans Frirum*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Cobbett, Mary, and Mike Younger. 2012. "Boys' Educational 'Underachievement' in the Caribbean: Interpreting the 'Problem'." *Gender and Education* 24 (6): 611–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.677014.

Connell, Raewyn. 2013. "The Neoliberal Cascade and Education: An Essay on the Market Agenda and Its Consequences." *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (2): 99–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.776990.

Connell, R. W. 1996. "Teaching the Boys: New Research on Masculinity, and Gender Strategies for Schools." *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 98 (2): 206–235. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819609800203.

Gillander Gådin, Katja, Albin Dahlström, and Heléne Dahlqvist. 2024. Ungas psykiska hälsa och utsatthet för våld och trakasserier: Rapport från en enkätstudie till elever I årskurs nio I Västernorrland. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn = urn:nbn:se:miun:diva-50564.

Heck, Ronald H., and Philip Hallinger. 2009. "Assessing the Contribution of Distributed Leadership to School Improvement and Growth in Math Achievement." *American Educational Research Journal* 46 (3): 659–689. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831209340042.

Heck, Ronald H., and Philip Hallinger. 2014. "Modeling the Longitudinal Effects of School Leadership on Teaching and Learning." *Journal of Educational Administration* 52 (5): 653–681. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-08-2013-0097.

Hodgetts, Katherine. 2010. "Boys' Underachievement and the Management of Teacher Accountability." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 31 (1): 29–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300903465401.

Ingrey, Jennifer. 2018. "Problematizing the Cisgendering of School Washroom Space: Interrogating the Politics of Recognition of Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Youth." *Gender and Education* 30 (6): 774–789. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1483492.

Johansson, Olof, and Helene Ärlestig. 2022. "Democratic Governing Ideals and the Power of Intervening Spaces as Prerequisite for Student Learning." *Journal of Educational Administration* 60 (3): 340–353. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-04-2021-0079

Jonsson, Rickard. 2014. "Boys' Anti-school Culture? Narratives and School Practices." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 45 (3): 276–292. https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12068.

Keddie, Amanda. 2006. "Pedagogies and Critical Reflection: Key Understandings for Transformative Gender Justice." *Gender and Education* 18 (1): 99–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500195184.

Keisu, Britt-Inger, Lena Abrahamsson, and Malin Rönnblom. 2015. "Entrepreneurship and Gender Equality in Academia – a Complex Combination in Practice." *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 5 (1): 69-92. https://doi.org/10.19154/njwls.v5i1.4766.

Keisu, Britt-Inger, and Björn Ahlström. 2020. "The Silent Voices: Pupil Participation for Gender Equality and Diversity." *Educational Research* 62 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1711436.

Kessels, Ursula, and Mieke Van Houtte. 2022. "Side Effects of Academic Engagement? How Boys' and Girls' Well-Being Is Related to Their Engagement and Motivational Regulation." *Gender and Education* 34 (6): 627–642. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.2011840

Leithwood, Kenneth. 2021. "A Review of Evidence about Equitable School Leadership." *Education Sciences* 11 (8): 377. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080377.

Lenz Taguchi, Hillevi, and Anna Palmer. 2013. "A More 'Livable' School? A Diffractive Analysis of the Performative Enactments of Girls' Ill-/Well-Being with(in) School Environments." *Gender and Education* 25 (6): 671–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.829909.

Mills, Martin, and Amanda Keddie. 2007. "Teaching Boys and Gender Justice." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 11 (3): 335–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110701238785.

Norqvist, Lars, and Pär Poromaa Isling. 2020. "Skolledarskap I Sverige: En Forskningsöversikt 2014–2018." *Nordic Studies in Education* 40 (2): 167–187. https://doi.org/10.23865/nse.v40.2230.

Pietilä, Penni, Liisa Tainio, Sirpa Lappalainen, and Elina Lahelma. 2021. "Swearing as a Method of Antipedagogy in Workshops of Rap Lyrics for 'Failing Boys' in Vocational Education." *Gender and Education* 33 (4): 420–434. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1763922.

Ross, John A., and Marie-Josée Berger. 2009. "Equity and Leadership: Research-Based Strategies for School Leaders." *School Leadership & Management* 29 (5): 463–476. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430903152310.

Salisbury, Jane, Gareth Rees, and Stephen Gorard. 1999. "Accounting for the Differential Attainment of Boys and Girls at School." *School Leadership & Management* 19 (4): 403–426. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632439968943.

Schmauch, Ulrika, Björn Ahlström, and Britt-Inger Keisu. 2021. "Inequality Regimes in Equality Work: New Public Management and Peripheralization Processes in Swedish Schools." In *Working Life and Gender Inequality*, edited by Angelica Sjöstedt, Katarina Giritli Nygren, and Marianna Fotaki, 211–230. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429356629-11-11.

Schrik, Paul, and Teresa Akinyi Wasonga. 2019. "The Role of a School Leader in Academic Outcomes: Between Self-efficacy and Outcome Expectations." *Athens Journal of Education* 6 (4): 291–306. https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.6-4-3.

Skolverket. 2022. *Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet (Lgr22)*. https://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id = 9718.

Skolverket. 2024. *Slutbetyg I grundskolan – våren* 2024. https://www.skolverket.se/download/18.bcb791419221c6a75313/1727178799386/pdf13149.pdf.

SOU 2010:51. 2010. *Könsskillnader I Skolprestationer – Idéer om Orsaker?* Stockholm: Fritze.

SOU 2010:52. 2010. *Biologiska Faktorer och Könsskillnader I Skolresultat*. Stockholm: Fritze.

SOU 2020:28. 2020. *En mer Likvärdig Skola: Minskad Skolsegregation och Förbättrad Resurstilldelning: Betänkande av Utredningen om en mer Likvärdig Skola*. Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik.

Stark, Elin. 2019. *Den goda skolan: I lagens namn eller en trygghetens famn? Diskurser om skolproblem I lokal media och bland skolverksamma*. PhD diss., Umeå University.

Sun, Jingping, and Kenneth Leithwood. 2017. "Calculating the Power of Alternative Choices by School Leaders for Improving Student Achievement." *School Leadership & Management* 37 (1–2): 80–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1293635.

UNESCO. 2015. *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* https://doi.org/10.54675/MDZL5552.

West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1 (2): 125–151. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002

Zimmerman, Fredrik. 2018. "Det tillåtande och det begränsande: en studie om pojkars syn på studier och ungdomars normer kring maskulinitet". PhD diss., Göteborgs University.
Zyngier, David. 2009. "Doing It to (for) Boys (Again): Do We Really Need More Books Telling Us There Is a Problem with Boys' Underachievement in Education?" *Gender and Education* 21 (1): 111–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802580844.
Åhslund, Ingela. 2018. "Nordic Research on Boys' Learning and School Performance: A Systematic Literature Review." *Utbildning och Lärande / Education and Learning* 12 (2): 41–61.
Åhslund, Ingela. 2019. "Uppfattningar, förväntningar och didaktiska val – en studie om undervisningens betydelse för pojkars skolprestationer". PhD diss., Mid Sweden University. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:miun:diva-35943.
Öhrn, Elisabet, and Gaby Weiner. 2017. "Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.131.