"Taking context seriously": Exploring the enactment of gender policy mandates in Catalan education

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Abstract

Several laws and plans contemplate the incorporation of a gender perspective in education in Catalonia. This article analyzes how the relevant policy mandates are transferred, recontextualized and implemented in Catalan secondary schools. Drawing on 15 focus groups with representatives of teachers, students, management teams and families (N=103) from 12 secondary schools in the region, the paper explores the multiple forms of enactment that take place according to the particularities of each of the contexts. Using the analytical framework established by Braun et al. (2011), the results show how the material, the situational, the external, and particularly, the professional context shape the enactment of gender policies in Catalan education. Likewise, the article highlights how actors at the school level develop gender-sensitive practices based on their values and beliefs. Finally, we discuss how, far from a top-down approach, there is also policymaking at the lowest level of the educational system: the school.

Keywords: education; gender; policy; enactment; implementation; secondary schools

Resum. '*Prendre'ns el context seriosament': explorar la posada en pràctica de les directrius polítiques de gènere a l'educació a Catalunya*

Diverses lleis i plans preveuen la incorporació de la perspectiva de gènere a l'educació a Catalunya. Aquest article analitza com les directrius polítiques en aquest sentit es traslladen, recontextualitzen i implementen en instituts catalans. A partir de quinze grups de discussió amb representants del professorat, alumnat, equips directius i famílies (N = 103) de dotze centres educatius del territori, s'exploren les múltiples formes de posar-ho en pràctica segons les particularitats de cada context. Partint del marc analític de Braun et al. (2011), els resultats evidencien que el context material, situat, extern i, particularment, el professional, modulen la implementació de les polítiques de gènere a l'educació catalana. L'article mostra, també, que els actors en l'àmbit escolar fan pràctiques relacionades amb el gènere segons els seus valors i creences. Finalment, es discuteix com, lluny d'una

aproximació de dalt a baix, també hi ha creació de política en l'últim nivell del sistema educatiu: l'escola.

Paraules clau: educació; gènere; política; implementació; escoles de secundària

Resumen. '*Tomarnos el contexto en serio': explorar la puesta en práctica de las directrices políticas de género en la educación en Cataluña*

Varias leyes y planes contemplan la incorporación de la perspectiva de género en la educación en Cataluña. Este artículo analiza cómo las directrices políticas en este sentido se trasladan, recontextualizan e implementan en institutos catalanes. A partir de quince grupos de discusión con representantes del profesorado, alumnado, equipos directivos y familias (N = 103) de doce centros educativos del territorio, se exploran las múltiples formas de ponerlo en práctica según las particularidades de cada contexto. Partiendo del marco analítico de Braun et al. (2011), los resultados evidencian que el contexto material, situado, externo y, particularmente, el profesional modulan la implementación de las políticas de género en la educación catalana. Asimismo, el artículo muestra que los actores en el ámbito escolar realizan prácticas relacionadas con el género según sus valores y creencias. Finalmente, se discute cómo, lejos de una aproximación de arriba abajo, también hay creación de política en el último nivel del sistema educativo: la escuela.

Palabras clave: educación; género; políticas; implementación; escuelas de secundaria

Summary

1. Introduction: The inescapable urgency of gender-sensitive policies

The desire to remedy gender gaps in educational participation, access and achievement (Monkman & Webster, 2015) and the introduction of gender perspectives in education have become central in the global education policy field. Starting in 1975 with the UN First World Conference on Women International in Mexico, and followed by the adoption of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, world-wide conferences have continued to place gender issues at the core of global education policy debates. Following the trend towards gender mainstreaming in all policy fields (Jacquot, 2015), initiatives such as Education for All and Millennium Development Goals introduced 'gender' into various goals and targets (DeJaeghere, 2015). Similarly, the updated UNESCO 2030 Agenda also mainstreams gender under Sustainable Development Goal 4, which focuses on education (United Nations, 2015). Thus, in a context where 'gender' has

been positioned as a global priority in education (Monkman & Hoffman, 2013), at least partly by the influential role of international organizations such as UNESCO, other UN agencies, the OECD and the World Bank, and where the EU promotes gender mainstreaming in all policy fields (Jacquot, 2015), it is not surprising that most national and regional governments have formulated policies to address gender inequality in education.

Focusing on the case of Catalonia, in 2009 this autonomous region in north-eastern Spain passed the current Catalan Education Law, which includes "coeducation"[1] and "effective equality between men and women" among the "governing principles" of the education system (art. 2.1.m Llei 12/2009, del 10 de juliol). Based on this legal precedent, a Government Plan (*Pla per la igualtat de gènere en el sistema educatiu*) was designed and implemented in 2015 (Acord GOV/5/2015). This plan explicitly highlights the need for "a change of perspective that allows revision of the approach to content, teaching methods and also the organizational aspects [of schools] to advance in the construction of non-sexist identity models" (Acord GOV/5/2015). The plan also includes relevant goals to advance towards gender equality, such as "to promote the integration of gender perspective in the school buildings, projects, programs and the gender-sensitive review of institutional documents" (Goal 1.4), and "to guarantee an education without sexist stereotypes or discriminations related to gender or sexual-affective orientation" (Goal 2.1) (Acord GOV/5/2015). Third, principles and goals regarding gender are also specified in the official education curriculum (Decret 119/2015, de 23 de Juny; Decret 187/2015, de 25 d'agost). In the case of primary education, the gender perspective is present throughout the curriculum as a cross-cutting capacity for students to achieve. In secondary education, however, the gender perspective is less central and is considered as a specific capacity in different fields. These include social sciences, physical education, philosophy', 'biology' and 'culture and values' (for a broader analysis of the legislation relating to education and gender in Catalonia, see Gavaldà-Elias et al., 2021a).

Despite the existence of such legislation, there is evidence that these statutes do not *ensure* the incorporation of the gender perspective into the Catalan educational system (Feu & Abril, 2020). In addition, little is known about what actors in secondary schools – namely teachers, principals and students – *do* regarding a gender perspective in education, as the enactment of policies is always subject to individual interpretation, as well as to complex social interactions between the respective actors involved. Thus, drawing on the concept of "policy enactment" (Ball et al., 2012), the aim of this article is to analyze how the gender and education policy matrix is translated, recontextualized and put into practice in secondary schools in Catalonia. Rather than focusing on analyzing the content of the "policies as text" (Ball, 1993), this article will explore what secondary schools *do* regarding gender, and the ways in which

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1. Note that the term coeducation, which is in common use in the Catalan- and Spanish-speaking context, refers to gender perspective in education.

secondary-school actors re-signify these policy orientations, by considering their agency in context.

While the concept of "policy enactment" was not originally devised for analyzing gender policies, some authors have conducted analyses using this framework. However, most of those studies have focused either on the enactment of policies linked to school-related gender-based violence in the global south (e.g., Parkes, 2016; Johnson & Parkes, 2021) or on the enactment of gender policies by local education officials and NGO staff (e.g., Unterhalter et al., 2012; DeJaeghere & Wiger, 2013). Whereas some authors focus on the differences between discourses around gender and sexuality education (specifically conservative, liberal, critical and postmodern discourses) (Jones, 2011), others analyze students' reactions to feminist programs that are implemented under different approaches (Ollis, 2017). In line with the former, our study aims to contribute to the literature by illustrating the tensions between "policies as text" and the process of "policy enactment". It will do so by drawing on a broader understanding of the gender perspective in education which seeks to "disrupt heteronormativity through critical pedagogy" (Atkinson, 2020, p. 1). The paper focuses on gender policies and actors within secondary schools in the context of Catalonia.

2. Analytical framework: Policy enactment

Previous education policy studies tended to analyze the processes of policy implementation in a linear and decontextualized way. This approach understands policies as top-down, imposed-to-the-schools guidelines that actors are only required to implement, without taking into consideration conflict or overlapping emotions. However, this tends to ignore the mediating role of local features and the agency of the actors involved (Perryman et al., 2017; Viczko & Riveros, 2015). In contrast to this approach, Ball et al. (2012) developed a more nuanced framework for understanding processes of policy implementation, called "policy enactment"; and argued that this approach allows for actual situations to be better captured and for the actors' agency to be taken into consideration.

In the context studied here, teachers and school leaders are thus not only understood as mere implementers of policy texts, but rather as agents who actively recontextualize the policies they deal with. Hence, teachers and school leaders re-signify and redefine policies according to their personal and professional biographies, as well as the historical, socio-political and institutional context of the school in question. In other words, school actors do not just *implement* education policies but rather they *make* them. This process entails an intricate and somewhat chaotic (re)creation and *enactment* of policies, which includes both intended and unintended consequences (Maguire et al., 2015).

Specifically, Ball et al. (2012) speak of two processes: first, interpretation, understood as "an institutional political process, a strategy, […] a process of explanation, elucidation, and creation of an institutional agenda"; and second,

translation, as "a space between policy and practice, […] an iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action" (p. 45). While interpretation refers to a process of de-codification and sense-making of external policy messages, translation relates to the transformation of the schools' agenda into particular actions, practices and materials to respond to the policy (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 1999). School staff are thus enactors; that is, they are involved in complex processes of negotiation and transformation of meanings, and so interpret and translate various policy signals based on individual and collective viewpoints.

Notably, in relation to these dynamics of interpretation by the actors, the specific material conditions that shape the processes of policy enactment must also be taken into consideration. As Braun et al. (2011) show, "taking context seriously" is important to "acknowledge that the material, structural and relational are part of policy analysis in order to make better sense of policy enactments at the institutional level" (p. 588). That is, different kinds of contextual contingencies are key in explaining divergences in the process through which policy mandates are put into practice by teachers and principals. For this reason, the outcome of a public policy is conditioned not only by "efficient" designs, but also by how actors understand and convey the meaning of policy statements in specific educational settings, among other types of contextual factors.

Following in this vein, the present authors identified four interrelated and overlapping contextual dimensions relevant to this analysis: *situational*, *professional*, *material* and *external* contexts (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012). The *situational context* describes the factors relating to the school's situation, such as its location, history, and intake. The *professional context* refers to the specific values, commitments and experiences of teachers and leaders, as well as their alignment or divergence from different policy mandates. For instance, actors are more inclined to embrace familiar ideas and ignore those that contradict their own views and practices, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance (Spillane et al., 2002). The *material context* is linked to the physical elements of a school, such as its infrastructure, available technologies, budget and the level of staffing. Lastly, the *external context* refers to the pressures, expectations and legal requirements and responsibilities that schools are subject to, from education authorities and the community. We apply these four contextual dimensions to guide the analysis of our results, as they are useful for providing a more complex understanding of the multiplicity of factors that shape the enactment of education policies regarding gender in secondary schools in Catalonia.

3. Methods and data

Our research involved the participation of 12 public secondary schools in Catalonia, which were selected according to three main criteria: (i) the secondary schools undertook specific initiatives and experiences regarding gender; (ii) they were territorially distributed throughout the four Catalan provinces

(Barcelona, Lleida, Girona and Tarragona); and (iii) they were public. In October 2020, we published an open call for participation to secondary schools in Catalonia. This led to responses from 28 secondary schools, of which 13 were initially selected in accordance with the criteria described above. This ensured that the participating schools had experience in enacting gender-sensitive initiatives and were actively involved in the topic. One school subsequently withdrew from the project due to the pandemic, leaving 12 secondary schools: six in the province of Barcelona, two in Girona, three in Lleida and one in Tarragona (Gavaldà-Elias et al., 2021b).

The research followed a qualitative approach framed within the "feminist-activist" research perspective (Knight, 2000; Biglia, 2007), which is based on feminist epistemologies and situated inference research. Specifically, we drew on 15 focus groups as our main method, as this represents a group technique that is both interactive and social in nature, and is oriented towards participants' joint reflexivity (Wilkinson, 1998). The research design consisted of two complementary phases. In the first phase, with a total of 103 participants, we conducted a focus group within each secondary school (N=12), with the joint participation of teachers (n=47), students (43), principals (6) and families (7), to explore their gender-sensitive initiatives and the actors' experiences and conceptions. Specifically, the questions related to what initiatives secondary schools undertook at classroom and school levels, the methodologies used, the organizational aspects involved, the spaces where they occurred, and the actors' approaches. Notably, the participation of both teaching and non-teaching secondary school actors provided us with more nuanced and complex data regarding the processes of policy enactment. The second phase, in which teachers shared their initiatives and the contextual aspects that shaped them (i.e. obstacles and drivers), consisted of cross-school focus groups (N=3). In each of these three focus groups, eight teachers from four of the twelve schools participated. All meetings were recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed to facilitate collaborative coding and analysis by the research team, using specific qualitative data-analysis software. The analytical categories used (i.e. professional, material, external and situational contexts) correspond to those described by Braun et al. (2011), and structure the results section below.

4. Exploring the enactment processes of gender-sensitive policies

4.1. Professional context

Above, we noted the most relevant regulations regarding gender in education in Catalonia, from the Law of Education (LEC 12/2009, of 10 July) to the references to gender in the official education curriculum and the *Plan for Gender Equality in the Educational System*. However, in practice, the inclusion of gender perspectives in secondary school materials such as textbooks is mostly either marginal or non-existent. As one teacher puts it, "In our economy book there's no mention of a gender perspective. There's only a very small section that talks about "equality at work", but it's a very small section" (Teach-

er, School 3). This generalized absence of a gender perspective in school materials differs substantially from the consideration of gender equality as a "guiding principle" of the education system. However, this is compensated by imaginative initiatives that some teachers undertake beyond the textbooks.

For instance, as one student says, "We introduce gender perspective in a lot of subjects. For example, we give presentations about women, you know? And we explain how they stood out, who they were, the important things they did… to raise awareness" (Student, School 6). Similarly, other gender-sensitive activities led by teachers also take place in schools; as one teacher notes, "Students had to look for some advertisements and had to stick them to this mural. What one group did, for example, was look for advertisements in the press about issues relating to work discrimination" (Teacher, School 3). Discussion of gender perspectives also takes place: "In Language class, […] students had some topics to discuss, which were set by the teachers to lay topics about gender on the table. And there was one activity that was a "Guess Who?" about distinguished women and their biographies" (Teacher, School 10). All these examples show that teachers initiate games or activities with a gender perspective, beyond what is provided in the textbooks, in ways such as those described above, linked to the idea of increasing women's representation, visibility and recognition throughout the secondary school curriculum.

Although official policies envisage a gender perspective, the materials provided, such as the textbooks teachers are supposed to use as tools, do not explicitly mention gender. In addition, most teachers said that there was no clear guidance about how to introduce gender issues in secondary schools, as the official regulations and policy orientations did not provide teachers with guidelines. Teachers interpret and translate the "principle of coeducation" in a very broad and creative way, according to their own values, commitments and experiences. Interestingly, this is also connected to how they understand gender and the need to introduce it into the curriculum in a certain way, for instance by bringing women to the fore.

At times, in contrast to teachers who conceive gender as a single axis and are mostly concerned about the introduction of "women" in general into the curriculum, some teachers adopt intersectional perspectives on gender. Interestingly, their awareness of the complex matrix of privileges and oppressions that intersectional perspectives highlight infuses their ways of understanding gender, and consequently, its introduction into school practices. For example, one teacher explains that she talks in class about a variety of women, "for students to realize that not all the interesting women are white. They need to realize a bit about the globality" (Teacher, School 3). In the same secondary school, another teacher explains that, "We analyzed the film "Hidden Figures", which takes place in the US and is about three black women, so doubly discriminated against, who are scientists." (Teacher, School 3). This demonstrates how the specific teachers' conceptions of gender, in this case intersectional and critical approaches, have a strong influence on the ways in which they enact the gender policy mandates.

Nevertheless, despite intersectionality adding a certain degree of complexity to gender, the previous ways of enacting such gender policy mandates are still mostly related to bringing women to the fore. However, some teachers go beyond such an understanding of gender, and also include aspects linked to gender identity, sexuality and sex education. For instance, one teacher includes references to sex education, and focuses on the treatment of the taboo around the clitoris and women's sexual activity, beyond the limitations of the textbooks, which "always talk about the reproductive system, but I like to talk about the function of reproduction [and] about all the internal structure of the clitoris, that seems to be taboo" (Teacher, School 3). Many other actions promoted by the schools try to highlight the perpetuation of cis-heteronormativity imbued in secondary education by including LGBTIQ+ issues and history. For example, a social science teacher explains that "We are studying history taking into consideration that the narratives we have been told are rooted in sexism and heteropatriarchy, … so we are studying the prehistory and at the same time reversing this discourse" (Teacher, School 7). Similarly, a student from another secondary school explains that "We learned the differences between the LGBTIQ+ collectives, the different names they have… and we also made a poster with important trans women who marked history" (Student, School 6). All these examples show how some teachers understand that gender does not only encompass bringing to light the work done by women; and, consequently, they include broader aspects linked to gender identity, sexuality and sex education into their gender-sensitive practices.

Furthermore, all the previous examples show the extent to which introducing gender into the curriculum is up to the individual teachers, which reinforces the importance of professional context in our study. In fact, all the participants agreed that their efforts to include gender perspectives are due to their own informed decision to do so, rather than a result of the official curriculum. However, the teachers also say that this individual effort has consequences: when there is no support from other colleagues, some teachers are left to develop gender-sensitive practices on their own. Some individuals said that this leads to feelings of loneliness. If the introduction of gender perspectives comes at the cost of some teachers' wellbeing because the values, commitments and experiences of other teachers and leaders are not aligned with gender policy mandates, this poses a great obstacle to the introduction of gender in secondary schools.

4.2. Material context

One of the most frequently recurring themes across all schools was the importance of marking International Days to celebrate and thematize gender. These celebrations were enhanced by inviting speakers or experts in gender-related topics to give speeches to the students. Events included workshops on days such as International Women's Day (8 March), International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November), International Day Against

Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (17 May) and International Day of Women and Girls in Science (11 February). This was mostly done as a complementary activity in combination with other activities. As one teacher explained, for instance, "On International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women we ran a mural contest, in which students could explain what violence against women was for them, how they wanted to eliminate it" (Teacher, School 1). Moreover, in some cases inviting experts was useful, as it compensated for teachers' lack of knowledge about certain issues. Teachers often reiterate their lack of knowledge as one of the main obstacles to enacting gender policy mandates. Thus, while inviting an expert may offer a solution, it requires a necessary school budget and planning for such purposes. For this reason, this way of introducing a gender perspective is shaped by a school's economic capacity, and to what extent they view gender as one of the priorities for principals and teachers. This is strongly linked to the notion of a school's material context, which in this case can either serve as a way to empower or impede the enactment of gender-sensitive policies in education.

Interestingly, beyond the idea of material context *shaping* policy enactment, in some cases, the introduction of a gender perspective also implied *modifying* such material context. Specifically, some secondary schools undertook changes in their infrastructure and technology to accommodate the inclusion of a gender perspective. One of the main spaces that experienced transformations were the toilets. As one teacher puts it: "Our toilets don't have gender; that is, they are not for boys or for girls, because sometimes some people are questioning themselves or are undergoing a transition, so they shouldn't feel bad or define themselves if they don't want to" (Teacher, School 7). Toilets, therefore, were seen as a gendered space that might have negative consequences for some students or teachers, so they were transformed into gender-neutral toilets.

In addition to the toilets, the introduction of gender perspectives in other schools also involved the transformation of playgrounds, as school actors identified a gendered use of space they wanted to modify. For instance, as one teacher states:

> We have started to rethink the use of the playground… to adapt the space for different uses other than a sports track in the centre. We would like to have spaces where people can stay, can chat or, I don't know, can do something artistic. (Teacher, School 10)

Similarly, a school principal explains why they have changed the playground: "We are trying to make it a more comfortable and "friendly" space, with ping-pong tables, picnic tables, benches, plants, a vegetable garden" (Principal, School 7). Such transformations relate to the gendered dynamics and unequal distribution of space that occur when the playgrounds consist only of a sports track. For this reason, teachers perceive that changing the composition of the playground by diversifying its spaces and the possible activities that might take place in them is a way of introducing a gender perspective to the school by re-thinking the very common position of power of boys in the playground. Thus, we can observe how the material context

– especially the toilets and the playground – not only shape and create the conditions in which the enactment occurs, but are also subject to transformation in the process of such enactment.

Overall, this also shows how secondary school actors not only interpret the content taught in classrooms, but also shows how their enactment spills over into how the space is interpreted from a gender perspective. Beyond the material spaces that we have discussed above, the participants also stated the importance of the creation or the transformation of the symbolic dimension of space. Some secondary schools, for instance, created a "coeducation commission", a "diversity group" or an "LGBTI group", which were simultaneously responsible for introducing a gender perspective into the secondary schools, a place for activism, and a safe space for people to express themselves freely. According to one mother, "I used to suffer from gender violence, and my daughter could find there [in the commission] the freedom to express herself, talk about what she had experienced and help others. It was a supportive place for her" (Family member, School 11). These groups, according to the participants, were crucial for the introduction of a gender perspective into their schools. Nevertheless, in most cases, meetings for the preparation of the groups' activities occurred during breaks and outside the members' working or studying time. This meant extra work for the people participating in these initiatives, who were mainly teachers and/or students who identify as women and/or part of the LGBTIQ+ community. Such unrecognized commitment and time were identified as a key obstacle for the development of gender-sensitive actions. In contrast, some secondary school leaders emphasized that they recognized the hours dedicated to the "coeducation commission" by its members as "working time". Participants noted precisely this factor as a key driving force for the continuation of such groups. Once more, this shows the relevance of the material context for the enactment of gender policy mandates.

4.3. External and situational contexts

These contexts also appear as important, yet minor, elements in our study. Regarding the former, some teachers state that there is a sense of urgency among secondary schools to create gender commissions or groups, following the recommendations by the Catalan Department of Education. Currently, there is still no legal requirement by the Department for the existence of such commissions and their functions and responsibilities, but secondary schools are increasingly creating them. Some of them said they were influenced by the gender-sensitive training courses that the Department offers to teachers; others, by frequent reports that such bodies will become obligatory in the future; and others were inspired by other secondary schools that had created similar initiatives. All these influences connect to the external context shaping the enactment. Following similar logics, several other changes are being established in the policy documents of the secondary schools, such as the introduction of gender-neutral language, or the creation of internal protocols against gender-related violence.

Finally, elements of the situational context emerge to a lesser extent. For instance, as they reported, the participating secondary schools located in high-density urban areas had, in general, more inputs and insights into what nearby schools were doing. As a result, they had more access and opportunities to collaborate with local education agents, such as specialized NGOs and associations, than those located in rural areas, which in general had a shorter history of introducing a gender perspective. Besides the urban-rural divide, participants identified coordination with and support from the local administration as a driver:

> With the relevant member of the city council, we have been working more and doing more activities together to prepare a more continuous counselling plan. It is an action that we carry out in the first and third year of secondary school. (Teacher, School 5)

All in all, the 15 focus groups with participants shed light on the complexity of the processes f enactment of gender-sensitive policies, and on the relevance of the *situational*, *professional*, *material*, and *external contexts* around shaping such enactment.

5. Final remarks

Our research identifies various ways in which Catalan secondary schools interpret and enact the policy guidelines in relation to gender education, considering the particularities of each context as well as the agency of actors. Far from a top-down notion of policy implementation, the research stresses the importance of looking at school actors, as well as their processes of interpretation and translation of policy mandates, to understand the complexities of the enactment of gender policies in education. Note that our results reflect the views of twelve secondary schools with experience in enacting gender-sensitive initiatives and actively involved in the topic, rather than a generalization of the whole Catalan scenario.

Drawing on the four analytical dimensions of context proposed by Braun et al. (2011), our results emphasize the influence of the material context and, to a lesser extent, the situational and external contexts of each secondary school on the enactment of gender policy mandates. However, the research demonstrates that it is precisely the professional context which becomes the main factor explaining the diversity in school practices. In other words, the ways gender policy mandates are enacted by school actors are closely linked to the values, knowledge and teaching experiences of the school staff. In this regard, one of the main findings is that the fact that gender policies in Catalonia lack clear, specific guidelines leads to a wide divergence of actions by secondary schools. Such failure to implement the "coeducation principle" enshrined in Catalan educational law into the official curriculum results in the emergence of bottom-up, teacher-led actions. This means that implementation of the "coeducation principle" is mainly left to teachers' motivations and initiatives, and responsibility for providing gender-sensitive education falls to school-

level actors. Furthermore, the extraordinary efforts, specifically in terms of overtime, made by some teachers to carry out gender-sensitive initiatives might have negative consequences for them, even to the point of isolation or burn-out, especially when there is no support from other teachers or principals. In this regard, acknowledging the work done by teachers, it seems necessary to ensure the formal recognition of their work, both by the secondary schools and by the education authorities.

Moreover, a more operationalized and concrete legal framework on gender education might be necessary to ensure the first steps for the effective fulfil-ment of equity in education. Likewise, the inclusion of a gender perspective across the curriculum and across learning materials is essential, yet is cur-rently not sufficient. That is to say, despite the need for more straightforward ways of implementing gender education policies, the role of school-level enac-tors is crucial, as their agency and capacity to re-interpret gender-sensitive mandates has been shown to be particularly effective. Therefore, it is not only laws, policies, action plans and the curriculum that should incorporate a com-prehensive gender perspective, but also all the actors involved in the education community. In this regard, teacher training on gender awareness, both in professional development and in in-service training, is particularly important, as this has the potential to foster bottom-up transformative school initiatives.

Interestingly enough, these results confirm the assumption of this paper regarding the importance of taking context seriously when implementing gender-sensitive policies. That is to say, having analyzed the contextual factors and mechanisms involved in the enactment of gender-sensitive education, it is evident that among the multiple roles of school actors (principals, teachers, students, families, and others), there is the role of policymaker, so policies are also *made* at the bottom level of the education system: the schools.

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