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Gender and Education Policy in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Hono te kete kii te hono Matauranga

Weaving the basket together with the knowledge  
of our ancestors to the policies of education

The decade of the 1990s is stimulating a depth of reflection regarding social policy issues. In the New Zealand context, our collective memory has been challenged by both the commemoration of 150 years since the Treaty of Waitangi, and as we approach the dawning of suffrage year in 1993, 100 years since women gained the vote. Politically, as the Government looks forward to election year and beyond into the 21st century, a reckoning of losses and achievements is being tallied in order to plan for action in the new era.

In an educational context, and in particular with regard to gender and education policy analysis, the possibilities for reflection have also been inspired by recent moves in the policy arena. The paper is written in the days following the refocusing of the Policy Division of the Ministry of Education in order to more efficiently produce its policy outputs. One of the consequences of the refocusing process was the decision to disestablish the Girls and Women policy unit and move to the creation of four tagged

positions within generic, core policy sections.

In light of these changes, and in view of the transition we must make from one policy cycle to another, the AARE/NZARE joint conference seemed to be an appropriate forum for us to take stock and plan for the future in the area of gender and education policy. In particular, we will focus on policy issues in relation to the school experiences of girls in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Any advances in their educational experiences will inevitably be restricted to short-term changes unless we reflect back over the historical context and prepare for the next century. It is vital that we develop and articulate a rationale for action as we strive to initiate strategies for change.

Notions of 'equality' and 'equality of opportunity' are well accepted democratic values of our society. Women's under-represented participation in a number of important decision-making arenas of social life, for example, politics, big business and the professions, underpins society's concern to ensure that women's unequal status with men is addressed in social policies. Concern for their unequal status educationally, has been a hallmark of education policies in Aotearoa at least since Peter Fraser's policy in 1939, as Minister of Education, regarding equality of opportunity for all. Since then there have been various re-interpretations which have more specifically recognised women's educational, social and economic disadvantage (Ramsay and Oliver, 1992). In 1992 we can certainly identify some positive changes for girls and women evidenced, perhaps, by the extent of backlash responses such as those described by Susan Faludi (1992). However, these changes seem minimal given the escalating public admissions of sexual abuse and domestic violence, the fact that New Zealand has the second highest rate of unwanted teenage pregnancy in the Western world, that women are more often than men dependent on the state, are under-represented in positions of power, etc. These are just some indicators of our status. We have to question how effective our society's democratic

policies have been.

In education, recent statistics show girls are more likely than before to remain in school to senior levels, are taking a range of "non-traditional" subjects and leave school more highly qualified than their male counterparts (Ministry of Education 1992). The number of women enrolling at universities is now higher than that of men. However, this apparent success is somewhat undermined by girls' continuing predominance in traditional subjects and lesser involvement in graduate studies and hence their achievements are not translated into high status occupational choices with concomitant financial security. The majority of women work in a narrow range of occupations and they are significantly more likely than men to be unemployed and underpaid. The average ordinary time hourly earnings for women is 81.3% that of men (Department of Statistics, 1991).

The situation for Maori women is far worse. They are more likely than non-Maori women to leave school at an early age, are more likely to have no qualifications and the qualifications they do receive are more likely to be locally, rather than nationally, based. Few attend tertiary institutions. Vertical and horizontal occupational segregation are particularly marked for Maori women, who are significantly more likely than non-Maori women to be classified as low paid (Ministry of Education, 1992).

To address these inequities, we need to understand the processes that produce and maintain them. Why do girls opt for a limiting, narrow range of subjects and why is there such poor achievement outcomes for some groups in particular? Social practices outside the education system clearly play a major role in shaping the aspirations and expectations of girls and women. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence from research such as that of Alton-Lee and Densem (1992) and Alton-Lee and Nuthall (1992), to suggest that the education system, through its structures, curriculum and classroom practices continues to contribute to these unsatisfactory outcomes.

The documentation of patterns of male dominance in educational settings is

now legion. At every level of education, males dominate teacher time, teacher attention and verbal space (Kelly, 1988; Newton, 1992). However, we are now in a position to understand the critical role curriculum plays in maintaining gendered educational outcomes. Alton-Lee and Nuthall demonstrate how the curriculum children experience in classrooms, both overt and covert, is shaped by the dominant cultural values and attitudes of New Zealand society - that is, middle class, Pakeha and male. They also show how these dominant social values are integral to the way children's knowledge is constructed and hence the curriculum becomes a vehicle through which learning can be disrupted in important ways for those who do not belong to the dominant group, for example, girls and Maori.

A curriculum is taught in our classrooms which characteristically involves "women or girls as secondary or subordinate to a male focus" or is biased in the invisibility and derogation of the women and girls it represents (Alton-Lee and Nuthall, 1991). An indepth analysis of two curriculum units which focused on people revealed that women and girls were generally excluded from the curriculum despite the teachers' commitments to 'equality of opportunity'. Interviews and tests with the children revealed that both boys and girls had considerable difficulty remembering what they had learned about women and were likely to attribute the little they had learnt about women's accomplishment to men. In the enacted curriculum for a study of the Middle Ages females comprised only 3.9% of references to people compared to 81.7% male. Their findings emphasise that even gender-unspecified terms such as people can not be assumed to include women. The children's acceptance of the subordinate status and the invisibility of women was apparent immediately after the unit and appeared to be even stronger a year later (Alton-Lee, Densem and Nuthall, 1990).

The implications for girls of Alton-Lee and Nuthall's (1991) research is that the curriculum they experience can disadvantage them in two ways. Firstly, it can serve to exclude them from instructional opportunities of the overt curriculum, thus directly affecting their achievement. Secondly, the curriculum may covertly position girls within a devalued subordinate group. Their well-being, and consequent motivation to learn, is affected by their 'learning' to devalue their own group and, by implication, themselves. Our classroom practices can be viewed, therefore, as hegemonic insofar as they reinforce the subordinate position of females in our society and maintain stereotypical views of appropriate gender roles and behaviours.

Such an analysis helps explain, for example, why girls tend to 'choose' primarily from limited subject and career options, 'choose' not to complete post-graduate degrees, 'choose' not to enter senior management positions and when they do apply, why they tend not to be 'chosen' for appointment.

To change the status of women in our society and the gender relations that produce and maintain their subordination, requires more than a focus on education as a site of transformation. And to make major improvements in the schooling experiences of girls and women requires the issues be addressed in a wider context than a focus on the written policy that we, as policy analysts in a central state bureaucracy, might achieve. However, schooling can be seen as a strong vehicle for transformation,

The basic starting point of our work is that while schooling is a site for the reproduction of gender relations, it is also a site for intervention and change. (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991, pg 5)

and we would argue that such policy can have a significant influence on the schooling that girls experience. Such a view of policy is not universally

accepted. Alton-Lee and Nuthall, for example, claim that

The most significant finding from our analyses of race and gender is that neither policy nor good intentions ensure effective educational practice that enhances student well-being and facilitates student learning. .... What are needed are systematic, comprehensive and professional (our emphasis) processes that change educational practice.

Alton-Lee and Nuthall (1991, p86)

Not only do Alton-Lee and Nuthall argue that policy does not affect practice, but also suggest that the development of 'professional' processes is a technical matter with no policy implications. The notion of 'policy' is, however, problematic. Gillian Fulcher (1989) argues that the traditional distinctions invoked between theory and practice, rhetoric and action, policy and implementation, in order to understand failures of

policy, are frequently considered as if the problem was apolitical, (as implied by the 'professional' imperative of Alton-Lee and Nuthall above) conveying little of the reality of the political struggle involved in formulating policy nor of the politics of its implementation. Fulcher particularly notes the absence of any insights to be gained by the reference to 'gaps' when discrepancies are observed between policy and practice. She claims policy making is more complex than such distinctions allow and articulates a concept of policy which captures a way of identifying where and how decisions are made. Fulcher thus provides a model with the potential for understanding why some well-intentioned democratic policies fail and such understanding brings opportunities to develop more successful ones. Her concern is with 'mainstreaming' policies with the objective of bringing about a 'better deal' for those school children called 'disabled'. Our concern, here, is with 'gender equity' policies and the objective of a 'better deal' for girls.

In her model, Fulcher uses the issue of education policy and mainstreaming/integration to describe processes of decision-making, in a range of arenas, consisting of struggles between contenders of competing objectives. The struggles culminate in decisions which would then be enacted as policy in each site. This model of policy as political states of play illustrates that all educational practices are political. Fulcher notes:

Policy is the product, whether written (laws, reports, regulations), stated or enacted (for example pedagogic practice), of the outcome of political states of play in various arenas. In these arenas there are struggles between contenders of competing objectives, either about objectives or about how to achieve them: in these struggles discourse is employed as tactic and theory

Fulcher, 1989, p11-12)

The recognition that all educational practices are political is certainly

not new. What Fulcher does, however, is to clarify the nature of the discourse in decision-making at all levels of the educational system, including teaching practices, teacher-parent encounters, the production of government statements of policy and legislation, etc. In challenging the distinction between policy and implementation which constructs implementation as merely procedural, she demonstrates the ways in which educational practices may maintain or subvert the status quo and its institutional base.

This model derives from a wider view of social life, including what we call 'policy', as consisting of practical projects: all practices are struggles to achieve objectives; they are based in a social theory (however inaccurate) and they are simultaneously political and moral.

Fulcher, 1989, p259

Fulcher recognises that people's practice reflects a view of the social world. This may be clearly articulated and evidentially sound or not, but it will be based on a value system likely to be in competition with others. And, further, as Alton-Lee and Densem (1992) found, the view of the world reflected in their practice may not necessarily be the view the person intends to promote. Systematic observations of classrooms with teachers committed to gender fairness, for example, frequently demonstrate the privileging of males. This analysis of behaviour has implications for understanding policy debates. The outcomes of debates regarding value systems, acceptable evidence and what practice is consistent with certain perspectives all contribute to the nature of the classroom experiences of students and provide opportunities for government policy failures. The parties to these debates will, of course, be more or less powerful in their advocacy and certain arguments will be more powerful in terms of their apparent credibility. Hence Fulcher's notion of discourse as both theory and tactic.

With regard to educational policy on mainstreaming or integration, Fulcher

shows how the use of certain discourses by decision-makers is more or less powerful at all levels of the system in exerting their interpretation of 'mainstreaming policy'. In her study across five countries, Fulcher identified particularly that when the discourses of 'disability' (focus on deficits of individuals) and 'professionalism' (focus on experts), accompanied the debates on mainstreaming or integration, they were typically more powerful and led to exclusionary practices while the discourses of 'pedagogy' and 'curriculum' which focused on what schools could do rather than on questions of who was disabled and who was competent to teach them, lead to inclusionary practices (Denmark was an exception in that pedagogy and curriculum matters were the usual discourses at all levels of debate). Within countries, these differences occurred despite an apparently common integration policy. What this means, of course, is that students in different settings, about whom such decisions are made, will receive different educational experiences despite a common government

policy statement. It is the explication of these discourses and the recognition of their political nature that enables an understanding of policy 'failures' and the opportunity to produce policy that might more accurately embody intent and strategies which more accurately reflect the political nature of implementation.

We will attempt, through applying Fulcher's model, to clarify and identify the politics of gender equity educational policy in order to recognise the variety of policy arenas and discourses in relation to gender equity. Hopefully, such an analysis will help to uncover the moments for transformation within which we can be instrumental. If we are seriously to address gender inequities, which clearly impinge on and undermine our society's commitment to democratic principles of fairness, then we need to understand the policy processes which impact on schools and classrooms, and which serve to undermine equitable practice. In other words, how are equity policies articulated in various educational arenas and how is it that schools may have their own, and different, policy practices within one set of institutional equity conditions? Some coeducational schools, Hagley Community College in Christchurch for example, have created girls only classes as an option for students and introduced women's studies to the curriculum, while others have interpreted 'equity' as having been fulfilled if no student is denied formal access to all subjects offered.

Decisions about the nature of the formal and enacted curriculum in any classroom will reflect the knowledge, values and pedagogy of the teacher as indicated earlier, but students' beliefs and prior understandings are also brought to the classroom. Within the classroom, then, there will be contending forces contributing to what actually happens. However, decisions in other education arenas, will also have contributed to the way gender equity is expressed in the learning environment. These will reflect, for example, the outcomes of competing views among teachers, the principal, Board of Trustees, parents and the wider community who make the decisions regarding what counts as acceptable teaching practice in the school, including the provision of adequate resources, opportunities for professional development, and accountability processes. Teachers' competencies will also reflect policy decisions regarding equity in their pre-service experience of the curriculum for teacher education. Government aims on what should be the outcomes of education will be reflected in policies such as curriculum, assessment, national monitoring, and support services, among others. These policies clearly impact on schools and will themselves embody the government's formal equity policies as interpreted, and negotiated, by the education bureaucrat. Processes within government and government bureaucracies in the development of such policies will also, then, reflect struggles for competing objectives among those involved. And like any other actors in educational arenas, these objectives will be based on different value systems and evidential sources which are more or less powerful and more or less subject to rational imperatives.

Our thesis is that educational policies of any government will encompass contradictions and opportunities for different interpretations of key

concepts in all arenas of educational decision-making. This clearly

recognises that teachers matter as sources of change and that government policy may not be a determinant of educational practice. However, state policy can, as Fulcher found, facilitate or hinder practices at other levels. The challenge for us as policy makers at the centre is to seize such moments to ensure the interests of girls and women are secured. For we are passionate about any opportunity for change in Aotearoa so that the educational experiences of girls and women, in all their diversity enables them to be proud of themselves and their achievements.

In relation to gender equity and policy, our task now is to briefly articulate what we believe to be some salient discourses and to frame them within the arenas of policy practice. How such discourses are brought to bear on decisions in various educational sites demonstrates how policies may be seen to 'fail'. We will then describe how gender equity policies are changing within the context of the state sector reforms and what the reforms have meant in terms of our work in the Ministry of Education, as policy analysts with responsibility for girls and women in education.

### Gender Equity Discourses

Gender equity discourses include ways to describe, explain and address the fact that females and males are systematically distributed differently according to a variety of indicators and whether these differences are important in terms of the democratic principles of 'equality', 'fairness', 'equity'. It is not important here to articulate the full variety of meanings attributed to such terms. The point is that different meanings lead to different actions so unless they are specified in any particular situation a range of possibilities ensues which may or may not lead to changes measured by the indicators. And a lack of change may not be considered important if the principle of 'equity' has been deemed to have been applied. However, what accompanies debate of such terms, and whether they are being properly applied to ensure gender equity, are two particular sets of competing discourses which we perceive to be especially critical in the policy process: what we might consider 'individual deficit' discourse in contrast with 'social construct' discourse and two related, but slightly different, contrasting discourses of 'democracy' and 'professionalism'.

Unequal educational outcomes are often construed as the result of differences in ability or some other salient attribute such as 'self confidence' or 'motivation'. Such attributes of individuals have long been considered determinants of achievement and such a view has a history of credibility. Opposing this theme of 'deficit' is the view that what is

taught or how it is taught is producing the unsatisfactory outcomes. When the deficit discourse is used, the objectives for strategies of change tend to focus on 'fixing up' individuals to compensate for their deficits while ignoring the ways in which their experiences may have constructed such outcomes. This includes the unintended bias of gender stereotyping that we all are likely to apply unless we consciously reflect on our behaviour (Alton-Lee and Densem, 1992). Focusing on individuals in this way enables responsibility for 'choices' to be primarily theirs and equity is assured if we provide appropriate opportunities for choice and if deficits can be properly identified and treated by competent professionals according to student 'needs'. The systems are viewed as neutral. In contrast, 'social construct' views do not assume people are equally able to demonstrate agency and identify that descriptions of 'needs' are inherently socially defined and not just a matter of the exercise of technical competence. Decisions regarding the what and how of teaching, then, are not viewed as merely technical, neutral and apolitical, and strategies to achieve gender equity focus on questions regarding the nature of pedagogy and the curriculum rather than the qualities of individuals.

The competing discourses of 'professionalism' and 'democracy' are described by Fulcher to illustrate the ways in which students may be excluded from regular classrooms despite integration policies of inclusion. The use of such language as 'teachers know best what students need' may illustrate the exercise of power and a denial of the political nature of such decisions in order to undermine 'democratic' educational practices of inclusion. Professionalism in this sense is different from the notion of the need for technical competence which Fulcher describes as "competence necessary for democratic practice" (1989, p277). Similar discourses apply to gender equity debates. What is important to recognise is that the notion of 'professionalism' may be used to hide the political characteristics of professional competence. Because of the power that the notion of neutrality seems to hold, recourse to professional competence or expertise may serve to sustain the belief in its neutrality even when it is used to promote competence in democratic teaching practice, as described earlier in reference to Alton-Lee and Nuthall (1991). 'Professionalism' discourse in the context of gender equity is evident in language teachers use to describe girls in deficit ways with recourse to justifying their judgements and consequent actions in terms of their professional expertise.

The kind of language used is similar to that of the 'deficit' discourse in that it includes references to neutrality of professional judgements regarding individual culpability and the nature of knowledge. However, it is used here to contrast with democratic rights in that it can serve to exclude girls from curricula on the basis of an expert's judgement of their lack of ability or motivation to exercise choice. 'Democratic' discourse, involves the language of rights to inclusion. In terms of gender equity, the political nature of curriculum decisions are made explicit and the rights of girls to an education that is politically inclusive is demanded ( see Hawkesworth, 1990, for a discussion of gender democracy and

inclusion). Their education, then, should achieve equal outcomes with boys in relation to their ability to be included with an equal power base in all politically important decision-making arenas.

In addition to a discourse of rights, evidence regarding the systematic exclusion of females from much of the experienced curriculum and its argued effect of producing undesirable attributes in girls (Alton-Lee and Nuthall, 1992), is also a tactical and theoretical rationale of the 'democratic' discourse used in debates to achieve the objective of curriculum and pedagogic changes. In contrast, evidence that females often do indeed have different characteristics from most boys, is used in 'professionalism' discourse to compete for the objective of addressing individual needs.

These discourses (among others) are argued, then, to be present in any educational decision-making arenas concerning strategies for gender equity and particular decisions will likely characterise the power base in any educational arena. Central policies regarding 'equality of opportunity', 'equity' and 'fairness' may certainly promote awareness of the issues but, as indicated by Ramsay and Oliver (1992), there is plenty of room for disagreement and, indeed, opportunities for it to be argued that equity strategies may be promoting the unequal status quo - that is, are seen to 'fail'. Such findings support Fulcher's model that all decisions are political. Before discussing the implications of this for central state bureaucrats in their development of policy, and our brief in particular, we need to describe the impact of state sector reforms in relation to the scope of our activities.

### Reforms in the Education State Sector and Equity Policies

Reforms in the state sector have focused on introducing changes to promote administrative efficiency and accountability through processes of decentralisation of power and control. Advantages to be gained from a clearer separation of central policy development from operations was argued by the State Services Commission (1991) to include minimising the capture of such policy by operational interests. In education, the assumption was that with more 'consumer choice' resulting from decentralisation, greater equity is ensured (Peters and Marshall, 1988).

The effect of the state sector reforms on education was to abolish the Department of Education and create a smaller Ministry as one of several agencies responsible for the New Zealand Education system. Other agencies included a separate Education Review Office and a range of special purpose central agencies (see Rae, 1992, for a more detailed account of administrative changes to education). The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing policy on aspects of education from early childhood through to tertiary, giving advice to the Minister and ensuring that government decisions are implemented. Other services previously

undertaken by the central and regional education agencies are now the responsibility of individual educational institutions through a board of elected trustees.

With the institution of the education reforms on 1 October, 1989, school boards became required to meet contractual goals of the state, through a

school charter, to ensure that both national imperatives and local goals are met. Charters at this time were to include mandatory clauses concerning principles regarding equity, equal educational opportunity and the Treaty of Waitangi. For example:

The board of trustees accepts that equity objectives underpin all activities in this school.

The board of trustees will ensure that the schools policies and practice seek to achieve equitable outcomes for students of both sexes, for rural and urban students, for all students irrespective of their religious, ethnic, cultural, social, family and class background and irrespective of their ability or disability. (Ministry of Education, 1990, p 5)

In addition clear equity goals and objectives were to be identified, for example:

GOAL A: To enhance learning by ensuring that the curriculum is non-sexist and non-racist and that any disadvantage experienced at the school by students, parents or staff members because of gender or religious, ethnic, cultural, social or family background is acknowledged and addressed.

(Ministry of Education, 1990, p 10)

These reforms, which highlighted many of the egalitarian functions of the education system, were in place for schools by October 1989. An Education Amendment Act in 1990 brought all the tertiary institutions to a common pattern of governance by a council and management by a chief executive officer, in terms of a constitution and charter agreed with the minister (Rae, 1992). However, in December 1991 the Education Reform Act was passed detailing changes to the compulsory section of school charters. The revised guidelines were subsequently defined in the New Zealand Education Gazette, 15 March 1991. Henceforth, the mandatory sections of school charters derive from a new set of National Education Guidelines. These will now consist of three parts, the National Education Goals (statements of desirable achievements by the school system), a statement on the National Curriculum of New Zealand (desirable areas and levels of knowledge, understanding and skills to be achieved by students) and the National Administration Guidelines (desirables code or principles of conduct and of educational administration).

These guidelines have not yet been promulgated and until they are, current regulations and charters remain in place. When the guidelines are promulgated, schools wanting to change their charters will be required to renegotiate them with the Ministry of Education and so may opt to keep their charter equity principles in place. A recent review of equity policy in schools (Ramsay and Oliver, 1992) indeed found that schools intend to keep their equity principles intact. These changes to the Education Act have not removed equity from state control as charters are still subject to evaluation by the Education Review Office. In addition, although specific equity principles and goals are not now part of compulsory requirements, there is room within the National Goals and National Curriculum Statements to ensure equity is a concern of educators.

The umbrella for our focus regarding justice for girls and women in education is the sixth goal of the set of outcomes for education described in the National Education Goals (New Zealand Education Gazette, 1 Aug 1991) and in the second of the 'Relevant Government Outcomes' of the Corporate Plan of the Ministry of Education as determined by the Public Finance Act 1989. Both of these goals state the desired intention to pursue

"equality of educational opportunity for students by identifying and removing barriers to achievement in education".

This intention is fleshed out further in the National Curriculum

Statements. Each board, through the principal and staff, will be required to

2 Monitor student progress against the national curriculum objectives, and to analyse barriers to learning and achievement

3 Implement strategies to overcome barriers to students' learning and to address identified learning needs.

(New Zealand Education Gazette, 1991)

Current policies thus focus on ensuring excellence by removing barriers to achievement in education and training. The notion of 'barriers to achievement' as a focus of our work will be discussed later.

The state sector reforms and the consequential changes to the education sector thus introduced significant changes into the educational environment. The challenge that drives our work as policy analysts is the need to understand what it is that shapes the chameleon nature of our work. The structural shift of direction from a concept of centralised social justice to the notion that local communities should have the choice to identify and respond to local needs, is a fundamental change in government policy which raises specific issues in relation to the education of girls and women. Furthermore, the potential for gendered effects of both the reforms and the subsequent new curriculum and assessment initiatives, has created imperatives for identifying essential moments for transformation.

## Gender Equity Policy Development at the Centre

Contradictions in state policy with respect to women mirror the ambivalent relationship between feminists and the state. Governments often embark on policies which improve the situation of women in some respects, but fundamentally undermine it in others.

Rosemary Du Plessis, 1992, p 209

Contradictions in state policy in relation to women are argued by Du Plessis to be a product of diversity within the state and the fragmented feminist claims on it. This is clearly illustrated in the education sector. Although the reforms include legislative requirements, through education charters, for gender equity to be addressed and the monitoring of these by the Education Review Office, no specialists to undertake the task of reviewing gender equity have been appointed (presumably this was the outcome of debates regarding their necessity). In addition, the potential of the charter statements to bring about improvement in girls' and women's education may be undermined by the decentralisation process.

Before the reforms the state education bureaucracy had a direct relationship with the professional constituency and was able both to respond to their needs as well as keep them informed of professional developments in countering sexism. It is now no longer appropriate to act as a central information-sharing conduit and there are now no structures in place to fulfil this role. The issue of the development and production of gender-inclusive resources and professional development to service the needs of those teachers who are committed to 'good' practice is a serious one. This is exacerbated by the fragmentation of delivery systems to educational institutions in terms of advisory support and teacher development as the system adapts to new ways of operating. The separation of the central policy making ministry from local institutions also minimises opportunities to develop coherence within the system for managing the implementation of gender equity. Individual institutions can respond to local needs however they might be expressed. Given our earlier analysis, the outcome of these expressed needs may not be democratic in relation to gender equity because of the power relations inherent in the process. This highlights the inherent contradictions in political systems committed to democratic aims when the processes themselves are the very

objects of change.

The implementation of government policy is, then, a political process and

state sector reforms have the potential to mask undemocratic practices. The implications for central state bureaucrats are to ensure policies are developed with an awareness of the nature of the political debates which will determine actual practice and to ensure, as far as possible, that policy intentions are specified and that their rationale is transparent. Awareness of the debates that may lead to different interpretations of central policy enables those arguments to be addressed directly and, if necessary, include statements of what the policy does not mean (as Denmark, for example, has done in relation to integration policies). In relation to our work, with the recent changes to the compulsory sections of charters so that the equity principles are removed, clearly new ways need to be found for developing, communicating and implementing the intention of gender equity policy.

The development of central policy is, of course, also a political process, as our earlier analyses demonstrate. Our work in the Ministry has been changed so that we focus now on policy advice to the Minister. The work plan he or she might approve is an arena of debate circumscribed by the discourses described earlier. They will also be evident in the debates during our work within policy projects as we try to ensure both democratic processes and that the products of policy development are gender-inclusive. Our role is subject to particular difficulties and contradictions. On the one hand we are bound to provide gender specific advice in terms of our brief as policy analysts responsible for education policy regarding girls and women, while on the other, we work within an institution that reflects the variety of viewpoints in society, and the relative power base which sustains the status quo, that had initially led to the establishment of our positions as a strategy for change!

At present, our positions (there are four in a division of approximately 50 analyst positions) form a separate section within the Policy Division. The four positions include one manager, which provides status for our work as specialists in gender analysis and has enabled some challenge to the power base of the status quo. We work across the range of the Policy Division policy projects as integral members of those project teams. Having some power at managerial level enables our inclusion in all policy division work which we have prioritised to be crucial for its potential impact on girls. When the disestablishment of the Girls and Women Section, and dispersal of the positions into four separate policy sections, takes effect in the near future, we will clearly need to find new ways to ensure an overview of the development of gender equity policy and implementation.

The way our specific policy work is now generated as a result of the reforms is particularly apparent in the development of a new National Curriculum Framework, and its associated curriculum and assessment statements, to be implemented in schools as mandatory requirements. Given the importance of curriculum in gender equity discourses as discussed earlier, it has been a crucial priority for us to be involved in these policy developments at every stage of the process. The commitment by government to ensure barriers to learning are identified and overcome, is a

prime focus for the development of curriculum policy that facilitates, rather than hinders or undermines, the achievement of equitable outcomes in schools.

This brings us full circle, then, as we grapple with the variety of interpretations of 'barriers to learning' at each point in the policy process. We hope we are able to take our own advice and be able to identify the important arenas of decision-making and the ways in which central policy can be specific in formulating intent, clear in communicating its rationale, transparent in its priorities and effective in the promotion of gender equity.

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