

Gender equity: a case for moving beyond his'n hers!

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I'll tell my ma when I go home

The boys won't leave the girls alone

They pulled my hair, they broke my comb

But that's all right till I go home

My mother said that I never should

Play with the naughty boys in the wood

If I did, she would say

Naughty little girl to disobey.

Folkloric verse fragments, anon, 1890.

Abstract

From these song fragments, which Judy recalls being sung by her grandmother who was born in 1872 in Melbourne and who had finished formal schooling by her twelfth birthday, it would seem that issues we now have learned to group under the term 'gender equity' have been with us for a very long time. Boys have been teasers and bullies and girls have been restrained and generally good. What we want to suggest in this paper is that perhaps the term 'gender equity' is nearing the end of its usefulness as a strategy for promoting social change, precisely because of the ways in which it is currently being mobilized. We will demonstrate that gender equity in current parlance can be seen to operate in an endless reiterative binary logic, based on the idea of a finite amount of opportunity that must be dealt out turn by turn to students as consumers. What we want to propose is a less materialist bound notion of educational opportunities, a renewed attention to ways of thinking about gender and a reconceptualisation of the goals of the gender equity movement. We will do this by:

- a. offering a brief overview of the recent history of gender equity in Australian schooling
- b. demonstrating the ways in which gender equity has become submerged in a rhetoric of competitive turn taking and constructed notions of 'a fair go'
- c. suggesting new ways of thinking about gender justice.

Introduction

Research since the mid 1970s had repeatedly shown that Australian girls were significantly less likely than boys to complete school, to achieve high results, to continue in post school education, to be recognised and remembered by their teachers, to utilize a range of expensive school resources, to be heard in class, to be known by the school community. In 1987 the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools was released. Although this document was later regarded by some as comprising a range of mixed messages (see for instance, Maddox, 1997), its release was hailed at the time as the long-awaited formal recognition of a good deal of feminist activity around education that had been occurring in the previous decade. The policy release coincided with the increasingly managerialist strategies adopted by the then Labor government, in a time marked by unprecedented levels of youth unemployment and increasing social inequity between rich and poor. It was not an auspicious time to embark on a progressive education policy, especially one that had significant resourcing implications. At the same time, and despite the difficult economic situation, there was a general level of hope that the injustices previously experienced by girls in the nation's schools were being recognized. There was at last an official document operating at the national level against which experience could be monitored and upon which recuperative strategies could be modelled.

The early 1990s were to prove volatile times for education. School retention peaked in 1991 and then tumbled dramatically in the years following, such that by 1996 the national average was only slightly better than that of some 15 years earlier. Interestingly enough however, girls continued to be more likely to remain at school than did boys - a consistent feature of school populations since the mid 1970s. Concurrently, girls as a group were more likely to pass at the senior school examinations. Through the 1990s came the dawning perceptions that girls were not only more likely to finish school and to pass at the year 12 level, but also that when they did enrol in the same subjects as their male peers, they were more successful. This feature, the fact of girls 'outperforming the boys', of girls 'dominating' in the end of school exams, began to be widely reported in the popular press from the early nineties and continues today. (No reporter remarked on the fact that in the previous fifty years of published school achievements boys had routinely 'outperformed the girls' and 'dominated' in the end of year results.) Such news stories became a catalyst for what is by now a widespread movement, in Australia and in the UK and the US, which aims to address the issue of boys in education - usefully shorthanded here and elsewhere as the 'What about the boys?' question.

There are many things to be said about the question of girls' end of school examination performance. Certainly some of the earlier feminist interventions had aimed at getting more girls to undertake subjects such as maths and physics and undoubtedly these were instrumental in girls' higher and more visible achievements. Of course girls had long been recognised as good and highly achieving students; it was only when they ventured to enrol in subjects previously colonised by males and male interests that serious concerns began to be raised. In addition, the degree to which the high achieving girls in maths and physics were seen as a credit to their schools and their teachers added to the visibility of their success. Inevitably there is a degree of arbitrariness about the comparisons of high achievement. Research has repeatedly shown that the profile of high achievement varies in terms of the way such achievement is measured. For instance, the West Australian study which showed that when the full range of subjects was used for the calculation of TER rank the gender balance in favour of boys was reversed (Peck and Trimmer, 1994). However this arbitrariness is rarely noted by press reports in the general desire to manufacture crisis. How do you measure who is doing well? Do you compare the small and more highly selected group of girls doing, say, senior physics with the average of the less selected group of boys? Issues of scaling and grading might be usefully involved in such distinctions, but the pundits

prefer the league tables and gross comparisons - after all in this connection at least gender and education has become a good story. In our view Richard Teese has supplied the most important question when he insisted one must always ask 'which girls?' and 'which boys?' before proceeding to declare a gender crisis in education (Teese et al, 1996). In Teese's careful analysis of national senior school enrolments and results, one can't avoid the impression that in general boys and girls from wealthy families do well out of school fairly consistently and others from low socioeconomic backgrounds equally consistently do not.

But we are ahead of ourselves. During the 1990s, in response to a range of pressure groups interested in raising issues about boys and education, the focus on girls that had led to the formulation of the National Policy for girls' education had given way to a National Framework for Gender Equity, which was announced in 1996. This move is highly significant. While it could be argued from a literal perspective that the term gender is simply inclusive of male and female, a more compelling analysis emerges when the move is set against the socio-cultural context of Australia in the late twentieth century. The election of a conservative government in 1996 signalled a widespread mood of retreat from big centralised government and an increased reliance on private providers for welfare and education. Whereas the feminist press had been for more central government intervention in the interests of gender equity in all schools, by the mid 1990s the government sought to distance itself from just this sort of intervention. Hence the switch from a *policy* to a *framework*, as the latter implies more latitude in its interpretation at each site. However, the adoption of the term *gender* is most significant. At one level it indicates the government's disinclination to be seen to attend to the needs of a particular group - but at another, and more importantly, the government's adoption of the term gender could be seen as even-handed, fair and impartial. This redirection was widely understood to have occurred as the direct result of the lobbying of the boys-in-education supporters (Lingard and Douglas, 1999). As such it can be seen as an initiative driven by male interests - interests that are masked within the gender term. Not only does the move to gender align neatly with the public backlash perception of girls being recipients of special treatment in the intervening years, it also carries the implication (sometimes stated) that the girls are now 'fixed up' and it is time to direct attention towards the boys. All of which makes the title gender equity exceedingly ironic if not quite ludicrous.

Theorising gender

In this paper thus far we have introduced our topic 'gender equity' in terms of girls and boys, just as it is presented in the popular press. At this stage it is appropriate that we return to the question of how femaleness and maleness have been understood theoretically so that we can demonstrate some problems with the current debates. In this section we offer a very brief overview of theoretical approaches to the question of gender in education, noting only some particularly salient theorists.

What would constitute comprehensive theorising about gender? Any review of the educational literature would reveal that many authors evade theorising about gender altogether and are content to assume essentialist differences between the sexes (eg assumptions about girls' preferred learning styles, women's more inclusive management styles, boys' propensity for larrikinism etc). Others implicitly recognise that discriminating practices in social life revolve around stereotypical assumptions that are gendered, but go little further than pointing out the effects of unfair treatment. The early research on girls and education sought to demonstrate that people who inhabited female bodies were afforded an educational experience very different from that of those who inhabited male bodies. The simple fact of physical sexual difference was identified in relation to more or less powerful positions as a learner, as a teacher, as a person in the world. There was an assumption of sameness within female sexed bodies and male sexed bodies - early feminist accounts and reports talked of 'girls' and 'boys' as though they were homogenous categories. The

preoccupation with equity led initially into the idea that if boys and girls were treated the same - in terms of being afforded similar choices of subjects, similar amounts of teaching time, similar opportunities to speak in class and to be heard - the injustice would disappear. There is a good deal of writing and research which attests to the understanding the same treatment is (a) virtually impossible to enact and (b) unlikely to lead to equitable outcomes. Bacchi's work (Bacchi, 1998) on this score is salient in that she argues that in the case of individuals presenting with different make up, different backgrounds and different cultures, equitable teaching would actually require that they be given different treatment.

Nor is it acceptable to continue to view gender as an attribute of the sexed body, although questions of embodiment continue to be central to much feminist theorising. Gender has been shown to be a relational construct (Connell, 1987), to operate between people (and between the self and his/her self perceptions), thus it is a dynamic construct rather than the static given of earlier times. We understand now that we perform gender (Butler, 1992), we do it to one another and to ourselves. And while there exists a range of scripts associated with masculinity and femininity, there are some ways of doing and being that are ratified by hegemonic versions of maleness and femaleness and others that are declared illegitimate. We know, too, that even these hegemonic notions are susceptible to change. One has only to look at the rampant homophobia that operated in cultural representations in the mid twentieth century to register the degree of change within hegemonic versions of being woman, being man. And most importantly for the current question, we know that schools form important sites for the performance of masculinity and femininity and its continuance in the post school world.

Debates about gender are aided by some view of what gender is. Recently Starr (1999; 2000; forthcoming) has extended Connell's (1987) framework for describing and explaining the social construction of gender. This framework has three interconnected aspects. First gender concerns social structures that are built upon differential distributions of power in all sectors of life, with men wielding and acquiring more social power than women, in the main. Secondly, differential structures of power are influential in the creation of differential divisions of labour amongst the sexes. The gendered structuring of production affects the types of work people do, how much they are paid, the value accorded to occupations, how much work people do, how the work is performed, what work is paid and what goes unpaid. Thirdly, and arguably most importantly, gender is constructed by unseen and often unspoken elements of social life that have their basis in the psyche of individuals and the culture in which they exist. Gendered structures of power and production depend on cathected notions about what men and women are and do. The structure of cathexis completes a framework for theorising gender because it canvasses the connections made between sexed bodies and psychological assumptions, expectations and feelings that surround and construct them. We 'weigh up' bodies in terms of their age, sex, race, education, cultural associations and wealth, while subconsciously ascribing to them certain assumptions and expectations about them, as well as determining the modes of behaviour and feelings we will exhibit towards these bodies (Starr, 2000). Through the structure of cathexis we can explain how structures of power and gendered divisions of labour alone cannot account for differences between the sexes. Together with the structure of cathexis, however, we have a powerful and comprehensive means by which to think about the complexities of gender and the inequalities based on gender. As stated above, we are all party to gender constructions for ourselves and others, and despite our best efforts, we all contribute to the dynamism that is gender.

What this means for equity between the girls and boys in schools is that the structures of gender - power, production and cathexis - help to explain issues that are at the crux of current gender equity debates. For example, girls are not encouraged to explore, be rascals or be boisterous during their childhood, so taking these messages on board they often are

better behaved at school than are some boys. They may live out messages that produce positive reinforcement when they are 'good girls'. In the same vein, women may experience more challenges to their work if they occupy positions usually deemed to be the preserve of men (cf. Starr, 1999). Boys may avoid subjects like home economics, if given a choice, because of its feminine associations. Boys and men in schools may be the dominant voices even if they do not occupy the most hierarchically powerful positions (which they usually do), and so on. There isn't a gender equity issue that can't be considered, if not explained, through this framework for theorising gender. Hence it is our contention that such a discursive tool would be useful in the whole gender equity arena in education and beyond.

Gender and education

The increasing levels of complexity in theories of gender can be seen to be reflected in feminist research and publication about education. From the static head counts that informed much of the earlier work - and indeed and importantly raised awareness and concern about the issue - we now have research such as the Kenway *et al* (1997) *Answering back*, the Gilberts' (1998) *Masculinity goes to school*, Lingard and Douglas (1999) *Men engaging feminsims* .. to name a few of the more recent. Theorists such as these write from a position in which gender emerges as a product of the range of discursive practices available at any one site. In their view gender is a construct that is necessarily and inevitably interwoven with power differentials and their work has revealed the various plays within which those differentials are brought to bear on the individual students and teachers who comprise the social mix at school.

This sort of sophisticated theorisation is notably absent from the boys-in-education movement, whose publications and reports appear more similar to the head counts and scare quotes in the popular press (Gill and Starr, 2000). The idea of sharing 'turns' about educational investment and focus, of engaging in what Lingard and Douglas call a zero-sum game in evaluating schooling (a game that comes down to a gain either for girls and against boys, or for boys and against girls) is both simplistic and dangerous (Lingard and Douglas, 1999). In the publications noted above, the writers have described schooling issues in terms of the dynamic ongoing everyday business of life in schools and have used theories of gender to inform their analyses of what is going on. The research base offered by the boys-in-education lobby appears to consist of numbers of boys failing to reach required standards, suspended from classes and/or school, discovered involved in anti-social activity; even suicide numbers are called to support this cause. Now we do not mean to imply that these issues are not serious and indicative of particular needs in the schools and communities. What we do say, however, is that if they are presented as boys' issues which require specific attention to be re-directed from the girls, then it is unlikely the programs will lead to genuine reforms and more likely that we will see a re-version to demonstrably inequitable schooling practices.

Our discussion will turn now to the ways in which discursive structures in educational policy concerning gender equity serve to reinforce the gender structures of power, production and cathexis. One such instance is how the very word 'gender' can aid an avoidance of equity issues associated with the sex of the social actor. In popular culture and youthspeak we have seen widespread adoption of a fairly confronting claim of essentialism under the guise of gender sensitivity: 'It's a girl thing ...' or 'It's a boy thing...' is the frequent claim, thereby asserting the speaker's right to a sexed positioning which avoids looking at the equity issue.

A note about language and educational research

One feature of educational research connected to the much publicised 'linguistic turn' of recent decades relates to the increased attention given to the ways in which terms are

deployed. Earlier in this paper we have pointed to the move in national policy talk from *girls* to *gender* as we see it as emblematic of other developments in the sociopolitical context. Similarly we have made the point about *policy* and *framework/strategy*. At this point in the discussion we want to turn to a concern with the ways in which we, along with other feminist educators, have talked about gender in our work in schools, ways which have possibly not helped the development of more enlightened thinking about the issue. We have said that equal treatment does not mean the same treatment, despite that being - and continuing to be - the case in the public mind. Certainly the original research into girls and education used comparisons between girls' and boys' school experience to point to the ways in which girls at school typically experienced different treatments, different encouragement, different teaching. However this was never meant to imply that giving the same treatment was the way to operate fairly and equitably.

By the time theorists were arguing for difference in terms of differences among girls as well as differences between girls and boys, the concept of equity remained stuck in the earlier formulations. Now the boys' lobby have picked up on the idea by demonstrating that there are particular aspects of schooling experience that seem peculiar to boys and hence a cause for concern. In fact in so doing they are recycling the earlier feminist arguments to do with girls - without the same depth of basis in research and theory. Pointing to the number of boys identified with 'learning problems' surely does indicate a cause for concern to do with gender equity. However the boys' education lobby offer only the vaguest relation between these concrete concerns and the ways in which masculinity is mobilised in public settings such as schools and classrooms. In fact their arguments lurch dangerously between inchoate notions of what a real man is and charges that schooling is over-feminised. We have developed this argument in another paper (Gill and Starr, 2000), the point for now is that the current degree of talk around gender issues and education can mean that researchers are confronted with a range of interacting positions when attempting to get at the what is actually going on. The original indicators of educational inequity were demonstrable difference between boys and girls in educational treatments - and these were related to stark differences in schooling outcomes. The claim about boys and education appears to move from demonstrable differences in schooling outcomes to the assertion that the educational treatments are inequitable. There is clearly a need for careful research, informed by theories of gender and theories of education, if we are to sort out this situation.

Back to theory

As argued above, penetrating the 'truth' of the matter will involve theorising about what gender is and how we construct it so as to have some basis for dialogue about its social consequences. Hence we are disappointed that so much hype and resources (several governmental enquiries into boys' education at both federal and state levels, numerous smaller lobby groups) are being expended while based on such flimsy theorising about gender. At the same time, the issue of the interests of boys and men being always in the foreground in institutional politics is not limited to schools, a similar ethos pervades higher education institutions as well (Mackinnon *et al*, 1998). Popular culture also conspires to maintain the gaze on male figures, even though the most recent forms vary considerably from the traditional male hero. Now we have *Men behaving badly* ... and its numerous corollaries, the antics of anti heroes such as Roy and HG, John Clark and so on, but the issues continue to be those of male interests and are recognized as such by audiences. The reiteration of traditionally male themes and characters continues to appeal to audiences - as do traditionally feminine themes and characters - but it's the male versions that get more exposure. While we can 'read' this effect in terms of the concept of cathexis or a variation of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, we can also through these concepts explain the longevity of such representation and the difficulties involved in cultural change. We return to the question

- what is it about schools that seems to be constitutive of gender regimes, even in the face of widespread gender reform?

One explanation for this re-institutionalisation of gender turns on the notion that women, even young dynamic feminist women on occasion, have internalized much of the gender regime - as have men - so that it feels right and just rather than unfair and discriminatory. They draw comfort from the sense of place it affords them - as it also allows their role and participation in the wider society. In the press to change things for girls and women for the better and to promote more equal power sharing and choice we must not forget to acknowledge the ways in which traditional discourses mobilise desire within a performative somewhat malleable concept of gender. In this way the scripts are being continuously re-written - women conscious of having choice about the way in which they do the world may choose to adopt traditional forms of femininity - because it feels good, they enjoy it and it accords with the understanding of their significant others.

And educational research?

Attempting to sort through some of these issues in conducting educational research can be very tricky. Certainly some themes from the earlier research have entered into the language and become regularly repeated in educational research by the participants in that research. Schoolgirls regularly report their experience of being harassed by the boys who gain more than their fair share of official attention. We would like to think that the lines are less 'victim-laden' than once was the case - but there is no doubt that girls continue to experience themselves as potentially - if not actually - victims of male violence in many of our schools. It's not a simple straightforward linear connection, however. In some reports, girls manage to see themselves both as 'missing out' because of the boys and as being vaguely responsible for the boys' welfare (Gill, 1991). By reading these responses in terms of the discourses around schooling and gender and the ways in which theories of gender sustain the centrality of the gendered subject we can make sense of the range of girls' responses - and boys' responses - to the gender regime operating in most schools. This position does not propose the immediate dismantling of the gender order, however, but nor does it commend the binary logic of an either/or zero sum game.

At the same time it is important to register other discourses that operate around students and schools as a consequence of the power positions in which they are located. For instance, young children at times appear to regard their teacher as akin to a god figure whose authority definitely countermands that of parents and siblings - at least in terms of classroom behaviour and practices. The consequences of their being children and *ipso facto* under the teacher's surveillance also impacts on the ways in which they perform gender. The general atmosphere of care and nurturance that surround the early years has been shown to tolerate different behaviours from girls and boys, behaviours that are recognized as falling under the teacher's protective mantle. The fact that the majority of primary school teachers are women, coupled with the protective nurturant role of the teacher at this level, constitutes the 'feminised' atmosphere within which much early education takes place. Rather than add to the numerous voices which complain that this situation creates great difficulties for boys in the gathering chorus of demands for more men in primary school (another form of gender equity argument), we would prefer to point to the ways in which early childhood teaching is constructed which are constitutive of the gendered label. To us it seems that women primary school teachers are being blamed for being "not-men" from a standpoint that identifies as promoting gender equity, when in fact what is happening is that women, yet again, are being scape-goated for a situation not of their own making.

Gender performance changes as schooling progresses. Surveys of gender and schooling (Milligan, 1992; Collins *et al*, 1996) have reported numerous instances of the girls seeing

actions of the boys as unfair, harassing, bothering and intolerable. Early publicity about the girls-in-education issue was based on notions of fairness. Now those same notions are being recycled by the boys in education press such that a NSW high school boy on the Sixty Minutes program was recently heard to complain "It's not fair! The girls are better at everything and they are laughing at us if we try to give an answer. They ought to realize we're only human." In this example the young man called on the concept of fairness and the school's responsibility to operate fairly and 'look after' his interests, while at the same time he was calling on the unequal power sharing experienced in schools in which students readily identify as victim, possibly because that is one way in which they can access a dominant discourse. Gender equity becomes twisted up inside these discourses in ways that are not necessarily much to do with more equitable power sharing arrangements.

Concluding section

What we have suggested here is that the early discourses around girls and education may have created the problem of gender being seen in just this way, with either boys or girls necessarily losing out. By coupling the terms gender and equity, and conceiving of equity always as always and only evidenced by comparison with the other sex, there is a sense in which those of us who have worked for gender equity in schools have contributed to the basis for the boys in education claims which we now hold to be inappropriate. What is needed is a revisiting of the meaning of gender equity - and possibly its reconstruction or abandonment - in terms of achieving an educational environment in which all young people feel free to engage in a range of activities and expect a range of achievements that are not marked by gender.

It seems that there is a need to uncouple gender and equity, but rather to talk of gender order, gender regime, gender politics, gender dynamics and gender justice to refer to the ways in which people and their institutions perform gender. In this way we would be less likely to be drawn into the ubiquitous comparisons and more likely to be able to stand by the decisions we make daily as teachers and educators in dealing with our students. Of course the ultimate interest is and remains a more socially just environment and one that is more crucially aware of the often unintended consequences of our actions.

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QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as the main point/target/focus of this paper?

To reclaim the issues around gender equity - and to show how the term ge has been constructed in ways which both represent and refract its earlier roots.

2. A central issue appears to be how the term gender is understood - how have you dealt with that in the paper?

3. And what of education research?

4. Is there a suggestion that feminist educators would do well to abandon gender equity?

5. So ultimately it's about the preservation of an ideal - and its operationalisation in schools and classrooms - and in educational research?