Lessons for 2003 from 1993:

Primary teacher standpoint on policy backlash against the gender inclusive curriculum

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Abstract

In this paper, I provide evidence of policy 'backlash' against feminism from the standpoint of the practitioner. When asked, in a case study of Victorian primary schools how the gender inclusive curriculum was conceptualised and enacted, practitioners critique the conservative policy shift that they observed. I premise this paper on the notion that critical reflection on the specificities of policy discourse from the previous decade represents transformative work for the contemporary policy context. I conclude with a discussion of how research agendas in the current era of uncertainty can be re-assessed in the light of this study.
Introduction

In this paper, I discuss one example of the changing policy context of the gender inclusive curriculum that exemplifies the so-called phenomenon of 'backlash' against feminism. I base this discussion on a shared concern that the specificities of the changing policy context are underestimated (David, Weiner & Arnot 2000). In particular, I seek to respond to neglect of practitioner discourse in the academy, where the standpoint of the grassroots level of feminist activism more generally receives insufficient recognition in mainstream circles (Taylor 1997). Whilst we have published academic critique of policy (see, for example, Kenway 1997), the same cannot be said of practitioners. This is even though teachers are acknowledged as occupying an important location in the policy process (Gore 1993; Mathews 1994; Mc Taggart et al 1997; Day 2000; Grumet & Stone 2000). My particular concern is that the standpoint of the primary practitioner is not taken into adequate account by the academy.

Theoretical perspective

The specific context for this discussion is the state of Victoria in the October of 1993, when Jeff Kennett leads the Liberal Party into office after more than a decade of Labor government. The specificity of this context cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, pre-empting policy review with a qualification that different discourses underwrite policy reforms is common (Hickey 2000). As Sandra Taylor (1997 p. 28) says, "differences in terminology reflect the particular historical cultural context".

With the need for historical specificity in mind, I also assert that critical reflection on previous decades represents strategic action (Coffey & Delamont 2000). Assessing reform events can offer emancipatory knowledge for contemporary conditions through the idea of policy building (Henry & Taylor 1995). Such assessment can, at the same time, remain cognisant that future attempts at reform will engage in a particular set of historical conditions too (Taylor & Henry 2000). From this perspective strategic action is about understanding, sustaining and reviving policy momentum - albeit in varying policy climates.

A feminist perspective on theory underpins this discussion. Whilst I also characterise feminism as multiple, I nevertheless use its broad precepts (Haraway 1997). Accordingly, I underpin this paper with the broader goal of transformation of gender relations in primary schooling.

To achieve this goal I take an optimistic view of the role of the state in transforming gender relations. As a consequence, I subscribe to the view that feminists still need the modern traditions of policy- in spite of the postmodern turn (Yeatsman 1994). In particular, policy is rightly acknowledged as an official discourse of reform for changing classroom relations (Arnot 1993; Arnesen 1997). However, while I interpret policy as an 'authoritative allocation of values' (Lingard 2000), it is also aptly framed as a discourse of struggle (Blackmore 1993; Taylor 2001). Indeed, I situate this study amid on-going critique of the 'backlash' phenomenon against feminist interventions in schooling (Kenway 1995; Foster 1996; Roman & Eyre 1997; McLeod 1998; Lingard 1998; Blackmore 1999; Lingard 2001; Taylor 2001).
To manage these acknowledged tensions between transformative and reactionary discourses, I emphasise my use of the term 'potential' to accompany the goal of 'transformation'. Furthermore, I assert that such a position is not the same as conceding that transformative potential never translates to transformative impact. Thus, I see gender equity policy as having transformative potential— even if hitherto unrealised (Collins et al. 1996; Segal 1999).

The specific background for this paper is the changing policy context of the gender inclusive curriculum as it was conceptualised and enacted in Victoria, with October 1993 representing the watershed. The policy definition which represents Labor conceptualisation prior to October 1993 was promulgated in *A Fair Go For All* guidelines for a gender-inclusive curriculum (1990) as it reiterates earlier policy papers such as The Equal Opportunity Action Plan for Girls in Education: 1988-1990 (1989a), *Primary Practices* (1989b) and *Primary Strategies* (1988). In addition, this policy conceptualisation of gender inclusiveness in *A Fair Go For All* (1990) is acknowledged as influential amongst Victorian practitioners for this era (Fowler 1982, 1983, 1986; Gardner et al. 1984; Suggett 1987a, 1987b; Vale & Roughhead 1987; Gilbert & Taylor 1991; Collins, Kenway & Mc Leod 2000).

So by way of background to this paper, *A Fair Go For All* (1990) defines gender inclusiveness as "curriculum which by its content, language and methods gives value and validity to girls and women, their knowledge and experience, equally with boys' and men's knowledge and experience... the inclusive curriculum takes into account gender, class and ethnicity" (p. 58). This particular policy conceptualisation from *A Fair Go For All* (1990) provides the main contextual backdrop for this paper.

**Methodological perspective**

I study this policy context by adapting the feminist interpretation of standpoint methodology developed by Nancy Hartsock (1985, 1987) and Sandra Harding (1991, 1992, 1993, 1994), where position is conceptualised as structuring understanding. In this case, I invert the focus of policy review from academics and policymakers to that of practitioners. This is based on my claim that including the standpoint of the primary practitioner on the policy process enhances the transformative potential of policy. Significant energy and commitment can be said to be available at the grassroots level of gender reform (Henry & Taylor 1995).

A case study frames this methodological stance. Parallelling the sampling method of Sandra Taylor (2001) and Catherine Marshall (2000), key primary teachers in the field of gender inclusive reform are nominated via a 'snowballing' technique. Invitations for nominations stopped when substantive repetition became evident in more than 100,000 words of verbatim transcripts. This sampling method results in a final sample of 18 interviewees, who subsequently validated the interview transcripts.

However, because these practitioners are so representative, ethical dilemmas associated with confidentiality are exacerbated. Indeed, in this case identification of interviewees seems likely, as opposed to merely possible. Potential vulnerability in their current and future careers cannot be ruled out. Like Bob Connell (1990) and Kathleen Weiler (1988), I am aware of the broader political conditions under which this data is made public— even with the time lapse. Given the incendiary nature of the data, pseudonyms are insufficient. As a result,
in an effort to protect anonymity, I adopt an interpretation of the precedent of amalgams (Cooper et al 1994; Allard et al 1995). Accordingly, amalgams embody the final sample of 18 interviewees. Amalgams are constructed on the basis of patterns in their conceptions of the gender inclusive curriculum, as this proves the distinguishing feature. These amalgams are referred to as 'Jemmima', 'Caroline', 'Anita', 'Maria' and 'Elizabeth'.

Data

In these interviews, I ask the nominated practitioners to describe the conceptualisation and enactment of gender inclusive policy in Victorian primary schools. From the outset, it should be noted that the interviewees appeared to express intense emotions. For instance, whilst setting up interview procedures, all stated with seeming fervour their commitment to publicising primary teacher perceptions of this changing policy context.

Practitioners begin the interviews by lauding policy conceptions promoted prior to October 1993, as more transformative. For example, Maria describes Victorian gender inclusive policies under Labor as "the absolute jewel in the education crown of Australia"{p.13}. Jemmima agrees saying, "it was really happening in the primary schools... We had such an impact... We made such a difference to the primary schools" {p. 5-6}.

Practitioner standpoint of a conservative shift in policy conceptions

However, the focus of practitioner standpoint in these interviews is on criticising the conservative shift in policy conceptualisation of gender inclusiveness. Indeed, they present this critique with considerable force. In doing so, they provide the specificities of this changing policy context from the grassroots level. Moreover, they provide specific evidence of a policy backlash against feminism in primary schools. In essence, the data shows that this sample contrasted Liberal policy conceptualisation of gender inclusiveness with previous policy conceptions under Labor. These practitioners concluded that significant deterioration in the transformative potential of gender inclusive policies was the effect of this conceptual shift.

Caroline's interview typifies the focus of practitioner standpoint on verifying a policy backlash against the gender inclusive curriculum. For example, Caroline says that she observed gender inclusive materials changing after October 1993 to "wishy washy... It was backlash stuff... the style changed... to not as prescriptive... There was much less onus on primary schools to show that they were doing something... There was absolutely none... There was not nearly as much accountability... Schools could basically be doing what they like... whereas... before we had to be accountable... You had to forward information... Later there was no one doing that"{p.6-7}. As a consequence, Caroline believes policy conceptualisation...
was confined in primary schools to the level of rhetoric after October 1993. She observes, "I didn't see later policy doing anything... You could make those policies, enshrine them and not do anything with them... they were nothing. It was like action plans without action"{p.12}. Caroline determines, "you got a different climate"{p.16} and explains by summarising, "in this changed economic model under the Liberals, in the area of girls, we tried to somehow within this market model to keep strong the things that you valued from the social justice model... but we were right out of the welfare state... into this market model... How could you get... attention to... equity issues?" {p.12-18}.

All interviewees agreed with Caroline's observation of this policy backlash against the gender inclusive curriculum following October 1993. For example, Jemmima concurs, "the whole area seemed to have been downgraded at that time"{p.4} and "those changes meant that even equal opportunity was no longer seen to be a serious issue and... this had a dampening effect on primary schools" {p.8}. Jemmima is dismayed "with the incoming liberal government. I was just horrified with what I could see happening... I heard so many stories about activists being placed in excess"{p.9}. Jemmima laments, "it was horrible... times changed and the gender inclusive policy was no longer promoted in primary schools" {p.8}. Jemmima decides, "I think some primary teachers tried to keep going... I don't think they would have stopped, but those new ones, those really basic ones among the primary teachers wouldn't have got far... It was absolutely tragic"{p.5-6}. Similarly, Elizabeth says she heard nothing in primary schools about gender inclusive policies following the change of the state government. Elizabeth reports, "I heard nothing after October 1993... It just sort of died"{p.7}.

Anita specifies these criticisms of the policy backlash against the gender inclusive curriculum. She comments explicitly on her experience in developing the first policy paper to be released by the in-coming Liberals. It was entitled The Report of the Working Party on Opportunities for Girls in Education (1993), which as the title implies, reverts from gender inclusivity to the weaker notion of equal opportunity. Anita specifically criticises this draft policy material as limited in its transformative intent compared with Labor's A Fair Go For All (1990). Anita laments, "The Report of the Working Party on Opportunities for Girls in Education (1993) was built upon a real pragmatic approach... for the extent that it kept gender on the agenda and that there was something that... could continue, but...it revisited old territory without reflecting on it... or bringing new insight on it... We were simply going to... another cul de sac where... we had to stop... We were in a lot of cul de sacs at that moment"{p.12} and "we were holding the fort... it didn't break any new ground... it became... the document that could go either way" (p.19-20) and "it was less prescriptive than the previous policy, which actually talked about targets, notions of action plans, reporting on very specific issues, very specific goals, very specific targets"{p.4}. Anita said that with the October change in government, policies became "very easily overlooked and they became less of a priority and less of a strategic initiative"{p.2}. Anita noted this caused the feminist teachers in primary schools "disappointment and... frustration"{p.3}. Anita says these primary teachers concluded that after October 1993 "there was no girl's program any more"{p.8}.

Maria's criticisms are detailed. A synopsis of Maria's lengthy discussion of the policy backlash against gender inclusiveness indicates her critique. For example, she says, "we didn't use... that terminology... of the gender inclusive curriculum... any more... After the October... That was not in flavour, it was not the post 1993 vernacular... We didn't really even talk about... equal opportunity any more... We didn't talk about social justice. I mean you even had senior members of the directorate saying to you of the gender inclusive curriculum 'that's 1980's speak, get in line'... They created the shift... They changed the policy documents... They changed the emphasis... All the previous Labor government stuff... was reworked with a 1990's smack, a 1990's vernacular. It was very powerful... those policy
shifts... We came up with terms like affirmative action under Labor. Did you hear that later? Affirmative stank to high heel after the October"{p.1-2} and "we didn't even hear about equal opportunity any more"{p.3} and "you could compare the statements of... policy documents from before 1993... to the ones we got later on... There was a huge conceptual shift... in how much we valued this... reform. That's what the Liberal document was like... bland, acceptable. There was nothing... in it that anyone could find umbrage to"{p.5-6} and "obviously it reflected... a shift in policy at the highest levels"{p.7} and "the policy document... had become blander"{p.11} and "this government used the term of the level playing field...They actually sold that message... It was that pretence of treating of everybody the same"{p.6}. Maria cites her experience of regional committees with the change in government as relevant saying, "I don't believe that... the gender inclusive curriculum... was an issue that was debated... even raised, even put on the table... It wasn't even raised"{p.9}.

According to Maria, the gender inclusive curriculum was coupled with radical versions of affirmative action by the in- coming government in an attempt to discredit more transformative interpretations. She believes this demonstrated that even the more conservative notion of equal opportunity had fallen out of favour in Victoria.

Maria verifies this by saying that her editing comments for a draft version of *The Report of the Working Party on Opportunities for Girls in Education (1993)* were rejected because her terms were too radical for the changed policy climate. According to Maria, even mentioning the term 'gender inclusive curriculum' was unacceptable. Significantly, these comments directly reflect Anita's critique of the development of *The Report of the Working Party on Opportunities for Girls in Education (1993)*.

Maria says as a result, her school council replaced reference to the term 'gender inclusive curriculum' with the phrase 'equal opportunity for all children' in their school-based policy. In her view, state policy 'insinuation' that gender inclusiveness supported girls at the expense of boys caused this change.

Moreover, Maria observes that "bully boy tactics" {p.3} discouraged more radical conceptualisation. In fact, Maria reports personal experience of state government surveillance. Maria reveals that officials watched her closely to see that she enunciated the prescribed conservative discourse at all times. Other interviewees confirm Maria's experiences. For instance, interviewees talk about a prevailing level of fear such that primary teachers became too intimidated to mention gender inclusive principles. They mention primary teachers who believed that a state government memo was issued following the election of October1993, which forbade even the use of terms like 'equity' and 'equality' in school charters. Interviewees felt that even a rumour of such a tactic discouraged the primary profession.

In relation to this, these interviewees would not conduct interviews in a government setting. Practitioners said they did not feel safe to speak in government locations. Therefore, each interview had to be conducted well away from the workplace environment. Sometimes, this had to be in locations that could not in all likelihood be identified with the practitioner before they would consent to be interviewed- in one case the interview had to be held in the out of town home of a distant deceased relative. In addition, it is important to note here that, unlike all other comments made in this paper that emanate directly from the interview transcripts as described, such discussion of 'bullying' is recorded in my field notes alone. While interviewees commented on bullying, it was only while the audiotape was not running- such as before or after the actual interview event. This note raises the degree to which these interviewees also felt intimidated.
One thing is clear on the audiotape- Maria's tone throughout the interview process is very tense and very sad. She says, "it was a very saddening experience because under Labor we had a very high focus on girls... There was a ministerial committee on women and girls...but then girls just slipped totally off the agenda... It was in the mainstream curriculum documents too... Girls were underpinning... those things... absolutely... But it... fell off the agenda"{p.4-6}. In fact, Maria ends the interview sobbing. She cries, "I just weep... We were making gains and it was a long slow process... You had celebrations...It was a collective... It was a very cohesive... time... I weep to see all of that... fragmented and it was, it was gone... It was isolated and it was fragmented... our achievements... It was not celebrated in any way... I get a bit emotional about this"{p.10}.

Practitioner standpoint on effects of conceptual shift on enactment

Practitioners theorise the effects of the described conservative conceptual shift in gender inclusive policy. In doing so, they provide retrospective evidence of the transformative potential of gender inclusive policy. In part, they do so, by relating policy conceptualisation of the gender inclusive curriculum with its enactment.

Practitioners focus on describing how the transformative potential of gender inclusive policy was undermined with the described conceptual shift. In terms of an overview, three main points emerge from the data. These points represent the three main ways that these interviewees characterise the described policy backlash against feminism. Firstly, interviewees perceive a related withdrawal of state policy mandate for school based initiatives. Secondly, they observe a resultant depiction of gender inclusive policy as merely 'optional'. Thirdly, they note an associated reduction in state resources for policy implementation at the school level.

Firstly, in terms of the deleterious consequence for a government mandate for school based curriculum development, Maria is indicative in her comments. She decides, "in our heyday... there were committees set up for... the gender inclusive curriculum... for that purpose... and there was actually some political muscle there. You could send... things... back to be rewritten... That didn't happen after the Liberals... Under Labor there were avenues for people working in the area to have input into... curriculum development, how it was presented... the style, the content"{p.5-6}. For Maria, the conservative conceptual shift meant feminist teachers in primary classrooms could no longer use policy to legitimate their efforts.

Caroline also comments on the consequential reduction in mandate for school based curriculum development. In Caroline's mind, the policy climate prompted by the conservative conceptual shift after October 1993 worked to minimise the transformative capacity of feminist teachers in the field. In her opinion, equivocable policy rhetoric could not inform or enable school based attempts to engage in transformative work. Caroline equates state presentation of the gender inclusive curriculum as optional with abrogation of systemic responsibility. Anita is also indicative in coupling the significantly blander conceptualisation of gender inclusiveness with a reduced mandate for practitioners at the level of curriculum development. Anita saw this coupling as represented in the increasing call to present gender inclusiveness as 'just good teaching practice'.
Likewise, Elizabeth claims post October 1993 policy rhetoric fell just short of openly declaring hostility to gender reform. At the same time for Elizabeth, government unwillingness to publicly commit to gender inclusiveness led to gender exclusiveness not being explicitly rejected in primary schools. In this way, Elizabeth noted that retaining a loose image of equal opportunity became more important than the substance of a gender inclusive curriculum in the schools. For Elizabeth, the most important implication was the associated reduction in support for primary teachers in their classrooms.

Secondly, interviewees comment in terms of the effect of the described conceptual shift as creating the view that from October 1993 gender inclusive policies were to be considered now more of an ‘optional extra’ for the peculiarly interested individual professional. Relevant to this push for gender inclusiveness to be constituted as an optional extra for these interviewees was the broader sweep of conservative ‘reforms’ unleashed on primary schools by the incoming Liberal government. These included mandatory curriculum standards frameworks called the CSF, which were to be enforced by statewide testing of pupils and local selection of teachers. For example, Elizabeth says the conceptual shift in October 1993 contained enthusiasm for this policy because it came to be regarded as an added extra in this changing policy context. For instance, Elizabeth comments, "there were so many other pressures on primary teachers then" (p. 3).

Maria details this point, "primary teachers were... seeing things as survival"(p.6) and "equity came to be seen as less of a priority... The gender policies were there but because there were so many things...like the CSF that had much more... immediacy... they took precedence"(p.2-3). Maria explains that "in the chaos following the election of the Liberals... people... were just so stretched that they saw the issue of girls as just another thing"(p.4-6) and "this Liberal government was very very clever... because they kept it a rate and a pace where you weren't able to stop and think about it and come to grips with it" (p.12) and "we were all very angry... The shifts that came so quick and so fast and so severely... It was like a period of grieving"(p.4). Maria admits that it was virtually impossible to keep a profile on gender inclusive policies "so it was not just something on top of all the other things"(p.7). Maria believed primary teachers couldn't innovate towards a more gender inclusive curriculum under these changed conditions. Maria describes them as at breaking point and grappling in crisis control in this time period.

Anita agrees with Maria and Elizabeth. Indeed, Anita is typical in using the word 'turmoil' to describe the state of primary teaching at this time and to perceive the attendant consequences for the transformative potential of gender inclusive policy. Anita reports, "primary teacher need to have... very specific ideas about what they could do... increased"(p.9) and "it changed... later we had to ask 'how do we rip through those issues?'... The time primary teachers thought they had available... limits what they believed they could do... the level of change they were thrown into... the pressure... was enormous... the CSF just monopolised people"(p.11-13).

Jemmima also recognised that amidst this conservative climate, gender inclusive policies came to be regarded as an additional burden. Jemmima notes, "it changed to being perceived as an extra... an extra; requiring dedication and commitment... added work... There wasn't much chance"(p.3). Jemmima confesses on a personal level, "it was awful... I left... I got to the stage where I didn't have the energy... to continue fighting"(p.10) and "primary schools were basically becoming more conservative... People were too frightened to rock the boat in any way... People were also... too exhausted"(p.12). Jemmima sums up wearily, "no one had the strength" (p.5-6).

Caroline concludes in similar terms. Caroline observes, "primary teachers were so busy fighting their own battles" (p.6-7) and "now, at that time, if I had, even in a very supportive
primary school… even said 'let's do equal opportunity for… a day', I'd get laughed at… because… people's energy levels were depleted then… Everything else got piled up on top" (p. 8-10) and "I think nobody had the time… to actually look at the stuff… unless you were an academic… The grass roots people out in the primary schools were just flat out… It was a nightmare" (p.8).

Thirdly, in terms of an associated reduction in resources for primary schools following October 1993, practitioners also comment on the effects of the conceptual shift. In the main, practitioners said that these diminished resources were needed for professional development and that this professional development was needed to translate the transformative potential of gender inclusive policies to transformative impact. For example, Jemmima observes, "there was a bit more money… You were able to do more things with more teachers… with more primary schools… You were able to have better programs… So they were more likely to try… new things" (p.1).

Similarly, Maria states wryly, that following the October of 1993, "reports can come out but if the funding is not there, well!" (p.4-6). Maria decides, "I think it was left up to the goodwill of people in primary schools" (p.5) and "there was no push, no resourcing" (p.11). For Maria, the reduction in resources for professional development finally convinced the profession that gender inclusiveness was off the government agenda. She said closures of equal opportunity centres gave a clear message to the primary teaching profession. Maria claims with no government resources for school level consultant appointments, publications, in-services and participation in curriculum networks; gender inclusive policy could only ever be a government platitude in the minds of primary teachers.

Anita's comments are a particular indictment of the cuts in funding which accompanied the conceptual policy shift of October 1993. Anita evidences state equity consultants literally reduced to begging for funds. Significantly, Anita reveals that development of the project Primary Foundations (1995c); the planned centrepiece of the imminent Girls, Schools and Beyond (1995a) which was meant to activate The Report of the Working Party on Opportunities for Girls in Education (1993); had no budget whatsoever.

Caroline goes so far as to say that policy conception in Victoria was no longer conducive to the realisation of transformative potential following the election of the Liberals, due to the ensuing reduction in resources. Caroline says, "it was seen as a priority before October… the rhetoric was… that the money goes out to the schools… What happens with equity is that on one in primary schools will ever… put some of their budget into funding… No one ever will, in the competitive environment that the Liberals created in the organisation of schools… take that central kind of responsibility" (p.16).

Thus, in criticising the described conservative conceptual shift following October 1993, these practitioners observe the transformative potential of gender inclusive policy from before October 1993 in retrospect- namely, by providing a mandate for school based curriculum development through a 'non-optional' policy platform appropriately resourced to support professional development. In doing so, they also identify the specifics of the policy backlash against the gender inclusive curriculum in this changing policy context.
Practitioner standpoint on the need to reflect on the lessons of 1993

Practitioners conclude the interviews by discussing their perspective on this specific changing policy context as holding transformative potential beyond that point in time. Indeed, interviewees say that they manage their distress about the policy backlash against feminism by a pragmatic optimism for future policy conditions. Furthermore, they confidently expect subsequent Labor state governments to again deliver a transformative policy climate akin to the gender inclusive project they witnessed prior to October 1993. For instance, Elizabeth says the primary profession takes an appropriately long-term perspective to change and Caroline talks about how primary teachers look forward to the social and political change that will once again produce a transformative policy context for the gender inclusive curriculum.

Jemmima exemplifies such a position. She says, "It couldn't go on like this shift to the conservative... There would always be a backlash. Back to the backlash" (p.5-6). Jemmima believes that a more conducive policy context will return and inevitably so. Jemmima says hopefully, "I just couldn't envisage us in the new millennium... stepping back into the 1960s... It's like we've probably gone up several steps and maybe back a couple" (p.9). Jemmima urges, "we have to build on what we learned" (p. 12)

Maria also looks explicitly to future policy developments to build on the constructive gains made under Labor in the 1980s. Maria believes that the conservative climate of October 1993 was a setback in a cyclical explanation of gender inclusive policy reform. She sees innovations and conservative corrections coming in successive generations, but that gradual progress is made. Maria concludes, "I have to take a perspective over a long period of time... It comes in cycles. Certainly gender issues will never ever go away again" (p.12). Maria finishes the interview by saying that she knows that in this policy field there are always relative losses and gains. Significantly, Maria says that in the current vulnerable climate, it is important not to lose sight of the positive foundations built at this time.

Therefore, practitioners explicitly argue for strategic reflection on earlier attempts at gender inclusive reform in the primary sector. They warn that the transformative potential of future gender reforms will be diminished if former policy achievements and contests are ignored.

Conclusion

Thus, these interviewees believe that lessons can be drawn from their observations of the specificities of a policy backlash against gender inclusiveness – namely, a transformative context contested by a conservative shift. I agree.

Certainly, the evidence of these interviewees may be located in the literature. For example, their perspective can be situated in academic critique of backlash against feminism more broadly (Blackmore 1999; Henry, Lingard, Rizvi & Taylor 1999). Their evidence may also be located in terms of academic critique of backlash more specific to schooling (Kenway 1996, 1997). In addition, their standpoint specifies the transformative potential of gender equity policies discussed more generally in the feminist academy. For instance, as Taylor (2001 p.
64) observes "policy is clearly very important to the activists as a way of getting their concerns, and more specifically feminist discourses, legitimated and taken seriously".

At the same time, their standpoint offers a unique perspective of the specificities of a changing policy context in terms of gender reform. For example, in this paper the described gap between policy and practice differs from discussion from a traditional linear model of the policy process. Indeed, feminists recognise that teacher practice is criticised under this model as too conservative to live up to the transformative impulse of policy (Kenway 1990; Blackmore with Kenway, Willis & Rennie 1996). However, in this case study I have identified limitations in policy conceptualisation that practitioners say impedes gender inclusive practice. In addition, in this case study I have offered a unique focus on the primary sector.

By way of conclusion, the lessons from 1993 could appear quite simple. According to these practitioners, the more reformist governments of the Labor Party are associated with more transformative policies for girls in education. Indeed, these practitioners believe the definition of transformation alters with any shift in party political ethos. Moreover, in the minds of these interviewees the idea of a conservative force is always party political. So, with conservative state government defeats across Australia and given constitutional responsibility for primary schooling rests with state governments, there is evident hope for gender equity considerations in the contemporary policy context of 2003.

However, Lyn Yates (1993 b), a key academic in this field, draws a more complex lesson from this changing policy context in her review of gender inclusive policies (1986, 1987 a, 1987 c, 1987 d). In essence, Yates (1993 a) contends that, in its original form, the gender inclusive curriculum embraces a more significant critique of existing gender relations than evident to date in policy terms- even when under Labor albeit more transformatively than when under the Liberals. I agree with Yates.

For example, I query interviewee assumption that an election of a Labor state government necessarily translates to a transformative policy context for the gender inclusive curriculum. Interviewed practitioners do not describe gender inclusive policies under Labor as conservative in inflection compared with, for instance, the academic literature exemplified by Yates. Further, these interviewees do not relate policy conceptualisation under Labor as so conservative in the first place, as to make it vulnerable to the conservative shift created by the in-coming Liberal government.

Relevant to this query more locally, is the fact that the Labor Party has been re-elected to office in Victoria for several years now. Poignantly, there has not been resurgence in gender inclusive policies for primary schooling and backlash against feminist interventions in schooling persist. On an international level, so- called 'new Labor' has enjoyed electoral victories in the United Kingdom and educational policy tensions around equity are being commented upon in both these locations (Blackmore, Thomson & Beckett 2000). For instance, Clarke (2000) argues that 'new Labor' cannot be expected to create wholly transformative policy contexts.

From a feminist perspective, clever strategic work is going to be required if transformative gender inclusive policies are going to be returned to state government policy agendas. Feminists are conducting educational research in an era of uncertainty with problematic futures- particularly so given the gender debates 'we still have to have'.

In relation to these still needed debates, I do not reject the concept of a gender inclusive curriculum as lacking in transformative potential, merely because of its inadequate conceptualisation in policy materials to date. A more emancipatory response is to promote more transformative conceptualisations in future policy work. Unexplored policy potential
resides in earlier policy attempts and they should be drawn upon. At the same time, strategic efforts are not going to be achieved by what Wendy Brown (2000) calls 'left melancholia'; or what Jane Kenway (1997) calls 'panic discourses'; or what Julie Mc Leod (1997) calls 'a thin and reductive story'.

On the other hand, through this case study I have tried to demonstrate that such strategic effort would be enhanced by more adequate inclusion of the standpoint of the primary practitioner. And this inclusion needs to go beyond merely analysing their reception of policy. The stated purpose of this presentation has been to activate new possibilities for gender inclusive reform that are more adequately based on the thinking of primary teachers. Educational researchers need to re-assess their research agendas and approaches to research accordingly.

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Notes