

Gender Reform in Schools: Slip-sliding away

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Introduction

I am going to offer a narrative about feminist gender reform in Australian schools (for a more extended discussion see Kenway, 1997). It is a narrative that spans roughly thirty years of activity. The key questions I will address are as follows.

- Why was feminist gender reform so successful in Australian school education systems?
- What conceptual trajectory did it follow?
- What were the micro aspects of macro reforms?
- Why did feminist inspired gender reform 'fall in a hole' in the mid 1990s?

The more provocative questions that I will address are:

- Did the feminist gender reform movement contain the seeds of its own destruction?
- And if so how?
- But also, what bigger forces were at work? Could these have been anticipated?
- What do such forces mean for feminist gender reform in schools today?

Gender reform; a success story

At their peak, policies and practices for feminist gender reform in schools in Australia were, arguably, the most advanced in the world. In the period from mid 70s to mid 1990s the developments included

- National and state policies and action plans which were quite regularly renewed and updated. These were very specific about what needed doing and why.
- Policies to ensure gender mainstreaming in major curriculum and school leadership reforms
- Dedicated staffing at national, state, regional and school levels. These people worked to develop and implement policy and consulted back and forth with each other as well as to school systems and to schools. They also ran professional development for teachers. This was quite a regular occurrence and gender reform networks existed in many regions of key states and some even had budgets, as did some girls' education coordinators in schools.

- Schools implemented many of the agendas for instance around girls and maths, science and sport; single sex classes, role model programs, notions of girl friendly pedagogy and curriculum — and the list goes on.
- Various affirmative action programs (A.A.) for women teachers and principals in certain states.
- Dedicated competitive funding for research and change oriented projects was also made available at Commonwealth and most state levels. Often academics worked in partnership with state employees and teachers to undertake these projects.

Over this time period, this agenda along with other broader social changes including women's changing modes of participation in the world of work and beyond, saw some altered patterns with regard to certain girls' participation, retention and achievement at school (Collins, Kenway, and McLeod, 2000a); although some girls in lower socio-economic groups still do not do well at school (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000b). Further, other gender issues remain in schools, as I will explain later.

Explaining success

Some of the key reasons for such success were as follows.

There was a critical mass of people involved and this was accompanied by a swarming phenomenon, people were attracted to the field because lots of interesting and worthwhile things were happening. Mainstreaming and side streaming worked in tangent. In other words, people in the side-stream tried to keep the mainstream honest.

The movement for gender reform involved strong activists for gender reform independent of the school system.

- They were in teacher unions and independent organizations set up by feminist teachers and principals, eg McIntock Collective in science education in schools.
- There was a strong body of feminist academics in universities who researched gender issues in education, and who made sure that gender was on the teacher education curriculum. They also adopted critical insider/outsider standpoint in their relationships with feminists in policy circles.
- There was a more widespread feminist movement keeping the issues on the front of the agenda in many other spaces in public policy, the media and the academy.

There were strong activists for gender reform within the education system itself and in highly strategic places.

- These people were very smart about policy and politics and the use of quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate the need for intervention and the use of rhetoric to get the public on side.
- In policy and practice terms, they pushed a very clear message about the problems and very clear solutions to address them.
- Overall, they adopted a very strategic essentialism around girls and disadvantage and the paths to educational access and equality. They talked up a discourse that resonated, which while controversial when first introduced was eventually quite widely taken up. Its key concepts were — role models, self esteem, non-traditional pathways for girls, single sex classes, sexual harassment and so on.

More broadly gender reform came on the heels of the long economic boom in the West that followed world war two. This had led to increased expectations about life's possibilities and to a surge of social movements for social change and justice; environmental, multi cultural, peace, Indigenous. These times also produced a baby boomer generation — people who felt that they could have it all. They had high expectations and benefited from a reasonably generous public policy spirit. It was thus that the political and policy climate was relatively responsive to equity agendas. They had a certain electoral appeal.

Conceptual shifts

There were a number of conceptual debates and shifts that occurred over these two decades of achievement. Gender reform mainly emerged in the late 1970s and for much of the 1980s as a liberal feminist agenda about gender equity, balance, parity; under and over representation in certain spheres; girls being equal to boys, females to males, equal work, equal worth and equal rights in the work place and so on. It also included shades of a radical/cultural feminist, often separatist, agenda that totalised and celebrated femaleness at the same time as it totalised and demonised males under the concept of patriarchy. These two standpoints, wanting equality and wanting difference, were uncomfortably blended in policy. For instance, single sex classes for girls maths and science were promoted according to the logic of female culture being different and more supportive, at the same time as girls were encouraged to be more like boys in order to get on in the world. However, the dominant emphasis was on girls' retention, participation and achievement; on equal access to every aspect of education but particularly those zones in which males dominated. Overall the focus was on gender and women's and girls' differences from males and their unequal relationship to them.

Conceptual critiques of and alternatives to both this liberal and cultural feminist agenda emerged largely in the late 1980s. These sought to diversify and complexify the conceptual frame and also to enrich the educational agenda. Three main theoretical foci emerged in the broad gender reform movement (These approaches are usefully summarised in Dillabough, 2001 and in the form of different papers in Francis and Skelton (Eds),2001). In general they opposed the one size fits all approach of the earlier perspectives.

1. One position sought to accommodate the diversity or differences amongst girls — class, ethnic, racial and sexual differences were elucidated and the search came to be directed towards the question ‘What sorts of interventions suit different groups of girls?’ The broad move involved a mix here of materialist, multi cultural and postcolonial and lesbian feminist agendas. In broader theoretical terms these moves were both structuralist and culturalist. Often drawing on the legacy of Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, there was work on girl cultures and subcultures particularly in relation to class or ethnic cultures or on popular culture and youth cultures and their implications for girls’ engagement with schools and schools engagements with them. Nancy Fraser ((1997) the American philosopher, calls this a focus on ‘differences among’ females.
2. The emergence of feminist post structuralism did indeed complexify every thing; the notion of the human subject, and of power, the relationship between power and meaning; binary thought and much more (Brooks, 1997; Paechter, 2001). It concentrated attention on the micro politics of gender and gender reform and on the ‘performativity’ of gender (Salih, 2002, Mansfield, 2000)). And in combination with psychoanalytic theory, it called attention to interiority — questions of subjectivity and subjectification, ‘the psychic life of power’ (to quote Judith Butler’s famous title). Multiple and intersecting differences and complex subjectivities came to be the focus. Nancy Fraser (1997) calls this a focus on ‘multiple intersecting differences’ and Francis (1999) points to some of the debates about it amongst feminists in the academy.
3. Towards the mid 1990s there emerged a feminist interest in masculinity/masculinities and the education of boys (e.g. Kenway, 1995). The gender reform movement aligned itself strongly with pro feminist male researchers on masculinity because they focussed on masculinity power dynamics but also on the gender dynamics between masculinity and femininity as well as on sexuality (for such views see Adams and Savran, 2002). They also supported

feminism and indeed kept pace with developments in the field. An important feature of this was the move away from the notions of boys as the problem *a la* patriarchy theory towards a critique of the hegemonic manifestations of masculinity and its implications for boys and men and well as for girls and women. Gendered violence and harassment came to be understood in much more subtle ways.

These three conceptual moves but particularly feminist post structuralism had a strong impact on gender reformers and flowed through, in rather watered down ways, into policy and curriculum reform in the form of notions of gender construction, deconstruction and complex subjectivities. The other flow-through involved attention to 'girls at risk' ('of not completing school'). These shifts meant the gender reform agenda now involved more nuanced understanding of masculinities, femininities and gender relations. They also meant that more attention was paid to matters beyond retention, participation and achievement. These included a more complex understanding of school cultures and subcultures and of matters of power and meaning. The move towards the complexity of subjectivity also problematised the identity politics associated with liberal and cultural feminism.

In summary then, in certain spaces we had a much more nuanced response to issues of gender, difference and inequalities in and around schooling. This rich agenda had the intellectual potential to make a considerable difference on a range of fronts. However, unlike their predecessors, such notions had little broad impact on teachers' gender reform practices and on popular perceptions. It certainly proved difficult to turn feminist post structuralism into political sound bites or slogans—it was harder to understand, harder to argue and to turn into practice.

The micro politics of gender reform

Meanwhile, what was actually happening in schools when macro level gender reform policies and action plans met the micro politics of school cultures and sub cultures? As we show in *Answering Back: Girls, boys and feminism in schools (1997)* this was not a straightforward success story. In this book we draw on feminist post structuralism to discuss the struggle over the meaning of gender reform that occurred in schools around questions of success, power, knowledge, responsibility and the turbulent and sometimes toxic and emotions it provoked. In researching the impact of gender reform in schools we took the dominant discourses I noted earlier and watched closely what happens to them when they are introduced in schools. For instance, we documented various resistances to gender reform by certain teachers and students. This involved various

attempts to subvert and undermine it, some quite viscous and violent. We also showed how responses also included reluctant accommodation and often, reinterpretation. Sometimes this was in order that the reform might more properly fit the particular circumstances of the school. Sometimes reinterpretation was an act of resistance. As we show, gender reform required considerable resilience on the part of gender reformers.

These complex micro politics pointed to the necessary but uneasy relationships between macro policy contexts and micro school cultures. Policies for gender reform were crucial and so of course were resources. Resources backed particularly those policies that had practical action plans, targeted priorities and specified outcomes.

Some of the conceptual limitations of policies emerged in their implementation in schools. The least successful gender reformers were those who were inflexible in their application of macro policies to micro settings. The best reformers adapted policies to suit the circumstances. Despite the energy and the momentum of gender reform, it was still nonetheless a subordinate discourse in the broader education policy field. It always had to justify defend itself.

Slipping away

Despite the success in the broader policy field and the various adoptions and adoptions in various school sites, by the mid to late 1990s the feminist inspired gender reform movement in schools was pretty much over. It was attracting little government and other support. The questions that arise here for me are those I listed earlier. 'Did the feminist gender reform movement contain the seeds of its own destruction? And if so how? But also, what bigger forces were at work? Could these have been anticipated?' I will now attempt to answer these questions.

Naturally one would expect that any movement for justice would hope that it would no longer be needed once its mission was accomplished and firmly embedded. So the obvious question to ask is 'Was the mission accomplished by the mid 1990s?' I'd say no. Certain intransigent problems remain and there is still much to do around such things as on going gendered violence (Kenway, and Fitzclarence, 1997, French, 1999, Robinson, 2000, Simmons, 2002), certain sets of girls remain at risk at school (Collins Kenway & McLeod 2000b) and after school (Kenway, 2000, Bullen and Kenway, 2003) and more broadly, women remain structurally subordinate in the labour market and in most sites of significant power (Summers, 2003).

That said, I do think there were ways in which the feminist gender reform movement unintentionally sowed the seeds of its own destruction. This is clearly a contentious argument but I will now outline what I see as several of gender reform's weaknesses.

One weakness was that the agenda came to be equated with restricted notions of equality rather than with cultural and economic change and gender diversity with justice. In the public's mind, gender reform had succeeded, for instance, when girls came to dominate numerically in various spaces in which they were previously minorities. Under such circumstances it was very easy to say that the 'mission' was complete. In other words success was too narrowly defined. Indeed, success screened out failure. A 'yes/but' phenomenon emerged; yes, this has *changed* but not that. The gender reform movement started to look greedy and insatiable— as wanting more than equity. Which was of course true— we did want deep cultural and structural change. However, this was outside the tolerance limits of those in power in education. As time went on and as girls' success was documented in more and more fine detail, they came to appear privileged. At this point a backlash of *mis-recognition* emerged.

Even though feminist post structuralism became ascendant in broad feminist gender reform agenda in Australia and elsewhere and came to dominate the academic field it also, I think, had some significant blind spots. It expressed little interest in the world of work or the economy and its terror of meta-narratives meant it was unable to speak to matters of structure. With some significant exceptions (e.g. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001), post structuralism's concentration on the micro and on interiority and on 'little stories' or mini narratives meant it paid scant attention to the big structural shifts going on around the world and to the implications these were to have on education. Indeed, it came to exemplify the problems alluded to by Nancy Fraser (1997) when she talks of the excessive focus on cultural injustice at the expense of material injustice and of the need to consider the politics of material redistribution as well as cultural recognition— matters I will return to.

The decline of the feminist movement in schools must also be mapped onto the rise of the boys' movement. Again, in quite a convoluted and perverse way we see the seeds of destruction in play in the ways in which boys were implicated in the gender reform agenda.

The focus of gender reform of the 1970s/80s and early 90s was on girls and women, their success in the system and girls' and women's reconstruction of themselves. This did not just provoke resistance in schools and systems; it also contributed to the rise of the boys'

movement, which remains powerful to this day. Why did the boys' movement 'hit the spot' for many boys and men. Let me try to explain.

The boys' movement

As we showed in *Answering Back*, boys were made conscious of their own privileges, hitherto so normalised that they did not even notice them, at the same time as they were supposed to let go of them in the name of gender equity. And certainly non-hegemonic boys did not feel privileged. Certain boys felt blamed and shamed by various aspects of the gender reform movement in schools. Further and eventually, gender reforms in schools were seen to have tipped the educational scales in favour of girls. Boys were allegedly ignored, left behind, and came to be constructed as victims of feminism in schools and then as victims of the entire education system and of life in general (e.g. Buckingham, 2000).

The boys' movement, which emerged over this time in support of boys, drew on all the familiar language and strategies of the liberal feminist/cultural feminist movement as well as on the international men's movement, (The latter is similar to cultural feminism and celebrates 'men's culture, indeed men's lost culture and men's need to reclaim it. See further Lingard, and Douglas, 1999). The boys' movement thus was able to readily tap into public awareness of gender issues and to resonated strongly with familiar discourses. Notably, it did not take up the issues of gender complexity and construction, let alone of gendered cultures and subcultures or pluralist notions of masculinity. Rather, it focused on boy/girl comparisons on matters of retention participation and achievement; as did early feminists agendas. It also had 'good spin'. This pleased the conservative media which gloried in the alarm it could generate through its highly emotive stories about 'gender wars in the class room', 'the war on boys', boys and men 'in crisis' and the like.

Eventually, boy advocates claimed the national and state gender reform agenda so that, over the turn of the century decade, it came to focus almost exclusively on boys. The old ideas were new again as single sex classes, stereotyping, boys' ways of learning, role models and so forth were all deployed to attend to the alleged disadvantage and needs of boys (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training 2002).

Feminists' attempts to respond to the hegemony of the boys' movement were either to try to mobilise a 'competing victims' logic (which failed for lack of clear statistical evidence and due to the needy/greedy scare-mongering that I noted earlier) or to argue the importance of recognising complexity— the gender jigsaw rather than the gender seesaw as we

called it (see Collins, Kenway, and McLeod, 2000a and Smith, 2003 for the UK). Both failed strategically and politically, as did pro feminist critical responses to the boys' movements, nationally indeed, as well as internationally— despite their persuasive power (Mills, 2000, Titus, 2004). Politicians on all sides of the political spectrum in Australia rallied behind the notions that boys are underachieving at school and in life and, more generally, that masculinity is in crisis—yet again, we might say. Boys came to be widely understood as the new disadvantaged and education systems mobilised their resources to produce boys' policies and programs around such things as boys and literacy (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, and Muspratt, S. 2002) and boys and pedagogy (Lingard, Martino, Mills, Bahr, 2002).

But the rise and success of the boys' movement cannot be attributed to the failures of the feminist gender reform movement alone. Bigger forces were at work. The rise of the boys' movement and the decline of the feminist movement in education coincided with rise of the neo liberal restructuring of the state and of economic systems. The state was subject to financial austerity, privatisation and deregulation agendas and the Australian economy fell in line in attempts to become more globally competitive. The world of work became more cut throat, individualised, unstable and less secure. Old 'rust belt' industries tended to give way to the service sector and to the rise of knowledge intensive industries. Education systems were restructured accordingly, they became mean and lean and marketised but also more tightly managed at the same time. Educational agendas came to focus on outcomes very narrowly defined. The feminists' agenda in education struggled to survive but pretty much collapsed under the weight of all of this. But further, as suggested above, with some exceptions (Henry, 2001), Taylor, and Henry, 2003), it did not really have available the conceptual and resources to deal with neo liberal restructuring. Certainly it did not have the political resources.

So, beyond the points made earlier, why did the boys' movement have so much resonance? I think the crisis/victim/'restore-the-balance' discourse resonated widely with males and certainly with teachers of boys for the following reasons.

Deindustrialisation had a major impact on working class males leaving many without work and without the working class culture they had come to depend on. Working class masculinity is indeed in crisis and working class males are being detraditionalised and required to reinvent themselves. The effects of this have been widely felt in working class families and in schools catering for working class boys as we have argued in Kenway and Kraack, (2004); see also McDowell (2003). Furthermore, many boys no longer link schooling to the job market. Indeed, school is

suffering a legitimacy crisis with regard to such boys and they behave badly as a result. They have withdrawn their consent from school and feel little investment in it (Collins, Kenway McLeod, 2000a).

It can be argued that economic restructuring and its unstable hyper competitive environment with its small core and large peripheral labour markets and with the ever-present fear of unemployment have made many males feel vulnerable and this has undermined their ontological security and worried their parents and teachers. It is also possible to argue that the so-called 'feminisation' of work in the ever-growing peripheral labour markets destabilised certain men's and boys' sense of their masculinity (O'Donnell, and Sharpe, 2000)

This is best argued through the concept of gender convergence — there is more casual employment for males so their work-place experiences are more like women's. But also the expanding service sector jobs are not conventionally coded as male. In this space, some males have been able to detraditionalise themselves and some have not.

Six faces of contemporary gender fundamentalism

These factors combined, have led to support for the boys' movement. They are also associated with the assertion of a form of gender fundamentalism with several faces, which I will now outline.

1. For working class males and those seriously destabilised by economic restructuring this gender fundamentalism is associated with a form of *masculine melancholia*; a longing to recover a lost past and a sense of power, control and centrality. This may be accompanied by the attempts to *reassert masculine centrality* and to serve male needs at the expense of those of women and girls (see Kenway and Kraack, 2004).
2. We also see the *displacement* of many of these new and negative 'structures of feeling' onto women and girls in the form of *blame and resentment* that sometimes spills over into hyper masculine performances of bonding or brutality or both together and to ritual humiliations of women and the weak. The book title *The stronger women get, the more men love football* (Burton, 1994) is very suggestive in these circumstances, for we know that there are strong links between male ball team sports and male violence against women. That domestic violence increases when teams lose is well known.

3. A third face of gender fundamentalism today is *denial*: a refusal to acknowledge that neo liberal restructuring also disadvantages women as the welfare state retreats, as women's dependency on what remains of it becomes more stigmatised and as women's caring roles become more intensified.
4. A fourth face of gender fundamentalism is *derision*. This is evident in many politicians' convenient and quite cynical and reactionary support for the 'masculinity-in-crisis'; resentment-of-women-and-girls discourse and their public vilification of feminists. Many very vocal politicians decry the 'political correctness' they associate with social movements that support the weak and the vulnerable and that oppose the politics of neo- liberalism. The success of this campaign has led to the *narrowing of the discursive space in which to speak*. Indeed, in some states of Australia it has become difficult to speak of girls in schools without getting ridiculed.
5. A fifth face of gender fundamentalism involves the *intensification* of hegemonic masculinity in core and powerful labour markets (gender intensification). While some women have gained senior posts, the whole fast capitalist, hyper performative, hyper-managerialist culture is unfriendly to families and to people who want some work/life balance. And the concept of hegemonic masculinity can also be applied to the current world order and to the global elite —those males involved in running the institutions which control the global economy; the WTO, IMF, World Bank and the US treasury for example. Hegemonic masculinity, by definition, is hostile to women and indeed to anything other than itself. Further, of course, these globally influential bodies have little democratic accountability and remain only marginally touched by movements for global justice let alone gender justice. It is in this hyper- competitive context that the politics of education are being played out. Gender justice, and indeed, social justice find little support here.
6. The sixth face of gender fundamentalism, and evident in the boys' movement, is a *non-reflexive* way of being in the world that is profoundly conservative and dogmatic about masculinity, femininity and feminism and refuses to grow conceptually. Educating boys and men about the role of gender in their lives and encouraging them to develop gender reflexivity is certainly not a major goal of the boys' movement. But it is a goal of the feminist movement and of pro feminist masculinity scholars.

Concluding thoughts

I do not support the boys' movement or the gender fundamentalism that fuels it. But I have some sympathy with those males who have been damaged by deindustrialisation and economic restructuring. I acknowledge the difficulties they face in trying to leave behind the gendered habitus produced by their historical relationships to work and the economy. However, the gender reform agenda clearly cannot be left in the hands of the boys' movement or the gender fundamentalists with their reductionist binary logic and their trivialisation of the complex links between education and gender and gender and culture and society. But neither, in my view, can the feminist gender reform movement go back to its earlier conceptual manifestations. Particularly, it cannot go back to its focus on culture at the expense of the economy and its tendency to decouple the social from the cultural.

There is a clear need for gender reformers to adjust their theory base and to find a theoretical rudder that is more adequate to the complexity of these times. It is my view that Nancy Fraser's work is helpful in this regard. In *Justice Interruptus* (1997) she discusses 'radical democracy in the post socialist condition'. She sees the post socialist condition without credible progressive alternatives to the contemporary order in which she identifies two main forms of injustice. These are, first, material injustice associated with economic exploitation deprivation and marginalisation and, secondly, cultural injustice associated with cultural domination, denigration and a lack of recognition and respect. She argues that females are a 'bivalent collectivity' in the sense that they suffer from both forms of injustice. I would add that the *gender convergence and intensification* in the world of work that I have noted in this paper need to be factored into this analysis. Further, the gender fundamentalism I have also described is a feature of contemporary cultural injustice for females. She makes the case that contemporary attempts to address injustice and to develop a comprehensive progressive vision for today must include both economic redistribution and cultural recognition. Her ideas provide a launching pad for the next surge of feminist energy and success.

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