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This article considers the potential contribution to equal educational opportunities policy of recent insights from feminist theory and research inspired by postmodernism. First, a general outline of this contribution is presented by means of a discussion of three twin concepts, which recent debates in feminist theory have centred on: socialization and construction, equality and difference, and diversity and generality. Second, three recent targets of Dutch educational policy are discussed from a feminist perspective: encouraging girls to choose mathematics and science, the introduction of the subject 'care' and the development of equal opportunities as an element of educational quality. It is argued that recent feminist insights are useful for analysing policy; they are particularly helpful in developing an approach to gender inequality in education which does not blame or stereotype girls.

Introduction

The position of women and girls in education has been the object of attention in most western countries since the mid-1970s. At first, the initiative was often taken by individual teachers and was small scale but a government policy on equal opportunities has become increasingly the norm (Wilson 1991). Policy makers, researchers, trainers, student counsellors and teachers have worked hard for the last 20 years on the realization of equal opportunities for boys and girls.

In the early 1990s it is evident that girls' educational position in western countries continues to improve. They are participating in ever increasing numbers in more and more different types of education. The educational level of girls no longer really differs from that of boys, although the under-representation of girls in mathematics and science remains an obstinate problem (Megarry 1984, Bennet and LeCompte 1990, Wilson 1991, Sikes 1992, Baker and Perkins Jones 1993).

If we look at the developments in the way in which the position of girls in education is *viewed* in policy, the impression gained of the situation is less favourable. From the moment that gender inequality in education was recognized as a problem, the problem has been approached in different ways (see Acker 1987). Some analysed the problem in terms of the attitudes and future expectations of girls, while some emphasized that boys' attitudes and behaviour should be discussed as well. Others drew attention to those aspects of the content and organization of education considered to be responsible for the continuation of gender inequality. In recent years, however, the field of interest of policy makers and researchers appears to have narrowed: the structure and content of education have faded into the background in the problem definition. There seems to be something wrong with girls in particular (Volman *et al.* 1993, Walkerdine 1989). Equal educational opportunities policy has become a policy on *girls*.

A great deal of thought, particularly in feminist research, has been given to the fact

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that gender inequality is often seen as a problem of women. More recently, this phenomenon has been tackled from a postmodern perspective. In our discursive society meanings of masculinity and feminity are bipolar and the dichotomy masculinity/femininity almost always takes the form of hierarchical opposites in the sense of better–worse, superior–inferior etc. In this article we will look at the potential contribution of recent feminist theory and research to the formulation of policy aimed at countering gender inequality in education. We will do this by looking at the situation we know best: the equal educational opportunities policy of the Dutch government.

The structure of the article is as follows. We will begin with a brief description of the Dutch educational system and the equal educational opportunities policy. This will be followed by a discussion of three twin concepts which are at the centre of recent debates on feminist theory: socialization vs construction, equality vs difference, and diversity vs generality. We will then discuss three issues in Dutch policy which we think are also currently of interest in other countries: choosing mathematics and science, the introduction of the subject 'care' in secondary education, and equal opportunities as an element of educational quality.

Background

In The Netherlands full-time education is compulsory from the age of 5 until the age of 16. A common curriculum was only introduced in lower secondary education in 1993. Until then, after primary education, pupils were directed into *either* one of three different levels within general secondary education *or* into vocational education. The division into two parallel systems, academic and vocational, meant that at the age of 12, children were taking the first steps towards their future careers. Also at the age of 12, gender inequality became apparent for the first time. Within vocational education, a choice had to be made immediately between several courses of study, e.g. technical, domestic and administrative. Few girls chose technical courses and few boys opted for home economics. Within general education, students had to choose between subjects after one or two years; many girls dropped mathematics and science. This situation partly explains the focus on 'choice' in the Dutch policy on equal opportunities. With the introduction of a common curriculum in lower secondary education, these choices are now postponed until the age of about 15, although in many schools streaming by level still exists from the first year.

In comparison with other European countries and the USA, The Netherlands has been fairly active in pursuing a *central* policy on equal opportunities. This was helped by the existence of a strong women's movement and a government that was concerned about the conspicuously low level of participation of Dutch women in the labour market. In 1979 the Dutch Ministry of Education initiated a policy on equal opportunities for girls and boys. Policy objectives on gender equality were formulated (Department of Education and Sciences 1979): (1) reduction of factors that hamper freedom of choice, including breaking with traditional sex-stereotyped roles (*roldoorbreking*); (2) revaluation of feminine qualities (*herwaardering*); and (3) increase in educational opportunities for women to enable them to 'catch up' (*achterstanden inhalen*). In this policy document, 92 policy measures were announced, ranging from developing curriculum materials and financing school projects to research and the organization of conferences and information campaigns. The existence of an equal opportunities policy provided a forum for criticism and further reflection on the gender and education issue.

In The Netherlands, however, measures for equal opportunities can only be imposed

on state schools. Roman Catholic, Protestant and non-denominational private schools can only be encouraged to take advantage of the 'offer' from central government concerning equal opportunities. They can, for example, participate in equal opportunities projects and teachers can make use of in-service training but they do not have to (Arends and Volman 1992).

Issues in feminist research

There is a strong tendency to identify the origins of inequality with the disadvantaged group in the first instance (Connell *et al.* 1982). Hence, gender inequality is often conceptualized as the problem of 'women lagging behind'. Since the 1970s, however, feminist theory has pointed out that many factors in education contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality (Stone 1994). The origins of gender inequality should not only be sought in women, but also in the organization and content of education. The concepts of the 'hidden curriculum' and 'gender role socialization' provided a vehicle for reflecting on the way education contributed to the perpetuation of traditional gender relations in the 1970s and 1980s (Sharpe 1976, Spender and Sarah 1980).

Socialization theories, however, which were so helpful initially, have increasingly become the object of criticism in feminist research (see e.g. Davies 1989a, 1989b). From a postmodern point of view, the way in which these theories describe the 'reproduction of gender relations' is experienced as too unequivocal and linear. They erroneously suggest that socialization always has a similar outcome and therefore cannot explain differences between women. Moreover, the active role of the individual in the process of socialization is ignored. The concept of '*constructions* of femininity and masculinity' (Malson *et al.* 1989) is currently used to explain that masculinity, femininity and the power relationship between men and women are social manifestations, which can take on a different form, dependent on time, place and cultural context.

We distinguish two levels in the contribution of this postmodern approach to the analysis of education and gender. First, attention is drawn to the role of education in the creation and perpetuation of *social* meanings of gender (Walkerdine 1989). Gender continually acquires new meanings in education and its related fields as a result of associations being made between subjects, skills, knowledge, etc. and the concepts of femininity and masculinity. Examples of such chains of association are the links between technical skills and masculinity and between neatness and femininity.

Second, a postmodern approach contributes to answering the questions of how social meanings of gender permeate the way in which *individuals* develop and what the role of education is in this. According to this approach, girls and boys actively give meaning to a gendered world, a world in which man and woman are opposites and in which people are expected to be one or the other. They develop a gender identity by participating in the existing discursive practices and by occupying their own place within these (Davies 1989a, Kenway 1994, ten Dam and Rijkschroeff in press). The development of gender identity is a never-ending process which also takes place at school. As 'woman' and 'man' have no unequivocal meaning and categories other than gender (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status) also play a role in the development of identity, it is a process that is not without conflict (Nicholson 1990).

This approach suggests that the way in which gender functions in the school environment is complex. This does not make it any easier to formulate general policy measures. Developing strategies for change is not the strongest point of postmodern

femininism. Its strength lies rather in analysing and deconstructing meanings of femininity and masculinity which are produced in education, educational policy and educational research. In this article we will nevertheless give some examples of local strategies that are consistent with this approach.

In the last decade feminist scholars have made use of the concepts of '*equality*' and '*difference*' in the discussion on the effectiveness of feminist strategies for change (e.g. Scott 1988, Hermsen and van Lenning 1991). The concepts of 'equality' and 'difference' are interrelated in feminist thinking. On the one hand, without the existence of gender differences, discussion on gender inequality would not make sense. On the other hand, the concept of 'difference' is needed to prevent the quest for equality being based exclusively on men's terms. Notwithstanding the criticism of the struggle for such uncritical equality, merely emphasizing 'the difference' or 'the feminine' does not necessarily constitute an adequate strategy either. The most important pitfall of thinking in terms of 'difference' involves taking an essentialist position (ten Dam and Volman 1991).

The twin concepts equality and difference point to the importance of questioning equal opportunities policy in two ways. The question should always be asked: what form of equality is considered desirable, and which differences are being assumed in or constructed by the policy itself?

In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that 'girls' comprise a very diverse group. The issue of differen*ces* has become an almost obligatory part of feminist educational research (see e.g. Biklen and Pollard 1993). Those who talk about 'girls in general' run the risk of excluding certain groups. Just like 'people' often means men, and 'youngsters' boys, the initial target of equal opportunities policy seems to be a white, middle-class girl, who wants a husband and two children and needs to be convinced that with maths and science as exam subjects she can even have a nice job too. This assumption has become increasingly untenable since the influx in education of migrant students and students from the former Dutch colonies in the 1970s.

Postmodernist feminists have also elaborated on the consequences of the notion of 'differences' at the level of the individual. The statement that identity is developed through participation in various, often contradictory discursive practices, as explained above, implies that not only 'women' must be regarded as a multiple concept, but the subjectivity of the individual girl/woman as well (Malson *et al.* 1989). The multi-dimensionality and unequivocalness of gender identity can be illustrated by the experiences of immigrant women. Sometimes being an immigrant and at other times being a woman is to the forefront in the way they are addressed by others and in their experience of their own identity. Situations may also occur in which neither of these categories is relevant.

When girls are not regarded as a homogeneous and fixed category, the main question from a policy perspective is how to manoeuvre between *diversity and generality*. Although the recognition of differences among girls makes it possible to introduce a nuanced policy, infinite subdivision of the policy's target groups is unmanageable. A similar problem has also manifested itself in the women's movement and feminist research. What is the content of feminist politics if it is no longer assumed that there is a homogeneous category 'women' with uniform needs and interests (Young-Bruehl 1987, Alcoff 1989)? An important question in the search for a balance between diversity and generality in equal educational opportunities policy is the relationship between the interests of specific groups of girls and those of girls in general. How can we be sensitive to the differences among girls whilst not losing sight of the 'general principles' of gender inequality? Another question is how differences among students can be taken into account without confirming stereotypical ideas about certain groups 'being different'.

In the following sections we will discuss three targets of current Dutch equal opportunities policy in education with help of the twin concepts discussed above.

Choosing mathematics and science

Although the equal educational opportunities policy in The Netherlands has several objectives (disadvantage, elimination of sex stereotyping and revaluation) this has not prevented the Dutch government from paying particular attention to the objective of girls 'catching up' with boys. At the present time, the educational choices of girls constitute for the Dutch government the core element of the issue of education and gender inequality. Girls' school careers lead to less opportunities on the labour market than those of boys. Policy measures have been implemented to encourage girls to choose scientific and technical courses in order to improve their chances on the labour market. The idea that girls must qualify themselves for the most favourable position possible on the labour market reflects the tendency in equal opportunities policy in general to equate equal opportunities with the participation of women in the labour force. In such a preoccupation of government policy on equal opportunities in education, girls are easily pathologized. Moreover the one-sided emphasis on the opportunities provided by mathematics, science and technology implies a simultaneous devaluation of the care sector, which offers career opportunities for girls as well.

Since 1987 a large part of the equal opportunities budget of the Ministry of Education and Science has been spent on the information campaign 'Choose maths and science!'. The objective of the campaign is to persuade girls to choose more scientific and technical subjects.[1] Slogans on buses, TV spots, newspaper advertisements and leaflets in post offices and libraries were introduced to convince girls and their parents of the importance of choosing these subjects. From a feminist perspective the criticism was made that girls were expected to become more like boys in their achievements, choice of subjects and future expectations. Relatively little attention was paid in policy to the conditions which would make it attractive for them to change, and to the question of whether this was desirable. The government was striving far too much towards 'equality' under the conditions of a 'masculine' norm.

The terminology of postmodern feminism facilitates a somewhat different analysis of the problem. It can be argued that new images and meanings of femininity and masculinity are presented in the 'Choose maths and science!' campaign. The government has attempted to influence the ideas of individual girls and boys by intervening in social meanings. The information campaign 'Choose maths and science!' has been successful in putting the problem of gender inequality in education and elsewhere on the agenda. However, it prompts a narrow conceptualization of the problem; activities to stimulate girls 'to catch up' on their own are not controversial.

It is not clear to what extent the information campaign has had an effect. In any case, girls have not opted for mathematics and science in relation to boys more in recent years than previously. It is questionable, however, whether equating emancipation with a change in mentality, mainly of girls, *can* be effective. The different ideas of girls and boys about mathematics and science have been interpreted as a *mis*conception of individual girls, instead of as products of existing discourses about femininity, mathematics and science (Urlings and Volman 1989). While participating in the discursive practices of our society, girls are confronted with contradictory messages both in school and elsewhere. The carefully created image in the information campaign of 'cheerful, laughing girls taking

maths and science who therefore have more opportunities' conflicts with the image of girls who are less suited to these subjects. Given the existing educational setting in which choices are produced, at the level of the gender identity of girls, emancipatory campaigns lead at best to the paradox 'we can, but I can't' (Collis 1985). The tenet that girls' choices are discursively produced within education indicates a need for more attention to be paid to strategies on the educational processes in which femininity is constructed in relation to maths and science. We will discuss two strategies.

Separate education for girls, yes or no, puts in the spotlight the 'difference–equality' debate. Coeducation is supposed to have a negative effect on the choices and achievements of girls in mathematics and science (Dale 1974, Smithers and Collings 1982). Separate education for girls would help to protect them in the first years of secondary education from the conflict that many experience between femininity and achieving in mathematics and science. Moreover, girls would receive more attention from the teacher in single-sex classes and it would be possible to work more quietly. Although separate classes for girls and boys can perhaps help reduce the under-representation of girls in mathematics, science and technical subjects, undesirable stereotyping is only just below the surface. Both teachers and pupils (boys and girls) are more likely to associate a policy of separate education with the needs of girls rather than with the gender-specific character of education and the gendering of maths and science (Harding 1986). To counteract the image of disadvantage and the association of separate education with the needs of girls, it is very important to find a way of developing and expressing discourses in schools in which the ability and capacity of girls and boys are equal.

The experience with a project at a Dutch secondary school where mathematics and physics are taught separately to girls and boys is a good example of the minefield in which such a strategy operates. Girls and boys are not very keen on separate groups. Their conclusion is unanimous that mixed groups are more fun. However, the list of advantages of separate classes for girls and boys includes comments like 'the girls dare ask more questions' and 'the boys can make better progress'. One of the disadvantages mentioned was 'we [the girls] miss the boys' clever questions' (van Eck 1994). Ultimately neither girls nor boys accept the creation of difference as a means to equality. Girls fear becoming part of a group that they (and boys) associate with a 'deficiency'. Belonging to such a group undermines a carefully constructed image of equality (ten Dam in press). In modern society there are virtually no discourses available in which gender inequality can be discussed. Government campaigns like 'Choose maths and science!' tend to make pupils think that gender inequality no longer exists rather than that the present (unequal) situation should be changed (Volman 1994).

Teaching strategies have also been developed on the basis of the hypothesis that the content of physics and technology is not attractive enough to girls and that it is possible to develop subject material which does appeal to them (e.g. Rosser 1990). The strength of projects on developing a 'girl friendly teaching method' lies in particular in the gathering of practical information and ideas on the gender-specific character of education. Implicit statements like 'girls require a modified method of working', however, are made all too easily. This position implies that educational factors (e.g. instruction strategy) that may produce gender differences in learning styles are neglected, thereby creating the risk of essentialism. Moreover, the idea of 'the' feminine learning style ignores the fact that all women are not the same. We strongly recommend concentrating on the 'differences among pupils' rather than on 'girls vs boys'. The multiple learning experiences and learning styles of girls can be accommodated under the heading 'differences' without predetermining girls' interests and how they learn.

Care independence

It was acknowledged in the Dutch Equal Opportunities Policy Plan 1985 that 'Everybody should have an educational qualification that enables him or her, regardless of the composition of the family unit, to be able to support him- or herself on the one hand and on the other to be able to take on domestic and caring tasks independently'. The first part of this objective is translated in Dutch equal educational opportunities policy as the pursuance of optimum qualifications for girls on the labour market. An important measure pertaining to the school objective was implemented at the start of the 1993–94 school year, when the subject 'care' was included in the common curriculum and as a result is compulsory for all pupils.

The strategy of including the subject care in the common curriculum gives substance to the idea that equal opportunities also have something to do with boys. It is a policy measure which, in terms of the twin concepts 'equality and difference', for once, is *not* directed at making girls equal to boys. Moreover, it is one of the few policy measures that has attempted the social revaluation of a field traditionally ascribed to women. The heated discussions prompted by this policy illustrate the statement that meanings of gender are continuously constructed in and around education. An analysis of these debates also shows how difficult it is, even for feminists, to maintain that the issue of equal opportunities is not exclusively a girls' issue and only of importance to girls.

Opposition to the inclusion of the subject care in the common curriculum was based on two arguments. First, opponents to the subject care did their utmost to minimize its importance by emphasizing that 'care' does not really require knowledge or skills. It was suggested that the time available at school would be better spent on something else, as care can easily be taught at home.

Second, the singularity of care as a school subject was questioned. According to its opponents, topics in the field of care are already included, or could be included, in other subjects. The Advisory Council on Government Policy, the author of the proposal for the common curriculum (WRR 1986), was also of the opinion that a number of cognitive aspects of care could be included in economics and biology. The argument to disperse the subject field of care over already existing subjects negated in particular the policy objective of revaluation.

Those in favour of including the subject care in the common curriculum disproved the arguments of the opponents by pointing out that girls are far more likely to learn something about care at home than boys. Moreover they reminded them, that before the introduction of the common curriculum, care was considered to be a suitable subject for some pupils, namely girls in home economics education. As to the singularity of the subject care, they admitted that some topics are indeed dealt with, at least to some extent, in subjects like economics, biology and social studies. However, teachers of these subjects deal with the topics in a completely different way from how they are presented in the subject care in home economics education (Robijns and Volman 1991). That which typifies the subject, the orientation on private life traditionally the domain of women, disappears. The main argument of supporters of the subject care, however, was that its introduction would contribute to the redistribution between women and men of work in and outside the home, or of paid and unpaid labour (Extra and Veneberg 1987). Women's aspirations to economic independence also require measures in the sector of unpaid work. Men lag behind in the field of caring tasks and that impedes women's participation in paid labour. Boys should therefore learn a number of caring skills at school, which they mostly do not learn at home, with the expectation that they will also learn to value and respect these

skills. An important argument for the inclusion of this field in the curriculum was that it should contribute to the social status of traditionally female skills and tasks. It was also assumed that the addition of a subject in the curriculum in which girls 'have a head start' would be good for their self-confidence (Weeda 1987).

Opponents argued that 'care' is a private issue, a construction that is part of private life and not a relevant subject in the common curriculum. Supporters of the subject 'care' primarily based their discussion on emancipatory arguments: does care help break down the division of labour between the sexes? Even the argument of 'revalorization of the feminine' was presented as a question of emancipation of women. In section 3 we pointed out the importance of analysing how femininity, masculinity and gender acquire meaning in chains of association. New meanings of gender were produced in this discussion. Although the strategy was aimed at boys 'lagging behind' in the area of care, the introduction of the subject in the common curriculum was primarily associated with the interests and emancipation of girls. Boys were expected to contribute to the emancipation of women, while the advantages for them and for society in general remained unclear.

Thus, the introduction of the subject care was constructed as a girls' issue. It is, however, also possible to defend its inclusion in the common curriculum on the basis of a general concept of education. Education should bring up pupils to be all-round adults able to function independently in different areas of life.

At the individual level of production of meaning, it is open to question whether the appreciation of caring tasks by boys will actually change simply because they are confronted with them at school. Our earlier comments on the information campaigns on choosing mathematics and science are also applicable here. The ideas of pupils are framed by the contradictory meanings that function on a social level. It is not inconceivable that boys will acquire the knowledge (e.g. of commodities) and skills (e.g. to be able to cook) in care lessons, but not the attitude or behaviour whereby 'care' will become part of the gender identity of boys. Not only the opponents of the subject care but also the equal educational opportunities policy itself contributes to these contradictory meanings. The futility of 'care' as a vocational training course is emphasized most clearly in the equal educational opportunities policy, which advocates technical vocational training as being particularly valuable for the labour market.

Emancipation as an element of educational quality

Fifteen years of equal educational opportunities policy in The Netherlands have not resulted in the structural incorporation of equal opportunities in educational practice. Equal opportunities have on the whole remained an issue for concerned individuals; there is not wide support at school level (Vermeulen and Derriks 1993). This problem is partly connected to the 'freedom of education' in The Netherlands – the fact that central government is only able to impose policy measures on state schools. The government does not have the necessary means at its disposal to compel other types of schools to consider equal opportunities. The reversal in recent years in the basic philosophy on which educational policy is based, as well as deregulation and decentralization, has exacerbated this problem. In this section we will look, however, at a strategy which fits in with the new philosophy: incorporating equal opportunities in systems to evaluate educational quality.

Deregulation and decentralization, the new keywords in Dutch educational policy, refer to the diminishing involvement of central government at a local and regional level.

Schools have acquired more autonomy and greater freedom in policy making as a result of a new financing system. Schools now have far more say in decisions on in-service training and guidance than previously. The development of equal opportunities policy is also increasingly the responsibility of the region and the school. The question is, will they spend some of their already limited resources on equal opportunity? These developments are in conflict with the fact that the government continues to see the equal educational opportunities policy as its responsibility. As a solution to the conflict, the government intends to use equal opportunities as a criterion to assess the quality of schools, as well as encouraging schools to develop an equal opportunities policy themselves (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen 1992). Targets and target figures concerning equal opportunities must be formulated. Assessment of the fulfilment of these targets could be coupled with the existing obligation of schools to produce annual reports. The latter would then include a report on aspects of equal educational opportunities policy, such as intake, transfer and output data subdivided by gender.

The proposal to include equal opportunities in annual reports in terms of 'quality' is consistent with the feminist statement that equal opportunities should not be presented as a problem of girls and women. When gender inequality is discussed under the heading of quality, it is defined as a school issue. Moreover, the issue is formulated in a positive instead of a negative way. Parents and pupils are attracted by quality.

Some questions, however, remain: will formulating targets and target figures be effective unless they have financial or other consequences? Our framework raises an additional question. The understanding that strategies must be local is typical of a postmodernist approach to educational strategies. Blueprints for 'the best non-sexist practice' cannot be given, as gender inequality takes on different forms in different places. This implies that gender equality in the school cannot be formulated exclusively in terms of target figures. Guidelines on how to evaluate the curriculum and the organization of the school in terms of equal opportunities are necessary, but these should not be formulated in set directives. We advocate that guidelines should be formulated in terms of questions on how a particular school contributes at different levels and in different ways to the 'production/construction and reproduction of gender differences'.

In The Netherlands such guidelines have been developed for teacher training inspectors and for the training colleges themselves (Jaarsma 1990). In the UK, there are examples of guidelines dealing with the following questions for various educational sectors. Where do inequality and sexism exist in the school (teachers, parents, curriculum, behaviour, facilities, organization, class, language, policy)? How can changes be realized at the level of the school (e.g. by linking equal opportunities and existing priorities)? Can a plan of action be developed (ILEA 1986)? Material for in-service training for teachers has been developed from a similar perspective (Adams and Walkerdine 1986). The course consisted of small research projects in the teacher's own school. The objective was to gain insight into the teacher's own work and generate themes suitable for discussion with colleagues and the development of policy in the school.

An example is the way in which the playground is used by children. Teachers and pupils at a primary school analysed what went on in the playground during breaks. They discovered that the space used by children often reflected and confirmed their position in the power structure within the school. Playgrounds are mostly large, open spaces and footballs, for example, can go all over the place. The footballers, mostly boys, take up relatively a lot of the space. A few boys determine who is 'allowed' on the main part of the playground. The games girls play take up far less space and are often banished to the less popular parts of the playground. There also seemed to be a hierarchy in the games that

were played and the school itself seemed to contribute to this hierarchy by the way in which the playground was designed. If there are not any pleasant places to sit, for example, this actually implies that 'sitting talking' is considered to be of less value than playing football. On the basis of the idea that the *layout* of the playground has an influence on how pupils use it, it was 'rebuilt' in consultation with parents and pupils. As an example, girls indicated that they enjoy play-acting. A group of children helped design and build a small theatre in the playground. Space was literally and figuratively created for girls and by doing so the school demonstrated that their activities were considered to be important (see Arends and Volman 1990).

On the one hand this project is an example of deconstruction of gender at school. On the other hand it illustrates that gender strategies do not have to be developed as specific policy. Questioning gender as part of strategies aimed at 'general' issues, such as the well-being of pupils or a safe school environment, offers opportunities to tackle inequality without falling into the trap of primarily trying to change girls. The example of the playground shows that an acknowledged difference in pupils' interests can be taken into account without sex-stereotyping.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, feminists have pointed out the contribution of education to perpetuating traditional *gender* relations. Recent equal educational opportunities policy, however, sometimes seems to have reverted to focusing exclusively on girls: girls' educational choice are at the centre of policy attention. Thus, the problem of gender inequality is disproportionately attributed to them. In this article we have tried to show how developments in feminist theory and research, especially those inspired by postmodernism, can be used to direct attention back to education. These developments give a new impetus to the analysis of the production of gender in education, both at the level of social meanings and at the level of the individual. They indicate how associations are constantly made in education and its related fields between subjects, skills, knowledge etc. and the concepts of femininity and masculinity.

This approach is particularly relevant to policy. It provokes reflection on the balance between striving for equality and respecting differences. How should policies, which are by necessity general, be formulated to accommodate diversity within categories of students while avoiding stereotyping?

From a postmodern perspective the problem of the exclusive focus on girls can be formulated as follows. Girls run the risk of being constructed as a special category, as 'different', which is easily equated with 'lagging behind'. Even in research on equal opportunities questions are often formulated in terms of 'why do girls not . . . ?'. In the examples we have discussed, it is evident how strong this mechanism is. In the public debate on the introduction of the subject care, even this policy measure aimed at boys turned into something that boys should do for the sake of girls' emancipation. Our argument is that girls' interests could sometimes be better served if less emphasis was put on them. Issues advocated specifically in the interests of women tend to quickly lose status and stereotype women. Parents, teachers and pupils often tend to associate policy measures aimed at combatting gender inequality in education with the needs or problems of girls, rather than with the gender-specific attributes of education. In our analyses of the construction of gender in strategies aimed at making girls chose mathematics and science, we have shown how important it is to be acutely aware of such unintentional side-effects.

A more difficult problem is the formulation of new strategies on the basis of these analyses. Recent feminist theory often emphasizes the changing and ambiguous character of gender differences. As a result general prescriptions for change are not readily available. In this article, however, we have used postmodern insights not only to analyse and deconstruct current strategies for changing gender inequality, but to construct new strategies as well. We have described the strategy of formulating equal opportunities as an element of educational quality, as an example of a strategy which is worth pursuing.

Relating strategy to existing discussion on education, which nowadays is frequently expressed in terms of educational quality, can help avoid putting girls exclusively in the spotlight. Although such a strategy can be defined as a *general* strategy for changing gender inequality, its implementation cannot be general as the meaning of the concept 'quality' is indeterminate. We have approached 'quality' as an element that has to be defined locally, namely by analysing the specific gender relations in a particular school and formulating feasible steps for change.

Translated by Jean Vaughan

Note

1. The accent on information as a policy instrument is not only connected to the analysis of the problem of choosing subjects. Decentralization in government policy has resulted in the government having less instruments at its disposal to get equal opportunities activities off the ground *in* schools. The provision of information is one of the policy instruments which can still be instigated centrally in a decentralized system.

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