
National Gender Equity and Schooling Policy in Australia: Struggles for a Non-identitarian Feminist Politics

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Abstract

This paper tracks the development of gender equity and schooling policy in Australia from the National Policy on the Education of Girls in 1987, to current policy concerns with boys' educational underperformance. The paper's key focus is on the ways in which feminist informed equity policy has been undermined by broader imperatives of economic rationalism and anti-feminist discourses. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's understandings of distributive and cultural gender justice and her notion of a non-identitarian feminist politics, the paper critically examines the ways in which such imperatives have re-articulated equity and schooling concerns. Through these lenses, the limitations of the affirmative gender binary politics and remedies that have dominated gender and schooling reform in Australia are highlighted. The paper concludes with an illumination of the gender justice spaces currently being mobilised in Australian schools. Such spaces, it is argued, fostered within a context of increasing autonomy and self-management for schools, are providing avenues for creative and disruptive (pro)feminist activism.

Introduction

The significant ideological shifts in gender equity and schooling policies in Australia, over the past thirty or so years, have been variously described. For O'Donovan (2006), they constitute a move from feminist difference to masculinist crisis; for Gaskell and Taylor (2003), liberation and sexism to boys and social justice; and for Yates (1998) a progression from constructions of girls as disadvantaged, "other" and diverse to a focus on power, sex and gender. Reflecting developments in gender theory, research and politics these shifts have generated a range of different ways of understanding and remedying gender disadvantage. Such shifts and their various effects reflect a highly contested and complex policy terrain marked by changes in gender theorising;

feminism's close but far from untroubled relationship with the state; the contested agendas of federalism and economic and social reform; and associated shifts in public and equity discourse (Kenway, 1990; Henry & Taylor, 1993; Lingard, 2003). Within this context "competing needs and demands" have been "refracted, mediated and translated" into gender equity and schooling policies (Sharp & Broombill, 1988, p. 29).

In Australia, this policy story began with the public visibility and impact of the women's movement and state support for feminism from the early 1970s to the late 1980s which enabled women's issues to be addressed (Eisenstein, 1996; Taylor, 2003; Yates 1993; Kenway 1990, 1997; Daws 1997). During this time institutionalised or state feminism had a major impact on the development of policies targeted towards greater equity for girls and women. Such feminism, however, constructed girls, boys and equity in particular ways and was variously effective in terms of how issues of difference were dealt with in policy and how such issues were received in terms of broader socio-political trends (Hayes, 1998). For example, the liberal feminist agenda associated with *Girls, Schooling and Society* (1975) was particularly effective in making visible areas of specific concern for girls especially given that the broader progressive political climate at the time was conducive to hearing such concern. However, such politics tended to homogenise gender difference and inferiorise a passive narrative of femininity (see Yates, 1998). Subsequent policy developments, although sensitive to how issues of difference impacted on girls' experiences of educational disadvantage, were constrained by other circumstances. *The National Policy on the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (1987) for example, was implemented during a time less receptive to feminist concerns in the context of broader socio-political trends towards "economic rationalism"¹. These trends circumscribed and reduced the gender equity potential of this and later progressive policy to an affirmative binary politics that again homogenised gender difference towards an inferiorising of femininity. Further reducing the potential of progressive gender equity policy, trends of economic rationalism – amplified in the 1990s and coinciding with an anti-feminist backlash – produced a shift in gender equity debates to a focus on boys as a disadvantaged group.

This paper's key focus is on the ways in which "progressive" feminist gender equity policy has been undermined in Australia by broader imperatives of economic rationalism and anti-feminist discourses. The paper's analysis begins with the first national policy (*The National Policy on the Education of Girls*) in 1987, through to current policy concerns with boys' educational underperformance with a focus on the national policy agenda and federal involvement in gender reform². Particularly in light of the policy vacuum following the most recent national policy, *Gender Equity: A framework for Australian schools* (see Lingard, 2003), the paper takes a broad view of policy in its analysis of both formalized national policy and key large scale federally

funded gender equity research – that has been significant in transmitting a policy message (see Ozga, 2000). Given the policy history of shifting equity priorities and competing agendas, the paper adopts a “critical theory of recognition [that] distinguishes those claims for the recognition of difference that advance the cause of social equality from those that retard or undermine it” (Fraser, 1997, p. 5). To these ends, the paper’s analytic frame recognises the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of gender injustice (Fraser, 1997, 2003, 2007). Gender injustice is understood thus as arising from both the economic structures of society – which produce gender specific modes of exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation – and the social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication – that culturally dominate, devalue and demean the “feminine”.

With this in mind, the paper conceptualises “progressive” policy towards gender justice as necessitating both a social politics of economic redistribution and a cultural politics of recognition and draws on this conceptualisation in its critical examination of Australia’s equity policy trajectory (Fraser, 2007). Certainly many gender policy reforms in education over the past 30 or so years have attempted (and continue to attempt) to redress these dimensions of gender inequity through, for instance, their focus on de-gendering curriculum and pedagogy and deconstructing narrow gender constructions towards greater equity outcomes. Such reforms recognise schools as institutions that can both re-inscribe and transform broader patterns of gender inequity. For example, in terms of curriculum it is well recognised that the gendered organisation of subject knowledge, gendered student subject choice and gendered teacher specialisations normalise and perpetuate a broader privileging of males and “the masculine”. Classroom pedagogy in relation to teachers’ gendered philosophies and practices are also well recognised as re-instating such privileging (Kenway, Willis, Rennie, & Blackmore, 1998; Connell, 2000; Keddie & Mills, 2007). The ways in which these practices align with broader socio-economic and cultural inequities for many females has been well established, for example, gendered curriculum choice for girls as a group is associated with their greater socio-economic disadvantage post-school relative to boys (see Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000a) and the unacceptably high levels of sexual harassment towards girls in schools is associated with a broader pervasive cultural devaluing of the feminine (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005).

While particularly some of the more recent gender reform agendas in Australia have been highly progressive, in terms of employing both a politics of recognition and redistribution towards greater gender equity outcomes, they have been undermined by the broader socio-political climate of economic rationalism and, more recently, anti-feminism. Such a climate has worked to reduce reform (seeking, for instance, to address the ways in which relations of class and “race” compound educational disadvantage for particular groups of girls and boys), to an affirmative theory and politics of gender

differentiation that has done little to disturb the underlying frameworks that generate inequitable gender outcomes (Fraser, 1997, 2007).

In highlighting the spaces of gender justice within this climate, the paper draws on Fraser's (2007) notion of a non-identitarian feminist politics capable of synergising gender justice remedies of recognition and redistribution. The focus here is on transforming the social arrangements that impede "parity of participation". According to Fraser (2007, pp. 27-30), this principle "requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another *as peers*" – "as full partners in social interaction". Fraser explains this as not a matter of numerical parity but "a qualitative condition, the condition of being a *peer*...of interacting with [others] on an equal footing" (p. 28). She notes that gender justice along these lines is possible when the distribution of material resources ensures women independence and voice and when institutionalised patterns of cultural recognition express respect and social esteem for women. From this perspective, Fraser (2007) argues that redressing gender injustice "requires a feminist politics of recognition" however not one that is based on identity politics (where, for instance, there is a focus on recognising and valorising female specificity). "Rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing women as full members of society" (p. 30). A non-identitarian feminist politics along these lines is particularly significant in its focus, not only on the class- and culture- based dimensions of gender disadvantage, but also, on how such dimensions interplay across multiple axes of social differentiation. It is also an imperative, as Fraser further argues, in supporting a move beyond the "postsocialist" impasse currently compromising feminist goals. This impasse has decentred claims for equality through "a general decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of redistribution" with the "relative eclipse of the latter by the former" (Fraser, 1997, pp. 2-3). While this shift in political imaginary towards greater concerns with cultural justice claims has been highly positive for feminists in terms of broadening understandings of gender justice beyond reductive economic paradigms, it has also displaced feminist struggles for egalitarian redistribution (Fraser, 2007). In Fraser's view a non-identitarian feminist theory and politics avoids circumscribing the feminist agenda to a truncated culturalism that "unwittingly colludes" with the agendas of economic rationalism.

What follows is a chronology that highlights some of the broader tensions and issues shaping gender, equity and schooling policies in Australia. Through Fraser's critical lenses, the paper focuses on feminism's changing patterns of effect on this trajectory within broader political and socio-economic shifts that have seen a rearticulation of equity concerns. Drawing attention to the limitations of the affirmative binary politics and remedies that have dominated gender reform in Australia, the paper concludes with an illustration of some of the gender justice spaces currently being mobilised in schools.

Such spaces, it is argued, fostered within a context of increasing autonomy and self-management for schools, are providing avenues for creative and disruptive (pro)feminist activism. While the paper is delimited to a focus on the Australian context, its critical analysis of the processes impacting on gender equity and schooling reform has relevance to other contexts (particularly the UK, Canada and the US) that have, to varying degrees, experienced similar socio-political tensions and issues around gender reform.

1987: The National Policy on the Education of Girls

The National Policy on the Education of Girls (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987) was highly significant given it was the first national policy on schooling to be developed in Australia and given that it required consensus in its formulation and commitment from the state education departments (Henry & Taylor, 1993; Hayes, 1998). Feminism's close relationship with the nation state, as with earlier gender equity policies, was instrumental in its actualisation (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003; Daws, 1997; Kenway, 1990; Yates, 1993). In contrast to previous policies however, such as *Girls Schools and Society* and *Girls and Tomorrow* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975, 1984), *The National Policy* represented an important shift in its conceptualisation of issues of girls, equity and schooling. Constituting a move away from liberal feminist/affirmative politics, *The National Policy* did not present girls as a homogenised or unified group. Rather, in its consideration of issues of difference such as class, ethnicity and disability as central to girls' identity constructions and their experiences of educational disadvantage, *The Policy* could be seen as moving towards non-identitarian feminist understandings (Fraser, 2007). Towards remedying gender disadvantage, *The Policy* articulated four priority areas: raising awareness of the educational needs of girls; equal access to and participation in an appropriate curriculum; provision of a supportive and challenging school environment; and equitable resource allocation (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987). Within a non-identitarian feminist frame – that focuses on transforming these schooling structures and practices to reflect greater parity of participation for girls – these priority areas represented the capacity to begin remedying broader issues of gender distributive and cultural injustice. Of key significance in terms of addressing issues of cultural injustice through a problematising of the institutionalised patterns that privilege traits associated with masculinity, *The Policy* adopted a more critical view of boys' education. Its dealing of issues associated with sexuality and sexual harassment for example signified a move away from the inferiorising of femininity evident in earlier policy (McInnes, 1996; Taylor 2003; Yates, 1998).

The five years following this policy signalled an improvement in girls' educational achievement, however, this improvement was seen as modest – particularly in terms of disrupting the strongly gendered patterns of subject choice perpetuating Australia's

highly sex-segregated labour force (see McInnes, 1996). In particular, the broader socio-political context at this time was seen as diluting the progressive potential of the policy with a change of education minister and shifts towards economic rationalism (Daws, 1997; Henry & Taylor, 1993). These trends constrained the policy's agenda within a broader emphasis on market oriented employment objectives which signalled a move away from a focus on "empowering disadvantaged groups" (Henry & Taylor, 1993, p. 165). Against this backdrop, the reform agenda was subverted, as reflected in earlier initiatives, to a predominant emphasis on issues of access (e.g. increasing girls and women's participation in non-traditional areas of curriculum and employment), rather than challenging gendered educational structures and practices (Yates, 1993; Henry & Taylor, 1993; Kenway, 1990).

The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls (1993-97)

A major review of *The National Policy* in 1992 resulted in *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls (1993-97)*, which included eight new priority areas, for example, examining the construction of gender; eliminating sex-based harassment; improving the educational outcomes of girls who benefit least from schooling; and reforming the curriculum and teacher practice to these ends (Curriculum Corporation, 1993). These areas could be interpreted as more strongly reflecting a non-identitarian feminist politics in their problematising of the ways in which issues of gender diversity and gendered social processes adversely impact on girls' schooling outcomes and in their explicit focus on issues of cultural recognition (e.g. eliminating sex-based harassment) and economic redistribution (e.g. focusing on improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged girls and de-gendering the curriculum). Most notably, *The Action Plan* focused explicitly on the social construction of gender – a recommended strategy towards greater equity outcomes, for instance, related to students in their early school years being encouraged to examine, reflect on and deconstruct gendered messages and practices. In terms of challenging the institutionalised patterns within and beyond education that reinscribe gender injustices (both cultural and socio-economic), such a focus was highly significant.

While well regarded in terms of its alignment with gender justice principles and its "teacher-friendliness", the potential of *The Action Plan*, as with *The National Policy*, was greatly weakened by the broader socio-political climate (see Daws, 1997; Gaskell & Taylor, 2003). The early to mid 1990s in Australia (as elsewhere, for example, the UK) constituted increasing resistance to a focus on girls' educational issues. A rightward drift in ideology in public discourse saw economic rationalism undermine the scope of *The Action Plan* (Gaskell & Taylor, 2003) with a reduction in funding for girls' equity programs, the dismantling of gender equity units and the mainstreaming of gender reform priorities (see Blackmore, 1999; Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003).

Broader imperatives of efficiency and economy, that in the 1980s had narrowed gender equity priorities to a focus on issues of access for girls, again narrowed equity priorities but this time to a focus on boys. De-regulation, competition and reduced funding re-articulated educational equity to a more concerted focus on standardised test results (especially in the area of literacy where boys have traditionally under-performed relative to girls) and university entrance scores (Taylor & Henry, 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Lingard, 2003). This culture of “performativity”, particularly in popular discourse, generated a view of boys as the “new disadvantaged” (see Lingard, 1998, 2003). Simplistic and selective reports of girls out-performing boys that tended to exaggerate progress in terms of gender reform became a catalyst for backlash “what about the boys?” discourses (see Mills, 2003; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maws, 1998; Yates, 1998). Indeed such backlash representations effectively used the inequities experienced by some males to make a case that *all* males are disadvantaged (Robinson, 2000).

Ironically perhaps, as key feminists have pointed out, the comparative measures that enabled a construction of boys as the new disadvantaged were similar to those that in the 1970s legitimised the disadvantaged status of girls (see Yates, 1998). In effect, as Hayes (1998, p. 12) argues, “feminists were being challenged within the discourses they helped to constitute”. Along the lines of Fraser’s critique of affirmative identity politics and remedies (1997, 2003), such discourses in support of boys’ educational disadvantage were similarly challenged as they were for girls – as homogenising gender identity, ignoring gender diversity and contributing to binary/inequitable understandings of femininity and masculinity (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Collins et al., 2000a). More significantly, however, feminists highlighted the injustice of this positioning of boys. To be sure, through Fraser’s lenses the affirmative politics of the “boy-turn” (see Weaver-Hightower, 2003) clearly compromised “the cause of social equality” in terms of dislocating gender and schooling outcomes from the broader inequitable power relations that continue to privilege both culturally and economically males and “the masculine”.

Although (pro)feminist work during this time highlighted the prevailing disadvantages girls continued to face at school (for example, the federal *Sticks and Stones* report in 1994 raised concern about the enduring prevalence of sex-based harassment directed towards girls), the broader “what about the boys?” backlash legitimised the common view that gender reform for girls had gone too far, was now unfair to boys and should be rectified in favour of boys (Yates, 1997; Hayes, 2003; Kenway et al., 1998). From the early 1990s this view was fuelled by anti-feminist discourses, particularly prevalent in the media (Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003; Mills, 2003). While conceding significant progress in terms of the redressing of some forms of educational disadvantage for some girls through gender reform, and noting the importance of a relational approach

to girls, boys and gender justice, feminists were compelled to adopt a defensive stance in protecting past policy gains for girls and keeping a feminist project on the agenda (Yates, 1993; Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003). Efforts to these ends were curtailed to some extent by the increasing diversification of feminisms and the increasing complexity of feminist theorising. Certainly, the affirmative equity politics of liberal feminist theorising and activism were weakened by “third wave” feminism’s cultural politics and focus on difference that informed gender equity policy from the late 1980s (see Yates, 1998). Moreover, the greater complexity of post-structural or post-colonial feminist theorising was “more difficult to convert into policies and school and teacher practices” (Lingard 2003, p. 44). In this respect, while such theorising reflected elements of a non-identitarian feminist politics, the broader climate of anti-feminism and economic rationalism from the early to mid 1990s was not conducive to supporting such politics.

Within this broader “what about the boys?” context, the NSW conservative state government initiated a major inquiry into the education of boys – the O’Doherty Report (1994). The report provided an account of specific matters of concern in relation to boys’ educational performance, for example, the predominance of boys’ in “support” and “special” classes; boys’ under-performance in literacy and tertiary entrance exams and their under-representation in terms of University and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) places. The report also detailed areas of social concern, for instance, boys’ difficulties with communication and conflict resolution; their over-representation in terms of behaviour problems; their low self-esteem; the lack of appropriate male role models for boys; and boys’ tendencies towards self-destructive and violent behaviours (O’Doherty, 1994). The report recommended the development of an inclusive gender equity strategy to address both girls’ and boys’ educational needs.

1997: Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools

Such concerns about boys’ educational performance, as detailed in the O’Doherty report, informed the agenda of the next and current national policy statement: *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA, 1997). Most notably, this document differed from previous gender policies in its consideration of equity issues for boys as well as girls, rather than boys in relation to girls. While the shift to a focus on “gender equity” and issues of gender, sex and power (Yates, 1998), could be seen as potentially progressive (in terms of fostering a non-identitarian feminist politics), the framework was compromised by its location within, and struggles to address, the conflicting agendas and concerns of broader masculinist politics, on the one hand, and (pro)feminist politics, on the other (see Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). Such compromising, evident in the broadness of the framework’s focus and aims and

its lack of clarity in terms of strategies for implementation and monitoring in schools, signalled an “endgame for specific national policies for girls’ education” (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001, p. 9). Certainly the framework was seen to align with anti-feminist politics and carried with it the implication that girls are now “fixed up” and it is time to direct attention towards boys (Gill & Starr, 2000).

This was most evident in how gender equity was presented in the policy framework (Part A). While the supplementary material in Part B provided a comprehensive and just account of gender and schooling concerns, there was a “presumptive equality” (after Foster, 1994) in Part A that positioned boys and girls as equally but differently disadvantaged. This stance reflected an affirmative binary politics of gender differentiation that “eschewed any recognition of the structural disadvantages and power differentials experienced by women as a category” (Lingard 2003, pp. 35-36). There was thus a compromising of a critical theory of recognition (Fraser, 1997). The broader political climate with the election in 1996 of the conservative Howard Federal Government did little to militate against this compromising with funding support for girls’ and women’s educational initiatives again reduced. This was not only reflective of backlash gender politics and economic policy, but also indicative of a widespread mood of retreat from big centralised government where responsibility for equity and schooling programs was increasingly devolved to the states and territories (Gill & Starr, 2000; Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). This retreat – alongside the poor reception of the *Gender Equity* framework – marked the ensuing “evacuation of strong centrally imposed gender equity policies at both national and state levels of government within Australia” (Lingard, 2003, p. 37).

Two highly influential reports followed *Gender Equity* in 2000 and 2002. Both were initiatives supported by the federal government – although they were instigated by vastly differing agendas and reflected opposing gender politics within the bureaucracy (see Lingard, Knight, & Porter, 1993). The first was a commissioned research report entitled: *Factors influencing the educational performances of males and females in school and their initial destinations after leaving school* (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000b) and the second was a federal inquiry into boys’ education, *Boys: Getting it Right* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002). While both were intended to move gender, equity and schooling debates forward, they were circumscribed (as with *Gender Equity*) by the broader context of division between (pro)feminist politics, on the one hand, and masculinist politics, on the other.

The (pro)feminist Collins et al. (2000b) research was commissioned by DETYA (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs) and comprehensively detailed patterns of gender achievement in terms of schooling and post-school outcomes. For

boys, their academic under-achievement especially in literacy was presented as restricting their schooling and post-school educational and employment opportunities and success, while for girls, their post-school pathways were presented as circumscribed by their secondary school curriculum choices (Collins et al.). Noting differential patterns of gender in terms of post-school pathways, the research drew attention to boys' greater access to, and participation in, full-time employment and further training despite girls' higher school performance and retention rates. Importantly, the nuanced approach of this research highlighted the continued significance of poverty and Indigeneity in compounding issues of educational under-performance for both boys and girls (see also Teese, Davies, Charlton, & Polese, 1995). The report's key recommendation, along these lines, was a "which boys?/which girls?" approach to addressing issues of gender and disadvantage.

The report's recommendations sought to redress issues of distributive and cultural gender injustice along the lines of Fraser's non-identitarian feminist politics (1997, 2007). For example, in relation to economic redistribution, there were recommendations around developing programs for the most disadvantaged girls and boys to redress the negative impacts of poverty, rurality and isolation; to support more productive and broader school to post-school education and industry training pathways; and to teach about issues of employment, including, gender segmentation (Collins et al., 2000b, p. 13). In terms of cultural recognition, recommendations focused on, as in earlier policies, the construction of gender and, in particular, a challenging of the "outmoded and inflexible gender identities" and exclusionary social practices (p. 10) such as sexism, racism and homophobia, that circumscribe the educational and post-school experiences for boys and girls. Importantly, such forms of redress centred on the social arrangements that impede parity of participation for women and girls (Fraser, 2007). As such, while focusing on both girls and boys, the recommendations represented the capacity to problematise and transform the gendered distributive and cultural patterns that reinscribe the subordination of women and girls. Importantly, the "which boys?/which girls?" approach enabled, not only a focus on class and culture, but also on how such patterns interplay across multiple axes of social differentiation.

The subsequent report *Boys: Getting it Right* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002), counter to the Collins et al. (2000b) research, had a much narrower mandate. Produced as a result of a federal inquiry into boys' education that drew on submissions from various education stake-holders, the scope of this report was delimited to inquiring into the factors impacting on boys' educational (under)performance particularly in relation to literacy and a detailing of strategies for addressing these factors. Notwithstanding this scope, *Boys: Getting it Right* differed substantially from the Collins et al. research. Unlike the latter's nuanced

examination of gender difference, *Boys: Getting it Right* reflected essentialised accounts and “common-sense” understandings of gender. This was clear in the report’s recommendations for improving boys’ educational outcomes, for example, through “boy-friendly” pedagogy, curricula and assessment and an increase in male teachers (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002).

Such ways of addressing boys’ educational needs are, of course, far from unproblematic, and have been extensively criticised by (pro)feminist research as constraining gender justice (see Alloway, 1995; Francis, 2000; Keddie & Mills, 2007). Drawing on Fraser’s theorising, it is clear that the affirmative politics of boy-friendly strategies promote gender differentiation through their essentialising of boys’ behaviours and learning orientations as similar. In the case of *Boys: Getting it Right*, such differentiation tended to reflect an active/passive gender binary. For example, the report aligned boys’ learning preferences with “structured activity . . . short-term challenging tasks” and visual, logical, spatial and kinaesthetic approaches, while girls’ preferences were aligned with verbal or interpersonal activities (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002, p. xviii). It is well established that such binary representations compromise gender justice principles in their perpetuation of narrow constructions of masculinity and femininity (see Connell, 1995, 2000; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Martino, Lingard, & Mills, 2004). The report’s compromising of gender justice was perhaps most obvious however in its failure to acknowledge and problematise the broader economic and cultural privileges that accrue to males as a consequence of their gender (see Francis & Skelton, 2005; Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2007).

Lingard (2003) in his paper, *Where to in gender policy after a recuperative masculinity politics?* notes the significance of these two reports, but speculates as to their impact and interplay for future gender and schooling politics in Australia. The generous federal funding of two major boy-focused initiatives following *Boys: Getting it Right*: the seven million dollar *Boys’ Education Lighthouse Schools* (BELS) scheme (2003-2005) and the subsequent 19.4 million dollar *Success for Boys* program (2005-2008), provides a sense of this future. Both of these initiatives are focused on improving boys’ educational outcomes and have involved schools developing site specific programs to these ends (see Department of Education, Science & Training, 2005). Of concern, Lingard (2003) draws attention to how broader socio-political factors (especially economic rationalism and anti-feminism) have generated a propensity in schools towards the take up of boy-friendly approaches such as those that feature in *Boys: Getting it Right* (see also O’Donovan, 2006). Within this context, backlash constructions of boys (for example as victims of schooling) such as those in the media and in populist texts (e.g. Biddulph, 1997; Pollack, 1999) and simplistic “quick-fix” approaches to remedying boys’ supposed educational disadvantage such as those in

Boys: Getting it Right are very appealing. Indeed, within the context of the broader evacuation of strong, centrally imposed gender equity policy at the national level, such constructions and approaches have become *de facto* policies (Lingard, 2003).

Gender justice possibilities currently being mobilised in schools

As this paper has illustrated so far, the broader socio-political climate in Australia over the recent period has, in many ways, been highly regressive for gender justice, especially in its sidelining of nuanced accounts of gender equity and reform. As with the Collins et al. (2000b) research, such circumstances have diluted the “which boys?/which girls?” potential of more recently commissioned commonwealth research, for example, the *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys* report (supported by the Department of Education, Science and Training, by Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002). However, the economically driven processes of devolution and deregulation within the current climate, while regressive to these ends, have also opened up new spaces for creative feminist intervention with the shift towards “policy active schools” (Lingard, 2003). Although less visible and less formally represented, such spaces are being mobilised within the aforementioned large-scale boy-focused national initiatives in Australia (the *BELS* and *Success for Boys* projects).

Notwithstanding the obvious problematics of the affirmative politics undergirding these initiatives (see Keddie, 2005), they are, nonetheless, providing significant opportunities for feminist and pro-feminist constructionist research to impact on the types of “gender work” conducted in schools (O’Donovan, 2006). Such projects, within the context of more devolved, localised and democratic forms of education management and decision making, are supporting “local feminist strategies of resistance and change” (Kenway et al., 1998, p. 341) that can be responsive to the “thisness” of particular schools (see Thomson, 2002). This is enabling attention to the equity concerns of specific groups of educationally disadvantaged girls and boys and to the localised micro-narratives of gender identity that may contribute to, or disrupt, such disadvantage (O’Donovan, 2006). These processes are also enabling the “building of higher levels of participation” in terms of the representation of marginalised groups and individuals within decision-making processes around addressing such issues (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003, p. 26). This local-level focus is important in highlighting the inaccuracies of taken for granted/mainstreamed assumptions about boys and schooling (e.g. “failing boys” discourses) and in drawing attention to issues currently erased within dominant equity debates (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). Thus the increasing shift towards schools’ greater autonomy and self-management alongside and increased interest in gender issues (albeit within a boy-friendly focus) at the local level is providing new scope for non-identitarian feminist intervention.

This is perhaps most evident in the development of transformative modes of pedagogy within both the *BELS* and *Success for Boys* projects (see O'Donovan, 2006; Delaney, in press). For example, site specific critical literacy programs – aimed at addressing specific gender issues within particular schooling contexts – have supported students' challenging of dominant gender constructions. In one cluster of schools within the *Success for Boys* project, this focus prompted a critical examination and deconstruction of the gendered and sexualised dimensions of bullying associated, for example, with hierarchical femininities and popular understandings of beauty, body image and an appropriate (hetero)sexuality (Delaney, in press). While such disruptive pedagogies are far from new, they continue to offer potential in terms of connecting with and transforming the localised social patterns that perpetuate economic and cultural gender injustices (Fraser, 2007). More broadly, transdisciplinary modes of curriculum are offering similar potential in terms of destabilising the gendered patterns of subject selection that continue to delimit many girls' post-school opportunities. While not explicitly focused on gender justice goals or mobilised within such agendas, these modes of curriculum offer highly generative spaces for non-identitarian feminist work in their reframing of the hierarchical, gendered, racist and classist organisation of traditional subject area knowledge and in their transdisciplinary focus on real-world, community-relevant justice issues (see Luke, 2003; Keddie, 2005; McLeod & Yates, 2006). Of significance the development of democratic modes of pedagogy and curriculum along these lines can generate social arrangements within schools that reflect greater parity of participation in terms of gender, but also other marginalised identities (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Fraser, 2007).

Such interventions – that respond to the gender equity specificities at the local level to work within and against (Lather, 1991) the broader constraining trends detailed in this paper – provide a trajectory of hope in terms of shaping the gender agenda of policy active schools. Central here, as these examples of pedagogy and curriculum begin to illustrate, are interventions focused on synergising gender justice remedies of recognition and redistribution towards transforming the underlying frameworks that generate inequitable gender outcomes (Fraser, 1997, 2007). Here the focus is not on an identity politics that affirms or valorises female (or male) specificity but on transforming inequitable structures and practices of both cultural recognition (for example, challenging the social patterns of representation that culturally devalue the feminine through a critical literacy pedagogy aimed at deconstructing dominant gender constructions) *and* material distribution (for example, reframing the hierarchical organisation of curriculum that produces gendered pathways and leads to gender specific modes of economic marginalisation). Particularly in relation to how the gender equity terrain in Australia has consistently displaced distributive gender justice claims, within a broader salience of cultural justice concerns, such synergy will remain central in sustaining innovative feminist work towards the qualitative conditions necessary to support full parity of participation (Fraser, 2007).

Concluding remarks

The broader socio-political tensions shaping the history of gender equity and schooling policy in Australia have both enabled and constrained the gender justice project. Such tensions, as this paper has detailed, have produced a highly contested and complex policy terrain where equity priorities have been undermined by the imperatives of economic rationalism and the discourses of anti-feminism. While the current boy-friendly policy climate is, in many ways, hostile to feminist concerns, the new spaces opened up in relation to schools' greater autonomy and self-management have provided avenues for creative and disruptive (pro)feminist activism. These strategic points of intervention gesture towards a whole series of possible positive effects for a non-identitarian feminist politics (Hayes, 2003; Fraser, 2007).

Endnotes

- ¹ It is acknowledged here that “economic rationalism” is an Australian descriptor for what is referred to elsewhere as “neo-liberal economics” (see Pusey, 1991).
- ² While education in Australia is ostensibly the responsibility of the states and territories, the establishment in 1973 of the Schools Commission – a Commonwealth body specifically responsible for addressing issues of disadvantage and inequality in schooling (Yates, 1993) marked the beginning of a systematised approach to federal government involvement in the regulation of schools (see Lingard, 2000). The federal and state/territory governments continue to share responsibility for education with the federal strength of influence lying in its funding provision.

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