

The Politics of Gender and Educational Change: Managing Gender or Changing Gender Relations?

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One of the strongest social forces driving educational change – in classrooms, curriculum, teaching and leadership – is the changing role and position of women in society. But the effects of changing configurations of gender relations in education are not straightforward. In this chapter, Jill Blackmore discusses how stronger orientations to gender equity in children's learning and educators' careers frequently run against the grain of deep-seated cultural assumptions about gender, long-standing institutional practices that don't easily accommodate changed gender relations, and parallel patterns of reform that seem to contradict or undermine many of the new directions otherwise being pursued in the name of gender equity.

In particular, Blackmore scrutinizes how gender-based reforms fare in the context of an increased market orientation to educational change, where many gender-sensitive practices in classrooms, curriculum and even the hiring of school principals are often construed as bad for the school's image in the marketplace of parental choice. Gender based reforms are also analyzed in the context of a new managerialism in education, where emphases on financial constraint and centralized accountability in rational systems of measurement and management, paradoxically mean that the growing numbers of women entering the school principalship turn into emotional 'middle-managers' of educational change – motivating their staff to work reasonably and committedly in an increasingly unreasonable world.

Blackmore concludes by saying that gender-based reform in educational change is about much more than recruiting women into educational leadership, or embracing their caring styles of emotional management, but also engineering much more fundamental shifts in the wider policy context of educational reform so that schools can be more responsive to gender based issues.

Change has become a prime focus of attention in education. It is widely argued that postmodern workplaces and social organizations need new kinds of workers and citizens: and these in turn call for new forms of schooling, new types of leadership and new ways of teaching. At the same time, issues of gender that had long been ignored in educational policy research has moved increasingly into the mainstream. What is it that has changed so that gender can no longer be ignored so readily? Also, what can research in gender equity tell us about the nature and effects of educational change?

The changing demographics and workforce patterns of post-industrial society have meant that women's role and position in society have changed. Women are now viewed as important producers and consumers in the post-industrial economy. In a period of political and economic volatility women also act as powerful political constituencies (Yeatman, 1992). Clearly, therefore, gender can no longer be

ignored in projects of social and educational change. But just how fundamental are effects of social change and educational restructuring on gender relations? And how has gender reform informed social change? Are they first level or second level effects? First level effects operate at the level of discourse. They are typically claims about the efficiency and effectiveness of a particular reform, and are often called upon to justify change after the event, and if change occurs it is fleeting and superficial. Second level effects are those that actually occur when a reform is implemented and that produces fundamental changes in social practice in terms of new contact patterns between individuals and the changes in what individuals believe to be important (Cuban, 1990).

Policies of educational reform have, while largely drawing upon more optimistic accounts of postmodernism about multi-skilling, team work and the democratising tendencies of new information technologies, often produced unpredictable and inequitable effects. Such effects are made more obvious when the question is asked: What impact will this policy have on Aboriginal girls or that program on working class boys? Seemingly progressive initiatives can reproduce social inequities if difference (of gender, race, ethnicity and class) is not addressed as a central and integral aspect of educational change. Furthermore, new policy initiatives seeking to promote changes such as gender equity, for example, are situated in contexts which may inhibit the capacity for those expected to produce reform to do so. Thus in many schools in Australia, while there is a popular rhetoric about gender equity reform for girls and women, it is in a time of reduced resources in schools, scarce university and training places, and a more competitive and market oriented environment. These factors reduce many schools' capacities to deal with social justice issues. Finally, many policymakers assume that policies are adopted as they intend. Thus the adaptation and interpretation of gender reform policies, as well the significant resistances, at the level of school are rarely addressed.

In this chapter, I consider why we should be 'uneasy' about the effects of educational restructuring and recent policy initiatives on gender equity. I draw from a number of research studies¹ which have focused upon gender reform, leadership and educational change over a period of radical restructuring of education in Victoria, Australia, since 1989. One project draws upon the experiences of female educational bureaucrats in seeking to produce educational policy; another was a three year project considering the reception by teachers and students of Equal Opportunity (EO) policies for girls; a third and ongoing project focuses upon women and leadership in schools; another considered the impact of the restructuring of educational work on women educators. A fifth project examined the claims of Schools of the Future, the policy which introduced self-managing schools in Victoria, from the perspective of how principals, schools and parents 'manage change'. The data were collected through unstructured interviews, documentation, observation, survey, and focus groups. This chapter highlights patterns, critical incidents, life stories and case studies which arose out of these projects. I use these to explicate the complexities of gender equity reform in the context of rapid and radical educational restructuring. By looking through the lens of gender, I consider how particular reforms have affected women and girls, and what studies