The Displacement of Girls as the ‘Educationally Disadvantaged’ Subject: A Genealogical Tale

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Shifting provision: Historical tales

Since the early 1970s in Australia and some other industrialised democracies such as the UK, Canada and New Zealand, discourses of differential provision in education have been replaced by those of equitable provision. This shift did not come about at once and some forms of differential provision remain (such as single-sex schools) but there has been an almost complete transformation in educational discourse. Before the shift, it was anticipated that characteristics such as sex, class and race would produce differential outcomes from schooling whereas, since the shift differential outcomes have been railed against.

This paper focuses on the shift in the Australian context from sex-differentiated provision to gender equity in education. Schools provided differently for girls and boys from the time a colony was established in NSW until the 1970s. Differential provision was an explicit aim of education. One of the first schools established in the early years of the colony was the Female Orphan School which prepared girls for domestic service (Selzer 1994). Another example was the Ladies' School tradition that flourished in colonial Australia (Theobald 1996). Further examples include primary schools that provided different curricula for girls and boys until well into this century (Austin & Selleck 1975, Kyle 1986) and secondary schools that remained predominantly single-sex until the second half of this century (Turney 1975, McPherson 1997).

However, since the seventies gender equity has become a major concern in educational discourses. Initially this concern focussed on improving girls’ educational outcomes and more recently there has been an increasing focus on boys. The degree to which gender equity has become an issue of concern is reflected in the achievement of the first national policy in the area of schooling. Since schooling remains primarily the responsibility of Australia’s six States and two Territories (although the Federal Government allocates funds for this purpose), the development of a national policy in education is only possible if there is mutual agreement and collaboration between the Federal Government, the States and Territories. The consensus required to formulate the National Policy for the Education of Girls (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987) indicates the level of commitment of politicians at that time to gender equity reform, and hence the degree of community concern.

It is curious that this relatively recent shift in educational provision with such widespread ramifications appears of little consequence to us now. The tendency to ignore this transformation may be attributed to an understanding of it as natural, transparent and self-evident. Such an understanding is consistent with historical tales that are structured by linear chronological sequencing of events. This type of history tends to portray the period of differential provision in education as quaint and unsophisticated and the period of equitable provision as increasingly sophisticated. In this context, questioning how this shift came about is unnecessary because it is attributed to the process of ‘modernisation' Popkewitz (1997, p. 25) traces the positing of ‘change as a natural and constant realisation of a higher order’ to nineteenth century social evolution that drew upon eighteenth century
ideas on natural history. Indeed it was during the nineteenth century that linear chronological accounts of the past emerged through the professionalisation of historical studies. Iggers (1997, p. 2) argues that central to the process of professionalisation was the firm belief in the scientific status of history. For historians, as for other scientists, methodologically controlled research made objective knowledge possible. Truth consisted in the correspondence of knowledge to an objective reality that constituted the past as it had “actually” occurred in a coherent sequence of events.

The twentieth century has seen profound changes in historical thought due mainly to new forms of social science-oriented history. These new forms have emphasised social structures and processes of social change over the agency of the individual. However the older tradition and the newer social science approaches both operate with the notion of unilinear time, with the conception that there is continuity and direction in history. “While few [social science historians] would accept an idea of progress that endowed this direction with a beneficial character, most operated with a notion of ‘modernisation’ or progressive ‘rationalisation’ that endowed historical development with coherence” (Iggers 1997, p. 4).

Representations: Discourses of critique and possibility

How the past is represented has implications for the present, not only because of the evaluative function of such representations but also because of their constitutive function. The silent anonymous association of progress with change masks resistance, play, uncertainty and holding on. This masking opens up possibilities as well as imposing limitations. For example, it opens up possibilities for research into gender equity to be taken seriously within an academy that highly values scientific research programs that are characterised by evidence of theoretically progressive problem-shifts. But it also limits representations of the field of gender equity to neat accounts masking its messiness, its power plays and its failures.

Representations of the past are discourses of critique and possibility—they constitute that which they claim to describe. As Biklen argues, ‘different feminisms construct differently what a girl is and hence come to read questions of gender and schooling from different vantage points’ (1996). In her examination of three reports by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), Biklen asks of each report ‘what and who are girls?’ and ‘what kind of site is school?’

Although the AAUW reports follow each other chronologically, Biklen resists telling a linear story because she states that she is interested in what qualities, markers and situations the researchers of the three reports connect to gender and schooling—in other words what gets taken up as a gender issue. Biklen’s focus is the constitutive function of the reports, she explores how certain questions and frameworks end up locating, directing and plotting what actions might be taken up in schools, how gender issues might be addressed and what the problems are.

In the Australian context, Yates’ (1996) description of changing assumptions and visions in contemporary educational reforms in terms of their assumptions about girls and their vision for schools shares some similarities with Biklen’s approach. Yates poses the questions, ‘who are girls?’ and ‘what are we trying to do to them in schools?’ In tracing how these question have been answered she identifies four frameworks:
1. Equal opportunity and the elimination of sexism
   – De-emphasising gender (1970s);
2. Girl-friendly schooling
   – Gender sensitive (mid 1980s);
3. Listening to girls, difference, inclusive curriculum
   – Gendered diversity (late 1980s);
4. Violence, harassment, boys
   – The construction of gender and the responsibilities of schools (1990s).

Yates utilises the ‘jargon’ of post-structuralism in acknowledging ‘that we have been constructing and deconstructing [girls] in different ways’ (1996, p. 4). But even when wearing her ‘postmodernist hat’, she maintains a focus on the evaluative rather than the constitutive function of her framework (p. 4). She states that her ‘concern is that any framework necessarily takes up some interests and disempowers others, and we need to try to uncover what voices and interests are being silenced in particular formulations’ (p. 4). In this way, postmodernism becomes another way of understanding and redressing inequity in education.

Biklen and Yates demonstrate an awareness of the constitutive function of discourse and the space they have opened up is explored further here. Whilst their explorations are framed by questions about girls and schools, this exploration is framed by the functioning of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ and its positioning within discourses of equitable provision. This type of framing facilitates representations of the past in terms of the descent of discourse or genealogy. Unlike the ‘interpretivist [who] concentrates on the liberatory potential of language to discover, or at least open the way towards, some unities of understanding, … the genealogist stresses the tendency of discourse to constitute that which it then claims to have discovered’ (Ferguson 1991, p. 330).

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Foucault suggests that, ‘discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could say at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said’ (1991, p. 63). A transformation, such as the shift in educational provision in the seventies, may be conceptualised as a juncture between discourses because the statements and claims that may be uttered now about gender and education, are vastly different to those that could be uttered before this shift. Such periods of transformation tend to be periods in which what constitutes the ‘truth’ is re-defined. New claims, new knowledge and new forms of power arise during these periods—how they arise is the focus of genealogy.

Genealogy is characterised by the search for discontinuities (junctures) since they represent a change in what is actually said and hence are important markers that trace the descent of discourse. Although this tracing may follow chronologically, unlike forms of history, there is no assumption of progress, only an assumption that discontinuities are shifts in power relations.

Genealogy conceptualises truth differently from traditional forms of history. A genealogical approach asserts that truths about educational provision identified by research and addressed by policy are not self-evident, rather, they are the products of specific questions, instruments and conceptual frameworks (Volman 1991, p. 46). Genealogically speaking, it was a shift in what was claimed to be true about the educational needs of girls,
boys and society, that gave rise to a shift in educational provision. The need for this shift and the direction in which it developed were not natural or transparent.

Such a deeply sceptical project is not alien to historical studies since historians are always on the look out for forgery and falsification (Iggers 1997, p. 140). But the status of resulting texts is a point a radical departure for genealogists and historians. Genealogists claim that historical texts resemble "a mere hall of mirrors reflecting nothing but each other, and throwing no light upon the 'truth' which does not exist" (Stone 1997, p. 242). Historians, on the other hand, operate with a notion of the truth that assumes some correspondence between knowledge and an objective reality.

Sometimes expressions of history and genealogy are almost indistinguishable from each other. They work with the same documents, they pay meticulous attention to detail, they are deeply sceptical, they are for the most part practised in similar institutional settings and they display disciplinary characteristics such as specialised languages and identifiable groups of experts. But history claims to be concerned about what actually happened, whereas genealogy is concerned with how such claims construct a past that is able to be described and known.

The ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’: Form and function

This genealogy traces the production of forms of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ within discourses of equitable provision. Although it has the appearance of a chronological tracing, even the earliest forms of this subject still having meaning and maintain a type of parallel existence in the present (Yates 1996). Older forms are not simply replaced by newer forms. Indeed, the process of incorporating newer forms usually involves resistance and contest.

Before the shift from differential to equitable provision in the seventies, a problem was not seen to exist and thus the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ did not exist. During this time it was generally accepted that girls were not ‘naturally’ suited to the study of certain subjects such as mathematics and science (Willis 1989) and that ‘despite manifest inequalities, the subject of sex differences in educational qualifications…aroused little serious interest’ (Martin 1972, p. 96). However after the shift, numerous forms of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ have been produced.

These forms represent shifts within discourses of equitable provision. They mark changes in what may be said about educational disadvantage, but more than this, they mark shifts in power relations—notions of disadvantage are contested and struggled over. As new forms gain meaning, older forms don’t simply disappear but they may be marginalised. The years indicated below, roughly mark the periods when these forms took on meaning. These forms (and others) can still be located within current educational discourses.

Girls are disadvantaged (early 1970s)

All girls experience disadvantage. Girls who are poor, Aboriginal and/or isolated are acknowledged. These girls experience more severe forms of discrimination but predominantly girls are treated as a unitary group.

Girls are destined to marry and bear children. This biological function disrupts their careers and restricts their participation in the workforce. Women generally work until the
birth of their first child, withdraw for a period of time to provide child care in the home and then return to work at a later time.

Girls are a minority at school and are even less well represented in courses past the compulsory age. Effecting change in girls, schools and society is conceptualised simply in terms of cause and effect explanations—changing attitudes changes outcomes.

**Girls are different to boys: Late 1970s, early 1980s**

Girls’ educational disadvantage is ‘confirmed’ by a new wave of research. This research is partly prompted by increasing youth unemployment, particularly among females. Boys’ experiences are the norm upon which girls’ deviance is measured. Compared to boys, girls: have lower levels of interest in science and mathematics (Keeves 1975); experience lower levels of self confidence (Edgar 1976); ‘confine themselves’ to female dominated occupations (Sinclair, Crouch & Miller 1977); are deficient in visual-spatial skills (Willis 1980); have limited occupational aspirations (Russell & Smith 1979); avoid risk taking, demonstrate convergent learning styles, are more conforming and passive (Partington 1980), have higher anxiety levels (Partington 1980), and; have greater fear of success (Leder 1982).

**Girls are OK: 1980s**

Girls’ difference is subsumed under essentialised ideas about how women and girls think and learn. Evidence that girls lag behind boys is explained in terms of girls’ different learning styles. Girls prefer to learn in ways that emphasise process and context. They are turned off learning by competitive content driven classrooms.

Girls share the same concerns, aspirations and experiences at school. Girls’ under-participation and under-achievement in mathematics, the physical sciences and technology can be redressed by making classes more ‘girl-friendly’.

**Girls are not just girls: around 1990**

Girls actively construct, resist and transform multiple subjectivities. Notions of femininity are not fixed or determined. Girls are not a unitary group. Being a girl means different things for different girls. Their complex, shifting and at times contradictory identities are acknowledged. Issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender (to name a few) are taken into consideration and used to explain why girls’ experiences and outcomes from schooling vary. Girls’ experiences are valued and their voices are heard in educational research and included in policy formulation.

**Boys need attention too!: early 1990s**

Girls’ successes are lauded and attributed to gender equity reform. Girls are outperforming boys at school and entering university in higher numbers than boys.

Boys now need attention because they are poor communicators and are falling behind girls. Boys are more likely than girls to be truants, to drop-out of school and to demonstrate behavioural problems. Boys lack good role models and have poor self esteem. They also experience the negative effects of masculine power because they accept bullying, competitiveness and a range of violent behaviour as normal.
Discursive effects: Techniques of power

These forms of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ are effects of discourses of equitable provision. They have been produced by these discourses and they make sense and have meaning in the context of equitable provision. They may be considered artefacts or even chimeras since no such subjects actually exist. This is not to say that no students are disadvantaged in schools, but that it is not the function of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ to describe or represent these students.

The functioning of this subject within discourses of equitable provision should not be confused with the strategic function of notions of disadvantage within liberal, radical and other discourses. Particularly in times characterised by conservative backlash, the need to reiterate notions of equality should not be underestimated but such a reiteration is not a function of the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’.

How this subject functions in discourses of equitable provision may be examined by considering how its subjectivity has transformed. The ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ is not fixed—it has no essential characteristics. It has been conceptualised in terms of ‘the problem’ with girls and more recently boys. The displacement of females by males as the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ illustrates that this subject’s discursive function in educational discourse is more closely related to the operation and effects of power than to the elimination of disadvantage.

At the time of this displacement in the early 1990s, there was limited evidence to suggest that the previous reform agenda (aimed at improving girls’ educational outcomes) had been achieved or exhausted. Indeed, sexual harassment was reported to be endemic (AEC 1991) and claims that girls’ educational outcomes had improved were based upon ‘crude indications of progress in addressing gender equity issues’ (MCEETYA 1995, p. 60).

However, within the space of a few short years concerns about boys in some areas eclipsed or replaced concerns about girls. In June 1994, Connell commented in the preface to his book Masculinities:

In the last five years masculinity has become a popular topic across the advanced capitalist world, especially in the United States. Those of us who had been trying for a longer time to call attention to this issue have watched, with some astonishment, as books on masculinity climbed the best-seller lists, television talk shows wrestled with the theme, and conferences, ‘men’s gatherings’, magazines and newspaper articles on masculinity multiplied (Connell 1995, p. ix).

Not only has this displacement taken place rapidly it appears to have effortlessly brushed aside resistance, despite what Pallotta-Chiariolli (1997) describes as overstated, inaccurate and often mischievous claims about absent fathers, the history of father/son relations, the achievements of girls and of feminism in schools and the damage that feminism does to boys. Previously robust feminist critiques have become marginalised within discourses they helped to constitute.

This displacement is not a progression in scholarship; it is not a moving on to the next stage of the gender agenda; it is a jolt or rupture that signals a whole new regime in discourse and forms of knowledge (Foucault 1972, p. 54). Bové argues that we can trace the pattern “in which an intellectually specialised language of a professional discipline is
constellated and made functional; we can see it extended both into a broader coherence with other discourses constituting other fields and into the processes which institutionalise discourses” (1988, p. 52).

By joining in what Bové (1988) calls the general disciplinary project, equitable provision has become an unquestionable educational objective and the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ has become an unquestionable category in educational discourse. It is this unquestionable status that marks the exercise of power. The shift in the seventies that made gender equity an issue of concern in education also brought it under the regulatory control of discourse. This is not to say that gender equity wasn’t regulated through educational discourse prior to this time, but that it was regulated by absence and by its location in the gaps between discourses. As Foucault suggests, ‘there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’ (1975, p. 27).

To transform these relations of power it is necessary to rid ourselves of the illusion that discourses of equitable provision are about achieving equitable outcomes from schooling for males and females (Foucault 1975, p. 24). This abandonment is premised upon the understanding that discourses are not what they claim to be. At first, this thought is deeply troubling because it so thoroughly disturbs that which so many of us hope for and have worked to achieve—equitable outcomes from schooling for females and males. An important (and somewhat comforting) distinction to be made is that this position does not question the value of equitable outcomes from schooling only that their achievement is not what discourses of equitable provision are about.

Alternative explanations of what discourses of equitable provision are about should not only be thought of in repressive and negative terms—it is possible that more females and males do now receive more equitable outcomes from schooling—but, from a genealogical perspective, how this came about has little to do with discourses of equitable provision. This is not to dismiss or count as nothing the work of those who have advocated social justice in schools, in particular feminists who have worked to achieve gender equity. However, genealogy explores the possibility that things could be other than they appear, not for the purpose of undoing or dismantling what has been achieved in the name of gender equity but for the purpose of altering and continuing to challenge power relations.

The displacement of girls by boys as the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ opens up new opportunities to examine how this subject functions in discourses of equitable provision. Although the mantle of disadvantage has shifted from girls to boys and in the process sidelined many girls’ reform strategies, a new construction of girls as high achieving active participants in education may be of benefit to girls. Such a construction is likely to fit more comfortably with the many girls who previously rejected being labelled ‘disadvantaged’. It also has the potential to reinforce high expectations of girls’ achievements and to support girls’ own aspirations by working against some of the attitudes that have presented barriers to girls’ participation and performance.

The displacement of girls by boys as the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ has also extended the general disciplinary project of equitable provision to all boys. In the past, factors such as class have been used to identify disadvantage among some groups of males. But, males generally were not constituted as educationally disadvantaged and so they remained peripheral to discourses of equitable provision. However, new discourses of masculinity have brought males within the regulatory control of discourses of equitable provision. Like girls before them, boys’ disadvantage is now being documented and explained, and strategies are being devised to address boys’ equity issues.
Conclusion

Despite the troubling, provocative and deeply sceptical approach suggested by genealogy, it also suggests ways of getting at relationships of power, it identifies and interrogates disciplinary effects and it resists, provokes and accommodates shifts in discourses of equitable provision. Perhaps as Kenway (1995) suggests, in such difficult times it is faint hearted responses that are dangerous.

As new discourses of masculinity become increasingly institutionalised and as feminists continue their struggle to improve girls’ educational outcomes in a hostile environment, it is timely to consider how representations of the past constitute that which they claim to describe. And, questioning how the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ functions in discourses of equitable provision has the potential to destabilise ‘truth’ claims, produce new discourse and transform relationships of power.

Although the displacement of girls by boys as the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ has been disruptive and is in many ways premature because some girls still need attention, we should also situate this displacement within a whole series of possible positive effects (Foucault 1975). Just as girls may benefit from being newly constructed as high achieving active participants in education, so too may boys benefit from a greater recognition and understanding of their educational needs.

In strategic terms, it is also worth considering that if this subject has been of limited value to girls, then it is unlikely to be of any greater value to boys. Almost thirty years of knowledge production within discourses of equitable provision have revealed too much about the ways disadvantage is constituted through multiple and complex subjectivities to accept a situation where the ‘educationally disadvantaged subject’ oscillates between sexes. This subject’s time may be up, its usefulness spent and its function shown to be limited.

REFERENCES


