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Negotiating and enabling spaces for gender justice

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Through feminist informed understandings of injustice, this paper draws on significant research to re-articulate prevailing issues of gender inequity within and beyond the contexts of education in Australia. Following a location of the unconvincing but pervasive warrant for boys' issues to dominate the gender equity scene, the paper turns to a discussion about locating and leveraging strategic points of intervention for transformative gender just educational policy and practice. New and emerging policy environments, more receptive to educational research, that address issues of economic and cultural marginalisation in new times are argued to offer generative spaces to reinvigorate crucial gender debates associated with post-school pathways and social outcomes. Foregrounding feminist concerns in these areas is presented as central to constructing strong policy frames that can better address issues of gender, economic marginalisation and cultural disadvantage. The paper then turns to a discussion about how radical re-envisionings of curriculum and pedagogy, to reflect issues of distributive and cultural justice, might work to dismantle and transform the inequitable power relations and underlying frameworks that generate gender injustice within and beyond the contexts of education. The paper concludes by illustrating the imperative of drawing on transformative gender justice lenses to evaluate and, in particular, anticipate the limits of particular reform agendas and interventions.

Gender injustice: Re-articulating key contemporary issues

In recognising that the particular goals of feminist and pro-feminist engagement in schooling are significant in shaping the ideologies of how we might pursue gender justice in education (Lingard, 2003), the paper draws on Nancy Fraser's (1997, pp.11-12) work to articulate two analytically distinct understandings of injustice.

> The first is socio-economic injustice which is rooted in the political-economic structure of society. Examples include ... economic marginalisation (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labor altogether), and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living) ... The second understanding of injustice is cultural or symbolic. Here injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication. Examples include cultural ... nonrecognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions).

Through these lenses, while the problematics of discussing 'all females' and 'all males' as distinct and separate groups are acknowledged, it is clear that gender justice is by no means a reality. As feminists and pro-feminists engaged in schooling we might begin to define our goals within a framework that draws on these understandings of injustice. This framework recognises that females as a group, relative to males as a group, in Australia and beyond, remain socio-economically disadvantaged through structures, systems and practices that privilege males and the 'masculine'. Traditional divisions of labour within the public and private spheres, for example, continue to generate gender-specific modes of exploitation, marginalisation and deprivation through lower salaries; over-representation in part-time work; increasing and unprecedented levels of welfare dependency; fewer career opportunities; and a greater share of domestic responsibilities for females (Ailwood, 2003; Fraser, 1997; Lingard, 2003; Hayes, 2003; Summers, 2003; McLeod, 2004a). Women as a group, relative to men as a group, also suffer cultural and symbolic injustice within an enduring patriarchal society that continues to devalue and demean activities connoted as feminine. This devaluation persists in generating unacceptably high levels of sexual assault and exploitation; a pervasive culture of domestic violence; the trivialising and objectification of women and the under-representation of women in all areas of public life (Brabazon, 2002; Fraser, 1997; Summers, 2003; McLeod, 2004a).

The sphere of education reflects these injustices with the generation and perpetuation of structures and practices that privilege the 'traditionally masculine' such as staff hierarchies (that reflect an over-representation of males in positions of authority and power), the hierarchical organisation and division of curricular and extra-curricular activities and the gendered nature of teacher practice (Alloway, 1995; Connell, 2000; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Within this context, girls tend to suffer relative to boys in terms of post-school options. Here, for example, girls are at a socio-economic disadvantage because they do not enjoy the same opportunities as boys in terms of vocational education and training programs. Further, while girls' retention rates are now greater than boys, as a result of their subject selection and, in particular, their under-participation in specific 'high-status' curriculum areas, girls do not benefit from the same vocational choices and security as boys (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Hayes, 2003; McLeod, 2004a). Indeed, to compete equally in the labour market, Collins et al (2000) found that females required more education than their male counterparts. Moreover, as a reflection of broader society, girls and women in schools continue to be subject to unacceptably high levels of sex-based harassment and abuse (Ailwood, 2003).

Essentialising females as a disadvantaged group grossly oversimplifies issues of equity and social justice, nevertheless, this essentialising has some strategic defensibility within the context of Fraser's understandings of injustice. Against this backdrop, we can construct an affirmative feminist agenda that seeks redress for gender injustices on the basis of a theory of both economic redistribution - "ensuring access to opportunities and material resources", and cultural recognition - "cultural and social diversity and respect" (Fraser, 1995, p.9). Importantly though, this strategic lens, through focusing on injustices in relation to economy and culture, allows a nuanced approach to the issue of disadvantage - one that acknowledges that gender interplays with other identity relations in ways that compound disadvantage.

Feminist and pro-feminist work in education has, of course, been approaching the issue of gender disadvantage through nuanced lenses for some time (Collins et al, 2000; Ailwood, 2003; Lingard, 2003; Hayes, 2003). Here the importance of a 'which boys/which girls?' approach is clear in nuanced readings of performance data that tell us that the most accurate predictors of educational d isadvantage in Australia are poverty and indigeneity (Collins et al, 2000; McLeod, 2004a; ABS, 2004). Despite these predictors compounding issues of disadvantage for both boys and girls in education and despite the broader masculinist socio-political discourses that amplify these issues of disadvantage for females, essentialised accounts expressing concern about boys' poor educational performance are the most common refrain in dominant equity discourses (Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003). This common refrain "...centres boys' needs, sidelining many issues still to be adequately addressed for girls" (Ailwood, 2003, p.19). Alarmingly, these concerns about boys are often justified as issues that must be addressed as matters of social injustice (Mills, 2003; Hayes, 2003). Drawing on Fraser's framework for understanding injustice, this remains both worrying and indefensible.

Amplifying the dislocation of social justice issues from their broader socio-political contexts, a presumptive equality is now the

dominant tenor of gender equity policy and practice (Ailwood, 2003; Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003). This presumptive equality (after Foster, 1994), characteristic of our most recent national policy statement - *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA, 1997), for example, is seen as signalling the 'endgame' for national girls' educational policies (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). While, according to Lingard (2003, p.45), *Gender Equity* "...held off the worst elements of recuperative masculinist politics, [it] ... also placed boys very firmly on the gender equity agenda..." Certainly this text, and more obviously, other gender 'equity' statements since, reflect the 'boy turn' in the gender debate (Weaver-Hightower, 2003), the downstreaming and mainstreaming of gender reform in Australia (Blackmore, 1997; 1999) and the reality that, "...in policy terms, girls are no longer identified as a specific 'equity target group'" (Henry, 2001, p.88). Rather, both boys and girls are positioned as equally but differently disadvantaged in schools. This presumptive equality "...eschews any recognition of structural disadvantages and power differentials experienced by women as a category..." (Lingard, 2003, pp.35-36) and can be seen as legitimatising an essentialist "...discourse of competing victims that should be considered rather unhelpful in terms of equitable change for either girls or boys" (Ailwood, 2003, p.25).

Fuelling the 'boy turn' in the gender equity debate, a *competing victims approach* (after Cox: see for example, Cox, 1995) has been a media favourite that has worked to generate panic around boys' schooling performance (Lingard, 2003). Here reductionist accounts of gender and crude indicators of success and failure (such as those associated with easily quantifiable standardised tests), have promoted a 'failing boys' discourse and a sense that all girls are now outperforming all boys (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maws, 1999; Gilbert & Gilbert, 2001). Often boys' underperformance in English tests, for example, is presented as a major concern. However, as Hayes (2003) and other commentators (Rowe, 2004) continue to point out, this is not a new phenomenon - boys as a group have trailed girls as a group in English over the past 100 years. Moreover, this 'outperformance' in English does little to advantage girls post school (Collins et al, 2000).

The 'boy-turn' and reductionist discourses of current gender equity debates are, to be sure, also made possible through broader socio-political structures and practices. Certainly the essentially neo-liberal tenets driving the processes of a globalised economy can be seen, in an Australian context, to generate legitimacy for these discourses. Taylor and Henry suggest that the ascendancy of these tenets, and in particular, the "... increasing emphasis on markets to drive educational provision, [the] devolution/decentralisation of schooling systems [and] a focus on outcomes rather than inputs as a policy and funding lever ..." (2000, pp.1-2) is highly regressive for social equity. Here, a de-regulated environment of competition, reduced funding, and the pressure of 'market advantage' is seen to be incongruent with producing enhanced equity outcomes (Taylor & Henry, 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Connell, 2002).

Against this backdrop, as Lingard (2003, pp.36-37) points out, "...equity has been rearticulated in respect of performance conceived in a particular fashion, that is, performance as measured by standardised tests and university entrance scores." This culture of 'performativity' has resulted in a strong focus on the measurement of literacy and numeracy outcomes. Indeed, as Taylor and Henry (2000) highlight, strong foundational literacy and numeracy skills are seen as a panacea in current Commonwealth policy for addressing issues of academic and social disadvantage and are key accountability mechanisms through which the state retains regulatory control over schools. Here, literacy is constituted as a "...surrogate for other forms of educational inequality..." (Taylor & Henry, 2000, p.6). Thus, in a context where market forces are driving school priorities classroom environments are characterised by an overemphasis on management, basic skills and narrowly defined understandings of success and achievement (The State of Queensland, 2001).

These socio-political discourses have made possible the overwrought concerns with boys' schooling performance. The rearticulation of equity to stress, particularly, literacy outcomes, has enabled a re-presentation of boys as educationally disadvantaged. Similarly, the discourses of performance and competition have legitimised other concerns about boys such as their poorer rates of retention relative to girls. Moreover, from the early 1990s these concerns have been amplified within a backlash context fuelled by public discourse, particularly the media, against feminist gains in education (Hayes, 2003). Nonetheless, as a response to the generally unconvincing but pervasive warrant for boys' issues to dominate the gender equity scene, feminists have been compelled to adopt a defensive rather than offensive stance in defending past policy gains for girls and holding off the worst ravages of recuperative masculinist politics (Ailwood, 2003; Hayes, 2003; Lingard, 2003).

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Certainly these broader socio-political discourses have transformed the 'map' of gender equity in Australia. However while the discourses and forms of knowledge spawned in this climate have meant that the articulation of feminist concerns has become increasingly transgressive and risky (Hayes, 2003), nevertheless new agendas and emerging policy environments can be seen as offering strategic points of intervention in terms of re-invigorating crucial gender debates (Luke, 2003a; 2003b; McLeod, 2004b). These new and emerging environments, for example, illuminate: the limitations of current attempts to address unprecedented change, diversity and complexity through regimes of efficiency, economy and performativity (Luke, 2003a; Darling-Hammond, 2003); the importance of a strong 'evidence based' social policy that can redress issues of economic and cultural marginalisation in new times; and the importance of strategically re-inventing curriculum and pedagogy to transform rather than support the inequitable structures and practices of schooling (Luke, 2003b). Against this backdrop, a 'whole series of possible positive effects' can be located in terms of pursuing a transformative gender justice (Hayes, 2003).

Strategic points of intervention: New and emerging policy environments

Luke (2003b, p.91) argues that a decade's mix of neo-liberal reforms have left us without a "... vision of what might count as a just and powerful educational system in new economic and social conditions, and increasingly complex, risky and unjust transnational contexts." Against a backdrop of unprecedented local and global change and diversity, Luke talks about the 'new push' for research informed educational policy. In terms of shap ing policy reform to frame a just and powerful education system, he talks about governments and systems now being more receptive to the analyses and insights of educational research - 'social evidence' that reflects the changed contexts and uncertain conditions facing communities and schools, state systems and bureaucracies. He argues that this strengthening of relationships between policy formation and social scientific evidence will be central in constructing a renewed commitment to redressive and redistributive social justice that moves

> ...away from a reductionist focus on outcomes towards a broader analysis of how educationally acquired capital has material consequences in individuals' and communities pathways through and via emergent economies and institutions (2003b, p.98).

This policy moment has generative implications in terms of negotiating spaces for gender justice that will transform the narrowly defined discourses currently pervasive in distorting issues of equity in education. Feminist and pro-feminist research that documents how changing demographic patterns continue to impact on issues of cultural and economic gender injustice will be instrumental here in reconceptualising the culture of performativity and map of gender equity. More specifically, the current receptiveness of policy to educational research in the areas of poverty, new demographics and cultures, available capital in social fields, life pathways, fair and unfair patterns of access and employment and changing economies and institutions (Luke, 2003b), provides a context to re-invigorate crucial gender debates associated with post-school pathways and social outcomes (McLeod, 2004b).

Key feminist research (Allard, 2004; Bullen & Kenway, 2004) that documents how issues of poverty, isolation and social and cultural capital interact to constrain the school experiences and future life options of particular groups of females will be instructive here in shaping policy agendas that seek to redress issues of economic and cultural gender injustice. The demands for a re-envisioning and designing of senior school trajectories to reflect new pathways and institutional partnerships (Pitman, 2003; Luke, 2003b), for example, will provide a context for new policy agendas to address the relationship between school performance and post-school patterns and experiences, and more specifically, the gendered patterns of subject selection and vocational pathways that contribute to economic marginalisation for many females (Collins et al, 2000; McLeod, 2004b). Associated work (Allard & McLeod, 2003) that investigates the disadvantages particular groups of females experience in relation to the gendered dimensions of early school leaving, will also be instructive in these policy debates, particularly as this work highlights the importance of addressing the impact of the social, emotional and relational dimensions of schooling (McLeod, 2004b). Reviving the significance of these dimensions certainly resonates with continued feminist and pro-feminist calls for a re-focus on social outcomes in gender policy and practice - calls often generated in response to the enduring prevalence of sexual harassment and abuse within our schools and broader local and global communities. Importantly, these calls can and should be situated within changing demographic patterns that reflect cultural and social disarray and illuminate the imperative of social cohesion in globalised and diverse socio-cultural environments (Luke, 2003b; Milojevic, 2003; Taylor & Henry, 2000).

Against this backdrop we can see that the dynamics and broader socio-political contexts that shape the current policy environment provide spaces for reviving crucial gender debates. Reviving these debates will be imperative in constructing a strong redistributive and redressive policy frame that can better address issues of gender, economic marginalisation and cultural disadvantage through initiatives and strategies that move beyond a presumptive equality to recognising the structural disadvantages and power differentials experienced by women as a category while also recognising that gender identity intersects with other aspects of social identity (namely socio-economic status and cultural identity) to compound issues of disadvantage for many females (Allard & McLeod, 2003; Fraser, 1997; Collins et al, 2000).

Strategic points of intervention: Transformative gender justice

Certainly, within the frame of various gender policies over the last 30 years, many gender reforms, initiatives and strategies in education have attempted (and continue to attempt) to redress issues of gender, economic marginalisation and social disadvantage - reforms, initiatives and strategies that can be seen as aligning with both a theory of redistributive and cultural justice such as encouraging girls into the traditionally masculine domains of science, information technology and mathematics; encouraging female teachers to seek promotion; designing 'girl-friendly' curriculum and pedagogy; and conducting girls' only classes (Fraser, 1997; McLeod, 2004a). These sorts of reforms, while they have been extremely significant in improving the schooling experiences and educational outcomes of many girls and women, in tending to either frame females within a deficit model or promote females' specificity, have tended to reinforce and essentialise, rather than challenge and transform, inequitable understandings of gender as difference and opposition.

In meeting the requirements of justice for all, Fraser (1997) challenges us to think about alternative conceptions to remedies based on theories of redistribution and recognition. In moving beyond these remedies she talks about the imperative of a theory and politics of transformation. Here the aim is to remedy social disadvantage through problematising and restructuring the underlying frameworks that generate such disadvantage. Crucially such transformative politics in relation to gender disadvantage will recognise the centrality of problematising and restructuring the power inequities of hierarchical gender dichotomies. More specifically, as Fraser (1997, p.30) articulates, a transformative politics aims to replace inequitable gender hierarchies with

> ... networks of multiple intersecting differences that are demassified and shifting [where] ever-new constructions of identity and difference are freely elaborated and then swiftly deconstructed ...

Through these conceptual lenses and within a policy framework that is moving towards professional interventions which reflect a sustainable focus on pedagogy and curriculum, rather than management and accountability (Luke, 2003b), redistributive and cultural gender justice may be pursued in transformative ways. In terms of redistributive justice and the crucial gender issue of post school pathways this would mean disrupting and transforming particular gendered structures and pathways within and beyond school and in terms of cultural justice and the issue of social outcomes this would mean disrupting and transforming gendered patterns of recognition and respect (Collins et al, 2000). To these ends, professional interventions would need to recognise diversity and difference through promoting multiple ways of being masculine and feminine but within an affirmative and discerning critical framework that seeks to problematise and transform the gendered ways of being, practices and structures that limit and constrain students' lifeworlds and future pathways. In other words, transformative gender justice will seek to question and challenge the social processes and structures that construct inequities through the privileging of 'the masculine' and marginalising of 'the feminine' but also seek to transform these inequities through the proliferation of alternatives that do not re-inscribe relations of domination. Of course, these sorts of professional interventions in pursuing the goals of gender justice reflect key research and writing in this sphere (Alloway, 1995; Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002; Collins e t al, 2000; Davies, 2000; Lingard, Martino, Mills & Bahr, 2002; MacNaughton, 2000; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) and thus are far from new. However, in further articulating what a transformative gender justice agenda might look like (and drawing on the understandings of redistributive and cultural justice articulated earlier), this paper adds to this research and writing in evaluating some of the key curriculum and pedagogical reforms and initiatives that currently seek to address issues of social/gender justice in education within Australia.

Earlier this paper articulated how gender inequities are endorsed and perpetuated within the sphere of education through structures and practices that privilege the 'traditionally masculine' - structures and practices such as staff hierarchies (which reflect an over-representation of males in positions of authority and power), the hierarchical organisation and division of curricular and extra-curricular activities and the gendered nature of teacher practice. In terms of generatively and transformatively responding to new configurations of diversity (including new configurations of gender diversity), Luke (2003a) calls for alternatives to compensatory programs or tactical fixes that attempt to modify existing systems. Resonating with Fraser's ideas for transformative justice, he argues for a transformative social justice through a 'radical re-envisioning' of curriculum and pedagogy. His involvement in constructing the key Queensland state curriculum and pedagogy initiatives, the *New Basics Project and the Productive Pedagogies* (The State of Queensland, 2003; The State of Queensland, 2001) are certainly reflective of this call and can be seen as particularly generative in addressing issues of gender inequity in transformative rather than compensatory ways.

In terms of the potential to transform the hierarchical and gendered organisation and division of curricular areas, for example, we might see frameworks that re-imagine the traditional eight discipline areas, such as the New Basics as disrupting and transforming the privileging of 'the masculine' through organising content knowledge to reflect key social issues and questions that draw on the skills of particular disciplines rather than being constrained within the outmoded, artificial and gendered knowledge boundaries of the eight key learning areas. The New Basics Project, a framework of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that is currently being trialled in fifty-eight Education Queensland schools, organises curriculum knowledge as follows.

- Life Pathways and Social Futures [Who am I and where am I going?];
- Multiliteracies and Communications Media [How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?];

- Active Citizenship [What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?]; and
- Environments and Technologies [How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?] (The State of Queensland, 2003)

Further disrupting the hierarchical and gendered knowledge boundaries of particular discipline areas, teachers in this curriculum environment are compelled to draw on their skills and knowledge to collaborate rather than isolate the specificities of their discipline. Certainly this curriculum environment would seem more likely also to produce distributive and collaborative, rather than hierarchical leadership and in this sense, can be seen as potentially generative in disrupting and transforming the staff hierarchies which tend to position males with power and authority and tend to privilege masculinist modes of leadership and relating. Moreover, such a framework in its transdisciplinary focus on futures and life-pathways and promotion of social cohesion and economic well-being can be seen as highly generative in terms of its potential to support a radical re-envisioning of gender just within-school and post-school pathways. Additionally, the promotion of social cohesion within the framework's emphasis on justice and cultural diversity foregrounds the importance of the relational dimensions of schooling (McLeod, 2004b). Particularly as these dimensions reflect the framework's design to respond to the complex social, economic, political and cultural diversity of 'new times', this foregrounding supports the recognition of gender diversity and difference but within a critical and discerning justice lens (ie, promoting gender identities of conciliation and collaboration rather than domination and individualism).

In terms of transformative gender justice and teacher practice, the Productive Pedagogies framework (the mandated pedagogical framework for state education in Queensland) has also been presented as potentially generative (Keddie, 2005; Lingard et al, 2002). This position draws on the understanding that quality pedagogy is central to improving students' academic and social outcomes (The State of Queensland, 2001). The Productive Pedagogies provide a scaffold to recognise and engage with student difference in intellectually demanding, socially supportive and connected ways. In this respect the framework is designed to integrate social justice issues within, rather than separate to, the pedagogical process through all four of its dimensions, *intellectual quality; connectedness; recognition of difference;* and *supportive classroom environment* (The State of Queensland, 2001).

In terms of transformative gender justice, the focus on the problematising of knowledge (a pedagogy in the dimension *intellectual quality*) for example, provides a platform for critically analysing and challenging the power inequities that construct gendered knowledge; the focus on valuing non-dominant cultural knowledges and inclusivity within an environment of social support and mutual respect (pedagogies within the dimensions *recognition of difference* and *supportive classroom environment*) provides a platform for recognising and valuing multiple ways of being male and female in respectful but also critical ways; and the focus on connecting with students' life-worlds and biographies (pedagogies within the dimension *connectedness*) provides a platform to explore issues of gender and identity through connecting with students' interests, preferences opinions, cultures, emotions and sense of self (Alloway et al, 2002).

Teachers drawing on key threshold knowledges in the area of gender and schooling is, of course, imperative in enacting the *New Basics and Productive Pedagogies* in such transformative ways (Martino, Lingard & Mills, 2004; Keddie, 2006), for example, in ways that value multiple masculinities and femininities but do not re-inscribe relations of domination and restrictive understandings of gender. In this respect, the gender justice capacities of these frameworks necessitate a critical approach to the issue of cultural recognition - one that recognises "...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). Nevertheless, these frameworks exemplify how radical re-envisionings of curriculum and pedagogy to reflect issues of distributive and cultural justice (Luke, 2003a) might work to dismantle the inequitable power relations that privilege traditional masculinity and masculinist modes of relating and transform these relations to reflect more equitable "...networks of multiple intersecting differences that are demassified and shifting..." (Fraser, 1997, p.30).

Strategic points of intervention: Anticipating the limits of particular interventions

Drawing on these understandings of transformative gender justice provides a framework for evaluating particular interventions. As Luke (2003b) argues, enabling a critical (and socially transformative) education project requires a broader social justice framework that can anticipate the limits of particular reforms. To illustrate this imperative, the following briefly articulates the limits of a current Australian reform agenda for boys. Certainly, the 'boy turn' in the gender debate has proliferated numerous curriculum and pedagogy related reforms and interventions for boys in Australia under the auspices of gender equity. However the most expensive and comprehensive reform to date is the DEST (Department of Education, Science and Training) supported $19.4 million *Success for Boys* program which builds on stages one and two of the seven million dollar *Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools* programs. *Success for Boys* aims to improve boys' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes and will focus particularly on supporting disadvantaged and at risk boys (those defined as being at risk of disengaging from school). The overview states the following.

The Australian Government is committed to helping all young Australians achieve strong educational outcomes. Research shows that overall, while many boys in Australian schools are doing well, boys are not achieving as well as girls across a range of educational and social measures.

Boys are more likely to drop out of school early and less likely to go on to university than girls. Boys achieve lower literacy scores and are more likely to experience discipline problems than girls.

Success for Boys aims to support schools across Australia to improve boys' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. *Success for Boys* will focus particularly on supporting boys at risk of disengaging from school through addressing three key intervention areas:

- Giving boys opportunities to benefit from positive male role models and mentors
- Literacy teaching and assessment
- Using information and communication technology (ICT) to engage boys in learning (DEST, 2005)

In analysing this brief overview, we can see at least two assumptions that may be interpreted as particularly constraining in terms of pursuing a sustainable and transformative redistributive and cultural gender justice. Firstly, its focus on boys only ignores the injustices that many at risk and disadvantaged girls still face in schools; and secondly its selective (and strategically indefensible) use of the 'competing victims' frame to legitimise this focus on boys, essentialises gender and achievement and reduces gender equity to school success, thus ignoring any recognition of boys' and men's relative economic and social advantage within and beyond the school environment. Further the proposal to improve boys' educational outcomes through the three intervention areas: positive male role models; literacy teaching and assessment; and information and communication technology throws up some key contentions in terms of potentially re-enforcing gender injustices.

These three curriculum and pedagogy related areas within the sphere of gender and education have prompted significant debate and disagreement. Indeed, the high visibility of these areas within gender debates can be seen as generated from the outcomes-based reductionist and partial accounts of boys' issues and supposed disadvantage referred to earlier. As such, many reforms that predominate within these areas draw on reductionist and partial ideas of boys' ways of being. For example, in relation to positive male role models, interventions to increase the number of male teachers in boys' lives are often underpinned by an understanding that

'feminine' and 'feminised' school environments disadvantage boys and that more male teachers would somehow work to fix this 'problem' (Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004). Similarly, many reforms put forward to improve boys' educational outcomes in the areas of literacy and ICT can be seen as drawing on reductionist assumptions about boys' supposed 'natural' (or biologically determined) behaviours and learning orientations (Martino et al, 2004; Keddie, 2005). Within the context of boys continued and enduring domination of space and resources in both these areas, 'boy-friendly', essentialist and prescriptive strategies, such as increasing 'masculine' curriculum content, resources and teaching styles are familiar (Alloway, 1995; Keddie, 2006; Francis, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino et al, 2004).

While certainly such reforms and strategies might be developed and pursued in gender just ways (that move beyond blaming and essentialising), *Success for Boys'* broader aims and intervention areas in responding to an incomplete and partial understanding of gender and disadvantage will likely generate reforms and strategies that will also be incomplete and partial (such as those listed above). Reforms more likely to generate compensatory initiatives or tactical fixes that sit within existing systems, rather than initiatives that transform the inequities of existing systems (Luke, 2003a). To be sure, unlike the *New Basics Project and Productive Pedagogies Framework,* the aims and interventions of *Success for Boys* cannot defensibly be associated with a redistributive and cultural gender justice (in relation to issues of economic marginalisation and cultural recognition and respect), and in this regard, the program sits on a weak and unconvincing platform. Indeed, *Success for Boys* in further enabling boys' issues to colonise the space of gender equity, particularly in the intervention areas of male role models, literacy and ICT, rather than areas associated with social outcomes (for example, exploring, challenging and transforming harmful understandings and enactments of masculinity), is more likely to re-inscribe, rather than transform the broader social systems, processes and structures that privilege 'the masculine' and construct gender inequities.

In terms of constructing sustainable approaches to improving boys' (and girls') educational outcomes in socially (gender) just ways, anticipating the limits of such large scale programs through transformative lenses is imperative. Importantly, while we can and should critique such programs through these lenses, articulating their limitations also allows us to strategically and generatively locate them within broader frameworks that reflect transformative (redistributive and cultural) gender justice. In this respect, for example, to refer to the intervention areas of *Success for Boys,* the issue of increasing the number of male role models and mentors in boys' lives would be understood as positive only if it signalled a dissolution, not perpetuation of gendered and masculinist hierarchies and ways of being (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Similarly, interventions that focus on literacy teaching and assessment and the increased use of information and communication technology would move beyond essentialist and prescriptive approaches to approaches that are understood within the context of quality pedagogy and, more specifically, within the context of supporting high levels of intellectual quality, connectedness, recognition of difference and social support (The State of Queensland, 2001).

Concluding remarks

Feminist and pro-feminist voices will be imperative in locating and leveraging strategic points of intervention within current equity discourses to reinvigorate crucial gender debates associated with post school pathways and social outcomes. Foregrounding feminist concerns within these areas will be central in constructing a strong redistributive and redressive policy frame that can better address issues of gender, economic marginalisation and cultural disadvantage. Significant here will be initiatives and strategies that recognise the structural disadvantages and power differentials that continue to disadvantage females as a category within and beyond schooling environments. This recognition provides a strong warrant for gender policy frameworks and reform agendas to move away from a reductionist and partial focus on outcomes towards a broader and more nuanced analysis of how educationally acquired capital has material consequences within and beyond schools (Luke, 2003b).

The dynamics of new and emerging policy environments within an Australian context can be seen as offering generative spaces for gender justice, par ticularly in relation to the receptiveness of policy to educational research in the areas of poverty, social capital, life pathways, patterns of access and employment and changing economies and institutions, and the move towards professional interventions that reflect a sustainable focus on pedagogy and curriculum, rather than management and accountability (Luke, 2003b). These dynamics provide a platform to redress issues of post-school disadvantage and social marginalisation through a re-envisioning of pedagogy and curriculum in ways that transform, rather than affirm, existing inequitable systems and structures (Luke, 2003a). Strategic points of intervention will involve a re-envisioning of curriculum and pedagogy within a distributive and cultural justice that dismantles the inequitable power relations that privilege traditional masculinity and masculinist modes of relating and transforms these relations to reflect more equitable and gender just ways of being.

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