

Looking back in anger:

What New Labour has done to gender equality in schools

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'A man that does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good'
Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87)

I had to stop feeling angry all the time – it was killing me; and this was one reason why I left London to go and work in Sweden in the late 1990s. Having spent most of my working life struggling against Thatcherism and its paler version Majorism, by the time Tony Blair made his appearance I was too exhausted to appreciate that anything good might come out of it. I was away on a visit to Sweden on election night in 1997, so I even missed the initial euphoria of seeing the old enemy fall. I had worked first for the Open University and then for an inner-London post-1992 higher education institution through the 1980s and 1990s, often productively and enthusiastically, but latterly under siege as the audit and punitive inspection regimes began to hit the 'new' university sector. My inner city university was one of the first on the teacher education inspection hit list and an initial failed inspection caused a dramatic reduction in staff and acute levels of stress and anxiety. My loved ones feared for my health and sanity, so an opportunity to move to a calmer place seemed increasingly attractive. Sweden seemed everything that England (London) was not: more orderly, more equal, less heated (and I don't mean the climate) and welcoming. Swedish interest in my work on gender and social justice was particularly gratifying, as concern in the UK about gender issues in education was plummeting, excepting where it focused on boys and their perceived academic failure. Boys were thus once more taking centre stage, even in feminist research. And because Sweden was so new to me, I decided to go, and because I had not invested so much energy in trying to change things, my anger began to subside.

I left almost at the moment that New Labour took power and spent most of the Blair years in Sweden. So I did not share friends' and ex-colleagues' disappointment and anger at the policies of New Labour, although I was similarly outraged and frustrated at the failure of the UK government to pay attention to the huge demonstrations against the Iraq War. In fact, I took part in the biggest demonstration ever in Palma, Majorca where I happened to be at the time – not on holiday but as member of a pan-European anti-racist website project, funded by Socrates. While I was away I read the *Guardian*

Weekly, listened to presentations at various international education conferences and read articles about how education was becoming commercialized and atomized. But in some ways, I felt I heard it all before. In the past, sociologists of education in particular had tended to be draconian in their criticisms of government policy, whatever shade, and their predictions for the future had often been more pessimistic than my own. So, to mix metaphors, I took all reports of the imminent melt-down of English education with a pinch of salt and kept my rose-tinted glasses firmly on.

On my return to the UK in 2005, I decided to move to Scotland rather than south of the border; so on re-engaging with British education, I was confronted with a Scottish system which, I was pleased to see, shared some characteristics of the 'Nordic' welfare model that I had come to admire, including a high commitment to and investment in the welfare state, including education (Melby et al. 2008). It has been only comparatively recently, in early March 2009, that I finally came to understand what the complaints had been about and what English education had come to. I was invited to a Department of Children, Families and Schools (DCSF) seminar on gender in the north of England, to give a lecture and to spend some time with teachers who had already carried out or were interested in carrying out research on gender issues. I welcomed the chance of re-engaging with teachers after years spent in higher education, and looked forward to hearing about how the greater awareness of gender issues for which I had fought in the 1980s and 1990s was being interpreted and carried forward by today's teachers. While the language of the website blurb about the DCSF 'gender agenda' seemed neutral enough (see below), emphasis on 'under/performance' and 'improving learning' should perhaps have prepared me for what was to come.

The DCSF is currently focusing on gender and the impact and influence it has on the performance of pupils in schools.

The gender agenda initiative involves schools, teachers and pupils, as well as field staff, local authorities and the research community. Its aims are to discuss and identify important gender issues and practical ideas for improving the learning, as well as the motivation, involvement and attainment of particular groups of underperforming girls and boys. These issues and ideas will be shared at specific events ... on this site and through various publications and media. In addition, we will be looking to encourage and support individual teachers and groups of schools to try out and evaluate new approaches to improving the performance and motivation of groups of boys and girls in their classes and some of their findings and case studies will also be posted on this site (DCSF 2009).

So far so good if a little anodyne you might say. And at least one UK government seemed to be taking an initiative on gender for a change – for the same could not be said for Scotland.

I took the train down south with some optimism, though aware of the criticisms of feminist friends in England that things were not all that they seemed. My contribution to the day was to give a presentation of a literature review I had prepared for the European Commission on the state of gender and education across Europe. Assuming I was talking to a relatively informed audience, I provided among other things, a critique of the EU's increasing focus on boys' underachievement and the relative uselessness of cross-national surveys such as PISA in identifying causal factors for sex differences (or for anything else for that matter). I also emphasized as have many other gender researchers in recent years, the interweaving of different social factors that impact on gender in schooling and wider society and the relative complexity of the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy, schooling, families, the labour market and so on. The message was that there were no simple solutions.

Most of the participants at the conference were far too polite to tell me what they really thought about my input, but in the small group discussions which followed, I found little interest in what was going on in the rest of Europe or indeed in any of the issues that I raised in my talk. Attention was concentrated instead on how these teachers could improve the examination results of their underachieving pupils, particularly boys; indeed their future and that of their schools depended on it. The point I am making is not to rubbish these clearly committed, well-meaning and professionally-engaged individuals; but rather to focus on why their interest in gender was so narrowly focused and why their knowledge of gender issues, the significance of gender gaps, the theories which explain such differences, previous research etc. was at such a low level. Thus stereotypes abounded in our discussions about the whys and wherefores of gender differences, and assertions were made about the intrinsic nature of girls and boys that made my hair stand on end.

It was as if I was stepping back 30 years – to the 1970s. With my anger levels rising, I tried to find out what had happened while I had been away. How was it possible that New Labour in a few short years had undermined the huge efforts made by education feminists of previous decades? Gender research was clearly flourishing in university education departments, it seemed to me, and was being published and highly ranked; but the important link between feminist work in universities and those working in schools had been lost. Moreover, as pointed out in a recent response by the Gender and Education Association to the DCSF gender agenda, the narrow interpretation of gender, for example, the use primarily of statistical analyses to identify patterns of boys' and girls' under/achievement (DCSF 2007) failed to relate gender processes to the lived experiences of children, schools and families (GEA 2009). In other words, gender in

education was reduced to a technology for determining and reducing gaps in examination results. This contrasted sharply to my experience in Sweden where gender was interpreted much more broadly to include gender inequalities in society as a whole and what schools might do to reduce them, the abusive and violent behavior of some boys to some girls, gender patterns in democratic participation, and widening career and work opportunities so that fewer girls are impoverished in adulthood. The GEA response posits that if gender is recognized only as a set of aggregated statistics or as a single issue (e.g. sexual violence), it provides little conceptual clarity for helping teachers to understand the complexities of gender or to address gender inequalities and discrimination in their classrooms - as was seen in the case of the participants at the north of England seminar.

So, after years of anger avoidance, I have begun to think of anger as potentially productive. Anger has become fashionable in recent months in the British media; mainly because it is seen as a product of powerlessness and as a legitimate expression of the need for change, as in the ruckus over MPs' expenses in Spring 2009. However I do not want to go down the road of using anger to attribute blame or to scapegoat individuals who are trying to do their jobs in a climate of censure (over examination results and league tables) and threat (of school closure if not closely following government policy). Rather I want to build on my anger (and to write this article) to see if my perspective is shared, to warn Scottish educationists off taking the English policy pathway (probably unnecessarily as they already know it) and to try to understand what has happened under New Labour. My provisional explanation is as follows: a genuine wish to ensure more equal educational outcomes have combined with other factors including an obsession with wiping out opposing voices from within and without New Labour, a distrust of public sector professionals and the development of technologies that enable the collection, collation and interpretation of large data sets have together combined to produce the Orwellian educational scenario of high pressure and narrowed aspiration that we see today. Is this an over-the-top assessment? Is this a concern exclusively about the treatment of gender? I think not, but it has certainly clarified my position on the creative value of anger. However, it is perhaps best to give James Thurber the last word: 'Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness' (quoted in Bell 2009: 27)

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