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## **Is gender-sensitive education' a useful concept for educational policy?**

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Responding to Astrid Sinnes & Marianne Løken (2012) 'Gendered education in a gendered world: Looking beyond cosmetic solutions to the gender gap in science', in *Cultural Studies of Science Education*

### **Abstract**

This forum contribution explores the idea of 'gender-sensitive' education. It draws on theoretical discussions of the concept of gender and of difference to consider ways in which 'gender-sensitive' education might serve the task of promoting equality and justice.

Key words: gender, gender sensitive education

Is gender-sensitive education' a useful concept for educational policy? From someone who has had a career long interest in issues relating to gender and equality, this question might seem a little odd. However, the article by Astrid Sinnes & Marianne Løken (2011) has led me to re-visit the concept of 'gender-sensitive' and consider how it serves the task of promoting and ensuring equality and social justice in education. In their article *Gendered education in a gendered world: Looking beyond cosmetic solutions to the gender gap in science*, Sinnes and Løken (2012) examine the ideological constructions of gender underpinning a particular initiative in Norwegian education – Lily – which is designed to increase the number of girls engaging in STEM subjects in the later stages of education where gendered trends in the uptake of these subjects continue.

The systematic analysis of a key policy with regard to gender and STEM subjects is an important discussion providing a critical appraisal of current policy understandings of gender in education alongside an exploration of persistent gendered trends even in contexts where there is explicit gender equality. There is no doubt that a policy and programme such

as 'Lily' is a genuine attempt to address what is a matter of fairness and equality. However, Sinnes and Løken (2012) demonstrate how policy on gender and education is riddled with unquestioned and contradictory assumptions about the nature of gender. Part of the issue lies with the purpose of policy in education and the nature of policy discourse.

Policy is written in a context of 'deliverology' (Barber, 2007) where complex and often 'messy' issues are bleached out in favour of identifying seemingly enactable strategies alongside achievable targets for schools and classroom practitioners. We see in educational policy designed to increase the ratio or performance of one gender or another in a specific domain that ideas of gender equality is still being constructed in one-dimensional terms. The 'gender problem' is perceived as a statistical one and so equity must be based on numerical equality. This partly reflects the overreliance on statistics and targets as the measure of improvement in education. Monitoring aspects such as take up of a subject has been vital in making the case about the limited access and systematic marginalization of specific groups. However beyond this, statistics give little insight into the lived experiences of learners in classrooms and nor do they help us to understand the experiences of those for whom specific policies are intended to support, is vital. Skelton (2010) for example, demonstrates the impact of one of the policy assumptions we currently need to challenge: as (some) girls are attaining higher than boys, then it is assumed that if there is a 'gender problem', it now pertains to boys. Implicit in this assumption is that view that because girls appear to be doing better than boys, they now have developed the kinds of attitudes and behaviours related to confidence and autonomy as well as a readiness to enter into non-traditional areas. Drawing from a recent study of high-achieving girls, Skelton (2010) found that the data "reveals the same patterns of behaviours amongst the same groups with similar explanations provided" (p 134) as girls from a study conducted in 1985<sup>1</sup>. Both groups of girls reported that they downplayed their abilities because of a fear of being disliked. The same sets of gendered expectations are still operating to shape girls' experiences in

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<sup>1</sup> Kramer, L. (1985) *Gifted Adolescent girls: self-perceptions of ability within one middle school setting*. PhD dissertation: University of Florida, USA.

education. The surfacing of the implicit gendered assumptions is an important task if genuine equality is to be worked towards.

The article by Sinnes and Løken helps point up the paradox of gender and the consequent tensions evident in educational policy. The authors map out of the three broad approaches to gender – neutral, female-friendly and ‘gender-sensitive’ education. These positions reveal different understandings of gender and so it becomes a difficult concept on which to base policy. The sketching out of the implications for each of the positions for classroom practice and the design of curricula programmes reveals how ideas about gender co-exist and compete in policy.

There are two polarized sets of understandings that the authors characterize as ‘gender neutral’ and ‘female friendly’. The crucial issue is the construction of gender within each of these positions. The gender neutral position might seem the ideal – a place where gender is rendered insignificant in education and any assumptions about gendered capabilities and dispositions are rejected. However, a gender neutral position ignores the power regimes underpinning gender hierarchies which continue to perpetuate inequalities. Further, an assumption of this position is that it is both possible and desirable to rid any intellectual domain of cultural meanings, a position that reifies the masculinist stance of objective rationality challenged by a feminist critique of science (Harding, 1986). The risks are that in adopting a gender neutral stance we ignore the continued influence of gender hierarchies on educational aspirations, opportunities and outcomes. In contrast, a female-friendly strategy suggests that we could seek ways of enabling women and girls to contribute their particular perspectives, capabilities and values to the scientific project. In a challenge to patriarchal values the growth of woman-defined, female inscribed sets of values has many attractions including challenging the unquestioned assumptions of the project of science particularly around the purposes, values and power regimes of science. However, if we pursue this position, policy then only addresses one set of needs.

There are threads in both of these which make them attractive and enduring positions in the landscape of educational policy. If we advocate for one stance or the other, however, we are in danger of polarizing the issues and so gender policy becomes reductive and constructed as the needs of one gender are set against the needs of another (Forde 2008). These two positions lead us to either accept that gender should have no significance in science education or that gender is the defining factor in shaping the educational experience and participation of women and girls in science education.

The tensions between these positions point to the paradox of gender in education, that is at one level gender in education is highly significant in the learning lives of students and yet at another level gender should have no impact on educational experience and progress. Gender is, on the one hand, profoundly important in our understanding of self being a defining feature in our identity, On the other hand, if we are to ensure equality and justice, gender should not in any way determine educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes. It is from the tensions between these two positions that the third approach of 'gender sensitive' has developed. Adopting a gender-sensitive approach would appear to address at least partially the issues posed by gender neutral and female friendly positions. This idea of gender sensitive education has potential but it too is worthy of close scrutiny particularly now that it has been taken up in international policy on gender equality and education (Council of Europe, 2004).

### **The concept of gender difference**

It is instructive to go back to early discussions of the term 'gender-sensitive' which Martin (1981) uses in her analysis the educational philosopher R.S. Peters' (1972) notion of 'the educated person'. Martin illustrates the systematic exclusion of women's work and experiences from intellectual and disciplinary enterprises. Male bias has been profound historically not just in determining the content of disciplines but also the "aims of those fields and the ways they define their subject matter, the methods they use, the canons of objectivity and their ruling metaphors" (p 101). Further, Martin makes the point that "Females *can* acquire the traits and dispositions which constitute Peter's conception of the

educated person; he espouses an ideal; which, if it can be attained at all, can be by both sexes" (p 102). But it is at a cost: "To apply it to females is to impose on them a masculine mould" (p 102). To counter this, Martin proposes her ideal of 'gender-sensitive': "one which takes sex or gender into account when it makes a difference and ignores it when it does not" (p 109).

The balance between being sensitive to typical areas of activity and interest on the basis of gender and reinforcing stereotypical constructions of gender appropriateness is a subtle one and we need to avoid simply recuperating narrow understandings of masculinity and femininity. Therefore we need to consider when gender makes a difference. This in turn raises a more fundamental question about the concept of 'difference'. Much of the work on gender in education has been premised on the idea of 'gender difference' as an organizing category. In order to find answers to the 'gender problem' there has been in both psychology and in education a search for gender differences and the causes of these.

Historically gender has been a significant issue in psychology, for example, for Terman and Miles (1936) gender was a bi polar uni-dimensional trait – masculine to feminine - and that it was good for men to be masculine and women to be feminine. With the development of feminism the issue of gender was given a new impetus to challenge the patriarchal construction of gender in which maleness/masculinity was positioned as normative. Early feminist work in psychology focused on examining how far perceived differences were real or superficial. A central question in this work was to identify what gender differences have been identified consistently. Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) conducted a groundbreaking study of a meta-analysis of over 2000 previous psychological studies on gender difference across a variety of domains: personality, social behaviour, memory and abilities. The purpose of the study was to identify what differences come up consistently and to propose an explanation of these differences. This study set the pattern for work over the next three decades in the psychology of individual differences (Lips and Colwill 1978, Hyde 2005). While this body of work might seem to hold possibilities of finding answers to the 'gender problem' in education we need to be cautious of any such claims particularly because of the bias is

towards the search for difference rather than similarity in such studies. As Squire (1989) argues:

feminist psychologies often assume a female subject is either like a male subject, or completely different from him. They treat all women and all men as if they were the same; [this is] to ignore the complexity and extent of power relations which affect subjects; and to replicate the stasis and dogmatism of traditional psychology (p 3).

Thus gender is constructed as two mutually exclusive categories based on the empirically evident sex differences. However, Lippa (2005) concludes that the gender differences identified tend to be small and more significantly, “[g]ender is not simply a matter of *sex differences*’. It is also a matter of variations within sex” (p 79-80, italics in original). There is a failure to recognise that there are significant overlaps between the genders and often in-gender variance might be stronger.

### **Gender sensitive education**

If gender-sensitive education rests on an understanding of a strict binary gender difference there is the danger of crystallizing specific learning strategies, content and intellectual domains which serve boys’ needs or girls’ needs and which become polarized into existing binaries of male/active/challenge as opposed to female/passive/conformity. Thus gender sensitive becomes reduced to sets of practices such as adjusting materials, the content, experiences and the use of role models to reflect the interests and experiences of one gender or another. Such strategies bring limited change because there is a lack appreciation of the operation of gender regimes of power. We need to look to a more developed understanding of gender sensitive education. Scantlebury *et al.*’s (1996) description of gender sensitive education illustrates the way in which teachers can respond to issues such as the well-established gendered patterns in aspects of interaction relating to the dispersal of questions, attention and meaningful contributions in the public space of the classroom. These are deliberative strategies to re-balance the socio-political processes of the classroom. Thus in this notion of gender sensitive education the emphasis is ‘sensitive’ through which

we can adopt an interrogatory stance in relation to the concept of gender and its place in the classroom.

The idea of gender sensitive education is messy, complex and sometimes contradictory. In Martin's original construction and subsequent commentators (see Diller *et al.* 1996) the complexity and fluidity of the concept of gender is clear and so a critical stance is vital. This critical stance is suggested in the final aspect noted by Scantlebury *et al.*'s. (1996) description of gender sensitive education: "All students would show respect for differences in others' attitudes, opinions and behaviour attributable to a student's gender, race, or socio-economic status" (p 273). In this we need to make overt the power regimes that underpin gender (and other social factors), whether we are addressing the learning needs of (some) boys or (some) girls). We can see this 'gender-sensitive' approach in Warrington and Younger's (2006) critical review of their own work around boys' achievement. They are critical of the adoption of strategies such learning styles based on a deterministic construction of gender - that boys learned differently from girls. To counter such strategies Warrington and Younger sought "to develop an alternative approach which acknowledges the diversity of boys, recognizes the problems some girls face and focuses on achievement for all within an inclusive context' (p 273). If we are to adopt this 'sensitive' stance to gender then we need to interrogate the concept of 'gender' itself and consider the ways in which gender is reproduced in classrooms.

### **The concept of gender**

The idea that gender alone is a sufficient explanation of the educational experiences and outcomes achieved by girls and by boys has to be laid aside in any notion of 'gender-sensitive' education. We need to include the idea of 'intersectionality' and appreciate where gender intersects with other social factors such as ethnicity, social class, sexuality and disability. However even within ideas of intersectionality, we must be cautious about homogenizing specific groups, for example, working class girls, Afro-Caribbean boys. As Mills and Keddie (2010) argue "we stress the importance of recognizing diversity with the categories of "boys" and "girls" *and* within particular groups of boys" (p 407, italics in



original) and I would add, of girls. Francis (2010) notes the increased understanding and recognition of the intersection of gender and other social factors but also points to the fluidity and contradictions within the 'individual productions of gender'. In order to understand these individual productions of gender we need now to explore this concept of 'gender' by drawing on theorists such as Butler (1990) who has questioned the concept of 'gender' as a useful category to organize around for social change and use these analyses as a tool to develop gender-sensitive education.

In both a gender neutral and a female friendly position, gender is seen as the cultural response to biological sex differences. This conceptualisation seems to imply that, because there is corporeality, sex already exists in/on the body. The figure of the body is conceived of as "...mute, prior to culture, awaiting signification" (Butler, 1990: 147). Butler disputes this conceptualisation of gender and instead illustrates the cultural apparatus and power regimes which constantly cite immutable sex differences as the means of defining gender. Butler argues that instead of conceptualising gender as the cultural shaping of behaviour and expectation premised on immutable sex differences, gender should be defined in a much more dynamic way: "...gender is an identity, tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (p 140). By viewing gender in this way, Butler reverses the hierarchy with gender being the discursive means by which 'sexed nature' is given an ontological basis. Gender is performance: through language and social exchange, through repetitive signifying that is regulated by the discourses of patriarchy, gender identity is performed and regulated as normative. Butler's description of gender allows us to reveal the regimes of power that perpetuate and regulate gender and, at the same time, places agency within this understanding of gender, that these regimes of power can be challenged. We can 'perform gender' differently. Butler (1993) argues that performativity is not a single act but is "...that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (p 2). If change is to come we need to understand and challenge these dominant discursive practices. Thus Francis (2010) argues that "if the identification of 'gender' is not made by the body, it must be made via analysis of performed behaviour" (p 478). This raises both the challenge of identifying and

categorizing different behaviours as 'masculine' and 'feminine', which comes with the risk of the stereotyping and/or reification of gender binaries inherent in such an approach (p 478). Therefore we need to find some way of understanding the fluid and sometimes contradictory nature of these repeated stylized acts.

Drawing from Haraway's (1988) discussion of situated knowledge, Sinnes and Løken (2011) suggest that one way forward is to listen "...to the many smaller stories in order to gain knowledge about the world" (p 21). Theorists such as Mac an Ghaill (1994), Epstein (1998), Reay (2001) and Connell (2000) have pointed to the existence of masculinities and femininities. This multiplicity has significant attractions enabling us, as part of a gender-sensitive approach to challenge narrow understandings of gender-appropriateness. However, the balance between individuation and collective marginalisation again is subtle. We could be forced back to a gender-blind position viewing any patterns simply the result of individual differences in ability, interest or preference and so experiences of marginalisation and bias are masked. We need some way to explore the co-existence of dominant and minority discourses.

One possibility can be found in Francis's (2010) discussion of 'gender monoglossia' and 'heteroglossia'. Taking Butler's (1990) analysis of gender as performance as her starting point, Francis draws from the linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's exploration of language where the term 'monoglossia' is used to denote the dominant form of language which is seen as "unitary and total" (Francis, 2010: 479) but at the same time there also exists heteroglossia, where there is "fluidity, contradiction and resistance" (*ibid*). Francis draws from empirical observational data from a study of high-ability girls to illustrate the way in which gender monoglossia and heteroglossia operate. Within this sample of girls, a wide range of behaviours were observed which moved beyond binary understandings of masculinity and femininity. Yet at the same time, the dominant position of gender monoglossia is maintained: "the monoglossic account of gender would include dominant binary understanding of masculinity as rational, strong, active and femininity as emotional, weak and passive" (p 479).

These theoretical discussions of the concept of gender may seem distant from the concerns of policy makers and educational practitioners alike. However, if we are to pursue this notion of 'gender-sensitive', the complex and often contradictory nature of gender needs to be grappled with. In a gender-sensitive stance we need to recognise and challenge the dominant discourses about gender appropriateness where assumptions and practices serve to reify existing patterns of gender discrimination, while at the same time acknowledge that gender as performance may be played in ways that are fluid and contradictory. As Francis (2010) argues:

The conceptual tools of gender monoglossia and heteroglossia facilitate the marrying of these two positions: we may see patterns of gendered behaviours and inequalities as expressive of monoglossic gender practice, but within this be attuned to the complexity and contradiction at play (heteroglossia), both in the diversity of gender production and in our categorisation of it. It is this attunedness to heteroglossia that offers potential for disruption and the avoidance of the reification of gender norms, and the exposure of gender as discursively produced rather than inherent (p 487).

## **Conclusion**

Constructing gender as performance may seem to be whimsical, the idea that we can take 'on and off' our gender. However, in this notion of gender as a set of stylized acts both exposes the regimes of power that maintain versions of masculinity and femininity as normal and appropriate and allows for the possibility of agency and change. This construction of gender in a gender-sensitive approach places the audience/reader in a critical role. Thus in a classroom, teachers and students can begin to appreciate both the possibility of multiplicity in behaviours and attitudes while at the same time understand the operation of hegemonic discourses including those that underpin policy, curricula and pedagogy which reify narrow definitions of gender appropriateness.

**[3506 words]**

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