

Too Much Talk and Not Enough Action? Trends in Research on Gender and Education in Europe and the Anglophone World¹

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Abstract

This presentation reflects on the development of the field of gender and education, as it emerged from the late 1970s onwards. It considers the reasons for its creation and the impact on it of various waves of feminism, and of Anglophone² ideas. The presentation continues with the findings of a small survey of the journal Gender and Education, the main journal of the field, at three points in almost 20 years of existence: 1990, 1998 and 2007. The survey findings suggest that the field of gender education has been influenced by changes both within feminism and higher education but that there has been a continuing dominance of Anglophone ideas. The presentation concludes with a call for greater reflexivity among gender researchers and suggestions for future action in order to make the field more inclusive and practice/policy oriented.

Background

This presentation reflects on the development of the field of gender and education, as it emerged from the late 1970s onwards. I was involved right from the beginning when, as a teacher and later a postgraduate student and academic, I was assiduous in my criticism of schooling and education generally as sexist and a major target for reform. Since then I have mostly worked in higher education and have, among other things, endeavoured to raise the profile of gender as an area of educational research, policy and practice. I have had a particular interest in whether and how feminist scholarship in education has changed over the years (Weiner, 1994; Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999; Weiner & Berge, 2001). I have spent most of my working life in the UK, indeed in London, though worked for eight years or so, from 1998-2005, in Sweden, where my track record on gender and also on antiracism and multiculturalism was of specific interest. I moved back to the UK in 2005, this time Scotland and am presently attached to the University of Edinburgh. The arguments of this paper are drawn from my experience as above of working in gender and education as a teacher and then later as a researcher, in varying national and international settings.

My first point is that greater reflexivity and critique is needed concerning feminist scholarship or, gender studies as it is now often called. In some ways, reflexivity has been a constant within feminism to the extent that there has been a range of internal disagreements, perhaps inevitably so for such a wide-spread and multi-level social movement (Yong, 1989; Hirsch & Fox Keller, 1990; Weiner, 1994). However, currently the divisions seem less ideological than in the past and more bound up with structures arising from globalisation and within the Academy itself. Western feminism, for example, has moved from second to third wave feminism(s) to address the fact that despite second-wave feminist action and the consequent removal of formal barriers to gender discrimination in many (Western) countries, the expected

¹ Presentation to 'Educating Women: A Conference on the Status of Research on the Education of Girls and Women', Hull House, Chicago, Illinois, USA 22-3 May 2008. It draws heavily on a recent co-written paper (with Elisabet Öhrn) entitled 'The Sound of Silence: on absence (and presence) in the field of gender and education'

² Strictly speaking, an Anglophone is a person who speaks the English language. The term specifically refers to people whose cultural background is primarily associated with English language, regardless of ethnic and geographical differences. The Anglophone culture is largely the legacy of the British colonial empire. Thus in this paper, included in the Anglophone category are studies from the UK, and English-speaking post-Colonial countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and USA.

equality goals have not been realised.³ Younger feminists have thus by and large turned to theories and explanations rather than to the political action favoured by earlier feminist generations. Meanwhile, global agencies such as the World Bank and UNESCO have activated programmes of gender reform in developing countries that largely equate to the demands of second wave feminism (Aikman & Underhalter, 2005). Eradication of gender discrimination in education, employment etc. has been adopted as a 'global' policy because lack of education particularly for women is seen as providing the main obstacle to global stability and economic growth. However, as part of a 'new' global discourse of equity and inclusion within development agencies and national governments and its social development agenda (Leach, 2003: 7), these initiatives have themselves been undermined to some extent by other policy strategies of the same agencies; for example, structural adjustment programmes which offer investment and loans to poor countries in exchange for increased privatisation and a reduced public sector. The literatures of the various orientations of feminist scholarship as outlined above are however largely separate; third-wave Western feminists tend not to read the literature on gender and development, and vice-versa. The field of gender and education is implicated since it largely reflects the third-wave interests of Western feminism. The issue for me is that this has meant that the aspirations of the creators of the field - about inclusiveness and social justice – seem to have been lost.

So in this presentation, I first consider some of the reasons for the emergence of gender and education as a field and the impact on it of various waves of feminism, and of Anglophone ideas. The presentation continues with the findings of a brief survey of the journal *Gender and Education*, the main journal of the field, at three points in its almost two decades of existence: 1990, 1998 and 2007 - to ascertain the varying impact of second/third wave feminism, Anglophone predominance and shifts within Academia. I conclude with a call for greater reflexivity about what we are doing as feminist academics, and suggestions for future action with the aim of making the field more inclusive and practice/policy oriented.

Gender and Education as a Field

What has come to be known as second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s across the western world, concerned primarily with generating gender change aimed at improving the conditions of girls and women. It was thus a major influence on the emergence of gender and education as a field. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the field was largely concerned with sex-differences research aimed at highlighting girls' under-achievement in examinations, under-enrolment in 'male' school subjects, and under-recruitment to 'male' careers and professions (Clarricoates, 1978; Deem, 1980; Kelly, 1981; Walden & Walkerdine, 1982; Weiner, 1985). However, as examination patterns started to favour girls in the late 1980s, the terrain shifted to more emphasis on exploring reasons for boys' and young men's relative academic failure. In the Nordic countries⁴ and in other non-Anglophone countries in Western Europe (particularly Holland) early efforts concentrated on seeking improvement in the conditions of girls in schools, getting more girls and women into male-dominated subjects and occupations, and recognising the impact of the hidden curriculum (i.e. socialisation processes) on girls and women more widely. Policy in those countries also shifted, though

³ *First wave* nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminism concentrated on opening up access of woman as a category to political, economic and social aspect of public and private life from which they had been hitherto excluded. *Second wave* feminism starting in the 1960s fought for a broader agenda which concentrated on social issues specifically affecting women: for example, reproduction, sexuality, domestic labour, violence in the home, and paid working conditions. *Third wave* feminism which emerged in the early 1990s argues for multiplicity of perspectives and for a more robust concept of agency which incorporates women's ability to act autonomously and politically, despite often crippling social sanctions (McNay, 2000)

⁴ The Nordic countries comprise Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and sometimes, Iceland.

later, towards support for research investigating the low relative achievement of boys and their so-called ‘laddish’ and antisocial behaviour.

From the 1990s onwards, concern with political action on gender began to decline due to the diminishing influence of the women’s movement and second-wave feminism and also to the post-structural turn of third-wave feminism or what Sue Clegg refers to as the ‘retreat into theoreticism’ (Clegg, 2006: 310). Gender researchers who previously might have self-identified as both activists and researchers, now no longer did so, at least to the same extent. In the case of Britain, the combination of interest in gender theory and the demands of performance culture and new public management within universities meant that gender researchers were less likely to think of themselves as change agents and more as scholars in one or more legitimate disciplinary fields, e.g. sociology of education, with perhaps a specialism in gender. This theoreticist turn was less apparent in Non-Anglophone (European) countries perhaps because performativity⁵ (management by targets and measured performance) and managerialism did not enter universities to such an extent as in the USA or UK.

However, we have also seen the emergence of new forms of feminist activism. A new generation of younger feminists has sought engagement in a variety of ‘pro-feminist’ or ‘post-feminist’ activity. For example, the university-based Warwick Anti-Sexism Society (WASS) in England, established in 2004, was set up to campaign against sexism, and develop a new language of action for ‘post’ feminist times. As Lambert and Parker (2006: 474) note, a concern to distance themselves from perceptions of ‘loony raving feminists’, was combined with establishing a meaningful collective identity around anti-sexism and more ‘relevant’ forms of feminism. Here, challenging stereotypes and attracting men to the anti-sexist cause became twin pillars of what Whelehan (2000) terms ‘new’ or ‘post feminism. The scope of WASS action was however limited to the immediate vicinity of the university, and therefore tended not to involve making connections with other student groups, either in the UK or abroad.

Networking is another form of feminist activism in the form of, for example, professional ‘networks’ of women aimed at enabling them individually and collectively to challenge stereotypes, and effect personal and organisational change (Mavin & Bryans, 2002). Usually women-only, such networks are utilised to exchange information, give feedback on work situations, share experiences, and provide help with career development. This form of networking, it is argued, constitutes an ‘emancipatory process’ which enables sharing experience and raising consciousness about the inequalities women in education face (Mavin & Bryans, 2002: 248) although detractors might point to its concern with individual enhancement rather than altruism.

So, currently, it might be said that the field of gender and education includes, on the one hand, increasingly ‘theoreticist’-oriented feminist scholars, and on the other, younger activists and older networkers interested mainly in forging individualistic and locally-situated forms of feminist action.

Practices of Exclusion⁶

A key problem for the field is the way in which the Anglophone/non-Anglophone dualism has been played out. This had a special meaning when I worked with Swedish colleagues because my Anglophone background was seen as particularly valuable in helping them get published. I became aware of young researchers in Sweden who need to publish in reputed journals, yet face

⁵ Judith Butler describes performativity as “...that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.” (Butler qtd. In *Identity: A reader*, 2000)

⁶ This part of the paper in particular draws on the paper written with Elisabet Öhrn

the twin obstacles of writing in a second language and drawing on a cultural context that is seen as outside the gender and education discursive 'norm'. The outcome is that they (as well as senior colleagues) face substantial difficulties in getting their work 'listened to' at conferences, and even more so, getting it into print. However, responsibility for lack of appeal and/or rejection of manuscripts is placed with the 'unsuccessful' researcher rather than the overall system of reviewing or the lack of language support offered. The consequence at the individual level is that many non-Anglophone researchers give up presenting or trying to publish in English, thus restricting themselves to the often (very) few available national-language discussion fora and journals.

This rejection of non-Anglophone research and ideas has had a knock-on impact at the level of the discipline. Non-Anglophone concerns and discourses are rarely visible unless substantial attempts are made to fit them in dominant Anglophone discourses. Non-Anglophone research tends thus to be viewed as exotic and unusual. This is exemplified in a recent overview of articles in the *Gender and Education Journal* where the editors, Skelton and Francis (2005) note the relative over-representation of contributions from the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The reason they give is that researchers from developing countries tend to provide 'case studies exploring specific issues in particular countries' (Skelton and Francis, 2005: 2). Perspectives from such sources are thus judged as illuminating the specificity of the region while Anglophone perspectives are seen as more generalisable to other countries and contexts. A similar point is made by Larsson (2006) who argues, for the field of ethnography, that "the relation between the Swedish/Scandinavian network and the Anglo-American is on the whole unilateral" (p 191). Swedes invite British and North American researchers to Sweden, and refer to and use their research - whereas the opposite seldom happens. Larsson also discusses the difficulty for non-Anglophone writers of attaining international visibility largely because (in this case for Scandinavia) their journals are not included in citation indexes.

A similar excluding practice is the one-way flow of "travelling" discourses (Mahony & Hextall, 2001; Lundahl, 2005) from Anglophone to non-Anglophone settings (see also Arnesen, Lahelma & Öhrn, 2007). British research on masculinities and boys, for example, has had considerable impact on policy-makers in Sweden whereas the importance of Swedish state policy for gender research, has attracted little equivalent attention in Britain. This inattention is surprising given that gender as a research field has been more important to Nordic policy-makers than their British counterparts, with no British equivalent to the Swedish National Graduate School in Gender Studies established in the early 2000s.⁷ As a consequence of such state gender policies, Sweden has witnessed a discernible upsurge of feminist doctoral research on gender and schooling (e.g. Berggren, 2001; Gannerud, 1999; Forsberg, 2002; Karlsson, 2003; Ambjörnsson, 2004; Sandell, 2007, Nyström, 2007). This also means that there is likely to be a critical mass of feminist researchers working on educational issues in Sweden for the foreseeable future. The relative impact of the state aside, this exemplar of one-way travelling discourse demonstrates both how the dominant voice is able to squeeze out others and the consequences for the eventual shaping of a field.

Survey of Gender and Education Journal

⁷ Full time doctoral students were first admitted in January 2002 and by 2005, there were 39 doctoral students representing 21 different disciplines. Established by the Swedish parliament, the aim of the graduate school was determinedly cross-disciplinary and wide-ranging.

The National Graduate School of Gender Studies works through interdisciplinary collaboration with participants from various scientific environments with diverse traditions. This diversity affects the structure of the graduate research training, scientific problem solving procedures, methodology, theory, reflexivity, and ethics (Graduate School website)

This section reports on a survey of the content of articles published in the *Gender and Education Journal* for three specific years: 1990, 1998, and 2007. The journal was selected because it is usually the first journal of choice for gender researchers working in education in many countries. The particular years were chosen to provide a sense of if and how content has changed from the 1990s onwards. 1990 was the first full year of publication (the journal was established in 1989), and 2007 is the most recent full year of publication, with 1998 an approximate midway point. The current thrust of the journal is articulated on its website as to further ‘feminist knowledge, theory, consciousness, action and debate:

Gender and Education is an international forum for discussion of multidisciplinary educational research and ideas that focus on gender as a category of analysis. Contributors should bear in mind that they are addressing an international audience. The journal grew out of a feminist politics and is committed to developing the critical discussion of gender and education in its broadest sense. It is particularly interested in the place of gender in relation to other key social differences and seeks to further feminist knowledge, theory, consciousness, action and debate. We welcome which examine and theorize the interrelated experiences of women and girls and men and boys, and how these shape and are shaped by other social differences. We expect articles to engage in feminist debate and to go beyond the simple description of what boys/men and girls/women do. Education will be interpreted in a broad sense to cover both formal and informal aspects, including nursery, primary and secondary education; youth cultures inside and outside schools; adult, community, further and higher education; vocational education and training; media education; parental education (journal website)⁸

The titles and abstracts of ‘original articles’ were examined to identify the range of topics, and predominant orientation (theoretical, empirical, archival, practice/policy) and whether originating from Anglophone or Non-Anglophone settings. The findings are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below.

⁸ <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/09540253.html> (accessed 9-Apr-08)

Table 1: Contents of the *Gender and Education* journal for 1990, 1998, and 2007

Year of publication	1990 (vol.2)	1998 (vol.10)	2007 (vol.19)
Topics (appearing more than once)	HE (4), historical (2), equal opportunities policies (2)	HE (7), FE (4), feminist pedagogy (3), women teachers (2), school management (2), girls (2)	Teacher Ed.* (7), primary (3) boys (3), management (2), HE (2), mothers (2), girls (2), teachers (2)
Theoretical	3	8	9
Empirical	6	17	24
Archives	1	1	-
Practice/policy	8	-	1
Viewpoint articles	6	-	-
(Essay reviews)	-	-	(3)
(Re-publications)	-	-	(3)
Other	-	1 (no abstract)**	1 (editorial)***
Anglophone	22	24	31
Non-Anglophone	2	3	4
Total articles	24	27	35

* Special issue on teacher education

** No indication given of orientation of article

*** Lengthy editorial, counted as article

Table 2: Topics covered once only per yearly volume in *Gender and Education Journal* in 1990, 1998, and 2007

Topic covered once only
<p>1990 Primary schools, European legislation, feminist pedagogy, coeducation, AIDS/HIV, girls, children's books, outdoor education, feminist evaluation, boys, careers, national curriculum, computing, adult education, lesbian & gay issues, disability.</p>
<p>1998 Religion, women's careers, computer science, film studies, history of domestic subjects, research, teacher education.</p>
<p>2007 Literacy, children's readers, female ballet dancers, post-school choice, HIV/AIDS, school front office, anorexia, glass ceiling, 'voice', educational achievement, verbal abuse, computer games.</p>

We can see that the number of articles increased over the period as more journal issues were published - 24 in 1990 (three issues per year), to 27 (four issues per year) to 35 (six issues per year). This suggests the growing popularity and maturity of the field.⁹ In terms of orientation, the 1990 volume has more articles on policy/practice and also more viewpoint articles which as indicated, imply the expression of points of view or entry into a debate. Viewpoint articles are missing altogether from the later issues. Thus, articles from 1998 and 2007 are more likely to be theoretical or empirical, with a tendency in 2007 towards greater emphasis on research studies. Little difference is discernible, however, in the level of dominance of Anglophone writers with few articles appearing from non-Anglophone sources over the years. Overall, the topics of

⁹ The journal is now included in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) which gives it added academic status.

the papers suggest a greater preoccupation with issues of Western feminism than with developments in other parts of the world (viz. two articles on HIV/AIDS and one on European legislation)

Concluding points

This presentation has sought to provide a brief overview of the field that has come to be known as ‘gender and education’. Dissonance between different feminist waves and the dominance of Anglophone interests and issues have been posited as possible exclusionary influences. The small study of the main journal of the gender and education field presented suggests that second-wave feminism was more prominent in 1990 and absorption with theory and research, a characteristic of third-wave feminism, is more evident in 1998 and 2007. The study also suggests a preoccupation with Western feminist concerns and a relative lack of interest in other parts of the world, developing or otherwise.

So what can we make of the study and its implications? First, it has to be acknowledged that the development of any new disciplinary field is complex, and therefore the struggles over status, power and knowledge faced by the emerging field of gender and education are not to be underestimated (Erixon-Arreman, 2005). Gender researchers in education (in Britain and elsewhere) have in some ways been enormously successful in scaling the walls of Academia. The field now ‘owns’ a high-ranked (British) journal, two-yearly conference, series of regional conferences and seminars, and an academic society. It offers also a productive career and publications pathway, at least for those whose language and cultural milieu is English-speaking.¹⁰ In so doing however, it seems that the field, originally created to expose and eradicate bias, has been compelled to jettison many of its inclusive practices (e.g. encouragement of debates and standpoints with/among practitioners) and has missed the opportunity to forge a discipline that is able to embrace practitioners as well as academics, policy and practice as well as theory, the developing as well as developed world.¹¹ This is not to say that I am ‘against’ theory; neither do I advocate the return to debates about sex or gender difference of the 1970s and 1980s. Rather, I want gender researchers to regain a sense of political as well as academic purpose. In so doing, the hope is that gender and education as a field might be re-shaped to be more inclusive.

What, we could ask ourselves, might the field of gender and education look like if the flow of research ideas was reversed and non-Anglophone research was re-positioned as central rather than peripheral to the field? Perhaps, current ‘second-wave’ concerns in developing countries of getting more girls into basic education might elevate political action higher up the current gender and education agenda. Or, greater attention to Nordic gender discourses might provide a focus on the potential of the state in promoting gender change. Or, research and analytic frameworks might be found which are more effective in challenging the current ‘obsession’ with boys and men.

Other more ‘practical’ means for making the field more equal and inclusive include;

- better language and editorial support for researchers/contributors to conferences and journals for whom English is not a first language
- editorial policies aimed at extending theorising to embrace those offering alternative perspectives on, and experiences of, the field.

¹⁰ A recent example is the proportion of books on gender among the new books announced by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in its March 2008 newsletter. Eight out of the 33 books mentioned (or just under a quarter) were primarily on gender including one feminist treatment of sex education (*Research Intelligence*, 102: 26-7).

¹¹ Action researchers, for example, have been much better at allowing a combination of different levels of writing and researching about education.

- non-Anglophone scholars invited (e.g. as referees) to comment on work other than from their own country or region.
- Anglophone researchers required to incorporate non-Anglophone literature where possible, particularly if written in English.¹²

These strategies, I want to suggest, would aid the development of new understandings of gender and education in terms of the changes and developments that are deemed significant, and would challenge the automatic assumption that the Anglophone voice counts most, and that Anglophone topics and issues are of most interest generally. Feminists working on educational projects in developing countries seem to have a better grasp of what such an 'inclusive' field of feminist scholarship might look like (Leach, 2003, Unterhalter, 2005; Morley, Fennell and Arnot, 2008) We have the exemplars, We have the knowledge. We have the talk. All we need is a little action!

¹² This could be easily done as Nordic doctoral theses are usually in paperback form with an English abstract and summary. They are also increasingly publicly accessible via university websites.

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