

EnGendering Change

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Abstract

This is a story of research, reflection and learning about a range of education issues which are related to the social construction of gender. Such issues include self-esteem and body image, social relationships, bullying harassment and violence, academic engagement and futures. Teachers are enormously challenged by a constant stream of directives and requirements. The author reports on how school and system communities can be supported to share, investigate and critically reflect on their experiences and perceptions and apply a gender lens to develop their pedagogy, curriculum, management and leadership for social change. Findings from the 2008 AWE *Leading Social Change Project* research are shared to support the argument for enGendering change.

Haven't we heard about this before?

For more than a decade we have witnessed a diminishment of concern about educational and social outcomes for girls, a positioning of men and boys as the new victims or competing victims in gender equity and schooling priorities and a revival of anti-feminist and essentialist interpretations of gender issues. It is clear from the literature reviewed and surveys and interviews I have undertaken that many educators have been persuaded by simplistic and essentialist explanations for engagement and behavioural issues and that they are unaware of the possible counter-productivity and dangers of reinforcing the very attitudes and behaviours they seek to address. It is also clear that there is an urgent need to consider what might have been lost in the backlash against feminism. Feminism is not a dirty word. The critical analysis of feminists has been foundational to the advancement of women and girls and has included a comprehensive critique of models of masculinity. It is important to acknowledge and respect their insight and the great difference they have made. Despite decades of research and resourcing in the field within the schooling system, the virtual silence about the construction and impact of hegemonic masculinity in our culture (Connell, 1997) remains a major concern and we need to take into greater account, factors such as the construction of desire, power and disadvantage, hegemonic masculinity, and the interplay of gender with other factors such as socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, disability and geographical location.

The dominant influence on community perceptions, including those of many educators, managers and bureaucrats, has been the media and media promoted popular

‘experts’ and this has resulted in theoretically impoverished and adversarial frameworks for action in relation to many behaviour issues, but particularly bullying and violence. Still, understanding about the connections is limited and resisted. An actively feminist approach is required to address perceptions such as backlash assumptions such as the need for empowerment of boys and more male role models and teachers; to critique and transform single sex programs based on stereotyped notions of girls’ or boys’ interests and values, and the evident underutilisation of opportunities and resources which refer to the social construction of gender.

Understanding the social construction of gender

Essentialism

Essentialism or biological determinism is the belief that there is some essential biological difference in brain structures, learning styles, and interests between males and females, that boys are possessed of particular masculine character traits such as aggressiveness and competitiveness, and are naturally more active and demanding – boys being boys. Essentialism also refers to adrenalin and hormones and differing rates of maturity for boys and girls. It is proposed that these differences must be accommodated and catered for in program design and implementation.

Examples of strategies founded on this understanding include: investigation of the presumed different learning styles of boys and girls; wilderness camps for boys and make-up and etiquette classes for girls; and the push for male role models and employment of more male teachers. Biological determinist theory is problematic because it cannot provide an adequate explanation for the wide range of differences in behaviours amongst females as a group, or for the wide range of behaviours amongst males as a group. These groups are not homogenous. There is a wide diversity within the population of boys, as there is within the population of girls. Identities, like social structures, are not natural and immutable, but are, in fact, dynamic and shifting constructions. Anti-feminist arguments tend to draw on essentialism and sex role theory in accounting for and excusing the behaviour of some boys and men, and promoting activities such as single sex programs. Emerging understandings point to the risk of essentialising gender and the need to move beyond positioning males and females as polar opposites.

Socialisation/ Sex Role Theory

This is the theory that boys and girls experience a passive, sponge-like absorption of messages, from models of masculinity and femininity, which is mediated through social institutions such as the family and schools. Behaviours and identities are seen to be consistent and problems are described as a product of attitudes passively acquired through socialisation. This explanation has been found to be insufficient on a number of levels. A fundamental problem is the strong link between socialisation theory and biological determinism theory. Socialisation theory actually reinforces ideas about difference based on biology. Discussions about equal opportunity or sex roles refer to assumed sex differences. Sex role theory is problematic in the same way that we don’t talk about essential and immutable race or class differences or race roles or class roles – because the exercise of power in these areas of social life is more obvious. The socialisation explanation also fails to account for individual agency in

choosing ideas and behaviours, or the influence of gendered power differentials in diverse environments. That is, it does not explain why gendered behaviours are not consistent – why some boys and girls do not exhibit the characteristics and behaviours ascribed to their sex, or how people are able to act differently according to their changing social contexts, that is, depending upon where they are and who they are with. This notion of choice or agency is a significant gap in the socialisation explanation for behaviour and is accounted for in the social construction of gender model.

Feminist understandings about gender and power

The social construction framework explains that there is no essential, universally distinct character that is masculine or feminine – behaviours are influenced by a range of factors including class, culture, ability, religion, age, body shape and sexual preference. Construction of gender theory argues that girls and boys are actively involved in constructing their own gendered identities. Men and women can even take up a range of different masculinities and femininities that may at times contradict each other. This construction of gender identities (or subjectivities), varieties of femininities or masculinities, is also seen as dynamic, ongoing, changing and changeable, rather than static or fixed. Allard, Cooper, Hildebrand and Wealands (1995, p. 24) assert that we “are not passively shaped by the larger societal forces such as schools or the media, but are active in selecting, adapting and rejecting the dimensions we choose to incorporate, or not, into our version of gender”. This emphasis on the complexities and contradictions in the social relationships that shape our understandings of what it means to be male and female – both individually and collectively, and the notion of agency, or conscious choice, distinguish the model of the social construction of gender from essentialism or sex role theory.

Poststructuralists emphasise the effects of language and discourse – how gender is spoken into existence; the intersections of race, class, dis/ability and sexuality; the problem of masculinist structures and the need to disrupt and transform male/female binaries. Unless we understand and challenge these binaries, we will, according to Alloway (1995, p.12), perpetuate “gendered ways of being that give girls relative to boys lower paid and less socially prestigious levels of education and work, inequitable access to public sources of power, and disproportionate family responsibilities...[and] an order that privileges boys in terms of future earning capacity and establishment of positions of social power, at the same time exposing them to higher-risk drinking, self-destruction, violence towards others and criminality”.

Social construction of gender theory is more complex and difficult to grasp than essentialist or socialisation explanations for behaviour, and does not promise easy or quick solutions. Key findings of the research into education and social change point to the primary significance of “threshold knowledge”, however systems, leaders and educators generally do not make adequate links between the social construction of gender and how this influences identity formation, beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and social and academic outcomes. Such knowledge has a critical influence on in the way issues are/are not identified and in the selection and development of curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

It is important to acknowledge and understand how personally challenging it is to consider long held, often unconscious beliefs about the meaning of being female or male. Considering how gender is a social construct results in a calling into question of many of our previous decisions and actions in relationships, parenting and work, and requires a reassessment and change of direction for the future. Emotionality, fear and resistance often arise when a social construction of gender analysis is held up against perceptual frameworks which are individualist or essentialist ('boys and girls are different', 'boys will be boys'). Sometimes responses are ardently anti-feminist, or oftentimes an essentialist explanation is just easier to understand and articulate, simpler, more comfortable, and appealing to notions of 'common-sense'. It is not surprising that many of us "resist a socially critical view and explanations about how behaviour and performance is related to the construction of gender by refusing to acknowledge the problem, or by supporting explanations that do not challenge (our) own agency and responsibility" (Framework for Gender Equity, 1997).

EnGendering education

A sophisticated approach involves identifying genuine issues of gender disadvantage through asking 'which girls?' or 'which boys?' and understanding the ways power structures privilege males and 'the masculine' both culturally and economically, to decrease the differentiated behaviours that constrain girls' and boys' schooling and post-school success. A focus on gender-just teaching and learning requires that teachers critically examine their own assumptions and behaviours and acquire a deep and critical understanding of how gender is constructed so as to identify and challenge (rather than reinscribe) the structures and practices that normalise and perpetuate gender inequity, and problematise and offer alternatives to dominant gender constructions. School and systemic support are central to enabling progressive practice with collaboration and dialogue around issues of gender justice and gender theory, the development and review of gender justice policy, and resource provision for ongoing teacher professional learning and comprehensive action research (Keddie, 2009, unpublished).

The AWE Leading Social Change Project

The Leading Social Change project was funded by an Australian Government Office for Women Leadership and Development Grant. It responds to findings from the literature and from the Leading Social Change survey and acknowledges that educational leadership "should be exercised by principals, deputy principals and heads of departments, but it is not limited to them and should also be exercised by teachers, students, parents and others" (Lingard et al., 2003). The project thus aimed to enable all educators, particularly those who are marginalised by their geographical location or otherwise disadvantaged by their inability to attend networking or professional development opportunities, to access current research and resources, share information and ideas, and participate in professional learning opportunities.

Specific project goals included:

- the development of caring, collaborative learning communities of "energy and knowledge creators" (Fullan, 2001, p. 270)

- the heightening of individual and systemic awareness of gender justice issues and specific key areas of concern for educators
- supporting reflection about personal gender identity constructs and their influence on our interpretative frameworks
- the identification and criticism of simplistic, essentialist and anti-feminist perspectives and political agendas which are constraining progress in our systems and schools
- the fostering of collective professional responsibility, confidence and courage to resist the popular discourse, silencing and inertia around gender justice
- the supporting and influencing of educators to better utilise management and curriculum opportunities and the wealth of existent resources, and the provision of models and examples of successful practice throughout Australian communities in a range of locations.

The project goals have been pursued through a range of activities such as an extensive literature review, surveys and interviews investigating personal and professional issues and experiences, professional development workshops, website development to include guidelines, networking and communication facilities, research tools, and an extensive virtual library of links, articles and resources.

The argument for a renewed focus on gender is supported by the findings from the Leading Social Change survey which asked about areas of interest and concern for educators; inspiration for activism; experiences of injustice; positive actions towards gender reform; and challenges and systems of support in relation to education and social change. The more than 30 respondents represent a diversity of voices and illuminate the complexity and locatedness of social change. The key findings of the research reinforce the significance of deploying theories of gender and theories of leadership in particular and the importance of critically reflecting on how our own philosophies about gender – our ‘gender agenda’ impacts on our practice. Responses support the employment of a non-essentialist approach, disruption of the ‘what about the boys’ discourse, attention to the many issues of disadvantage still facing girls and the application of a social constructionist/poststructuralist approach.

These personal stories provide an important professional learning resource in terms of their potential to stimulate critical reflection and conversation about specific gender concerns. For example, the comments associated with respondents’ inspiration for activism and experiences of injustice are useful in prompting critical reflection of our own personal gender agenda; while respondents’ comments associated with identifying positive actions offer useful practical ideas for gender reform. (LSC Project Evaluation)

The following is an illustrative sampling of responses:

Survey question: *What are your areas of interest or concern?*

Breaking stereotypical thinking. Creating awareness about gender issues and systemic gender discrimination
Senior Policy Officer

Supporting girls to reach their potential academically and socially, with a wide view of possibilities for future. Girls from low socio-economic backgrounds – setting high expectations and promoting value of education. Trying to get a grip on sexualization of young girls – media impact, interaction between girls, looking to education rather than media images to influence futures. (Principal)

Equitable access to education for pregnant and parenting young people.
Equitable access to education for students at risk.(Project Officer)

Body image, learning styles, ICT competencies, career paths, self-esteem. It worries me that the Federal Government has dropped funding for Gender Equity in Australian Schools and places a higher emphasis on boys' education. (School Chaplain)

In my role I am primarily engaged in coordinating school-based programs to prevent sexual assault. This sits within a broader commitment to end violence against women and girls, in all its forms, or on the other hand to help to shift society towards respectful relationships and the appropriate use of power and control. I believe this will enable women and girls – and certainly, men and boys too, to reach their full potential as fulfilled, active and creative members of their community and agents in their own lives. This is just one aspect of my feminism. (School Program Coordinator – Prevention of Sexual Assault)

Counter to the dominant public/policy discourse around equity and schooling, which is boy-focused, there are many areas of disadvantage still confronting girls which are being subsumed or sidelined. There is an urgent need for a refocus on these issues.

Survey question: *What has inspired you to become active? What has been your experience of injustice?*

I have been inspired personally by the lives and achievement of my female ancestors. I am also inspired by the varied career choices of my daughters and nieces. However, I am concerned about the largely unrealised potential I observe in many middle years female students due to lack of aspiration and adequate career guidance. (Lecturer)

I have had a strong sense of social justice from a very young age. I was fortunate to have a natural love of learning and did well at school. I was also acutely aware of unfair/unjust treatment of others who struggled. As an art teacher I related well with students who were considered 'behaviour problems'. This was a turning point because I realised that the students

weren't the problem, it's the system. Every position since then has been about trying to change the system. (Project Officer)

Listening to other inspirational stories from young people and motivating behaviour change. (Youth worker – urban secondary school)

I have met fierce resistance when implementing non-standard ways of managing and leading schools – despite achieving goals and more. Daily issue: hitting the wall is very tiring – it would be nice not to have to justify every opinion or method. (Deputy Principal)

Teachers and schools need to be politically aware, ascribing to a political gender equity agenda that recognises gender injustice and problematises constraining structures and practices, and understanding that schools and teaching *can* make a difference.

Survey question: *What are the most significant positive actions that you have witnessed, or in which you have participated?*

My job gives me goose bumps every day!

It is difficult, but one that springs to mind is when talking over a picture book using the Philosophy 'Circle of Enquiry' with an upper school class a few years ago, the concept of violence came up. The school is extremely multicultural (270 children, 34 different cultures) and a young Bosnian girl began talking about the abuse she and her family had been suffering from her father, who had finally left not long before this came up. I cautioned her about disclosure etc, but she insisted that she wanted to be heard, so I allowed her to continue.

She described what had happened and how she finally stood up to her father.

The class listened in silence, a young (refugee) boy from Liberia simply said, "What is wrong with that?" (her father's behaviour of abuse both physical, verbal, and financial). I looked at him in amazement – he was serious. He explained that that is the way all the men he knows behave. I turned to the girl and simply asked her to tell him how she felt. The quiet, respectful open discussion that followed amongst the class was something that, as a teacher and parent, I was proud to witness. Talk about the teachable moment! I believe that that discussion may have had a huge impact on him questioning and perhaps not continuing the pattern he had grown up with. (Teacher – Human Relationships Education, and Learning Support (1))

In working as a teacher, the way I viewed the world and the belief I had in the ability of both young men and women, has a phenomenal impact on their own belief in their ability. There is nothing more satisfying than

empowering young people to dare to dream and even more importantly to feel equipped to step out towards their goals. (Senior Policy Officer (1))

Perhaps in contrast to the idea of 'most significant' actions, for me the most important and perhaps meaningful positive actions are on a very small scale that is, the interactions between people every day in every place or more specifically, the choices many people make every day to treat those around them with respect and dignity. This is perhaps as powerful as broad-based political campaigns or social movements, and on the other hand I have witnessed and experienced very harmful interactions and a clear lack of respect in the name of broader social change. Working with young people in particular, it is important that adults' and leaders' actions are consistent with their words – and in our school's prevention program we try to assist schools to sustain the structures, reinforcements and incentives to encourage school leaders and adults to demonstrate respect and openness in all their interactions with students. (School Program Coordinator – Prevention of Sexual Assault)

There are some positive and generative spaces of justice currently being mobilised in schools and it is important to reflect on and tap into these models and examples.

Survey question: *How did particular people help shape your ideas and practice?*

My mother was a big influence because she had no opportunities to go to high school or further education because her father didn't believe in it and her mother didn't fight for it. She encouraged all of the girls in our family to have the best career we could get, to set us up in life. (HOD Senior Schooling)

The strong, independent women that I had as family and teachers were strong role models and introduced me to the right literature. I think the way they lived their lives was more important than any skill or specific attribute. (Educator and domestic violence worker)

I think the most powerful aspect would be when professional women come together and discuss frankly their experiences and what they or others have or are doing has had the biggest impact. Reading literature has also been very beneficial, as it provides ways to identify, problem solve and ways in which to communicate. (Teacher)

Understanding and motivation is supported by strong models of equity and leadership in personal and professional domains, along with engagement with current literature about these issues.

Survey question: *What are the leadership issues which concern you?*

Teachers must also be prepared and encouraged to discuss social change. If it is not seen as something expected it is likely that teachers turn to

subject content only. Social changes must be seen as necessary and the society as possible to change. If schools stop naturalizing some behaviours as male or female for good and start discussing them this is already a great change. (Educator and domestic violence worker)

Departmental responsibility for effective and assessable education of teaching staff in relation to discrimination within the system. (Secondary teacher)

Number one obstacle has always been the lack of long-term commitment to issues. Social change is a long-term process. I have often been frustrated by the quick fix/tokenistic approach. (Project Officer)

The hardest challenge is changing people's attitudes and beliefs. I have found a lot of discrimination occurs due to genuine ignorance. People don't know what they don't know. Helping them (gently and with dignity intact) see another perspective is hard work but very rewarding (through conversations, research, in the field activities, etc). (Principal)

These responses highlight the importance of a holistic approach that coheres teacher, school, systemic and community practices.

Survey question: *What have been the challenges in your involvement in education for social change? How have you met these challenges?*

An ongoing challenge is people's mindsets. 'Lifting the veil' and moving people into new ways of being and doing motivates my practice and leadership as an educator. As innovators, we need to model that we can move beyond the perception of a given and received world. I work on multiple levels...with students, teachers, teacher education students, school and tertiary systems...but accept that change happens essentially on an individual level. Being a partner in a person's learning journey and change is very special and motivates me to keep going in finding better more humane and sustainable ways of living and learning. (Lecturer)

In brief the main obstacle is that gender justice is not the core business of the schools I work in partnership with. That has created the challenge of finding ways to make it relevant, meaningful and efficient for them to partake in gender justice in their particular context and all its constraints. The factors that have enabled me to meet these challenges have been the specific funding and resources for my role, the program and for the schools. (School Program Coordinator – Prevention of Sexual Assault)

Survey question: *How have school or system leaders supported you or others to address gender issues?*

There was an excellent start in the 90's with a group of women in EQ who had licence to work with gender, sadly that has all now met its demise. I do my own reading and have a group of like-minded women to refer to. (Facilitator, national project)

Talking about this in workplaces and at conferences has empowered others to speak up, and has created spaces for women to think about how they might re-empower themselves. (Lecturer)

It's been a good reflective tool for me to complete this survey. Thank you for the opportunity to share and develop! (Project Officer)

These responses show the importance of communication and networks of support for critical reflection on personal philosophies and the disrupting of restrictive ideologies. Clearly, the effectiveness of educators requires that administrators and systems acknowledge the issues, understand the complexities and contestations, and provide stronger and more public support for engendering change.

Free online resources and support

AWE has done it again! This is a comprehensive, user-friendly and extremely valuable learning guide and resource treasure e-chest. I'd certainly recommend it for early career educators but also for those of us who have been working in the area of gender and education for a long time. We may be feeling a little jaded, tired, or just not up-to-date with all the wonderful stuff out there. How refreshing and exciting to find all these significant projects, publications and resources readily at hand. The sections on popular culture and media literacy, girls and bodies, and sexual diversity, were particularly useful and timely! What a wonderful resource! Thanks! (Dr Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, Deakin University)

The AWE website now includes an online forum for discussing significant gender issues such as bullying, harassment and violence, an extensive virtual LINKS library of links, articles and learning and teaching resources in key target areas, profiles of inspiring leading women, school case studies, and sample articles from the Association's journal *Redress*. The recently uploaded *Gender and Education Guidelines* provides visitors to the website with further theoretical and practical information examining the costs of the gender divide, resistance to gender change and reform, school management, behaviour management, learning and teaching, and inclusive curriculum strategies. The *Guidelines* also include findings from the *Leading Social Change Project* and links to current educational research and tools and checklists.

Invitation to participate

The Leading Social Change project is continuing and the AWE warmly invites all members of the community to visit our website at www.awe.asn.au to find out about our research, make use of our wealth of online resources, and add your voices and your stories to the conversation about making a difference. Contact the author, Maria

Delaney, to discuss the provision of additional support for your school.
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