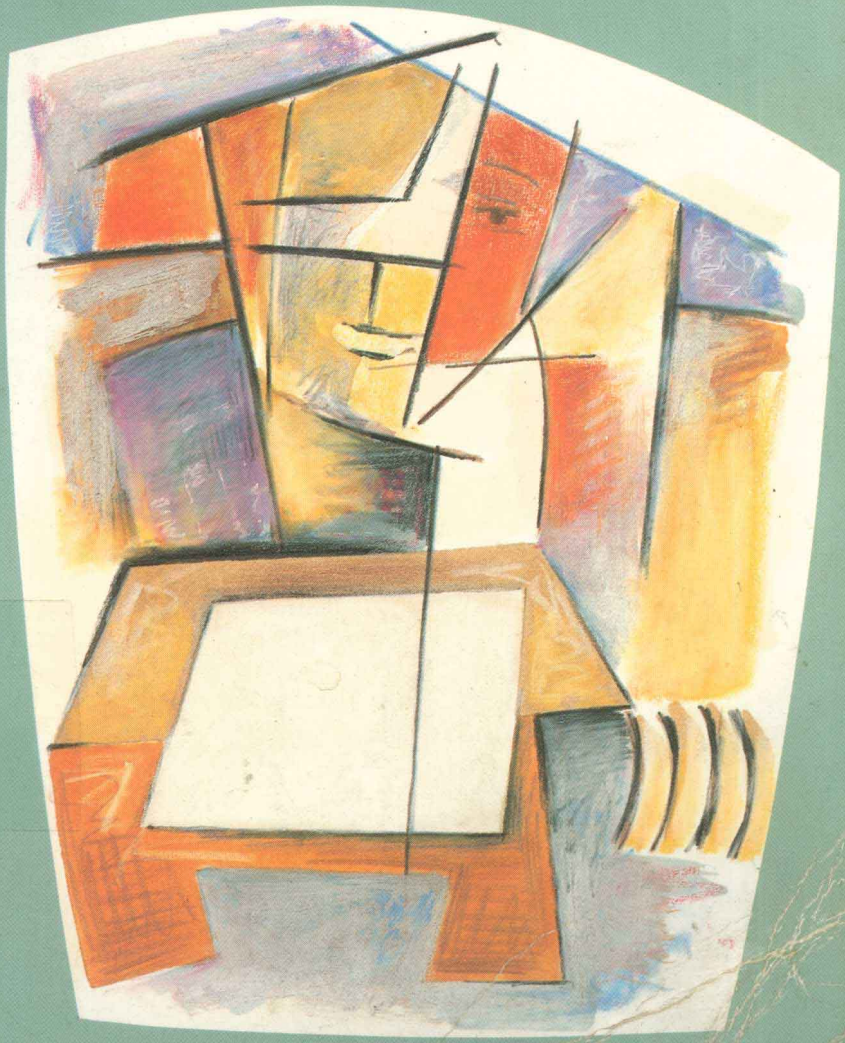
FEMINISMS IN EDUCATION

an introduction

Gaby Weiner



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Feminisms in education

Women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it.

(Confucius 551–479 BC)

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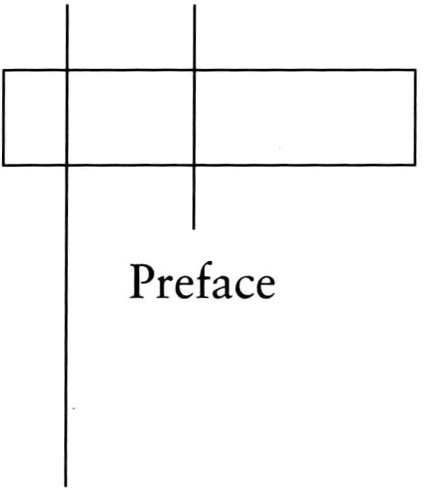

Preface

The chapters of this book cover a range of issues concerning feminism and education. All the material is new although some has appeared in the form of conference papers and those familiar with my work will detect some enduring themes, in particular relating to the work of feminist practitioners. The book therefore can be read as a whole (as the arguments developed form a sequence); however chapters can also be read on their own if readers have a specific interest in one theme. The book has been written to address as wide an audience as possible from practitioners wanting to challenge sexist practice from an informed position to postgraduate students and academics interested in feminist issues; however, others I hope will be attracted to some of the ideas of the book. I have consciously attempted to write in an accessible style often struggling to make complex ideas comprehensible without over-simplification or misrepresentation. If I have succeeded, it is because I have benefited from the help and advice of colleagues, in particular, at the National Foundation for Educational Research and at the Open University.

I would also like to offer particular thanks to the following people who have helped shape the ideas in this book: Dena Attar,

Madeleine Arnot, Stephen Ball, Michael Bassey, Jill Blackmore, Richard Bowe, Agnes Bryan, Leone Burton, Hilary Claire, Wendy Couchman, Miriam David, Judy Dean, Rosemary Deem, Felicity Edholm, Debbie Epstein, Maureen Farish, David Hamilton, Lesley Holly, Alison Jones, Lesley Kant, Pam Lomax, Meg Maguire, Val Millman, Joanna McPake, Kate Myers, Carrie Paechter, Barbara Quartey, Tom Popkewitz, Janet Powney, Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Sandra Taylor, Lucy Townsend, Kathleen Weiler and Lyn Yates.

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1

Introduction

As we progress through the final decade of the twentieth century, these are stressful, worrying yet potentially exciting times for those working in education. What ethical and professional challenges face us at this time? How are these different from earlier times? How do we keep equality issues on the educational agenda during an era which, for most of us, appears increasingly state-controlled, antiprofessional and market-led? How can yet another publication on gender help in this?

It is my view, however, that despite the New Right rhetoric of the 1980s and the subsequent 'shell-shock' of practitioners into the 1990s (Weiner 1993), possibilities for pedagogical advance in the context of feminist practice still remain. It is thus a task of this book, by scrutinizing past and present educational discourses, to reconstitute an ethical practice to meet future political and professional challenges and uncertainties.

The main aim of this book, however, is to provide an overview – from a particular feminist perspective – of issues relating to gender, curriculum, pedagogy and practice: for a wide range of people involved in education from those entering the teaching profession, to those reflecting on their practice mid-career or

wanting to challenge sexist practice from an informed position, to those studying for higher degrees or with a general interest in feminist issues.

The principal themes and ideas of the book derive from feminist thinking and practice proclaiming both the 'good news' of the transformative powers of feminist consciousness and the 'bad news' of social inequality (Lewis 1990). It is also largely informed by political and policy developments in education in the UK, though drawing on theoretical and educational developments elsewhere if known to me or if they seem particularly illuminating or relevant.

The analytical perspective adopted for the book has been principally shaped by ideas within feminist poststructuralism for several reasons. Feminist postructuralism allows for exploration of how girls and women actively position themselves in discourses that subordinate them as well as consideration of the workings of patriarchal structures such as the school and education more generally. It also provides an analytical framework for unpacking the micro-political – that is how power is exercised at local (as well as national or international) levels, how oppression works, is experienced and where resistances might be possible (see Chapters 4 and 6 for a more detailed discussion of this perspective).

Gramsci's focus on the importance of *organic intellectuals* serves as a useful starting point here. He argued that the intellectual contributions of progressive groups (such as feminist or socialist educators) are vital for societal change.

> A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders.
>
> (Gramsci 1971: 334)

It seems to me that if reducing social inequality continues to be a major goal for teachers and other educators, feminist practitioners, as organic intellectuals, will need to continue to analyse and understand policy decisions and outcomes as well as developing their own practice if they are to maintain their challenge to sexist practice.

Feminists working in education have certainly moved forward in the last two decades from the position of having to provide evidence of female disadvantage and gender discrimination in order to enable girls' and women's issues to be placed on the educational

agenda to articulating a value-system and practice of feminist education that allows for greater sexual equality at the same time as acknowledging the differences that separate women. In the past, the British perspective on gender has tended to value 'action' over 'explanation' and 'equality' over 'difference' and this was probably an appropriate choice for earlier decades. However, drawing on the work of feminists in the United States, France and Australia in particular, a greater focus on 'difference' and 'explanation' now seems timely, in order to help us clarify the 'problem of girls and women' and how we may move forward into the 1990s and beyond.

In looking at the twin focus of 'equality' and 'difference', I consider two of the most interesting areas of feminist enquiry in recent years: the importance of creating a feminist pedagogy, and how this meshes with theoretical developments within feminism and within educational research to formulate and produce a practice grounded in feminist values or feminist praxis.

A key focus of the book is that of *curriculum* since changes in British education over the last decade have resulted in curriculum emerging as, what Smith (1990) calls, a 'border case': that is, a site of intensive debate which is of crucial interest because it highlights and problematizes taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge, gender and culture. So, specific curriculum policy orientations need to be considered as emerging at a specific time in history; for example, curriculum policy in Britain in the late 1980s was perceived by Hall (1988) as both 'modernist' and 'regressive'. 'Modernism', he argued, is evident in the attempts to replace 'outdated' social welfare policies of the post-World War II period with free market policies perceived as more in line with the needs of the modern state – and 'regressivism', in the harking back to a former 'golden' Victorian age.

> I'm talking about the taken-for-granted, popular base of welfare social democracy . . . Thatcherism was a project to engage, to contest that project, and wherever possible, to dismantle it and to put something new in place.
>
> It is a project . . . which is simultaneously, regressive and progressive. Regressive because in certain crucial respects, it takes us backwards. You couldn't be going anywhere else but backwards to hold up before the British people, at the end of the twentieth century, the idea that the best the future

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> holds is for them to become, for the second time, 'Eminent Victorians'. It's deeply regressive, ancient and archaic . . . It's also a project of 'modernisation'. It's a form of *regressive modernism.*
>
> (Hall 1988: 164)

Regressive modernism is also visible in British curriculum documents of the 1990s where, despite a rhetoric of equal opportunities, there is a failure to address the gendered nature of students' schooling and educational experience. The consequence of this is that when they appear, girls and women (as well as students from black and minority ethnic groups and/or from inner-city areas) continue to be perceived as somehow 'not good enough'.

Curriculum also marks the point where ideas and practice come together within educational institutions. However perceived (see Chapter 3 for a full discussion of this), it is socially constructed and as such, is both a reflection of dominant ideas and a place where these ideas are played out or resisted through practice. One of the arguments of this book is that sexual relations and divisions are likewise formed through ideology and concretized in practice and thus curriculum needs to be viewed as implicated in the definition and construction of gender relations – for example, in defining gender-appropriate behaviour and/or in shaping perceptions of the appropriate place for girls and women in the family, school and employment.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the specific discourses on femininity and masculinity that emerge at different historical periods are visible in contemporary curriculum formulations. Thus in Britain, the 1923 *Report of the Consultative Committee on the Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls* (Board of Education 1923), the 1967 Plowden Report on Primary Education (Central Advisory Council for Education in England 1967), the 1988 Education Reform Act (DES 1989a) which included the establishment of a national curriculum and a 1992 official report on the value of single-sex secondary education for girls (HMI 1992), can all be explored alongside prevailing discourses on, or ideologies about, masculinity, femininity and what counts as 'normal'. In reading them, we can gain insights into how masculinity and femininity have been constructed or produced within and through education in the past, and thus how such constructions may be understood and challenged today.

Thus, a thorough reappraisal of the relationship between gender, curriculum, pedagogy and practice seems timely for a number of reasons:

- The evident need to recreate a feminist practice in education for the 1990s and beyond.
- The impact of the uncertainties of politics and policy in the world context and the ensuing emergence of a variety of new theoretical and political positions including new strands within feminism. In fact, as the title of the book suggests, it is more appropriate to talk of feminisms rather than imply one, unified feminism.
- The importance of acknowledging the considerable achievements of feminist teachers and local government authorities committed to increasing educational equality in the early and mid-1980s which are in danger of being written off in the market-led, corporate climate of the 1990s.
- The relatively recent creation of a national curriculum in England and Wales which has resulted in the re-emergence of 'curriculum' as a pivotal area of policy-making and, consequently, as an arena of debate and conflict.
- The emergence of concerns about the cultural perspectives offered through curricula. For example, in my own work on national curriculum documentation in the UK, I suggest that the curriculum perspective offered remains mono-cultural, male-centred and technocratic (e.g. Burton and Weiner 1990; Weiner 1991b).
- The development of a technology of text production for curriculum policy, used in a particularly powerful and unique way – to create 'teacher-proof' curricula: this is at a time when school teachers are being subjected to what Stephen Ball has termed a 'discourse of derision' (Ball 1990a).

These factors have, together, made necessary the reconceptualization of what counts as feminist practice in education. If the impact of feminist and other equality discourses within education are to continue into the late 1990s and beyond, we need to unpack both the complex set of meanings arising from this variety of factors and their implications for equality issues.

The task of this volume, then, is to restate the aims and achievements of past feminist activists at the same time as exploring the complex arguments emerging from feminist and curriculum theory, for example, those of black feminism, poststructuralism and

postmodernism. How can these theories illuminate the situation of the practitioner or the student teacher? How do they differ from earlier conceptions of equality and progress? Or have, indeed, as some claim, all the battles been won? I shall argue that equality issues are still vitally important to the work of education – for students, practitioners and other educationists; that concepts of equality and feminist practice are constantly shifting and mutating; and, with the ever-present possibility of 'backlash' (Faludi 1991), that previous gains need to be sustained at the same time as new campaigns are activated. I shall also argue that poststructural feminist ideas are particularly helpful in enabling us to understand the complexities of curriculum practices.

Furthermore, in arguing that gender relations or the relations between the sexes are discursively constructed, I maintain that the relationships between men and women, girls and boys involve power and domination, powerlessness, submission and resistance. If it is true that biology creates sex differences between men and women, it is also true that notions of womanhood and manhood, femininity and masculinity have a material and social basis. This volume concentrates on how femininity has been produced historically and culturally but it is also important to acknowledge recent, significant work on how masculinity is similarly discursively constructed (e.g. Connell 1989; Hearn and Morgan 1990; Mac an Ghaill 1991).

Like others writing during this period, I also have concerns about the authorial voice and about why the reader should accept my account and analyses of events. What legitimacy does this account have? How can I avoid distortion and inaccuracy, yet maintain a 'balance' between my personal convictions and the field of work that constitutes 'gender and education'? In his work on 'orientalism', similar to feminism in its obliqueness to mainstream scholarship, Said identifies methodological and perspectival difficulties:

> difficulties that might force one, in the first instance, into writing a coarse polemic on so unacceptably general a level of description as not to be worth the effort, or in the second instance, into writing so detailed and atomistic a series of analyses as to lose all track of the general lines of force informing the field, given its special cogency.
>
> (Said 1991: 8–9)

Counter discourses outside feminism such as that of Said can help illuminate the condition of women. As someone who grew up as an 'oriental' in the British colonies, his reflections are helpful in the deconstruction of such terms as 'woman'; for example are 'women', like Said's 'orientals', objects that are historically judged, studied, depicted, disciplined, illustrated, contained and represented? Another link with feminism is Said's criticism of the conception of a 'true' knowledge from which scholars can maintain detachment.

> No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his [*sic*] involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society.
>
> (Said 1991: 10)

It could be (naïvely!) argued that the male perspectives of writers such as Said are inimical to the feminist project and therefore should be discounted. This is not the stance of this book. Here it is argued that there is no such thing as the 'essential woman' or a 'true feminism'. Instead, it is held that the category of woman is unstable due to its dialectical relationship with other social categories which themselves are continually changing (Riley 1988). As women, we may share certain experiences of sexism and domestic responsibility and we may differ in ethnic origin, class or culture; but what unites most of us is our consciousness that it is other people who set the agenda. Thus what serves to link less powerful social groups are their experiences of 'otherness' and exclusion from the sites of power and meaning-making. This is precisely what Said is claiming is his identification of 'orientalism' as a political vision of reality shaped by the West in which the difference between 'them' and 'us' is promoted.

Hence, though much of this volume is devoted to charting the development of *feminist* discourses within and about British education, other sources will be used where they help illuminate the human, and therefore women's, condition. Additionally, the starting point for the exploration of examining feminist issues in education is that *feminism* has three main dimensions:

- *political* – a movement to improve the conditions and life-chances for girls and women;
- *critical* – a sustained, intellectual critique of dominant (male) forms of knowing and doing;

- *praxis-orientated* – concerned with the development of more ethical forms of professional and personal practice.

The attempt to develop an authorial voice will begin in the next chapter where I select events and influences in an autobiographical journey through the last 20 years as a consumer and producer of educational ideas and curricula. The third chapter examines concepts such as 'curriculum' and 'pedagogy' and the variety of approaches to curriculum analysis, change and evaluation, focusing in particular on two periods in British curriculum history: the large scale national curriculum projects of the 1970s which aimed at persuading teachers to voluntarily change their practice and the more prescriptive government-led curriculum developments of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Gender issues are foregrounded where possible providing a link to the fourth chapter, where I include both an update of developments in feminist theory and an attempt to read these theoretical developments alongside practitioner and research initiatives relating to gender. The fifth chapter outlines the rich variety of teacher and policy initiatives related to gender over the past decade and a half and how they can be understood in the light of present and future curriculum policy initiatives and analyses. The chapter ends with a relatively brief discussion of how government policy can be understood in terms of feminist values and practice. The sixth moves to the specifics of curriculum analysis and interpretation by exploring the gendered curriculum as a discursive framework in which 'difference' is produced, such that girls and boys, teachers and pupils, different racial and ethnic groups are differently positioned as powerful or powerless, good or bad, feminine or masculine, workers or mothers and so on. It uses poststructuralist frameworks to analyse how gender relations are inscribed within curriculum practices, considering three examples of how such an analysis can be helpful. Two are devoted to specific subject areas (mathematics and science) though in different sectors of education and the third is my own study of British national curriculum documentation. In the latter instance, texts are scrutinized in order to reveal how precise forms of knowledge are produced and presented to teachers; how they are likely to affect current gendered school experiences – of pupils, students and teachers – and how they are utilized for political and rhetorical purposes. The seventh and final chapter explores recent developments in feminist praxis

and methodology as a basis for teaching and research, using a particular instance of how feminist praxis was defined and constituted in a research project on staff experience of equal opportunities policies in higher education. All the chapters offer some suggestions for feminist practice and for future action but Chapters 6 and 7 offer specific suggestions for developing an educational politics out of feminist poststructuralism and for creating a feminist praxis as a basis for feminist action.

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