

Researching Education in Times of Globalization: What is happening to Gender Equality in Schools?

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Abstract. The author's intention is to show the predominant trends in discussions about gender equality in education today. It seems that the coordinates are getting more and more fixed: standardized international approaches in educational research are closely connected with political and economic imperatives; the neoliberal terminology (i.e. "knowledge-based economy", "cost-effectiveness", etc.) is put to frequent use. The issue of gender equality in education is set aside, as the success of girls in international testing presumably attests to achieved gender equality. The parties in question are now "post-feminist successful girls" on one side and "failing boys" on the other. This talk about the advantage of girls masks numerous subtle discriminations (either old or new ones that are generated by the new social and economic conditions). The author shows that "rhetoric" of equal opportunities stems from a greatly narrowed focus on what gender means in terms of equality in education. This analysis is complemented with a wider view of the post-feminist landscape (in which feminism is seen as no longer needed), more and more marked by the neo-liberal logic of practicality in the context of accountability, wider educational goals are completely put aside. These developments toward neo-liberal discourse of excellence (already analyzed in quite a detail in Anglo-American theory) are truly global. The author will try to problematize this discourse that is more and more gaining ground in public and political debates and leads to harmful consequences.

1. Introduction

My intention here is to touch upon some of the predominant trends in discussions about gender equality in education today. It seems to be the case that the mainstream coordinates are becoming more and more fixed: standardized international approaches in educational research are closely connected with political and economic imperatives, and the neoliberal terminology ("knowledge-based economy", "cost-effectiveness", "the need to increase competitiveness", etc.) is put to rather frequent use in educational contexts on all levels. The Berlin communiqué [1], for example, wishing for a "coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area", speaks about the need "to increase competitiveness" that must be "balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area". It is far from clear how this is to be accomplished, however, as there is less and less regard given to anything that does not comply with the politics of the market (or marketization, for that matter).

As girls in international global researches such as PISA (the *Program for International Student Assessment*) or TIMSS (*Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*), to mention just two, are in general good achievers [2], their success presumably attests to attained gender equality. Besides, they are achieving in traditionally “male” curriculum areas, so they are – as it seems – harnessing post-school opportunities in greater numbers [3]. Hence there is no need for any action or initiatives in this area.

Even more, it seems that the pendulum has swung the other way, in other words that it is now the girls/women that are favoured [4]. The parties in question are now “post-feminist successful girls” on one side and “failing boys” on the other, with “failing” somehow implying that the girls are prospering at the expense of the boys. But what is usually quite neglected is the fact that this rhetoric of equality or equal opportunities stems from a greatly narrowed focus on what gender means in terms of equality in education. For one thing, wider educational goals – such as social competence, diversification of abilities and increased understanding [5] – are completely put aside. For another, while success is the lot of some, others are still struggling on their paths through educational systems.

These global researches are part of wider dynamics of globalization in education, with neoliberal insistence on marketization, performativity and the “enterprising individual” that influence not only education, but also lead to legitimization and reproduction of social and economic stratification. Education is now subjected to the same goals which guide the economy and social welfare [6]. Deficiencies, be it financial, social or health-related, cannot be blamed on governmental policy or practice, but on the individual and his/her inability to (self-)manage fittingly [7].

2. The post-feminist “landscape”

I would like to start by putting this understanding of “achieved” gender equality in education (this is my main concern, but of course education cannot be thought of without acknowledging the wider social circumstances) in a somewhat broader context, which today can be named as post-feminist. This view will help us understand the gender-equality constellation which seems to be taking over in educational analyses.

Let us look at this post-feminist “social and cultural landscape” in which feminism is seen as no longer needed (because its goals have been achieved, indeed over-achieved); there even seems to be a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment emerging [8]. We are witnessing a moment when ideological discourses incorporate feminism (more about that in a moment), or at least some of its demands, while at the same time mock it as outdated and *passé*, as being, in short, no longer relevant. This might be part of a strategy to deflect attention from the consequences of modern global capitalism, with its renewed and even intensified forms of (hetero)sexist politics in education and schooling [9].

Post-feminism brought, it is usually thought, a lot of positive changes to the lives of women. But those changes are more than problematic at the level of principles and beyond. As phrased by Lilijana Burcar, there is strategic incorporation and at the same time a hollowing of feminism at work – thus an illusionary image is made, suggesting that progressiveness is what this is all about. Through this neoliberal takeover, the concept of feminist empowerment is modified – now it is linked to the logic of individual responsibility in a system where women are supposed to have limitless possibilities. The evidence given for this is mediated through the counting of women in different bodies or employment sectors and stressing the fact that there is a growing number of girls/women that proceed in an educational vertical direction, though, incidentally, this does not say anything about the conditions they might meet in their career paths nor about the pay they receive after they become part of the workforce [10]. So feminist ideals are depoliticized: what we have now is the promotion of “institutionally acknowledged and politically watered-down feminism” [11].

It is easy to conclude that our contemporary society no longer needs feminism: now is the time for post-feminism, which reaches beyond unnecessary feminism. Even if we accept the assumption that

we cannot speak about a post-feminist *clean-cut* division from feminism, as Stephanie Genz [12] has put it (by the way, there is much to say about the term post-feminism itself, but I must leave that aside; see [13]), the important fact is that this is about a conservative turn of the depoliticized “feminism” (I put the latter word in quotation marks as there is no really such thing as “depoliticized feminism”: feminism is by definition a political movement).

In the words of Angela McRobbie, it is precisely this disavowal or denial of the necessity or *rationale* of feminism that permits the subtle renewal of gender injustices that are quite easily overlooked as they are marked by the high visibility tropes of freedom attached to the (homogenized) category of young women or girls [14]. Popular and consumer culture, through which women’s success and freedom are interpreted, constrains women into new – post-feminist – dependencies. True, some elements of feminism are included in political and institutional life – they go by the names of “empowerment” and “choice” –, but these are converted into individualistic discourses and used as a kind of feminist substitute, a sort of “*faux-feminism*” [15]. At the same time, “real” feminism is presented as a sort of “monstrous ugliness which would send shudders of horror down the spines of young women today” [16]. Freedom and independence are articulated through (individualistic) participation in consumer culture. Media present girls as the new attractive heroines that can easily compete with their male peers; but, for one thing, this refers to a very narrow segment of girls and, for another, these successes are relative and momentary, more often than not limited to *young* girls/women (another source of discrimination here!) and do not lead to any further professional careers [17].

3. Post-feminist education

So it is claimed that gender equality has already been achieved in educational settings, at work and at home. The questions about what gender equality actually means and what is implied in the phenomenon of these post-feminist successful girls are not asked. As Jessica Ringrose has put it, one of the most significant implications of this discourse is the reduced understanding and shift away from any insight into wider issues of sexism [18]. “Girls’ high test scores can be used as evidence, a measure that shows they have conquered social barriers. This works discursively to legitimate the system and to suggest that feminist goals have been attained, since what counts as success is reduced to high attainment on a test score” [19].

The girls, somewhere between “girl power” and neoliberal equality, according to Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby, have become “the poster children for individualized success. And if girls can do, be and have anything they want, then feminism has done its job and is, therefore, no longer necessary [20]. Structural limitations are redefined as personal suffering, success as an individual accomplishment. The collective nature of oppression is obscured and there is, it seems, no need for organized action to remedy social injustice [21].

And successful girls somehow imply unsuccessful boys or, even, girls’ success is interpreted as something that happened at the expense of the boys, among the reasons being the feminization of teaching staff (this disadvantages boys), feminized teaching methods (biased towards girls) and the like. This, in turn, is seen as somehow deviant, a reason why the boys now need special attention (and often also special financial resources). The post-feminist dynamics of blaming it on feminism that has gone too far with its demands and logics of a “calamity” that struck boys have become indisputable fact, common sense.

I must add here that I am not suggesting that the gender gap and/or boys’ underperformance is not a cause for concern, nor I am opposing, *per se*, the testing and assessments (and really this is not the issue here). What I am suggesting, however, is that one must be extremely cautious in interpreting the results and basing measures thereon. The reason for such caution is, as Becky Francis and Christine Skelton note, that over-concern with boys’ achievement will mask the problems girls encounter in

schools, justify greater expenditure on meeting boys' needs and deflect attention from the gaps connected with "race", social class and so on [22].

This is additionally motivated by globalization, with its restructuration of educational systems – homogenization and introduction of a new scale of values where, for one thing, specific cultural identity no longer comes into view. Countries that have not done well in international comparative research of various educational achievements change their curricula: they reduce the national-specific component and put more stress on (presumably) universal knowledge [23]. This has in turn produced a "techno-rationalist" culture of "curricular fundamentalism" in which both schools and teachers are required "to aim for specific, quantifiable versions of 'achievement'" [24] and in which passion for ranking (of countries, schools and so on) is clearly demonstrated, regardless of how disputed these versions might be or how ideological their use is. Test scores, disaggregated by gender, become an equality tick box, like other affirmative action politics, which greatly reduces our understanding of gender in school [25]. One further example of the passion for ranking is – I really cannot help mentioning this, although it does present a slightly different perspective – the Academic Ranking of World Universities by the Center for World-Class Universities of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which uses very specific criteria for ranking that are – among other things – focused on (or perhaps originating from) some sciences (natural), while "deprivileging" others (humanities, social sciences) and is highly influential. But I must leave that aside.

4. The neoliberal view of education

Michael Apple offers a very succinct analysis of some of the goings-on in the American educational system and schooling in the recent past, but doesn't it sound so very familiar in present times and present goings-on in Europe, Slovenia included? Conservative modernization (the term, as Apple demonstrates, is far from being nonsensical), coupled with neoliberalism in a very intricate combination, introduces its own visions: what is private is good and what is public is bad. Public institutions (schools including) are "black holes" into which money is poured and then seemingly disappears, but the results they provide are not adequate (somehow along the lines of "This is not what we are paying for!"). The dominant norms are efficiency and an "ethic" of cost/benefit. Economic rationality rules supreme [26]. Constant cost-cutting and the demands for closer links between education and the economy are made to seem *inevitable* [27].

And on a more individual level, neoliberalism, according to Jessica Ringrose, "operates as a totalizing discourse through which subjectivity is re-constituted in economic terms, where market values and commodification thoroughly saturate the construction of self and other" [28]. This concurs well with the thesis that neoliberalism and post-feminism are discourses that mutually reinforce each other, that neoliberalism is "gendered". Both, post-feminism and neoliberalism, prosper on individualism and free choice and women are to a greater extent than men "caught" in the dynamics of change, transformation and self-regulation [29]. What is at work is commodified "feminism" (see above for why quotation marks are necessary here) with its main character the woman as empowered consumer [30].

A couple more things need to be mentioned that are of crucial importance for understanding other hues of (in)equality of education (I am focusing on gender, but there is an intersectional perspective in the background of my thinking). Firstly, the gender achievement gap is narrower than differences that are marked by other axes of marginalization. Secondly, inequalities can be specified in a slightly more profiled way. Geert Driessen and Annemarie van Langen [31], for example, suggest differentiating between two forms of educational inequality: vertical, which means unequal opportunities of social groups that cannot reach higher educational levels, and horizontal, which has to do with differences in distribution in various educational sectors (some are considered as having more prestige than others).

Another quite obvious, but perhaps therefore also somehow hidden, fact is that the alleged success of girls is not measured nor evaluated in its own right, but in the light of what it can tell us about the

success or failure of boys. And finally, the focus on gender in educational policies in the West can lead us to suspect that gender is “the easy option”, as dealing with it does not raise the issues of social justice, distribution of wealth and so on [32]. Indeed, many an important difference (seemingly) disappears when categorical differences between girls and boys are constructed.

5. Concluding Remarks

It seems that the debate about gender equality is caught in more and more static coordinates. At the forefront, there are large standardized approaches to educational research that in the final resort end with the issue of the quality of the educational system and future success in the global economy, where one kind of rationality is more powerful than any other – economic rationality – and any money spent on schools that is not directly related to economic goals is suspect. Education is seen as simply one more product [33], a marketable commodity “in which values, procedures, and metaphors of business dominate”, and it is a “masculinist” business at that [34].

The commonsense “fact” of today that equality in education and beyond has been achieved must be contrasted with the following expositions: (1) that those few girls and women who are beneficiaries of this new world order are paying their own personal price “for their privileged place in the consolidation of existing practices of power (in education as elsewhere)” [35], and (2) that those places are surrounded by those who have not succeeded, for which they have only themselves to blame, as the existing interpretation goes, because acknowledging structural limitations is not included in this framework of glorifying individual success. These developments towards neoliberal discourse of excellence have already been analysed in quite some detail in theory pertaining to the Anglo-American context, but Slovenia, it seems, has also followed in these footsteps, together with the promotion of the culture of standards, achievements and cost-efficiency. These movements, as Michael Apple notes, are truly global: their logics have spread to many nations [36].

The talk about the advantages the girls are supposed to enjoy in the present moment masks numerous subtle discriminations (either old or new ones that are generated by the new social and economic conditions). It seems as if academic success implies that there is no longer sexism in schools and that the girls (and of course boys as well) are in a kind of gender-neutral universe with no hidden curriculum imposing, say, masculine values and expectations, not to mention expressions of more blunter sexism in interactions, communication, organization of time, use of materials and so on.

In the analysis of the relations between media, dominant gender and sexual discourses, educational policies, research directions, and the lived experiences of girls and women, the following proposition can be articulated: post-feminist presumptions about gender equality “obscure on-going issues of sexual difference and sexism that girls experience in the classroom, playground and beyond” [37], not to mention other dimensions of obstacles in education and academic careers that are quite put aside and go in more critically oriented literature by the names of “closed doors”, “glass ceilings” and “leaky pipelines”. But this is not to say that only the present moment is to blame for this bad construction work of education and academia, in other words, this is not a new phenomenon in itself, however, it is marked by new dimensions, unfavourable to girls/women.

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