

Am I bovvered? An exploration of the purpose of lifelong education for women in a non-feminist era

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Background to bovvering

Why do we bother with post-compulsory education for women and role is there for feminism in education when we can see girls achieving well at school and successful women all around us? Katherine Tate's schoolgirl character, Lauren, frequently reminds us that she isn't 'bovvered' and why should she be when girls and women are doing so well? Girls in the UK and Canada are now outperforming boys at school (National Statistics Online, 2007; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2004, Myers, 2007) there are more young women going into higher education than ever before (Wolf, 2006) and they're demonstrating that they can achieve the same, if not better, results than men and women are breaking through some of the glass ceilings in commerce and industry - albeit in very small numbers (Catalyst, 2007). The UK Equal Pay Act has just celebrated its 30th birthday and the Gender Equality Duty has been introduced, educational establishments in both Canada and the UK have been working with equal opportunities policies for many years (Section 11- Canadian Human Rights Act, 1977; UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979) and Women's Studies courses are no longer as prevalent as they were in the 1980s. From Margaret Thatcher to Ellen McArthur, Kim Campbell to Anita Roddick, women are showing they can enter traditionally male environments and compete on apparently equal terms. As

Thompson says, 'it is widely assumed that 'we are all equal now' (2007). Yet something is not right. Women still earn substantially less than men with the same qualifications (IWPR, 2007; Women's Future Fund [WFF], 2007), subject choices at higher educational levels are still linked to gender (EOC, 2006; HESA, 2007; Kurtz-Costes et al, 2006, She Figures, 2006; Drakich & Stewart, 2007; Robbins & Ollivier, 2007), women still undertake the majority of caring responsibilities (Robbins & Ollivier, 2007), the labour market - including the internal market within education - is still structured on the basis of traditional gender roles, women with poor literacy and numeracy problems face long-term social disadvantage (Bynner and Parsons, 2006) and women are still under-represented in all aspects of life that bestow power and influence (Bynner and Parsons, 2006; WFF, 2007). The long term effects mean that women have less earning power, thus less opportunity to build up capital, investments or pensions which leads to disadvantage in old age. How can this be when legislation and institutional policies are in place to bestow equality of opportunity on all women?

Bovversom concepts

In this paper we explore two distinct but related themes: the purpose of lifelong education for women; and the insidious influence of neo-liberalism which seems to smother feminism from mainstream discourses which influence women's experiences of education. It seems that lifelong education is a much used and abused phrase which is adopted by politicians and policy makers with little regard for its original meaning of *lifelong learning*. The distinction is important as the originators of the term saw that we should focus on learning (something we actively take part in rather than being the passive recipients of lifelong education) as part of life, making it non-vocational, using situations not subjects as the vehicle for learning and linked to the interests of the learner (Lindeman, 1926; Yeaxlee, 1929). The move towards lifelong education as a concept used by politicians to justify the focus on skills-based and vocational education rather than liberatory, recreational or transformative learning opportunities for adults (Thompson, 2007; hooks, 1994) is a key reason for being very bothered about the rapidly diminishing educational opportunities for women, particularly immigrant and socially disenfranchised women.

Using an unashamedly critical feminist stance and our experiences as adult educators in the UK and Canada, we examine the effect of a neo-liberal agenda in four interrelated strands of adult education: (1) the regressive perspective from education as a transformative influence for women to education as a means of training women to fill skills gaps (as highlighted by the Leitch Report 2006); (2) the persistence of inequities in pay and status for women (EOC, 2006; Pay Equity Task Force, 2004); (3) the impact of the social exclusion agenda and; (4) the spectre of feminism at the door of policy decisions. We will argue that the pervasive nature of a patriarchal hegemony which uses masculinity as the norm and femininity as 'Other' (Kronsell, 2006; Bagilhole, 1995) is hidden by apparent concessions to the specific needs of women (in the form of legislation and rhetoric) whilst protecting the interests of the majority of men. We will argue that post-compulsory education is still necessary, still viable and still the potential catalyst for change for many women.

Ideological context of the Skills agenda - Neo-liberalism

Neo-liberalism, rooted in classic 19th Century liberalism, is characterized by its focus on the primacy of the market, individualism, small government, and de-regulation. Central to neo-liberalism, is the concept of economic rationalism, which emphasizes deficit reduction, cost-effectiveness, and government efficiency, and de-emphasizes increased government services and poverty reduction (Breitkreuz, 2005). A neo-liberal agenda works to convince citizens that the main role of the State is fiscal responsibility, not the provision of a social safety net. This agenda uses the rhetoric of privatisation and government down-sizing as an appropriate means to achieve this end.

The rise of neo-liberalism is evident in most industrialized countries since the 1980s "due to the emergence of the global economy evidenced by the internationalization of capital, and the proliferation of trans-national companies, coupled with rising national deficits and declining national growth" (Breitkreuz, 2005: 151). Neo-liberalism has dominated the discourse on nearly all social programmes such as health, welfare, and education (Breitkreuz, 2005; Murray, 2004; Giroux, 2002; Lightman et al, 2005). Neo-liberal modes of governing do not mark a turn towards more

progressive policies that would recognize that the plight of poor and/or marginally excluded are a product of broader socio-economic and political structures that have benefited some while leaving others behind. This type of governing has increasingly shifted the responsibility for social and economic welfare to individuals by limiting the role of government in providing for the well-being of those excluded from mainstream social and economic life.

Within formal institutions of lifelong education, there is an increased focus of treating students as customers, where education for work supersedes education for citizenship, where research funding arrangements are closely tied to business interests as opposed to academic integrity, and the 'economic viability' of programme offerings gain precedence over the criticality value of these programmes (Giroux, 2005). What is most troubling about neo-liberalism is the hegemonic character of its acceptance - its pervasiveness seen both in the 'common-sense' application of its principles, but also, in that it continues as an unquestioned social reality (Giroux, 2002). The pervasive influence of neo-liberalism's market-driven culture fundamentally affects how we address the meaning and purposes of lifelong education. Yet there is little recognition that it is not in the interests of employers and the free market to 'give low-paid workers an inflated sense of their own worth or capabilities by making more education easily available' (Thompson, 2007). As women make up the majority of low-paid workers and outnumber men as participants in education, this is likely to cause further tensions for women in lifelong learning.

One of our underlying concerns for the future of adult education for women is its changing purpose. A neo-liberal educational agenda does not analyse how power works in shaping knowledge production or how the teaching of broader social values safeguards against turning citizen skills into training skills for the workplace (Giroux, 2002). This political ideology does not call into question the existing social order, and importantly, issues of race, class, and gender are not raised. It does not address why some forms of knowledge are valued and privileged over others. A pedagogy informed by such an ideological underpinning serves to contain the political, equates quality of life with the personal over the social, and masks the form of reproduction of structural inequalities. As an ideology, it appears to include the economic, political, and social pressures to conform and maintain the status quo. It clearly illustrates the tension between neo-liberalism and

equity principles. As Thompson (2007) notes, the ideas of the New Right celebrating 'free market economies on a global scale [and] structural adjustment policies at home and abroad' were more resilient than the 'anger, ideas and creativity' of second wave feminism.

The Leitch Review (2006) makes it clear that education in the post-compulsory sector will be focused on providing skills demanded by employers (although this is already being contested, TES 19th May 2007). Yet employers are predominantly men and the people earning least in the UK and Canadian economies are women in part-time, temporary jobs which are frequently unskilled posts in service industries (Statistics Canada, 2006; WFF, 2007). The skills on offer may not provide women with real choices as they are designed to address the needs of men in positions of economic and political power without any form of consultation with the 'recipients' of this educational skills agenda. If women want a voice in this agenda they will need to be engaged in educational opportunities which give them real choice and long-term transferable skills. Learning capacities to become employable should not presuppose an uncritical acceptance of business values or the inability to evaluate concepts about how productive work can be reorganised in a more socially just way.

Persistence of inequities in pay and status for women

Women still earn less than men, even though they are more active in the labour market and have legal rights to equal pay. This attracts considerable press coverage and research showing that the pace of change is slow (Times Higher, May 11, 2007). But is it just evolutionary? Is it the case that women have only had equal rights for a relatively short time and we just have to wait to catch up? As the Pay Equity Task Force (2004:24) noted, "most empirical studies indicate that there is a wage gap and that a substantial component of this gap cannot be explained by using human capital and workplace characteristics associated with individuals". Or is something much more deeply rooted working to hold back the progress of women? If it will all just come out in the wash as this generation of feminists fades into the distance why does the government feel the need to continue with legislation (Gender Equality Duty, 2007) to remove gender stereotyping in schools? Thompson (2007:9) notes that 'life in wider society ticks over as though

feminism is all over bar the shouting'. It is as though women have gained a certain level of equality that does not compromise patriarchal hegemony too much and neo-liberalism has moved in to contain feminism again.

The impact of the social exclusion agenda

In this era of political calls for social inclusion of those most marginalised in society, we choose to use the term social exclusion rather than inclusion to emphasize the insidious nature of the exclusion that women continue to face. This is in terms of a patriarchal hegemony which acts to keep women, their experiences, interests and potential contributions, at the edges of sites of power. Although women greatly outnumber men in education, they remain in positions which are less influential, carry less status and attract less financial reward. We also use the term to highlight the fact that the increasing achievements of girls and women are actually exclusive as they do not relate to a general improvement in their position. Rather, it is only some girls and women who are gaining ground on their male counterparts, predominantly those from middle-class settings, and the girls and women in the most socially excluded situations are now becoming disenfranchised from their female counterparts. Adult education remains an important 'second chance' for these women who have become excluded from educational achievements.

The f-word - feminism knocking at the door of policy decisions

Our field of study throws open a contradiction; we describe ourselves as feminists yet we believe that feminism, if not dead, is distinctly unwell. As Murray notes, 'feminism - known in some quarters as the f-word - has become almost too shameful to admit, with lots of women prefacing their opinions with 'I'm not a feminist but...' (Murray, 2001). It is this embarrassment linked to the seemingly huge bounds towards equality (after all, half a decade of equal access to education is a relatively short time) that we see as holding the key to the persistence of inequalities. Feminism allowed women to question what being a woman meant, cracked apart arguments as to the role and abilities of women and provided a theoretical

and practical platform for change. Education played no small part in this as a transformative power in the lives of many women (hooks, 1994) and the mere fact that women could enrol on courses, have space to discuss issues of interest to them, bring their perspective to bear on longstanding theories and gain the same qualifications as men gave previously invisible women a voice. But the first flush of feminism was quickly absorbed into the patriarchal hegemony through such strategies as 'incorporation of women's studies into academia [which] has diluted and tamed its radical roots (Richardson & Robinson, 1994, Bagilhole, 1995) and the inclusion of women throughout education in academic and management roles, yet keeping them confined to specific subjects and grades (Drakich & Stewart, 2007; Robbins & Ollivier, 2007).

So are we bovered?

Although we live in a time and place where girls and women have made huge steps forward in achieving parity with their male counterparts, there is still a lot of ground to cover in addressing the tension between neo-liberalism and equity principles. If we stop questioning existing practices or agitating for greater equality now we will only serve to reinforce current institutional structures and hegemonic discourses. Women will become subsumed into the political and patriarchal agendas associated with education rather than using education as a force for liberation and transformation. This does not mean we want girls and women to strive for the 'equality' as portrayed by the ladette character of Lauren - a young woman who is aggressive, surly and far from bovered about the impact of education. Rather, we argue for a reassertion of feminist analysis and critical questioning of the role of lifelong learning to ensure that women can make informed choices, question hegemonic practices, challenge persistent social and economic inequalities and have access to educational opportunities that offer long-term equity. In this paper, we have demonstrated that a feminist analysis of lifelong education brings into focus issues of power, privilege, and masculine hegemonic practices. Heightened awareness of these issues is critical if, as educators, we are sincere in our efforts to counter systemic and structural obstacles that privilege individual needs over social concerns, freedom of choice over democratic values, and consumerism over citizenship. Though we use a feminist analysis to illustrate our argument, this is not solely a

'woman's issue' – issues of equality, inclusivity, and social justice matter to us all. And yes, we're really bovered about what education has to offer.

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