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A bit of a dirty word: ‘feminism’ and female teachers identifying as feminist

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A bit of a dirty word: ‘feminism’ and female teachers identifying as feminist

Following the identification of a gap in the literature around reasons for contemporary women’s self-identification as ‘feminist’ (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015), this paper discusses an empirical study of an intergenerational group of contemporary Australian female teachers collaboratively designing English curriculum around girls’ media. The paper explores the group’s shared conversations around feminism, over a series of meetings, as we (teachers and researcher) plan curriculum and negotiate broader subject positions possible for girls and women. These contexts include the competing discourses of feminism and postfeminism and how these mediate texts chosen for study, our pedagogical approaches, and the ways we experience our own lives.

In this study, we struggle to find a shared language, across generations, with which to work collaboratively in a community of practice committed to the critical study of media, but involving different individual orientations to ‘feminism’. This is a space in which impediments to the feminist study of girls’ media quickly emerge. The paper also serves as a reminder that feminist scholarship takes place in schools, as well as in the academy, and that the gender studies work teachers do in schools is potentially whole population work, worthy of keen attention in the gender studies academic mainstream.

Keywords: feminisms; postfeminism; curriculum design; identity
**Introduction: the dirty word**

*Researcher: What did you think of the way I noted that we hadn’t used the word feminism, in that first...?*

*Elinor: It’s become a bit of a dirty word, hasn’t it?*

*Rachel: It’s got a lot of baggage associated with it.*

*Elinor: You’re not a feminist are you? Of course you are. We all are. You are too.*

*[giggles, murmurs, general restlessness!]*

This tiny vignette from our second curriculum design meeting opens as a moment of crisis, a small rent in the cohesive social fabric of a collaborative project. Suddenly, instead of taking polite teacher-researcher turns, everyone makes sound and moves, creating a whole sensory disturbance, a physical embodiment of uneasy discourses. Elinor Lee¹, claiming everyone as a feminist, is the Head of English at Haslemere College and one of the most experienced teachers present. To an extent hers is one of the voices of authority present. I am a feminist academic, and I have introduced the word, questioning why it did not come up in our first meeting.

Yet not everyone is comfortable with ‘feminism’; personal discourses jar here for at least some of us. Emerging from such moments, this paper explores how the word ‘feminism’ becomes central to a collaborative case study of teachers designing curriculum around girls’ media for the coeducational secondary English classroom, via a series of meetings and other interactions. These conversations contribute empirically to addressing the gap in the literature around ‘the dynamic and contextual factors’ (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015, p. 1) influencing whether women consider themselves to be feminist.

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¹ Pseudonyms are used for teachers and school to comply with ethical considerations and protect participant confidentiality.
Initiating this project as researcher and former teacher, I was interested in what we might do with girls’ digital media in the classroom in Australia and how I could work with teachers to develop pedagogical approaches to new media texts, such as online games. Yet the main research question evolving through the circumstances of the study was:

- How do female teachers design curriculum around girls’ popular culture for the coeducational classroom?

It had quickly become clear that the study’s aims would not involve identifying theoretical approaches or practical skills in relation to exemplary design practices (which would smack of the neoliberally driven notion of ‘best practice’), but rather thinking in a broader sense about the particular gendered performances of identity that take place in this work. Engaging conceptually with Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Dorothy Smith (1987) and Judith Butler (1997, 2007), I organised a series of loosely structured teacher meetings, with question prompts inviting reflection on our lives as well as our work. The intentions behind this became expressed through the following sub-question:

- What might be the gendered addresses and subject positions negotiated in curriculum design in this particular setting, both for teachers themselves and imagined student subjects?

Seeking to answer this question, I looked for thematic sites of struggle emerging in our interactions. In particular, I have considered how we, as an intergenerational group of women, orient ourselves to what we call ‘feminism’ and what this might mean for the potential whole population gender studies work that English teachers have the capacity to perform, especially as exposure to feminist beliefs through education has been identified as key to later self-identification as a feminist (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015).

In exploring this orientation, our focus shifts from the artefacts of curriculum design
(syllabi; units of work), to how we experience ourselves in performing this work.
(Grumet 1976).

Haslemere College and teacher co-researchers

Haslemere College is a private coeducational secondary school in a rural area about an hour from Melbourne. The school has a largely white, middle class student population and a mix of male and female teachers; I had worked as a consultant at the school previously, and when Elinor, the Head of English, heard about the planned study, she volunteered for her staff to be invited to participate, with teachers positioned as co-researchers keen to develop their own understandings of teaching highly gendered children’s media texts, for example those produced by Mattel. Teachers could choose whether or not they would use the materials developed, and there was no compulsion about being involved, yet all the English teachers at Year 7, who happened to be women, were keen.

Anne Fastor, Rachel Saipradit, Jess Martin and Zoe Corres, along with Elinor, met and liaised with me over a six month period, in order to design a unit of work on online play spaces. While this was not an explicitly feminist project, for example as expressed in the plain language documentation inviting participation, the teachers from the outset were keen for students to, as they said, ‘deconstruct’ and to develop ‘an awareness of how they’re being manipulated’. Ultimately, however, the completed unit of work was not a major focus, but rather the study concentrated on the processes and discussions involved in our planning, and the concurrent absence of feminist deconstruction in the unit.

The research design and ethical approval also left room for including the work of students, and I became involved with a former student, Kate Tindall, who had written an essay and social media posts on being victimised at the school for her feminist views,
seeking permission to quote from her writing. The ages of the women involved in the study range therefore from 19 years, to 59 years, with two of us in our early thirties, and two of us in our late forties; we have Anglo and Mexican backgrounds.

The school has a deep commitment to coeducation, yet one of the teachers tells me that she has her son at the school, but her daughter at a nearby girls’ school. Another teacher tells me she believes in single sex education for girls, and coeducation for boys. Gender plays a key role in decisions made around schooling in our families, as well as in our curricular decisions; the consequences of being ‘feminist’ in coeducational space evolve through the study to be important influences here.

**Feminism and postfeminism**

*C*urriculum – I don’t think it’s just me – is used as discipline in as much as what’s successful gets adopted and that’s the male ethos. So, homeroom excursions, for instance, support male needs. Within a class I get around it in a kind of mumsy way and I’m considered something of a fiery feminist. As if!

Here Elinor describes Haslemere’s culture and the complex negotiations around gender that inform curriculum design choice, performances of feminine teacher identity and classroom practice at Haslemere. She also invokes the spectre of the ‘fiery feminist’ and at the same time distances herself from it. Are we feminists? What are feminists? What is feminism? In the proposal for this study, I looked to feminism as the fragmented and ever changing political project which, in all its guises, focuses on ‘analysing gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them’ (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 3) and how ‘gender discourse as it is negotiated in media production, text and reception is unstable and dynamic, including and excluding certain versions of femininity in an often contradictory way’ (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 153). I imagined working with teachers to help students think about this too, in relation to Barbie™ texts, and the pleasures and perils of play.
Yet when we sat down together at Haslemere, any shared commitment to ‘feminism’ was almost immediately called into question and my assumptions were challenged. I was no longer sitting with a group of fellow students in my 1986 Women’s Studies class, but in a very different and much more fragmented context. This might be understood as ‘postfeminism’, described by Rosalind Gill as:

’a distinctive sensibility made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a make-over paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.’ (2007, p. 147)

This is a place of tangled feminist and postfeminist ideas, where even the ‘mumsy’ execution of feminine/teacher power is immediately articulated with angry, man-hating, old-hat ‘feminism’, and where the aspiration of neoliberalism’s address to young women as subjects of professional and economic capacity (as described in the work of Angela McRobbie, 2009) runs up against the humiliation they experience through enduring sexism. Rachel, one of the teachers at Haslemere, insists on the currency of this word when she suggests that instead of finding a new word for feminism: ‘Maybe we just say racist, sexist. Leave it at that. And bring it back down to its real agenda.’ Yet overtly critiquing this agenda is not necessarily uppermost in importance to the younger women in our group.

McRobbie locates post feminism in the decade from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, a period when feminism became ‘relentlessly vilified’, while still achieving some of its aims, for example the entry of women into the professions (2012). She writes of girls being perceived via luminosities, which are:

...suggestive of postfeminist equality while also defining and circumscribing the conditions of such a status. They are clouds of light which give young women a
shimmering presence, and in so doing they also mark out the terrain of the consummately and re-assuringly feminine. (2009, p. 60)

In my research diary and in our meetings, we touch on all of Gill’s points, above. I contemplate different approaches to schooling boys and girls, excesses of femininity in girls’ dress ups and the need to reinvent myself for success in the workplace. I even vilify myself as a grey-brown feminist goblin mother, now that I no longer dye my hair blonde. These are postfeminist concerns.

This study therefore aspires to feminism in the postfeminist context through multiple layers, firstly in its continuation of cultural studies’ radical research tradition that values girls’ media consumption as worthy of study (whether at school or in the academy), commenced with McRobbie’s work on girls’ magazines (2000). This project also adds a feminist perspective to the growing body of work on how teachers negotiate neoliberalist, rationalist curricular imperatives (for example, Ball, 2003; Apple, 2012), proposing a gendered subtext to the distant, patriarchal voices of the ruling relations (described by Smith, 1987) of both mandated curriculum and some curriculum theory which separate teachers from their work and obliterate race, class and gender. It also contributes to the literature on reasons why women may or may not identify as feminist, elucidating the ‘subtleties and nuances’ (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015, p. 3) in this choice and linking this to the performance of gendered identity.

Research design

Dorothy Smith, along with Mikhail Bakhtin and Judith Butler, provide important theoretical resources for the study. Smith (1987) informs the privileging of gendered teacher standpoints in the study, Bakhtin (1981) the heteroglossic nature of identity emerging through competing internally persuasive and authoritative discourses, and Butler (1997, 2007) the understanding of gender as performative rather than innate or fixed. Thinking with these theorists, identity is multiple, forcibly bifurcated by gendered
divisions (Smith, 1987), iterative and open to change (Butler, 2007) and emerging from multiple interpellations (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997), as we label each other, and ourselves, ‘feminist’ or not.

These influences assisted me in the creation of a research design incorporating interwoven vignettes from my own life, research journal notes, media cuttings, teacher meeting transcripts, family photographs and song lyrics, in a heteroglossic ‘glitterbomb’ (McKnight 2015) both shiny and effete. These conceptual resources also align with the feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (Baxter, 2003) approach taken here, to think about and write around what transpires around feminism in our interactions through the study, alert to the “sites of struggle” (Baxter, 2003, p. 187) in our interactions and the ways competing discourses coalesce, temporarily, into documents such as meeting transcripts or units of work.

The research design is also feminist in its desire to create and collect materials highlighting gaps and silences, around the loss of feminist and poststructuralist insights in education provided by theorists such as Dale Spender (1989), who have described girls’ invisibility in the curriculum; the feminised teacher workforce being effaced in curriculum documents; the curricular diminution of young people’s popular texts via a conservative preoccupation with ‘Literature’ and, reflexively, in its attention to my own silences and sense of disempowerment in my own life, as a student mother, sessional teacher academic and designer of curriculum. Then there is also the political silence of young women around feminism, proposed by Angela McRobbie (2009). In our second meeting, Rachel, who is 50, says, admiringly, ‘To me the archetypal feminist is the suffragettes. You know if I have to pick an image of what it means to be a feminist: the suffragettes’. Zoe, 33, on the other hand, when she thinks of women marching, says, ‘I
have an image in my head I guess that’s kind of… negative’. She and Jess, 34, have to be drawn out to discuss feminism at all.

To address these gaps and silences, I seek a standpoint outside of masculine and patriarchal curriculum discourse, a standpoint closer to the complicated and contradictory world of everyday life, where I sit at the kitchen table reading popular yummy mummy blog mummamia.com, appalled by Slutwalks, and excited at the renewal of seventies feminist journal, Spare Rib, and where Elinor says, in the Haslemere library meeting room, ‘I’ve got girls in my Year 11 class who say, I am not a feminist, I just believe in equal rights’. The teachers involved checked and commented on meeting transcripts, continued conversations and narratives via email after meetings and suggested resources that became part of the study. They have also read and commented on subsequent academic articles prior to publication to further enact the collaborative nature of the project.

Discussion: struggling with feminism and postfeminism

I want to explain something. Jokes about feminism. Question: Would you make a joke about a disabled person if there was one in the room with you? What about a joke about someone’s mother dying, if you knew one of your classmates had recently lost someone? Probably not. So why is it, that young men find it permissible to make light of feminism and women’s issues in general, but especially in the presence of women?

Makes me wish I had a neon sign that says, ‘I AM STANDING RIGHT HERE!’

So says former student Kate Tindall’s Facebook post, published while she was a student at Haslemere College in 2011, in which she is both highly visible as a feminist activist on social media, and invisible as a woman. This post leads to both physical and virtual bullying, which a number of teachers, including those in the staffroom, as well as those directly involved in the study, want to discuss. In the space we have made for planning a unit of work, Anne tells me instead about Kate, and also about how male staff make
her feel intimidated in the school gym, and try to prevent her discussing gender issues on the school’s Equal Opportunity Committee. It is not easy to be a feminist at Haslemere.

Curriculum around girls’ culture is designed and performed in the school context of a range of the kinds of feminist and postfeminist ‘sensibilities’ expressed in the post above. I borrow this word from Gill, who, drawing on McRobbie, sees an ‘entanglement’ (2007, p. 161) of discourses around feminism, more complex than the simple notion of the backlash against feminism explored elsewhere (Faludi 1991). How does the rhetoric emerging from this entanglement inform the ways we work together to design curriculum? I focus here on our conversations around design, on the social space of our interaction, rather than on the specific activities and sequences of our lesson plans.

This analysis also takes place in the context of neoliberal reform in education and is, I argue, as do both Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009), intrinsically linked to it. Neoliberal demands, particularly on women, for self-surveillance, self-discipline and individual empowerment through choice, combined with renewed interest in sex differences, rub up uneasily against earlier social and political feminisms looking to critique social constraints. Gender critique is absent as a priority in the new Australian national curriculum, while simultaneously teachers are required to comply with its imperatives, enacting the surveillance of detailed, coded descriptors, for example, obeying these authoritative voices rather than more internally persuasive ones that might otherwise constitute their ideological becoming (Bakhtin, 1981) as more activist teachers. These historical feminisms inform the older members of the group; I note here that I do not attribute a single ‘feminist’ stance to any individual, although a generational divide was suggested in the complex discursive play of our interactions.
‘Baggage’ is used a number of times in relation to ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’. These are words bulging with borrowed meaning.

In theory, and under neoliberalism, girls are said to have stepped forward into the light of surveillance, as success stories of post feminism, and evolved into neoliberalism’s ideal subjects (McRobbie 2009); these theories had resonated with me and informed my work, yet in the curriculum design process girls were the opposite of hyper visible! Girl students, in particular, were largely absent from our rationale, even when we specifically looked at studying Barbie™.

At first I was surprised to find that not only did we have complicated feelings around girls’ culture, but girls themselves were not foremost in our decision making. Was this because, in a postfeminist context, feminism is deemed so successful that girls have moved beyond concern? Girls were prominent in the stories we told of our own lives, but not in stories of the classroom. I examined my questions closely to see if in any way I had led us down this boy-focused path, but could find no evidence of this. Girls are both visible and invisible.

In our meetings

To think about this, I look more closely at the meeting transcripts, and the ‘baggage’ around feminism. Elinor’s rhetorical ‘You’re not a feminist are you?’, from the quotation opening this paper, uses an accusatory interrogative, with her tone and volume indicating the outrageousness of the suggestion, the feminist viewed as outcast, as beyond the pale, highlighting the social distance that others might wish to create between themselves and ‘feminists’. Then she asserts her own position and claims ours, reinforcing this with the ‘of course’ and the repetition of the pronouns, with ‘are’, invoking a united feminist front, a fantasy of solidarity that is subsequently dismantled.
when I ask Zoe if she would consider herself a feminist, and she responds, ‘No. Not particularly.’

Jess, also, apologetic and laughing, says, ‘I probably stick with Zoe,’ with the delivery of this utterance suggesting the need to appease, to smooth over discord, while ‘stick’ provides a figure of counter-solidarity, softened by ‘probably’. Rachel’s reference to feminism as a ‘dirty’ word references the abject (Kristeva 1982; Butler 2011). Feminism is a word to shun, heavy, soiled and laden with baggage, a word difficult to claim, even for Rachel, who is vocally sympathetic to Elinor’s stance, and later denounces sexism. ‘Feminism’ has a metaphorical weight that is the anathema of the shining, white, upwardly mobile neoliberal girl subject (McRobbie 2009). Zoe continues here:

Zoe: I guess I have an image of what a feminist looks like and I went to Sydney University, and I’m talking about the leaders of the feminist marches across Australia. I have an image in my head, I guess, that’s kind of... negative. [burst of laughter]

Researcher: That’s really interesting. Could you describe the image? [laughter]

Zoe: [reluctant] Ok, it’s kind of, ok, you know, they’re lesbians. There’s nothing wrong with that, I have family that are lesbian... um, of course there’s nothing wrong with that [quieter, as if as an aside]. They have... I don’t know... they’re unshaven and...

[laughter]

Jess: Angry.

Zoe: Angry at men and... they live in share houses [laughter] in inner city Sydney... nothing wrong with that either, they just do. Um, er... I don’t know... yeah.

Elinor: [in a quiet, amazed voice] It’s an age thing. It’s because you’re young.

Rachel: It’s fascinating. [draws word out]

The heteronormative and homophobic attitudes displayed here, while simultaneously disavowed, give rise to discord in the group, as the older women contemplate the
necessity to be docile and non-threatening to be appropriately feminine. The laughter
performs a leavening function, but, as Anne, who is not present and later reads the
transcript, says, some of us are shocked and disappointed that feminists might be
portrayed this way. It is as if the routine business of curriculum planning has shifted to
something raw and passionate; there are interruptions, voices compete, attempts are
made to backtrack or qualify, and powerful anecdotes; tightly packed glitterbombs in
their own right are deployed:

Elinor: A feminist to me is my mother. She’s the first lot of women who tried to do it
all...

Zoe: Oh! [surprised]

Elinor: ...with her mother telling her I won’t look after your children if you’re sick
because it was her job to stay home with them. It was the people who went out and did
it with no support, no takeaway dinners, no husband helping in the background. To me,
that’s the feminist. It’s an age thing. They’ve changed people’s minds.

Rachel: Feminist to me is my mum, who went to get a bank loan. She’d just inherited
her parents’ house and they said no. Even though my dad had retired, she was working,
she owned her own home outright, and they said no, unless you get your husband to
sign it. She said, “I want all my money now, and I’ll take it to another bank.” That’s
feminism to me. Equal rights [slowly and carefully]. It’s not about how you look, it’s
not about whether you’ve got hair or not, It’s about purely equal rights...

Zoe: [interrupting] You didn’t ask me what I thought of feminism. [voices speaking over
each other]

Elinor: That’s the way lots of young people think. My mother paid a year of HBA
[health insurance] in January and married on February 12 and went and said I’ve
taken out joint HBA with my husband now and can I have a refund and they said no.
[Hmmm] That person no longer exists. [silence] It was like she’d died. Now she was
Mrs R A Lee, Margaret White no longer existed and therefore was not entitled to a refund for a year of HBA. You gave up your identity when you married.

It is not possible to neatly read classroom practice off these rhetorical positions around so-called ‘feminism’ and our pedagogical approaches to each other, in these meetings.

As Jess says, hinting at the struggles beneath her own identity work, particularly in the repetition of the word ‘still’ suggesting a temporal space beyond feminism:

*It’s just that stereotyped perception, and I don’t want be, I don’t want to identify myself, I don’t want to be like that. But I still, yeah, I still... try to do it all and I still have very strong beliefs about not being dependent, you know, financially, on a partner and that’s why I work, because if it was just me I still... like I still, all of... but just... the unshaven... [giggles] arms and the... [laughter]*

When others respond to my question about how feminism might inform their practice, for example looking at stereotypes, or Barbie™’s 1950s origins, Jess says:

*See, I’m still all ok with that. It’s just my personal... like I can separate that...*

The word ‘separate’ here suggests the entanglement of discourses around feminism that we must negotiate in order to perform being an appropriately feminine woman/teacher/wife, the clash of persuasive and authoritative imperatives, yet is still wary of activism in its lukewarm ‘ok’. Authoritative discourses might be those of both militant feminism and patriarchy, experienced similarly as exterior demands for compliance, or interpellations to be resisted.

Elinor brings us all back to the fold, although it is still not clear that all are happy to be there.

*It’s the word. We need a new word. We all share the same values, but we need a word.*

*[yeah, yeah, universal agreement]*

Yet while she has performed the important textual function in the context of the meeting, of bringing us back to the same page, and allowing us to move on, reasserting
the cohesion of the faculty, she returns to this later, dissatisfied with relinquishing ‘feminism’:

I worry though, that the fact that the word feminist has been hijacked [yeah] is actually part of the ‘undermine the whole concept’. Deride, stereotype, marginalise and therefore you can no longer say you are and maintain ..., and no longer... you can’t be a feminine feminist. Do you know what I mean?

Rachel returns to this later, too:

Yeah, that’s the point: you can’t be pink and angry. [general laughter] And, you know, do you have to give up being feminine to be, you know, to want rights?

In one of the most tense interactions illustrating the clash of feminist and postfeminist discourses, the group debates whether equal pay has been achieved:

Zoe: I still ask those important questions in my class. I don’t think you can be an effective teacher if you wonder what the kids are going to think about you. So I’ll ask things like, are men and women still getting the equal amount of pay in Australia for doing the same jobs.

Rachel: They never have been. So there’s no point in putting the ‘still’ in.

Zoe: Exactly.

Rachel: We have yet to reach that.

Zoe: Well, my mother ...

Rachel: That’s the whole thing, the argument has been hijacked away from what we’ve gained and I’m worried that people are going to start losing that ...

Elinor: Did they ever get it?

Rachel: Yeah, no, that’s what I mean. We’ve only gained a certain amount. We haven’t gotten there.

Zoe: In some professions in some states we have like if you look at teaching, but if you look at the power positions...
Rachel: In your particular thing... but really, if you look at the wages between men and women, they’re not equal.

Zoe: Yeah, yeah, in general.

Rachel: So it hasn’t been achieved.

Rachel forces Zoe to set aside the postfeminist illusion of equal pay, yet this does not translate into us developing a feminist unit of work. Rachel is also the most resistant to studying girls’ media at all, fearing that she will not be able to discipline unruly boys disengaged by ‘girls’ texts. We might come out, or perform as feminists to each other in the ‘“safe space”’ (Swirsky & Angelone, 2015, p. 13) of our meetings, yet this may be more difficult in the coeducational classroom, where other gendered imperatives and power struggles exist.

**Apologising for Feminism**

I return now, despite all this researcher-initiated discussion, which makes feminist discourses visible in ways they might not otherwise have been, to the absence of girls, or concern for girls in the meetings overall; this is discussed more fully elsewhere (McKnight, 2015). Boys loom large; we simply do not mention that girls might have particular needs in relation to these texts, or include this as part of the rationale for study. Is it possible that the disavowal of feminism – the difficulty around performing an activist identity – has obliterated what might be described, if problematically, as feminist pedagogy?

Anne says, in response to my question about why we didn’t use the word feminism in the first meeting:

*I thought it was really interesting that we didn’t use the word ‘feminism’ and I thought you know, just as an old dyed-in-the-wool [funny drawling voice] I thought yeah, ten years ago we would have. But that term didn’t come up. It’s really interesting.*
Again she uses a derogatory tone and humour to suggest how others perceive, in this case, the older feminist. She sets up the generational divide, but also represents herself as unreformable and immune to postfeminist discourses, soaked in feminist theory and aware of a change in the rhetoric driving curriculum design. She refers on another occasion to Germaine Greer as ‘a crusty old feminist, but also a real ideas woman,’ again placing feminism firmly in the past, and fixed. The ideas of second wave feminism emerge as internally persuasive, but Anne dissembles, and critiques herself, the ‘old dyed-in-the-wool’ and the icons of the kind of feminism that drove Elinor and Anne’s mothers.

Feminism emerges as aligned with shame, despite Elinor’s confident claim that we are all feminists. In discussing pedagogical prompts for deconstruction in the classroom she says:

*I kept kind of feminising the whole thing. Feminist-ising, I mean, the whole thing. As I went through I was using it as a little sort of political agenda [emphasis –naughty tone]*

Even in the context of this relatively sympathetic audience, it seems we perform the disavowal of feminism, being but not being, embracing, but not embracing. There is danger in being a feminist, unless it is in a playful, not threatening kind of way. ‘Little’ takes the sting out of the political agenda. Then there is the way *having* a political agenda is constructed as naughty and outside the ‘usual’ work of assessing materials for study; there is self-surveillance operating here, alert to the need to keep different political and professional selves apart, perhaps illustrative of the impact of neoliberalism on the identity of the activist teacher, replaced by the automaton skills focused teacher. What selves remain for us to inhabit, if the lefty teacher lambasted by Thatcherism (McRobbie 2005, p. 25), and the lesbian feminist do not serve us?

Later, as our conversations veer everywhere but the classroom, Elinor says in relation to Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s internationally reported
parliamentary attack on misogyny: ‘I liked the speech.’ But she uses a confessional
tone, as if she shouldn’t have, reluctant, apologising. Zoe uses a similar tone when she
says:

\[\text{My first year of university [laughing], I did accidentally sign up to a feminist group [laughing] you know they sold me... ok, I signed up to a communist group also by accident. But, um, I wouldn’t define myself with that word, that’s for sure.}\]

In this conundrum, one must apologise for being a feminist, and also for not being a
feminist, or even for being one by accident! No wonder we find it so difficult to write
the unit, to find language in which to couch our intentions around the gendered limits
we perceive in toy-related websites.

**Feminist as Troublemaker**

I turn now to the disavowal of feminism in the school context in which our curriculum
design work is situated. In two of my interactions with Anne, one in person and one
over the phone, she tells me the same story; it is clearly a story that she feels it is
important I hear, something that she is troubled by, about gender issues at the school.
She says:

\[\text{At the Gender Equity Committee, the moment I talk about it, there is just this turn off.}\]

\[\text{Turn the volume down. Get her off. [shouts the last]}\]

In another telling she says:

\[\text{I remember the first time I had to talk about gender equity. You should have seen the eyes rolling. It was like ‘Get her off!’}\]

Here is the feminist as loud, ranting, harping and heckled, followed again by expulsion
and rejection. Anne describes trying to go to the school gym where the muscle bound
male staff hang out, and how, ‘The look was like what are you doing here? I told Simon
[principal] about this and he said why didn’t you call them on it? And I said I lost my
nerve.’ She describes how the student representatives on the Gender Equity Committee have also spoken about the ‘male culture’ of the gym.

She says of joining the committee:

> When I came, that’s five years ago, they had done an audit, and the staff were very emotional. I wanted to do a staff meeting... no, you can’t do that, we’re just meeting for policy, who’s in POR [Positions of Responsibility], whereas I wanted to get into the culture and I wanted to get into the curriculum.

Here is the feminist as trouble maker, the dangerous political animal who is a threat to stability, who must be silenced. Yet there are clearly issues at the school: the senior physics classes contain no girls; the school camps are not all open to girls (in practice, not policy) as with the gym; Movember is celebrated eagerly, but not International Women’s Day, and in language, the disavowal of both women’s culture and of feminism are performed daily. Anne describes students who attend her failed attempt at establishing a committee for International Woman’s Day saying disparagingly, ‘What is this, a women’s knitting circle?’

In the staffroom, another teacher tells me the students saw it as ‘a hangover from feminism’, placing feminism firmly in the past. While we are chatting, Anne tells me the story of Kate Tindall, a former student, who was traumatised by her experiences at Haslemere. She wrote a powerful piece about this for her university creative writing course, and sent it to the school. She gives me a copy of this piece, which is deeply moving, and describes the victimisation the student experienced as a result of her feminist views, an escalating crisis of physical and online intimidation beginning with her ‘Happy International Women’s Day!’ on the whiteboard being changed to ‘Happy International Women Complain about Nothing Day’. Other staff join in our conversation: the trauma seems to have had a lasting impact on the school community. Kate writes that she says to herself:
'I’m a feminist.’ It felt like I was apologising. And that put me even more on edge. I said it several times under my breath that day when I got home and the more I said the less strange it felt.

The performance of the feminine requires a masquerade of simpering; in my research diary, I write about a Melbourne woman captured on CCTV as she is approached by her murderer. She totters in her high heels, struggling with her enormous handbag, with the ‘candelabra items’ described by McRobbie (2009, p. 67), all the accoutrements of femininity exaggerated to the point of parody. The masquerade (Butler, 2007, p. 64; McRobbie, 2009, p. 59)) might also be perceived in Elinor’s need to make a naughty joke in mentioning feminism. Yet this raw student writing explores the rage and grief underpinning this façade; in the course of the study I experience these emotions myself, and explore them in my own stories; there is a powerful synergy between student Kate Tindall’s words, ‘written in fury’ as she later tells me, and my own writings. This link also exists between Anne barred from the workplace gym and me assessing sex-segregated gyms at my children’s prospective schools, between girls not able to choose a ‘bloke’s camp’ like surfing or a subject like Physics in 2012. It is evident in my uneasy TV viewing of Australian ‘period drama’ *Puberty Blues*, which positions sexism as belonging in the bad old seventies of my own childhood, between Elinor apologising for ‘feminist-ising’ our curriculum work and me removing ‘feminism’ from my thesis title.

This space for reflecting on curriculum design, for jamming and playing, is not about trivial subversions, but offers flashes of rage – when Elinor slams her hand on the table in a meeting and says, ‘The fight is not won!’; in Rachel’s insistence that the younger Zoe is wrong about equal pay, and in the rough ways we manipulate the Barbie™ dolls we examine as interview prompts in our meetings, demonstrating our frustration with their plastic limitations.
There is anger, also, in Elinor’s description of sexist interactions with male students, hinting at a vast, unexplored sexism informing male students’ relationships with female teachers. Prior to her bang on the table, she tells us about the boy who uses the term ‘retarded chick’ to describe a teacher, and the other teachers respond with recognition and empathy.

Elsewhere she says, of the same incident:

_He assumed that language, well, he made one of two assumptions – he either assumed that language would also put me in my box, or he assumed that I would understand that’s how he would feel and that is how he would frame his response, but he didn’t think, for example, might best not say that or, that’s not the sort of thing you can say, he felt quite entitled, whatever his agenda was, to frame it that way, and to me. I mean, not that it would be better if two males had that conversation, but see, there’s still things to be angry about, in my opinion. In my mind... and yet anger is not a female... when is Barbie angry? [mmms of agreement]_

The murmurs of assent, from both younger and older teachers, suggest wider agreement with these observations, and this is undeniably how I would like to see it. On the other hand, when I question the study’s teachers individually, via email, about Anne’s observation that she was amazed to find on arrival that Haslemere is ‘such a progressive school, but such a blokey school,’ Zoe responds firmly, ‘I haven’t been at Haslemere long enough to notice a specific culture.’ By other accounts it is a pervasive culture that the school, under a new principal, is at pains to change. In her response to my question re whether Haslemere is ‘blokey’, Elinor responds:

_Gosh! Yes! People would die if they realised because the prevailing myth (that kids as well as staff believe) is that it’s all fine. Heck no! Look at the discipline problems – 90% male. Curriculum – I don’t think it’s just me – is used as discipline in as much as what’s successful gets adopted and that’s the male ethos._
Her method of coping with this is to employ a ‘mumsy role’ and she says how she uses this to get the respect that male staff ‘dish out to the men folk’. The complex and contradictory nature of being ‘mumsy’, however, is demonstrated by the students’ distaste for the knitting circle. Home, the very home where I find myself trapped as a full time research student and mother, is invoked as the ultimate waste of time; there is irony in having to seek respect through what is so patently disavowed.

**Conclusion**

All of this is elided in the actual unit of work we design, which barely touches on feminism, and contains no activities that relate specifically to female gender. The unit cover does not look as if it relates to girls at all (it features a gender neutral picture of a human hand and is entitled ‘Play On’); the unit does not dare to suggest that Barbie™ might have a harmful impact on girls, or at least, any more harmful than the Transformers robot toys might have on boys.

This paper illustrates the conflicting discourses, the disavowals, subterfuges, compromises and dissemblings that complicate our performance as appropriately gendered and gender activist teachers, even prior to entering the classroom. Our choices emerge as much more than rational or merely compliant with mandated curriculum. What are the complex struggles around gender activism that underlie other units of work, taught in schools everywhere? This study offers insights into the ways gender is performed in the space of coeducational curriculum design, and links curricular choices and silences to broader cultural gender issues.

For the student victimised on Facebook for wanting to celebrate International Women’s Day, for the female teacher who cannot exercise in the school gym, for her colleague uncomfortable with what she perceives as an ugly, activist identity, for the researcher frustrated because a unit cannot focus on Barbie™ as a global phenomenon,
feminism, even in purportedly postfeminist times, is indeed still a dirty word. Why should it be? Such questions about gender and curriculum do not belong only in the literature of education, but are of concern to us all.
References


