

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Closing the Gender Gap: what does it really mean?

LOIS WEISS, *State University of New York, Buffalo, USA*

This hit me at the worst of times—I had just finished running a 700–person conference on urban girls in Buffalo and really resented that I had signed on to this project. Why did I say ‘yes’ to this one? Why was I saying ‘yes’ to anyone? So I picked the volume up with much trepidation, and could not put it down. It is a stunning achievement. Arguing that it is the decisive break with the social and educational past that explains the closing of the gender gap, the authors skillfully weave through post–1945 data, traversing ideological shifts and institutional and cultural change in order to establish their main points. Having sung the praises of the volume (and it is indeed wonderful), I want to raise some questions, not about the book *per se*, but questions related to what we need to probe next in order to maximize the authors’ extraordinary insights.

I must point out at the outset that it is no small achievement that this work was done collectively and in the interstices of the authors’ lives. It is very fashionable right now to push collective work on campuses because high-level administrators imagine that such work will land more large-scale grants. Given the increasing pressure on all faculties to obtain grants in light of diminished state resources for higher education, many of us are being pressured to engage in this form of collective work. But this form of work is very difficult. It can be exhilarating, of course, but the difficulties associated with collective scholarship should not be underestimated (Weiss & Fine, 2000a). It takes time, effort, respect of the sort that one cannot imagine, and a willingness to work within and between the cracks of one’s own personal and professional life as well as that of others. I know from personal experience that these collective efforts across personal and professional obligations and desires must be continually worked at; they do not just happen. We must begin to lay on the table what these collaborative arrangements actually look like and how we can encourage them to work. Arnot, David and Weiner have accomplished what is exceedingly difficult. I encourage them and others to begin to sketch out how such collaborations across personal and professional lives, and in their case across nations, can be so successful.

Having said that, and with deep respect for the work of my esteemed colleagues, I do need to raise the question: what does it mean in terms of achievement and attainment that the gender gap has closed? I worry about this notion and think we need to keep probing its relevance. Michelle Fine and I in the United States interviewed 154 men and women, representative of different race and ethnic groups, the working class and poor as well as the aged (Fine & Weiss, 1998; Weiss & Fine, 2000a). In many ways, these

individuals exemplify the closing of the gender gap. Women, in fact, far surpassed men in terms of the amount of education they had. They were, across racial and ethnic groups, pouring into tertiary-level institutions in order to make their lives better. But guess what? Their lives were hell. They were poor, with all the associated problems of living and breathing in poverty. Ninety-two percent, 86% and 67% of our white, Latina and African American women, respectively, told stories of physical abuse; horrific stories, which have been matched in further, follow-up studies. So they may have closed the gender gap in terms of achievement, but so what? Right now the US is putting into place various forms of welfare reform as the 61-year-old guarantee of federal cash aid to poor children comes to an end. Many states are looking to replace current arrangements with workfare—disallowing the possibility that women can go to school. What Arnot, David and Weiner have documented is an extraordinary phenomenon, but we need to focus on its meaning rather than let attainment outcomes wholly colonize the discourse of school success. What exactly does it mean that women and men have virtually closed the gap in educational attainment? Do they obtain equivalent jobs in the paid labour force? Are women able to negotiate more equal labour in the home/family sphere? Are women's lives free from the haunting physical abuse that surrounds us now?

In the United States people of colour have closed the racial gap in educational attainment as well, but it means precious little in terms of the distribution of wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). More years of schooling do translate into better jobs for people within racial groups but not across racial groups. In other words, white men with a secondary education still earn more than black men or women with more education (Fine & Weis, 1998). And when we get to the subject of wealth, as Oliver and Shapiro so clearly demonstrate, the gap is increasing by racial and ethnic group in spite of the closing of the gap in educational attainment. Thus, while Arnot, David and Weiner have offered a brilliant piece of scholarship, it is important that we not assume that this closing alone will translate into broader egalitarian outcomes.

Having said that, I also want to spend a bit of time thinking about what it is about the school that may facilitate both short-term and long-term change in terms of achievement/attainment, as well as potential long-term change along the lines I have just outlined. If the school doesn't change and girls just get more of it, we have to ask the question, once again, so what? I don't deny the important points raised by Arnot, David and Weiner about increased numbers of feminist teachers, improved curriculum and so forth, but this is not enough? Girls in the United States, for example, receive more sex education than ever before, but sex education tends to stress hormonally charged boys who cannot help what they do, leaving the only subject position of girls as being not provocative so as not to arouse the boys and men in their midst. Obviously we would agree that more is not necessarily better. It is interesting in this regard that not one of the well-known *Nation at Risk* reports (National Commission on Excellence and Education, 1983) of many years ago in the US, in which the schools were seen to be wholly inadequate, focused on gender inequalities as a problem. We don't see it as one. But it is. Girls are being harassed in the halls of schools and abused in school and at home (Weis *et al.*, 1998). Bureaucratic structures are still predominantly male, with very little room for alternative voices. The incredible problem with separate spaces in the US, by race or gender, unlike in the UK or Australia, means that there are few separate spaces in which girls are encouraged growth. The US curriculum is pathetic; I've seen teachers look to the small additional boxes on women in history texts and tell the students to skip them because it is not going to be on the test. None of this denies the important point

that the authors make regarding change in schools, but there is still much to do in this regard.

Recent research has highlighted some amazing spaces for girls in schools and outside of them—what Michelle Fine and I refer to as ‘safe spaces’ (Weis & Fine, 2000b). It is these spaces that we need to begin to spotlight, these counter-hegemonic sites, if you will, that enable young women to grow their bodies, spirits and minds in more than a decorative way. By pushing toward these spaces we will fill out the ways in which increased educational attainment for girls could mean enhanced life possibilities.

Correspondence: Lois Weis, Graduate School of Education, State University of New York, Buffalo, USA. Email: weis@acsu.buffalo.edu

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