RESEARCH ARTICLE

Refractory accounts of feminist educational policy work: the case of *Gender Equity: A Framework For Australian Schools*

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Abstract

Feminist engagement in education policy in Australia has been extensive and impactful, with periods of high activity and influence in the past through to a present where it seems difficult to find feminist voices in policy spaces. There are diverse perspectives on the earlier decades of feminist policy influence that shift according to context, the social and political milieus of each moment, location, and position within the policy assemblage. In this paper I focus on the era of the mid 1990s, and the national policy *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) as a case of policy emergence, mutation and dissipation. Drawing on my own recollections and interviews with eleven policy actors who were variously involved in the gender and education policy work around that time, I explore processes, strategies, obstacles and affordances of the times through four types of trouble: policy trouble, patriarchal trouble, school trouble, and genders and sexualities trouble. I offer these as refractory accounts of feminist policy work, that might break through linear accounts and add further nuance and context to our revisiting of feminism in education.

Keyword Gender equity · Policy enactment · Policy actors · Feminist education policy · Australia

Introduction

In the paper that was the provocation for this special issue, Lyn Yates opens by noting that there are many different perspectives on the decades of feminist activity in education policy and practice in Australia. Significant gaps and differences have always been part of those stories, with nuances and variations that have shifted according to context, the social and political milieus of the moment, as well as shifting theoretical influences and activist agendas. These are mapped throughout the paper as Yates (2008) offers a personal and intellectual account of her imbrication into the intricate histories of feminist activism in education, social and political life. Two eras are of interest in her revisiting of feminisms in Australian education: the 1970s into the early 1980s, and the 'present' of the paper in the mid-late 2000s. This paper engages in a roughly parallel way by considering the mid-point between her two eras, the mid-1990s which

saw the development and release of a key policy document: *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA, 1997). My aim is to develop a 'refractory'[1] account– suggesting both the action of breaking and diffusing light and borrowing from the title of defunct Australian feminist journal *Refractory Girl* (1977–1999). Refractory accounts of feminisms and education aim to multiply and complicate linear narratives.

My method also parallels Yates' research, where she interviewed policy actors from the earlier period for her doctorate. The refractory accounts of this paper are 'insider' accounts of eleven people I interviewed who had been variously involved in policy work during the 1990s. Participants were differently positioned in relation to *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) across a vast national network. Their locations included bureaucracies at national, state and regional levels; community organisations, and academics consulting from universities. I was most interested in the people from whom we tend not to hear– the "hewers and drawers of policy work" (Ball, 2015, p. 467), those responsible for policy implementation.

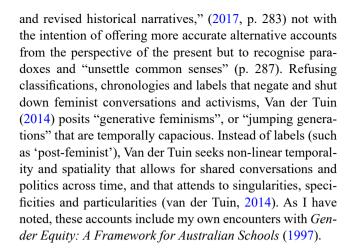✉ Susanne Gannon
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[1]   (of water, air, or glass) make (a ray of light) change direction when it enters at an angle….mid 16th century: from Latin *refract-* 'broken up', from the verb *refringere*, from *re-* 'back' + *frangere* 'to break'.

Their narratives acknowledge that policy enactment is complex, contradictory, and intimate work (Addey & Piattoeva, 2021). It takes place in networks that are mobile and multi-directional, that operate at multiple scales at the same time. As Yates' (2008) account reminds us, where, when and what company we keep in our work and intellectual lives matter in the narratives we tell, so parts of my own story also weave through this paper. I do not offer another thread in a linear story of progress (or lack thereof). Rather I want to suggest that policyscapes and policy histories are inherently fragmented, partial and locationally specific. Starting points (ditto finishing points and stops along the way) are arbitrary. The first half of the paper engages with *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) as a policy text, while the second half of the paper explores intimate accounts of policy enactment. I consider four kinds of trouble: *policy trouble*, the complexities and political contexts in which policy is developed; *patriarchal trouble*, which examines the ways that boys' education lobbyists sought to influence or curtail feminist work; *school trouble*, which considers the difficulties entailed in [outsiders] working with schools; and *genders and sexualities trouble*, which examines gaps and traces of change. Finally, I return to the present with a nod to broader feminist troubles to consider how these troubles (and more) continue resonate.

By 'the present', I refer to recent experiences of researching gender and secondary schooling[2] where my coresearchers and I faced some unexpected conundrums. We hoped to map gender-related policy, policy networks and trajectories over time, including *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) as a pivotal moment. Although in a pilot project I had interviewed policy actors who worked in the mid-1990s, it proved almost impossible to find or speak to equivalent policy actors in the present. We also faced extraordinary difficulties in speaking to teachers and students in schools in our state of New South Wales, which was led by a conservative Liberal Government through the period of our research. We became aware of the leverage exercised by a conservative politician with influence across school sectors and his capacity to block research on gender and schooling. We moved the research to another jurisdiction, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and spoke to a central policy actor there, whose comments I return to in the conclusion of this paper.

This research is inspired by a broader 'temporal turn' in feminist scholarship (Gannon, 2016; McLeod, 2017; Van der Tuin, 2014). McLeod argues that it is crucial for scholars to attend to "memory and the movement of received

and revised historical narratives," (2017, p. 283) not with the intention of offering more accurate alternative accounts from the perspective of the present but to recognise paradoxes and "unsettle common senses" (p. 287). Refusing classifications, chronologies and labels that negate and shut down feminist conversations and activisms, Van der Tuin (2014) posits "generative feminisms", or "jumping generations" that are temporally capacious. Instead of labels (such as 'post-feminist'), Van der Tuin seeks non-linear temporality and spatiality that allows for shared conversations and politics across time, and that attends to singularities, specificities and particularities (van der Tuin, 2014). As I have noted, these accounts include my own encounters with *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997).

Encountering *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*

My interest in the pivotal moment of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) began when it landed in the school support centre in regional Queensland where I was working from 1995 to 1997 on secondment from my school. This was the first and only 'gender equity' focused national education policy and was signed off for implementation by all states. It was simultaneously the culmination of extensive feminist collaboration and activism around girls' education, and a capitulation to a liberal agenda that minimised differences and insisted on equalising policy attention to boys and girls. It fell into limbo almost as soon as it was released. Yet it also fell into my hands in a School Support Centre in far north Queensland. By then I had been teaching for more than a decade in rural and remote Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland. Yet, in the mid-1990s, even immersed in practice as a teacher in regional Queensland, I felt then that I had plenty of engagement with feminist initiatives. I moved to Queensland and began working in schools in 1986, just three years before the long reign of the conservative National Party under Joh Bjelke-Petersen ended. As the new decade and new era began, schools were at last able to offer Human Relationships Education and were given scope and support to develop school-based curriculum. An energetic group of feminist teachers, including myself, developed our school wide program, drawing on expertise from community sectors and with expert support from the region, with oversight from a local consultative committee. We worked collaboratively with NGOs including branches of Family Planning Queensland and the AIDS Council and consulted with students, parents and communities about what they wanted to learn. Links between school and community were furthered when I volunteered on the management committee

of our local Rape Crisis Centre. Important centrally developed resources landed in schools including *No Fear (Secondary): A kit addressing gender-based violence* (DEET, 1995). In my school, teachers experimented with single-sex classes in some subjects, and developed units of work and resources in English that engaged critically with representations of gender in texts. We contributed to early work on the *Gender Up Front* resource for HSIE/SOSE that was being developed with schools across the state. A wave of high-quality English teaching resources such as *Gendered Fictions* (Martino & Mellor, 1995) came into schools showing us how to implement critical literacy in classrooms. A new Queensland English syllabus (1994) was explicit about the place of critical literacy in all English classrooms, and I was seconded to the regional school support centre to work with teachers across to implement that Syllabus. This is where I encountered *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997).

Here I turn to the policy text, its structure and its intent. Most of the initiatives I had already been involved in could be understood within its five broad strategic directions: (1) Understanding the process of gender construction; (2) Curriculum, teaching and learning; (3) Violence and school culture; (4) Post-school pathways; (5) Supporting change. For me, the logic of drawing all these together in an overarching policy framework made sense. The structure of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* offered both practical strategies and the rationales underpinning them. Part A, the 'Framework for Action', describes outcomes for each of the five directions, briefly lists school-based strategies, and measurable indicators of success.

These excerpts indicate some of the logics of the time. Firstly, curriculum was understood to be an appropriate vehicle for social and cultural change. Yates notes that earlier feminist work had understood "that *the story schooling tells* students through the curriculum content (and through the hidden curriculum in the form of 'role models' and the like) *matters*" (2008, p. 477). These traces are evident in this excerpt. According to Yates (2016), of all contemporary social movements, feminism has been most concerned with the question of "what kinds of citizens are being formed via curriculum" (p. 371). The kind of citizen being produced through Strategic Direction 1 (+2, 3, 4) would be one who might be free (or free-er) of the limits of gendered expectations, stereotypes and practices that contribute to different and unjust outcomes and futures for young people of different genders, and within different cohorts of boys and girls. At this policy moment, boys and girls are always understood in binary terms. The intertwining of feminist policy work with curriculum reform also indicates the co-location of the Gender Equity Taskforce with curriculum development in Canberra (Gannon, 2016). The same unit had recently been responsible for drafting National Curriculum Statements and Profiles. Secondly, the excerpts reveal a logic of reason– an assumption that people (being presumably fair-minded, intelligent, well informed, educable) would get on board with social and cultural reform. If only teachers, managers and parents had the right information, skills and professional learning, they would comply with and support the implementation of Strategic Direction 1. This disregards the affective investments and passionate attachments that adhere to gender.

In educational policy research, linear assumptions about top-down implementation have been thoroughly debunked. Policy enactment is always "an elusive and slippery process" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 138). Multiple points of focus are necessary: the "routine and mundane" practices through which policy gets done, the types of "artefacts" that realise and represent policies, the "competing or contradictory" discourses and subject positions in policy (Ball et al., 2012, p. 138). The attachment of government bureaucracies to what Ball and colleagues call "deliverology" has increasingly made students, teachers and schools visible to "the gaze of policy" (2012, p. 139) via technologies of audit, performativity, and accountability. The indicators in Strategic Direction 1 suggest that "an increase in opportunities/ provision" will be enough for profound change. These indicators do not account for personal investments, subjectivities, desires, the affectively potent and often inarticulable complexities of gendered experiences and the subtle and covert operations of power in social domains. These are not amenable to capture. Thinking through these complexities required new resources that were beyond those of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997).

The theoretical underpinnings of policy are important. How is thinking shifting, and where, and what differences are being made as a consequence? What are we struggling with and what tools are needed to help us grapple with the problem? Advocates, academics and policy workers committed to social justice and equal opportunity had been labouring over a sustained period to address significant gaps in the lives of girls and women through a sequence of influential policy initiatives. These were most acceptable when they fitted the logic of "neo-liberal agendas" of "career, power and status in the public world" (Yates, 2008, p. 476). Yet, the emergence and influence of feminist poststructuralism was a "striking phenomenon" of the time (2008, p. 478) with its focus on "very difficult and non-commonsense concepts" (p. 479). As Yates explains elsewhere (2004), research approaches are permeable and dynamic. They respond to movements in thought beyond education, and to the limitations of theories and frameworks that have become commonplace. Researchers draw on new theoretical tools as required when the tools at hand are no longer

adequate. While academics may privilege complexity and what may seem to be theoretical obtuseness, bureaucrats, parents and other stakeholders may construe the problem in more straightforward or common-sense ways. Yet, "'common sense' may be precisely a central part of the problem that produces patterns of gendered inequality" (Yates, 2004, p. 51). While Part A of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) does not mention theory and the strategic directions are couched in plain language, the emerging influence of poststructural feminist theory is apparent. For example, the key tenet of feminist poststructuralisms - binary oppositions - is implied in the explanation: "Dominant concepts of masculinity and femininity define males and females as opposites by highlighting their differences and assigning them unequal value, status and power" (1997, p. x). This language was not completely unknown in schools. Some of the critical literacy resources for English teaching were already oriented towards this concept. The time when I encountered *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) also coincided with my part-time enrolment in a Master of Education (Hons), where I met Bronwyn Davies and began my own dizzying engagement with feminist poststructuralism. If theoretical complexity might be seen as an obstacle for people in schools, then the Framework does not overtly use much of this language. However, it was a complex policy document with diverse anticipated audiences and many interconnected parts.

The second main section of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) is Part B: 'Perspectives on Gender Equity in Schooling.' This section is a bridge between the pragmatics of the suggested strategies for schools and broader thinking around gender and schooling. It comprises two collections of essays: framing papers for the five strategic directions, written by the senior policy actors responsible for producing the Framework (Gannon, 2016); and a selection of conference papers on gender and femininities, masculinities, indigeneity, culturally diversity, disability and more. As an example, the first framing paper elaborates strategic direction 1: Understanding the process of gender construction. It is a distillation of current thinking, staged through sections on gender and power, gender and difference, gender relations amongst boys and girls. It discusses the role of language, agency, relationality, and elaborates the implications for schools and for girls. The nuances of intersecting disadvantage are explored, as are the operations and effects of dominant masculinities. Whilst informative, grounded broadly in research about social worlds, and reasonable in tone, the text might have been provocative to those who are invested in the status quo:

It is this painful process of developing and proving masculinity, at the expense of femininity, which partly explains the contradictory phenomenon that while men, as a group, are powerful and dominate the economic, political, social, and personal spheres of life, they often experience fear of losing power. This feeling of powerlessness may increase males' negative attitudes and behaviour towards females, for example through sexual harassment. (1997, p. 28)

Doubtless, and as the narrative accounts in later sections suggest, some of the people in positions of power were men who reacted against *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) and those feminists who had worked on it.

Most of the seven essays that are included in the remainder of Part B came from the Promoting Gender Equity Conference of February 1995, which had been convened in Canberra to inform the development of the Framework). Eva Cox (1997, p. 74) describes "a set of very mixed messages" in the call for the conference, offering an early warning that the emergence of "competing victim syndrome" risks "reinforcing the status quo by removing the legitimacy from those of us who act as change agents" (aka feminists). Other papers in the document explore the social construction and costs of masculinities (McLean, Martino), a group pf papers address intersections of gender with indigeneity (Herbert), cultural diversity (Pallotta-Chiarolli), and disability (Hastings), and the final paper presents the views of parents on sex education (Beckett, Bode and Crewe) (see MCEETYA, 1997). Attention to boys is clear and attention to the intersectional dimensions of gender is apparent. It's interesting to compare this selection with the published proceedings of the conference (MCEETYA, 1995), which is around 450 pages and includes the full text of 32 papers, and a list of another 65 scholarly papers that had been contributed by scholars to inform the work of the Gender Equity Taskforce. Yates describes the conference as bringing together around 200 people from all sectors and interests: "people who had been seriously engaged in this area for some time" (1999, p. 561). Regardless of its compromises, *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) was underpinned by comprehensive intellectual labour and the best scholarship available in Australia at the time. Amongst the papers is evidence from many research projects with schools that indicate the complexities of equity work oriented towards change. Papers that appear in the published proceedings but are not included in Part B of the Framework address homophobia, sex-based harassment, violence, and the experiences of 'girls at risk'. Amongst the conference papers are careful articulations of theoretical shifts, analysis of the datascapes of schools and their limitations, evaluations of gender related policy initiatives to date, and many warnings against the rising tide and influence of 'what about the boys'

advocacy. Even though they may not have all been included in Part B of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997), all these resources informed the development of the Framework from 1995 through to its release.

The seven essays that were included in the final version of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) provided a set of resources which could potentially have been used in schools for professional learning. However no guidance is provided for Part B beyond the vague suggestion that readers can "access particular information on various issues pertaining to gender equity". There are few hints about how Part B might be used to deepen understanding, provoke debate or underpin further initiatives in a school context. Rather, Part B appears to be there to justify Part A– rather than to be put to use in any practical ways in schools. In Yates' later assessment, the conference was indicative of an emerging gulf emerging in the policy space between the bureaucrats, academics and other high level policy actors who were immersed in this work, and teachers in schools who were mostly not. In schools, teacher attrition from the profession had become a problem and increased work pressure and funding cuts meant that "attention to gender issues was a luxury" (1999, p. 561). More than twenty years later, these issues have become more deeply entrenched.

Undoubtedly the move from polices that focused on girls to the policy that purported to give equal attention to boys and girls is the most contentious aspect of this policy moment. In the stories told about *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997), this was a major capitulation from earlier initiatives that focused on inequities impacting on girls. The introduction notes that the Framework must be read in combination with the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993–1997* (Australian Education Council, 1993), yet in effect it effaced that policy. Locating myself in that moment of encounter with the document in the School Support Centre, this capitulation was not apparent. As a feminist teacher located in the regions, inside schools and outside policy networks, always working in coeducational secondary schools, the inclusion of boys and girls did not seem so remarkable. If a death knell began to sound for feminist education policy at this point, it was not the only one. The Framework that had seemed so timely was never implemented as had been planned and agreed upon (Gannon, 2016). At the federal level, a significant change of government took place as the conservative Liberal National Party (LNP) coalition with John Howard as Prime Minister won power from the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in March 1996. The work continued despite a "real sense of doom" (Gannon, 2016, p. 340). A draft was released in mid-1996 and a final version dated 1997 for distribution. Although the policy was not officially rescinded, it rapidly faded from view and lost institutional support.

Many scholars have mapped this vanishing policy, from various stances and locations, within and outside the policy apparatus. They remind us that *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) must be understood within the context of the many policies and reports that preceded it and those that came after, and within the limitations of the pragmatics of policy development which is marked by compromise at every turn. The reduction and refocusing of gender equity initiatives on boys' education that was marked by the Framework's inclusion of boys alongside girls at every point has been extensively explored. Various participants at the earlier conference had warned that this was on the horizon, and the anticipated shift came to pass. *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) was an instance of policy "closure" where "mainstreaming and downstreaming" obliterated continuing concerns around girls' education (Ailwood, 2003). It was the "endgame" for girls' schooling policies (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). It tried to straddle the "conflicting agendas and concerns of broader masculinist politics, on the one hand, and (pro)feminist politics, on the other" leading to a "policy vacuum" where equity policies were devolved to state governments (Keddie, 2009, p. 28). In an analysis of the contentious "de facto" policy of the *Boys: Getting it Right* parliamentary inquiry (House of Representatives, 2002), which called for the termination of the languishing, but not quite defunct Gender Equity Framework, Mills et al. (2007) describe this as the peak moment for "recuperative masculinity politics" as it positioned boys and men as the "new disadvantaged" (p. 18). The effectiveness of "backlash politics" around this time "took the wind out of feminist sails" (McLeod, 2017, p. 290). Subsequently, gender-related reform has been "patchy" at best, losing both the impetus of "official policy attention" and the earlier "grassroots and teacher-led mobilisations" (McLeod, 2017, p. 290). A recent cartography of gender related policy in Australian schooling describes *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) as the moment that "removed any direct challenge to hegemonic patriarchal practices in schools" (Wolfe, 2022, p. 1049). The surge of patriarchal fury around this time became a sort of white noise drowning out other perspectives. Though Yates', 2008 paper does not explicitly mention *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) or subsequent policy machinations, she concludes that by the 2000s, it seemed that "feminist concerns about the substantive content of what happens in schools struggle to be heard" (p. 480). Close to two decades later, this situation continues.

Another legacy of the feminist bureaucratic work around *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* 1997) and related policies was their insertion into neoliberal or new managerialist modes of accounting for social policy,

Table 1 Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools (1997), Strategic Direction 1 (pp. 12–13, excerpts)

1. Understanding the process of gender construction	
Outcome	The concept of gender construction will be acknowledged, examined and understood at all levels of schooling.
Develop and deliver curriculum within compulsory and post-compulsory frameworks which provide opportunities for girls and boys to:	• Study perspectives on the construction of gender within different historical, cultural and socio-economic contexts • Examine and challenge current gender-based relationships which limit options for different groups of girls and boys • Explore the role of language in the construction of gender • Critically examine the impact of popular culture on gender…
Increase the knowledge, understandings and skills of teachers, managers and parents about gender construction by:	• investigating and identifying the appropriate skills which teachers and managers need to deal with gender construction and its impact on the lives of boys and girls • identifying ways that teachers, managers and parents can overcome resistance to learning about gender construction…
Indicators of improvement:	• An increase in opportunities across all curriculum areas for students to examine how gender is constructed • An increase in the provision of, and participation in, professional development courses for teachers and managers which include an examination of gender equity issues • An increase in the provision of, and participation in, parent/ teacher forums on gender equity…

Table 2 National action plan for the education of girls 1993–1997 (p. 17)

Priority: Improving the educational outcomes for girls who benefit least from schooling	
Questions for schools	What mechanisms are in place to assist communication with the parents of girls from these groups? What provision is made to improve the access, attendance, participation and outcomes of girls from these groups? To what extent does the curriculum select a whole school approach to improving educational outcomes the girls from these groups? To what extent can teachers demonstrate that their expectations of girls from these groups are not less than their expectations of other students? Etc
System-level indicators	Retention rates and attainment levels over time of girls by group. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, girls from non-English speaking background, girls who have a disability, who live in rural and remote areas, or who live in poverty.) The percentages of teaching and support staff, by gender, that come from disadvantaged groups.

leading to policy as "deliverology" (Ball et al., 2012). The "Indicators of improvement" listed for each strategic direction signalled this thinking. There is a clear shift between the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993–1997* and *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) in terms of audit and accounting practices. The *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993–1997* provided "Question for schools" that were phrased in such a way that schools could self-examine their own internal practices, separately from "System level indicators" that were to be reported across jurisdictions. For example, see Table 2 for a priority area that had completely disappeared in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997).

Just a couple of years later, the indicators of improvement demanded by *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) are more ambiguous and are required to be reported at school level as well as system level (See Table 1). While the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls (1993–1997)* includes some observations about how system-level reporting of data might be reorganised, it does not suggest a move to school level reporting. Thus *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) exemplifies what Yates describes as another important legacy of feminist bureaucracy– the insertion of "technologies of managing and auditing the life of schools… disciplining

and constraining that work to certain types of outcome agendas" (2008, p. 477). Similarly, Taylor (2003) names *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) as the inaugurating policy for data-driven monitoring and reporting of gender equity outcomes. The neoliberal steering at a distance through audit practices attached to policy and funding has extended to all dimensions of school life such that it has become almost impossible to imagine other ways that schools could operate. The mantra of accountability (and its embedded 'countability') infuses all aspects of contemporary school operations (See Table 2).

Working around *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997)

In the previous section, I have woven in some of my own idiosyncratic encounters with the Framework and the policy and practice moment in which it emerged, along with some close readings of the documents. There are– of course– other stories I have not told, moments of resistance or personal attack amongst colleagues in my own school, or the paradoxes that arise from endeavouring to live feminist principles in one's personal life. However, these are always part of the (feminist) territory. Another bureaucratic secondment

took me away from school in late 1998, to the Equity Programs Unit in Education Queensland in Brisbane for a term. Here I met the policy actors who were labouring for change across the breadth of social justice issues impacting on the lives of young people. By that time, most of the professional learning in schools delivered by the unit was focused explicitly on boys. In this workplace, I met people who were significant in policy development for gender equity in my state– those "hewers and drawers" (Ball, 2015, p. 467) who are essential to any policy implementation. Fast forward to the second decade of the 2000s when I'm firmly entrenched in academia and wondering what happened to the policy, and the policy actors– at various scales, in various locations, and with various responsibilities– who had been involved in the work around *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997).

My interest here is in the narratives of some of the policy actors involved in the work, an eclectic collection of people who were working in various contexts and locations within the policy assemblage that the Framework was part of. The eleven people who were interviewed were women and men whose names I found in documents, some whose work I knew already, and some who were named by others as instrumental in their contexts. Others were approached who did not respond, or with whom there was no opportunity for face-to-face interviews. As I understood policy work in gender equity as intensively intimate work, it seemed important that interviews were undertaken in person. Interviews were undertaken in Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra– in cafes, university campuses, homes. I took a marked-up hard copy of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) to interviews. A broad set of open-ended question prompts guided each interview, beginning with: Can you tell me your story of involvement with the Framework? Other question prompts asked about the genesis, purposes, most significant features, gaps and blind spots from the perspective of the present. The shortest interview ran for 45 min and the longest for almost two hours. Although most of the interviews I report on in this paper took place between 2015 and 2017, I also include final insights from a later interview with a contemporary policy actor[3]. Most of the initial eleven interviewees had retired from full time work at the time of the interview. Ethics approval means that involvement was confidential, and no information would directly identify participants, unless they opted to be named[4]. In this paper, people are identified through their

location and particular roles at the time, though these are slippery and multiple. Some people moved in and out of various types of project work, and others represented stakeholder groups. Some were early in their careers in this space, while others had been working for decades. Most were involved in multiple ways– in their substantive roles, on advisory groups, steering committees and more. Interviewees included: academics who worked on projects associated with *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) and related policy work; centrally located federal and state policy actors; a regionally located equity officer who worked with schools and was also on state committees; and a parent representative. Their narratives touched on work at the federal level, in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia– and on the work that preceded and followed the Framework. Consistent with Yates' account of the "energy and excitement and new networks and questions" (2008, p. 476) of the times, all the interviewees referred in different ways to energy, camaraderie, intellectual and emotional labour, and commitment to social justice reform. They also all referred to the troubles emerging from those times and the work itself, some of it personal and targeted, some of it broader. I address these in turn as *policy* trouble, *patriarchal* trouble, *school* trouble and *genders and sexualities* trouble.

Policy trouble

Obviously, policy is always embedded in its times and contexts, which requires policy workers who are working for change to learn to deploy tactics and strategies, make compromises and shift gears where required. They must be astute about the direction of changing political winds. As I have mentioned, a change federally from the Australian Labor Party (ALP) which has generally been associated with socially progressive policy to the Liberal National Party (LNP) coalition which is generally the bastion of conservative policy was the death knell for *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997). I have explored this elsewhere at the federal level (Gannon, 2016), so here I examine an account from Queensland which illustrates the complexities and high stakes of working for social justice in the policy arena. In Queensland, although the decades of conservative Queensland Nationals had ended and the ALP held the state government through most of the 1990s, a bye-election in 1996 led to a hung parliament with a National Liberal coalition holding the balance of power for two years. The Gender Equity Unit in the education department was a pivot point for culture wars. Senior bureaucrats and the ministers to whom they answer change priorities and what becomes possible or impossible quickly shifts (Gannon, 2016). Legislative support for the broad sweep of social
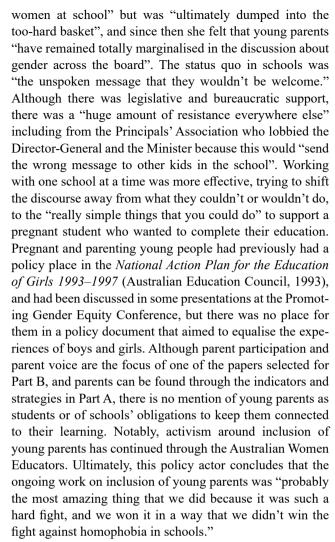
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[3] Interview conducted as part of ARCDP *Gender Matters: Changing Gender Equity Policies and Practices in Australian Secondary Schooling* (Gannon, Robinson, Adams, Smith). All other interviews were undertaken in pilot project *Does gender (still) matter? Gender equity policy in education in post-feminist times* (Gannon).

[4] Note that in Gannon (2016), both participants agreed to be named.

justice reform work came from the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act (1991) which, for the first-time, protected people in that state from unfair discrimination and sexual harassment[5].

Feminist bureaucrats in Queensland had long histories of activism, and no more time to waste. One of the people I interviewed described their university experiences as shaped by the "massive uprising of action around civil liberties in a whole range of areas, around the environment, around nuclear ships in the river and Aboriginal issues, around women's rights, and particularly, very much, around gender and violence, racism" and more. This was common for all the people working in the Equity unit: "virtually everyone who came in to work in that field had some considerable experience in another life." The euphoria of the times, when there was finally a Social Justice Strategy for Queensland was "like winning the lottery". Throughout this time, people working in gender equity "changed a really big range of things and worked like maniacs." However it was short-lived and ultimately "disheartening". With the mid-90s change of Minister, people "were terrified of losing their jobs, and that all this work that they'd done was going to be lost". In his first visit to the unit, flanked by the Deputy Director and Director General, the new Minister said, "I've got 100 principals who tell me that the Gender Equity Framework is absolute rubbish," to which she remembers responding "you will meet many hundreds more Principals who will tell you that the Gender Equity Framework has actually been a blessing for their schools." This might seem like school trouble, but the figures of principals are mobilised here by the Minister to provoke policy trouble. After this exchange, the Director came down and said: "you've done yourself no favours. How dare you speak to the Minister like that." She was then tasked with writing a new framework for the state "that did not mention the word gender" and the work was "almost entirely diverted" to boys' initiatives. So what did gender equity policy address before the reset to boys?

A commitment to student needs and voices underpinned all the social justice work. Collaborating on the national *No Fear* kit on gender and violence (Gannon, 2019) was a "sensational experience". For this policy actor, it was the "most gratifying piece of work" she had done "because we constructed the work so that the voices of kids in the classroom were at the centre." However meeting the needs of young people also led to conflict. A state policy that she was working on aimed at "keeping pregnant and parenting young

women at school" but was "ultimately dumped into the too-hard basket", and since then she felt that young parents "have remained totally marginalised in the discussion about gender across the board". The status quo in schools was "the unspoken message that they wouldn't be welcome." Although there was legislative and bureaucratic support, there was a "huge amount of resistance everywhere else" including from the Principals' Association who lobbied the Director-General and the Minister because this would "send the wrong message to other kids in the school". Working with one school at a time was more effective, trying to shift the discourse away from what they couldn't or wouldn't do, to the "really simple things that you could do" to support a pregnant student who wanted to complete their education. Pregnant and parenting young people had previously had a policy place in the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993–1997* (Australian Education Council, 1993), and had been discussed in some presentations at the Promoting Gender Equity Conference, but there was no place for them in a policy document that aimed to equalise the experiences of boys and girls. Although parent participation and parent voice are the focus of one of the papers selected for Part B, and parents can be found through the indicators and strategies in Part A, there is no mention of young parents as students or of schools' obligations to keep them connected to their learning. Notably, activism around inclusion of young parents has continued through the Australian Women Educators. Ultimately, this policy actor concludes that the ongoing work on inclusion of young parents was "probably the most amazing thing that we did because it was such a hard fight, and we won it in a way that we didn't win the fight against homophobia in schools."

Discrimination against same sex attracted and gender diverse young people was a social justice concern for people working in the Gender Equity Unit in Queensland. Through conversations with community sectors and schools, gradually "the minutiae of daily life as a GLBTQ kid started to become more and more part of our conversation". They received invitations to participate in and contribute to meetings, activities and events that were aiming for practical strategies that could work in schools. A group of students in an urban high school had set up "a support group for homosexual students and gender-diverse students". People from the unit were invited to come to an event at the school. This prompted: "a flow of written requests to the department to develop policy and programs, support programs, and they kept coming, and I kept sending them on to the Director General with a report of some kind, and some suggestions about what we might do". However it was difficult to get any response from above, with one letter being returned "with a handwritten note [from the DG] that said, 'I never

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[5] The Act prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex; relationship status; pregnancy; parental status; breastfeeding; age; race; impairment; religious belief or religious activity; political belief or activity; trade union activity; lawful sexual activity; gender identity; sexuality; family responsibilities.

want to receive another one of these from you, ever'. Underlined, underlined."

There was a sense from those in charge that the Gender Equity Unit was problematic. There was "far too much agitating, there was far too much activism, there was far too much pushing the boundaries." Rather than being merely responsive and silent, the unit was actively involved in initiatives that aimed to bring about progressive social change. By the mid-late 1990s, the attempt to "marginalise the Gender Equity Unit, and in fact to marginalise almost the entire social justice voice, was well, well, well entrenched". By this time "there was no longer any pretence that it was going to be taken seriously". There was a sense, even when the government returned to ALP, that social justice had "had its moment… time to move on and get back to the real business of what schools are about". There was "very very strong resistance in schools" despite pockets of activist teachers who tried to integrate the work into their practice, many of whom became isolated in their schools.

Patriarchal trouble

In this section, I examine the ways that boys' education lobbyists sought to influence or curtail feminist work. I have called this section patriarchal trouble rather than boys' trouble because I do not want to undermine concerns about the education of boys, and girls, and young people of all genders, for whom school has not been a place where they can flourish. Rather, patriarchal trouble is about the hostile actions of some boys' education advocates. Patriarchal trouble can begin in school, for teachers who are trying to effect change, or in the office for people who are doing feminist work in bureaucracies. A policy actor in Queensland described how while she was working in her school on pilot projects on sexual harassment, she was "mercilessly harassed by a couple of male teachers." Their actions included "porn filed up in my pigeonhole", and a colleague who called her "a shitbag" in front of a class. The principal refused to act on the name-calling because he was apparently a "good teacher" in his subject. While this might be school trouble it is underpinned by ganging up and aggression from an identified cohort of men with the intention of reducing or humiliating a feminist educator: patriarchal trouble. People also talked about trouble in more public contexts. While the 1995 conference was remembered by another participant as an invigorating experience, there was clearly tension, particularly from a small group of boys' education advocates. One of them challenged her with the comment: "I wouldn't have thought someone who looks like you, dresses like you, would be doing this feminist work". Decades later, she still recalls how a group of boys' education advocates sat in a block in the front row during her presentation, and the sense of intimidation that emanated from them.

Academics broadly agree that there was a redirection– or hijacking– of gender equity policy and resourcing to focus solely on boys' education. Gender-related work was narrowed to boys and literacy which was less controversial or disruptive than questioning the social construction of masculinities in Australian culture and society, or to bullying which was approached as an individualised pathology. This trend crystallised with the release of *Boys: Getting it Right Report on the Inquiry into the Education of Boys* (House of Representatives, 2002), mid-way through the eleven years of national LNP coalition government. The turn away from girls' education is clear throughout the document as boys are positioned as the victims of girls' success, with *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) positioned as a stealth vehicle for damaging boys. The Report notes that the current framework "does not separately research and identify boys' needs, and at times it is couched in negative terms, even setting boys' needs in the context of what still needs to be achieved for girls" (2002, p. xviii). Therefore their first recommendation is that *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* must be revised and recast to "provide an overarching policy structure for joint and distinctive boys' and girls' education strategies" (2002, p. xxv).

Many of the people I interviewed referenced how significant funding was allocated specifically to boys' education initiatives, and effort therefore had to be redirected to where the money was. This impacted academic work, project work and bureaucratic work. In a few cases it enabled people to produce high quality resources for schools that drew on some of the feminist thinking that had developed through earlier work (e.g. Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; Alloway et al., 2006). However it also funded and contributed to a proliferation of freelance consultants shaping the field of boys' education. Someone who had worked on a range of projects across multiple states described the privatised approach to consultancies of the later *Success for Boys* initiative: anyone could go on the register, leading to "random people" being listed as experts; "all kinds of people who are qualified and not. Ultraconservatives doing really terrible things in schools and schools don't realise." Some consultants became very prominent in the field of boys' education. An academic I interviewed described the litigious style of a well-known boys' education consultant who threatened to sue for defamation because he had been mentioned in a forthcoming academic book. This consultant had "made a bit of a business of suing academics" with a profitable side hustle in negotiating "out of court settlements from academics." The strategy worked as the publisher asked the authors to change the manuscript. That section had assessed the

limitations of essentialised notions of masculinity, which were fundamental to the consultant's approach to boys' education in the many schools with whom he worked, and his own proliferating populist publications. This is an example of patriarchal trouble because it entails heavy-handed intimidation, the exercise of power with the intention of shutting down debate and silencing other points of view.

School trouble

This section considers the difficulties entailed in [outsiders] working with schools. For some participants, working with schools and in schools was a rewarding and enjoyable part of their work in gender equity. Yates describes the vigour of the earlier era as a "huge wave of qualitative and case-study (and later poststructural) work" explored the intricacies of school life and the experiences of diverse young people within them (2008, p. 477). Many of the people working as policy actors had been teachers in schools, and some moved back and forth between schools and projects around gender equity and related issues. Some people continued to work closely with schools. I return to these more positive accounts later in this section but look first at the trouble some participants experienced in working with schools.

Some participants stressed the inherent conservativism of schools as institutions. In ACT schools, in a project supported by the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls (1993–1997)*, teachers investigated gendered practices in classrooms and documented their collective efforts for gender reform. The academic who worked with them observed that through the project the teachers moved from being "bright eyed, bushy-tailed, obedient little subjects… into radical, questioning, innovative people" causing trouble for themselves in their schools. Principals wanted "something favourable to say about this is a gender equity school and look at the wonderful report that says we're doing such great things". When critical accounts were generated, the principals became "angry and defensive". There was "real conflict" between the agendas of principals and research. No doubt this tension continues into the present in some research in schools. Immersion in practice meant that, at first, teachers couldn't see the "rampant sexism" surrounding them, but when they did, "they couldn't unsee it." They were increasingly "out of kilter with the way schools were done". Another centrally located policy actor worked with schools in rural NSW to develop a broad approach to equities. She was "shocked to the core" about how "gender-blind" the schools were. There was a view that "these kids were dumb, that poor schools, these kids weren't as capable as the wealthy schools". This deficit framing was more overwhelming to her than the lack of awareness of gender issues. Teachers were anxious about what needed to be

written up– because their Principal would need a report "to justify having this project". From her perspective, this meant that teachers "could not relax" and did not understand that "they were the target of the project." That is, participation would ask teachers to "identify their assumptions, explore their assumptions, test their assumptions, maybe grow their understandings a little bit about some of the equity issues". Both examples suggest the performativity entailed in a school becoming involved in a nationally funded project (Gannon, 2016). Deep transformation was not intended or desired by school leadership, though was some kudos from being involved and the funding would allow some things to happen in schools that might not otherwise. It also underscores the orientation and expectation of self-reflection, self-critique and transformation that characterises feminist pedagogy. This suggests the "self as a project" (Yates, 2008, p. 477) approaches of feminist poststructuralism, and earlier feminist work.

Some participants have worked extensively with schools and have broader thoughts about how gender equity initiatives impact on them. One participant who worked on projects, consulted with schools, and moved in and out of teaching in several states, observed that when funding for boys' initiatives became available "lots of schools were just taking the money and buying more sports equipment". She also talked about the perverse and uncritical deployment of more recent funding schemes for violence prevention that have fuelled a surge in external providers. At worst, they deliver personal development and self-esteem programs that are about "let's make the girls less slutty so they're less likely to be raped" or "let's teach them how to put on a bit of make-up and have some self-respect and be more likely to get a job". They lack any feminist analysis of structures of power, and gender imbalances that are baked into our culture and society. More trustworthy external providers involved in relationships education bring other problems into schools. They don't understand how schools work. Consequently, as another participant who has worked extensively with Victorian schools notes, they "think they are able to do the work better than schools", so there is "a real arrogance and lack of understanding of teachers' skills." They do not understand the need to be responsive to schools, in that "if teachers need them, and schools need them, they will use them." Nor can external providers mobilise whole school approaches to change which can "bring along the parents… bring along the rest of the staff." The importance of astute leadership that is open to fostering change from inside cannot be underestimated.

Teachers in schools have been crucial to the development and trialling of resources for most gender equity initiatives. In the early work, action research was well supported as part of professional development for teachers. In some work on

gender and violence, teachers in trial schools in Queensland worked with the project officer and each other to observe their classrooms and bring a new lens to classroom interactions. In that project there was "a lot of time allowed for them to explore their own issues around gender and come to some kind of understanding about gender that they could work within". The work was "collegial" and principles such as "valuing people's experiences, valuing their insights was played out in the way the project was set up and developed"– leading to "an enormous level of creativity" as well as feelings of "vulnerability". Teachers in primary schools as well as high schools gradually became more comfortable and inventive. For example, in a primary school, an early years' class (1/2) walked around their school with a map, shading in where they felt unsafe, and providing the foundation for work throughout the year. Another participant, who had worked as a Special Programs Officer in a Queensland region and sat on the state ministerial advisory committee on gender equity, understood their job to be facilitating teachers' access to resources, providing them with advice, and then "getting out of their way". In many cases, in the early 1990s, interesting initiatives were already underway in schools. Each school had nominated a gender equity person and overall this participant felt, "we were doing fantastic things." One of these fantastic thinks was a major equity conference that was hosted in Cairns in the early 1990s that brought together school-based people with policy people. Over many projects, and through several decades of equity focused work in and out of schools, this participant's perspective is that "you don't get too grandiose about things, you just kind of do them, you fit things into the system" so they can "become absorbed". When changes are "established and embedded in all the processes and practices then why do you need somebody to come in?". At the end of a recent literacy project, he noted that each time he went to schools to offer support "the principals, heads of department, often teachers, would say, 'Oh what money will we be getting?", to which he would respond " 'What for?'" They hadn't understood that they had been skilled up and could carry on the work themselves: "You're 'it' now. You kind of know as much as everybody. There is no - you are the people". This may say more about funding shortfalls in public schools than it does about the content of any initiative or processes of school change. It also raises issues around diffusion and responsibility. At what point do initiatives for change, that are initially driven from outside, begin to trust teachers and schools to do the work? To what extent can we tolerate what might seem to be less than perfect implementation of policy initiatives? What support, preparation or initial resourcing might be needed to set them up well?

Genders and sexualities trouble

The final theme of trouble entails the difficulties experienced by people in all locations in the policy assemblage in including any traces of genders and sexualities beyond binaries and beyond assumptions of heteronormativity and (more recently) cisnormativity. Risk aversion was rife and shaped decisions everywhere, and still does in the present. One of the participants who worked at various times as an adviser, consultant and academic across multiple states mentioned the "three parent syndrome" which maintains silences around difference and discourages initiatives that disrupt conventional gender orders. Calls from three parents (to the school, to regional office, to the minister's office, to the media, etc.) are enough to intimidate, or provide justifications for initiatives to be shut down in schools. The parents who call to complain "might come from a couple of faith communities, and then, because they're gatekeepers, they shut down everyone else because of sheer ignorance." As my coresearchers and I have found in our own endeavours to work with a NSW school, small groups of parents allied with conservative politicians are highly effective gatekeepers who can shut down any conversations around gender and schooling in the present.

Earlier eras of policy around gender and schooling have been described as complicit in the erasure of attention to gender and sexualities, and as perpetuating "entrenched reductive sexist, racist, homo/transphobic and misogynistic practices" (Wolfe, 2022, p. 1041). The participants in my research describe how they endeavoured to pay attention to genders and sexualities as understood at the time, and the forces that made this work difficult. At the time of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997), wider social and cultural contexts for diverse sexualities were hostile and volatile (Gannon & Robinson, 2021). One of the participants described a well-funded consultancy project on boys' educational experiences that was undertaken across several universities. When the researchers went into schools "we didn't even ask about homophobia, but the boys of course were telling all this." What stands out about this experience is the pressure that was placed on the research team by federal bureaucrats to remove "the words homophobia and gay from the findings". In effect the whole report was stripped of any mention of homophobia. The pressure was so intense that this person said, with the support of their Head of School, "I can't have my name on that document." The report was rewritten and the university lost their share of the funding. The participant recalled this as a moment when, as an emerging academic, they were able to avoid the taint of compromised and centrally controlled research where bureaucrats curtailed what they were able to write. Decades later, with the pressure for external income so high

in universities, it is difficult to imagine that such resistance and support would be possible in the face of much-needed government funded research.

The impacts of homophobia on young people's schooling were also of concern to parents' organisations through the period of development of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997). One participant recalled that parent organisations "across the country were particularly anxious about teen suicides on the strength of kids' sexualities". Along with eating disorders, this was seen as a "critical social issue" by parent organisations. Yet, in the Framework, attention is sporadic and would be easy to overlook or disregard. Homophobia is bundled in with "sex-based harassment (including homophobia)" (2007, p. 18) in Part A. In the glossary, 'homophobia' and 'homophobic harassment' both appear, though sexuality does not. In the framing paper for strategic direction 1 in Part B, the figure of a boy is mobilised as being "seen as shy and quiet" and therefore being understood by teachers as "in need of fixing". The authors of the Framework extrapolate from this example to note that the "rarely stated but feared possibility of homosexuality underscores teachers' concerns" (1997, p. 25). This seems to imply that teachers are assumed to be heterosexual, cisgender, inherently conservative and inclined to tamp down any intimations of difference from their students. While sexuality appears in lists of differences that intersect with gender (e.g. "such as ethnicity, sexuality, types of disability and Aboriginality" p. 56), there is no potential or possibility of a more positive, generative or even celebratory notion of diverse sexualities contributing to a richer and more diverse society.

Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools (1997) is silent on sexualities. The assumption of "rarely stated but feared" homosexuality seems to shape the document itself. At most, there are "little glimpses," as one participant put it, and those are framed within deficit perspectives. One participant who was an academic at the time acknowledged that, even where they did attempt to address homosexuality in their work with boys, the treatment was "perhaps a little unsophisticated" in the context of "where queer theory has gone". A policy leader reflected that at the time they were developing the Framework, "there was barely anything around" which meant that any mention at all was "quite brave." The "first little, tiny patch in there" was "a major step forward". All previous policies for girls' education, in their infrequent references to sexuality, had also assumed that sexuality equalled heterosexuality. For example, the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls (1993–1997)* referred to "practical, day-to-day issues that worry girls: menstruation, fertility and sexuality" (Australian Education Council, 1993 p. 44). However, clearly, schools around the country had many teachers and students

of diverse sexualities. Perhaps the silence and fear in the policy reflected the closeting that was forced on teachers by their employers and the widespread hostility to sexual difference of Australian society and culture. It also perhaps suggests a gulf emerging between some feminist theory/ activism and some queer theories/ activisms. Without doubt, in the present, transinclusion seems to be the most contentious and dangerous work in educational sociology and in schools.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to share some refractory accounts of policy work around gender and education, in dialogue with Yates' (2008) revisiting of feminism and education in Australia. By refractory, I meant to shed light from multiple angles and perspectives on the complex work of policy formation and enactment. Clearly, feminist theorising and praxis have had fluctuating impacts in Australian education over time. The eclectic accounts I have presented in this paper do not offer an epic narrative of feminist achievements or a tragedy of feminist capitulations, but they do suggest more about the complexities of such work in such times. Due to the limits of space, I have not drawn in this paper on the nuanced arguments about intersectional diversities and other blindnesses of the policy and era, though I hope some cracks have begun to enter. Yates contrasts the optimistic energetic era of 1970s/ early 1980s, with the first decade of the 2000s where education's capture by audit and marketization had diminished opportunities for feminist concerns about equity to find a place. My contribution has been to look at the interim era, roughly focusing on *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997), where I explored policy trouble, patriarchal trouble, school trouble, and genders and sexualities trouble. I also promised to consider the present context through the account of a senior policy actor from ACT. That will form the final refractory account, aiming to trouble any sense that this sort of work in the present might be too hard, too expensive, too disruptive, or too controversial.

When my coresearchers and I approached the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) for permission to undertake research in schools in that jurisdiction, gender equity immediately made sense to the Directorate as it was a priority for public education under their Inclusion and Wellbeing Policy. As well as case studies with teachers and students in three senior colleges, we interviewed a senior bureaucrat responsible at the time of the interview for this policy area. In ACT public education, there is a broad and overarching commitment to schools as safe, inclusive environments for all people. This means looking at all policy and practice "through a lens of gender equity as well as inclusion". In the

present, this means thinking beyond assumptions of binary gender. For example, schools need to offer "equitable uniform options", including "a gender-neutral option". Online enrolment forms are designed so they have "an option for a preferred name and they have an option for how they identify their gender." Gender equity and inclusion does not require the mobilisation of competing victim discourses or disregarding issues of perennial feminist concern such as violence against women and girls. An International Women's Day challenge event brings students from multiple schools together to look at "how we can do better in our schools and in our system." Student advocacy and student voice are prioritised as this "student-centred" approach leads to "a great deal of pride and agency throughout the process and after". In the ACT, their safe and inclusive schools initiative continues to work with NGOs to sustain the "valuable" work in schools that was started with the Safe Schools Coalition, including attention to gender diversity. Making sure that "systemic sorts of barriers can be removed or reduced as far as possible" is a key focus of this work. All schools also are resourced with Safe and Supportive Schools Contact Officers to consult with and support students and their needs. Consultation with "LGBTQI + students and their allies and teachers" was the focus of a recent forum to discuss the ACT data in the latest *Writing Themselves In* (Hill et al., 2021) report, which found that though despite progress with "visible signs of support" and "pride groups" in schools, students "still experience homophobia and transphobia and harassment in the community and at school". Perhaps what is most striking in the interview with this policy bureaucrat, is the attention given to what young people say, and what young people want, in their schools. In contrast, the student perspective is almost absent in the accounts that policy actors gave about their work with *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* in the 1990s. Young people were subjects of policy, contributors to research, participants in classrooms where materials were being trialled, subjects of concern but they rarely seemed to have scope or routes directly to those who were centrally responsible for policy. We might consider that the cacophony or partiality of young people's different voices and perspectives might make consensus difficult, or we might regret an apparent lack of well-developed theories about gender driving their actions, or we might point to the convenience of geography or the middle-classness of the ACT. However, it seems that young people have plenty to say when we pause to listen to them. How might this challenge feminist policies and practices in education? If we take van der Tuin's suggestion of "jumping generations" seriously and seek shared conversations and politics across difference, then perhaps this is what we need. As she reminds us, "The only constant of feminism is that we have not yet reached the goals of any category of feminism whether of the past or the present" (2014, p. 117). The way forward for feminism, she suggests, is to "leap into the future" knowing that "the works of the feminist past will still be at work, there, tomorrow" (2014, p. 117).

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no interests of a personal or financial nature to disclose.

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