

Jane Gaskell (Educational Studies)
Interviewed by: Vanessa Much, 2000

VM: Let's start with what your research has focused on - the research you have done and where that is going right now.

JG: My field is Sociology of Education. I look at the educational system and how it is organized, and gender is one of the ways in which schools are organized. So, I have looked at gender as it works within educational institutions and how it affects educational institutions, and how education affects women's experiences - and that is the Women's Studies part of it. I have also done other kinds of work in Sociology of Education, which could be divided into two kinds of studies. One is the relationship between work and education; vocational education and how schools prepare people for work and how that has been organized. The other thing is about the relationship between secondary schools and the communities in which they exist. So I have done studies of secondary schools across Canada and how they are different depending on what kind of communities they are in. Again, that is a sociology of the community and their relationship to the secondary school. That is a kind of overview. Right now, I have three projects.

The first one is not a Women's Studies project. It is taking a look at the kind of diversity that is offered by School Boards to students, because some School Boards have a lot of options - you can take "outcome based" education, or you've got a fine arts school. And others emphasize neighborhood schools. Gender is a part of that. Because some kinds of schools, like a Fine Arts School, will enroll a lot of young women in their programs, and when you have other kind of schools with more technology, for example, you tend to get fewer women, so there is a gender component. But this study is really not primarily organized around Women's Studies.

Two of these that I am doing now are much more closely related to gender. One is a history of gender equity initiatives in education from 1970 to now, in the year 2000, in different provinces across the country. So I am doing a project with someone who used to be one of my grad students and she is now a Professor at the University of New Brunswick. She and I are working on a comparative study of different school systems in different provinces and how they responded in the 1970s to the women's movement, to bring about change in gender equity, and then what has happened to gender equity initiatives in the school system since 1970.

VM: Have you found that these gender initiatives have actually played out within the school systems?

JG: Well, that is what we are looking at. Of course, they have played out, but the question is how they have played out and what the mechanisms are that make them sometimes have more impact and sometimes have less impact. So in looking back to the 1970s, what is quite striking is that after the Royal Commission on the Status of Women there were a lot of recommendations about how education needed to change. So for the Vancouver Status of Women, when it was first set up in 1971, education was a big issue

and they did studies of textbooks, and they developed a lot of materials for the schools. They were closely connected with the BCTF, which also set up a Status of Women committee, which focused on issues of gender equity. The Ministry also set-up gender advisory committee on gender equality. So there was a lot of circulation of the ideas that feminists suddenly had in the 1970s, and a lot of changes actually took place. And then you find that advisory committees are stopped, and status of women committees become multi-cultural committees or social justice committees.

What we are looking at is how that happened differentially in different provinces and why there were some resources behind it sometimes and not at other times. And what kinds of social capital – in other words what kinds of connections among women and with the Ministry – were in place at different times.

VM: How has your research evolved over the years? Has there been more focus on gender over the years? Or did you start with gender and now it is starting to branch out?

JG: Yes, I would say I started with gender. My graduate thesis was on young women and their aspirations. I have moved in and out of gender – once you see gender, you can never not see gender, it is always part of what I end up writing about – but it has been more or less central to the different research projects that I have done. I guess it is less central now than it was fifteen years ago.

VM: Do you have any reflections on why that is?

JG: Right now I am going back to the 1970s, which is when I started being an academic. There were a lot of women in the educational community in the BCTF and in the Women's Movement who were really concerned about education, so there were a lot of collaborative kinds of projects going on and there were a lot of people from the Ministry who wanted somebody to do a study on this or to write about this or to talk about it. So it was partly that it was central to my own sense of what I was doing, as I had always been connected to the women's movement and active within it. It was also partly the environment in which I was working, where there was a need for feminist analysis and it was new and exciting.

We had conferences where we would introduce new volumes of research articles to try to get it going, and then after a while I guess you move around. You do different kind of things and other opportunities open up, and again the environment probably changed, so that I got the opportunity to do a lot more work on secondary schools and there is a lot of money in those areas. You are drawn in where there is a lot of research money being offered and now I have come back and done this project on gender equity because I have always been interested in it. It seems like a timely thing to do, and we got a good research grant to look at it, and it will be fun to work with Linda - so for some very personal and academic reasons.

VM: Has your research been received differently over the years by the academic community, depending on whether it is feminist identified or not? Has women studies, or gender research been more accepted in the academy at some times than at others? You have said that you started when the women's movement, in the 70s, was really

prominent. Was there any backlash with certain academic areas or fields?

JG: When I first came and got interviewed I gave a seminar, which was all on Women's Studies and I was told, "Oh, we are not interested in that. Your interview is canceled with the Dean (or whoever) – go home we do not want you." So I went home, in tears, as my husband had been offered a job here. I was told that there were a couple of guys in the department who just did not want any feminists, but there were other people in the department who then tried to change the department's mind and once that was achieved they offered me the job. Yes, clearly, there was a lot of resentment at the time of Women's Studies which, of course, from my point of view is a wonderful place to be and it is fun to be resistant and to have a new theory and a new way of looking at things that you know is right and to be able to write it out and to make a name for yourself. Because it was new and it was interesting.

VM: Do you know how your research is received within the actual secondary schools?

JG: As I was saying, in the 1970s, I think part of the reason I did a lot of feminist work was that there were a lot of women in the schools and there were also women in the NDP government in Victoria who were very supportive of this kind of work. They wanted more of it, so they asked us to develop a Women's Studies course for the high schools because they really wanted a Women's Studies course. They wanted the materials and there were no teaching materials out there so we did that and had a wonderful time doing it. Of course, there was resistance to it. The Minister said, "Oh, you can't talk like that in schools" and so we would fight back. Yes, there was resistance, but there was also support.

VM: Do you know if there are any Women's Studies programs actually in any of the high schools?

JG: I think they have disappeared. This is one of the things that this research project that we are doing now, is trying to find out – what has happened to a lot of that. At the time, there was a provincially mandated course and they put resources into developing materials. If there are Women's Studies courses now it would be only because individual teachers were teaching it. It wouldn't be because the Provincial government had come up with a course outline and decided that this was material that needed to be included.

VM: Do you speak to any of the teachers within the secondary school system that self-identify as feminists, about their experiences?

JG: We have had quite a few graduate students who are feminist teachers within the school system and we have worked with them to develop whatever kind of critique and analysis they wanted to make of the schools, and it has always been useful. I speak at Teachers' Conventions and workshops and that kind of thing and I have friends who are teachers.

VM: Are girls within the educational system being streamlined into certain programs?

You mentioned in regard to one of your research projects that this may happen. Is there more stream-lining going on now with these multiple programs, for females? Are there more barriers being put up at some levels for girls within these school systems? How does their situation seem at the moment?

JG: When you read all the newspaper stuff, it is boys who are falling behind and that are causing all the trouble. At the moment, that is the main thing that you see in the newspapers. The girls are certainly doing fairly well academically and I think if you look at that, actually girls have always done well historically. The point is that now it is much more of a threat because they are not only doing well in school, but they are likely also to do well in the workforce and get into professional schools in things that they did not use to do, on the basis of their good grades. But I do think it is important that in high schools girls are now more likely to participate in science, as well as to do very well in English and Languages, and Socials; that is great. I think it has partly to do with the kind of confidence and equality that we are seeing more of, compared to when I went to high school. I think at the same time, though, having had a daughter who has just gone through the school system, that there are still a lot of personal relationship and harassment situations – name-calling and that kind of climate- lack of respect for women, and a sexualized environment. Many of the things we are talking about, in terms of the culture of high schools, have not changed.

VM: Have administrators addressed these issues?

JG: By and large I don't think administrators have, though some administrators have. But there are a lot of schools where there is a big silence on the subject and I think that it gets worse in a way, when you say "Oh girls are not the problem anyway. Girls are doing fine."

VM: Could it be considered a type of anti-feminist backlash?

JG: In the sense that there is less energy within the system to deal with issues that are specific to gender.

VM: How has your position as Associate Dean in the Faculty of Education affected your ability to do research, if it has at all?

JG: There is much less time. I do find administrative work interesting because you get to meet a variety of people and see how the institution works, and you meet more people outside your own department, so there are certain advantages to doing it. But the downside, clearly, is that you don't have the time. But I still do research, but the time to actually sit quietly and write it up, is what is missing.

VM: Do you do any teaching at all?

JG: I teach one course a year.

VM: Is that with graduate students?

JG: Yes.

VM: Has there been an increase in the number of graduate students studying gender?

JG: I think there probably has been, with new hiring then the deployment of faculty. When I first came there was nobody else doing feminist research. But now in our department there are quite a few people who focus on gender issues. We are developing a new MA concentration that will allow students to look at gender issues in education and feminist approaches to social justice, within the department. There are more courses now than there used to be. There used to be one course, it was the graduate course on Women in Education, and now there are more than enough courses that they can take. And, of course, they can take courses at the Women's Studies Center, now that we have the graduate program beginning there. So I think that there are more opportunities for study on Women's Studies issues than there used to be. In our Methodology courses we have a section on feminist methodologies, and feminist critiques of traditional research methods, where they get a more mainstream introduction to research methodology and education.

VM: Is the UBC climate becoming more receptive to gender research and to Women's Studies?

JG: It depends what you mean, "more", from when. I came in 1974, so yes, compared to 1974 there is clearly more openness to doing Women's Studies and to gender relations. Just the fact that the Women's Studies program even exists, when I came there was no such thing. There was one volunteer course, and now we have got a Women's Studies program at the undergraduate level, and the graduate level starting, and people are hired into Women's Studies. That kind of thing was not around in the old days. Which isn't to say that there are no problems getting attention for Woman's Studies. Many of the staff in the undergraduate Women's Studies program are sessionals.

VM: In what areas is there room for more growth?

JG: I think as, I said, the Women's Study Program is still kind of a second-class program taught mainly by sessionals and not given the same status as other programs.

VM: How about in regards to research?

JG: Again, I think there is a lot more openness to research. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council has had a strategic grant area on women and change. Now they are closing that, and the rationale is that women are now equal and participate in all areas of research so we don't need it any more. But, they still have not put a Women's Studies committee together in the regular grant program. So I think that is a serious problem. I think there are still people who don't like feminist research, like Stanley Coren, talking about the course "Women as Agents of Change" as political activism not scholarship. But I really think he is a minority at the moment. I think the majority of

people used to think like that. I think now most people treat him as an oddity. But some people still listen to him and he still gets to be on the front page of the *Vancouver Sun*, and he manages to be a problem, but ultimately he has not won.

VM: I am planning on going into Education, which is why I was interested in interviewing someone in Education. My interest is in how you bring feminism into the classroom. I feel that when you read the newspaper and you see the Surrey School Board and its reaction to certain policies it is a very scary environment to walk into. Even at this point, where we supposedly have gender inclusiveness and gender equity, yet we are still in a position where feminist beliefs and values are not to be brought into the classroom.

JG: The Surrey School Board issue is a great example. It was focused around issues of homophobia. The BCTF has been very, very strong on opposing it and bringing in motions around equity and opposing the kind of things that the Surrey School Board is doing, but ultimately education is political. When I talk about schools in different communities, we do see very big differences in different communities across this province and across Canada, and some communities are very, very conservative and they have very, very conservative schools. I went to a school in Alberta, a rural, religious, right-wing school. The expectations there for girls and for conformity were astounding and frightening. You would not be happy in a school like that, and if you went in as an individual feminist teacher you would be seen as an oddity and it would be very tough. In that sense it really does reflect the community. Whereas, in Vancouver some of the schools are still pretty conservative and are difficult to deal with, but there are enough people around that you would get some support in the way of raising the issue.

My general sense of that is that it is always easier for a few people to do it and it is really hard to do as an individual, because when you start to question, you get scapegoated. It becomes hard to pull back and think of a good strategy and be able to move forward, unless you have other people to support you and talk to. So we try to do that in the teacher education program. We have some courses that are focused on social justice, and we go into schools and talk in great detail about issues of social justice and how, as a teacher, you can struggle for the ideals that you think education ought to be founded on, and what some of the struggles are and what the difficulties are in relationship to doing that. So it doesn't answer your question "what do you do?" because there are so many different strategies. Some people would do things around developing curriculum material; whether it is taking books into the school, which would get you in trouble in Surrey, or developing your own materials which you get kids to read (story books) or take a look at what the boys and girls are doing and try just to have a discussion about it, so that it is visible as an issue, because I think in a way part of the problem in education has been making it an issue that you can't talk about.

Everybody is supposed to be the same and everybody is supposed to be equal. So if you raise issues of gender you are odd, because you are not treating everybody the same. So making it a visible issue in the classroom or in the staff room, or elsewhere, is a big struggle for teachers. It comes in and out of vogue and in some ways the fact that everybody is now talking about boys has its progressive side. Because at least everybody is talking about gender, so then you can start to look at differences and talk about them. I always think that making it visible is the first step and when it fades off the map

completely, so people cannot even name it or think about it, then we are in worse shape.

VM: Have you done any research looking at the intersection of race and gender or class and gender?

JG: I guess in my position there isn't any other way to see it or to do it. Although it is interesting, there was a lecture by Virginia Valian, who was talking this week, and she did a remarkable job of managing to talk only about middle-class white women. I guess my background was with Dorothy Smith and her sociology of everyday life. It takes you pretty immediately into looking at issues of class and culture as part of what feminism means to people. So to begin with, my interest actually was in class. I was looking at working-class girls as opposed to middle-class girls, and what difference it made to their conceptions of femininity, and what they wanted to do with themselves. I dealt, to begin with, just with class issues and not so much with issues of culture and race. As Vancouver has become more multicultural and multiracial it has become more part of how you have to think about schooling and the experiences of young people in the schools. So it has worked its way into my research because it is essential to understanding the schools that I go into these days.

VM: Do you analyze curriculum at all, and actual textbooks and things like that? Has there been a shift towards more multiracial and multicultural presentations within the curriculum?

JG: Yes, there has been. It has in fact been mandated by the Provincial Government, but then their whole process of approving curriculum material and putting things on lists has changed over time. So there used to be a list of approved texts and we would use them. Then they told the publishers, at one point, they had to become more gender equitable and they had to show more representation of multicultural groups. Suddenly then you saw more representation both in relationship to gender and in relationship to culture. Now, they have moved into a much wider set of resources that can be used in the schools. It is a more decentralized process so it is harder to know what is actually being used. And of course the other thing is that schools never throw out books because they never have enough money to replace the resources that they find in the library, so it often takes a long time to replace text and bring in more books, so there is always a continuing problem with that.

VM: Is there also a problem with teachers actually teaching the multiracial and multicultural perspectives? Where they actually have the text book, or resource, and yet they still don't teach it?

JG: It is more of an issue in some subject areas but it has been quite a big debate in the history and social studies curriculum. Certainly, how much do you actually talk about women's history and how much do you just do political history of Canada? In all subject areas there are all kinds of opportunities to bring in feminist content. I had a student, just last year, who is teaching at a local high school, she is looking at revision of the history curriculum and what it actually did between Grade 8 and Grade 12 in terms of bringing in

feminist contents, and she said that it still looks pretty bad. Although, she did say that it was getting better.

But it is still very token and you are not supposed to talk about women here or just put a little about women in there. It was not really a gender equitable kind of curriculum. Women's history was not integrated into the ways that history was thought about, and gender equity had lost some ground as a language used in the curriculum because gender disappeared for a while during the 1980s and early 1990s. But, her version again was that the History 12 curriculum was the worst, because it really is a political, male history of Europe.

VM: Do you find that there is a strong distinction between the rural communities and the urban communities in the sense of the type of teachers they can actually attract - so you don't get as many feminist teachers within the rural communities?

JG: I don't know as much about that as I probably should, because I haven't been to a lot of rural schools in the last little while. Although I used to do student supervising around the province, and we would just go and observe student teachers in different places, which was really interesting. I would guess that it is true, that in the urban Lower Mainland views are more progressive.

VM: During the student teacher evaluation did you notice whether the student teachers were actually bringing gender equity into the classroom?

JG: In the education program we do teach gender equity, they know it is an issue that they need to pay an attention to. Some students would say there is way too much of it.

VM: Do you find when you go to evaluate them that you could actually see them trying to be more gender inclusive and gender equitable within their lessons?

JG: It is certainly one of the things that people who go out and supervise student teaching are aware of. It is one of the things that is in the seminars that we conduct - it's one of the issues that is supposed to be talked about and thought about. But we hope that just by making it visible, by making it something that is thought about, it would click sometime, maybe even a year later. It would become part of what you think about when you are thinking about teaching and how you should be towards the students.

VG: Do you think that there should be more focus on issues of class and sexuality within the education program?

JG: Well, again, I think we try to bring them in. All of the courses that are talking about gender are also supposed to be talking about issues of sexual orientation, which still creates a big fuss in some classes. But it is there on the curriculum and everybody has to go through it before they can graduate in the program. The same with race - we do First Nations also as a compulsory unit where everybody has to think about First Nations issues, and what we call multiculturalism. I think, again, we see a lot more attention in the curriculum areas to thinking about music, for instance, and what different traditions

of music are out there.

Regarding issues of immigration, there is some discussion with the new Social Studies program and the criticism of not presenting enough multicultural focus is still basically there. So I guess there are two ways of thinking about it in the teacher education program. One is, we do something on how to think about teaching, orientation to the kind of social issues you have to face. And we also do curriculum with how to teach, and it really should be infused into both sections of the program. I guess I don't want to say it is all perfect but, I do see much more awareness now of the multiculturalism. I know some grad students who have been very concerned that we don't do enough about sexual orientation, but we do talk about it. You can't force faculty members to teach the things they don't want to teach in their courses. But there are quite a few resources that we have brought into the library, we just try to make it a rounded environment. There is a very strong BCTF policy around sexual orientation.

VM: Have there been more females enrolling in secondary programs with concentration in sciences or other non-traditional areas?

JG: Actually, one of the major areas where we don't get enough women is social studies, which is interesting. We get quite a few women in science because women tend to take biology, so there are a lot of woman in science, but not so often in physics and chemistry. The areas where we don't get them are in technology, although there are more now than there used to be, that means that there are two or three instead of zero. I think there are two, but there used to be never any women and we have made an effort to try to recruit more so they don't have to come through BCIT in a particular program. There is a remarkable dearth of woman in Social Studies. English and languages have an overwhelming majority of women. I don't think it is too bad in math. The people who instruct math in this Faculty I think are all women: Cynthia Nicol and Susan Pirie, both are secondary math people

VM: Has there been a recruitment of males into the Home Economics program in the same sense that females have been recruited into the Technology Education program?

JG: I don't think there has been. At least I have not been aware of it. But we do have a feminist, Linda Peterat, who teaches home economics, and she is very interested in women's experience and values women's experience in thinking about family studies and home economics. And she has home economics teachers coming in and working with her who are very interested in feminism and what it means in the school. They make women's experiences visible, to think about equality in the home when you are teaching about family studies.

VM: Do you have anything that you would like to add or anything else that you wanted to say?

JG: No.