Book Review

Ringrose, J. (2013). *Postfeminist education? Girls and the sexual politics of schooling.* New York, NY: Routledge.

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In, *Postfeminist Education?*, Jessica Ringrose (2013) powerfully illustrates how postfeminist media discourses have infiltrated Western educational policy and curricula. Ringrose's book contributes significantly to the field of curriculum studies for the ways that she knits postfeminist media exemplars, poststructural and (post) psychosocial theory, and educational policy together to demonstrate the shortcomings in current policies and practices that shape girls' experiences in school. *Postfeminist Education?* is divided into three sections: the first unpicks three "postfeminist panics" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 4) around the current state of girlhood; the second develops a conceptual and methodological approach to unpacking these panics rooted in psychosocial and Deleuzo-Guatarian theories; and the third draws on empirical data from two UK-based studies to challenge the validity of the postfeminist claims set out therein. These three components persuasively build an understanding of

the postfeminist terrain and its implications for theory and research in girlhood and education.

Ringrose charts the contemporary discourse of *postfeminism*, exploring how it is central to media representations of girls and women. She positions herself alongside Angela McRobbie (2004) and Gill and Scharfe (2011) in her conceptualization of postfeminism as "a set of politics and discourses grounded in assumptions that gender equity has now been achieved for girls and women in education, the workplace and the home" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 2). Postfeminist narratives also frame feminist goals as having gone too far in that women have now surpassed men in their achievements, and that these successes have been gained at the *expense* of men. Ringrose closely links neo-liberal and postfeminist perspectives in her analysis of girlhood: postfeminism works to commodify the female as the empowered consumer, reinforcing neo-liberal emphasis on individual consumption as primary social, economic, and political participation. In the first half of the book, she repeatedly critiques the oppositional construction of girls as "*either* empowered consumers/winners *or* vulnerable victims of sexualized society" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 4) within postfeminist and neo-liberal discourses throughout her analysis of media narratives of girlhood and education.

Ringrose begins by outlining the relationship between media representations of girls and educational policies and discourses shaping girlhood experiences of schooling. This link is explored through three feminine figures resulting from media-fueled *postfeminist panics* over the state of Western girlhood: the successful girl, the overly aggressive girl,

and the overly 'sexy' girls. Utilizing Arjun Appadurai's (1996) notion of the *mediascape*, or a media landscape, Ringrose maps the patterns of feminine representations and societal interpretations within the media that are related to these three girlhood figures. She guides the reader through her interpretive process of the mediascape by comprehensively outlining out the media surrounding these girlhood figures, and then injecting critical questions into the media available, demonstrating how she has framed the material from a postfeminist perspective.

The first postfeminist mediascape addresses the figure of the overly successful girl; it constructs "the fantasmic figure of feminine success positioned as a direct consequence of feminism" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 20), and situates men and boys as the new disadvantaged group. The concerns that Western schooling has become feminized and that education has swung too far in support of girls evoke a frightened public cry that boys are being left behind. The resulting postfeminist discourse vilifies girls who are seen as too successful, and fuels policy initiatives designed to redress male disadvantage. For example, Ringrose cites a pedagogical intervention in Canada calling for more male teachers and active learning strategies to suit boys' learning style in the classroom. Ringrose (2013) explains the implications of this policy direction as:

> A shift from a feminist stance that understands complex
> socio-cultural patriarchal power relations as underpinning
> social institutions like schooling (Spender, 1982) to what I
> am calling a postfeminist educational policy terrain that
> understands 'gender gaps' and 'sexist society', to refer

almost solely to the need to help boys catch up to girls in

school. (p. 24)

Through the mediascape of the overly successful girl, Ringrose persuasively illustrates how postfeminist anxieties about changes to the dominant gender order manifest in gendered educational policy and practice.

Ringrose then examines the mediascape constructing girls' aggression as rampant and increasing (emphasizing bullying behaviours), and the psychological development discourses arguing that girls are more aggressive than boys. Within these postfeminist discourses, feminism is figured as responsible for unleashing too much "girl power" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 28), resulting in female aggression and "revers[ing] earlier claims of girls' vulnerability into claims of mean-ness and powerfulness" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 28). In this analysis, Ringrose (2013) asserts that social class divides the representations, and subsequent reactions to girls' aggression:

> Some (middle class) girls are positioned as at-risk
> feminine subjects who express aggression pathologically,
> as indirect, mean bullies, for instance, which put them in
> need to psycho-educational interventions (Aapola *et al.*,
> 2005). 'Other' girls (primarily working class), meanwhile,
> are represented a risky out-of-control subjects, in need to
> greater legal interventions. (p. 28-29)

The messages disseminated through the mediascape are then taken up via educational policies and "pedagogical regulation"

(Ringrose, 2013, p. 33), aimed at correcting both types of female violence.

The final mediascape is the postfeminist panic about girls' sexualisation; girls are becoming *too sexy too soon.* Ringrose (2013) argues that concerns over sexualisation maintain "classed and raced moral boundaries and regulating appropriate norms of feminine sexuality" (p. 43). This mediascape is distinctly postfeminist "because they often position sexualisation as a moral problem resulting from too much and too early sexual liberation for girls on the back of feminist gains" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 42). Linked to education policy, this mediascape looks specifically at how sexuality is addressed within schools. The postfeminist panic over lost sexual innocence "reduc[es] sexuality to an issue of parts and plumbing and disease" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 52), and confines sex education to discussions of "age-appropriate feminine sexuality" (p. 43).

Ringrose's significant contribution to the theorization of girlhood is her conceptualization of the current debates around girls' agency. She provides a compelling argument for reconsidering the tendency to understand girls' experiences through the dichotomy of exploited and empowered subject-positions. While girls' studies and education research is rife with binary representations, Ringrose pushes readers to see beyond these simplistic categories. She theorizes girls' relative agency versus the regulatory structural or discursive constraints placed upon them. Further elucidating the link between postfeminism and neo-liberalism, Ringrose (2013) raises "questions about the contemporary

usefulness of the concept of agency, if we do not simultaneously deconstruct the neo-liberal discourse of the 'choosing' rational subject" (p. 60). She draws on Angela McRobbie's use of a Foucault-inspired governmentality framework to unpack postfeminist impositions of a *discipline of choice*:

> The dynamics of regulation and control are less about what young women ought not to do and more about what they can do. The production of girlhood now comprises a constant stream of incitements and enticements to engage in a range of specified practices which are understood to be progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine. (as cited in Ringrose, 2013, p. 65)

Ringrose holds that discourses of girlhood choice function as technologies of constraint: instead of what girls *cannot* do, emphasis has swung towards everything they *must* do. She therefore cautions against trusting narratives of girls' choice, power, and empowerment as evidence of girls' agency present in much of youth and education research.

To make sense of the three feminine figures resulting from postfeminist media panics, Ringrose (2013) develops a "new discursive, psychosocial and affective theoretical-methodological approach" (p. 70). She employs Judith Butler's poststructural theories of subjectification, discursive agency, and re-signification, "for thinking about how discursive contradiction and interplay can subvert the gender order" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 72). She then situates her methodology within

psychosocial research tradition in the UK, utilizing psychoanalytic tools "to understand contradictory discourses of idealized femininity… explore how and why girls 'invest' in both repressive and problematic discourses of femininity and how and through which processes, oppressive discourses can also be resisted" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 75). Finally, Ringrose (2013) harnesses the recent "affective turn" (p. 70) in sociological and educational research exemplified by "post-psychoanalytic poststructuralism derived from Deleuze and Guattari" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 70.) and their use of *schizoanalysis* to theorize aspects of feminine subjectivity that she finds otherwise impenetrable. Schizoanalysis aims to first, "overthrow" the "binary logics, normative strata and totalizing theory" reproduced in psychoanalysis; second, to discover research participants' "desiring machines"; and third, to "find lines of flight" around the production of desire that "ruptures a given stratum" (p. 79). In weaving together this theoretical-methodological approach, Ringrose emphasizes these tools' utility to think outside of discourse, and to move beyond the potentially problematic surface claims of narrative and voice, and the subsequent assumptions about agency. Furthermore, this work contributes to the burgeoning conversation around the creative applications of Deleuzo-Guattarian theory to method.

Ringrose then brings in empirical data from two UK-based studies she previously conducted to challenge the validity of the postfeminist claims set out in the mediascapes of the successful, the aggressive, and the sexy girl. The data best demonstrates current shortcomings in

educational policy designed to address gender and girls' experiences within the school. Ringrose's 2004/5 study, *Girls and the subject of aggression and bullying*, addresses media, policy and research contexts around femininity and sexualized aggression, drawing out how heterosexual competition regulates and disciplines girls' behavior and performance. Ringrose (2013) shows how anti-bullying interventions in the school "can miss the complex power relations of gender, sexualized and classed culture, and parenting and school choice, which shapes the unfolding of the interpersonal dynamics between the girls" (p. 99), supporting her claim that the concept of bullying in the current educational discourse is "ineffectual" (p. 100). The second set of data from a 2008 study at the London Knowledge Lab explores young people's negotiations of social networking sites, providing insight into how girls perform sexual identities in the context of new digital technologies. Ringrose aims to balance tensions between viewing girls as producers of new media; understanding the limited discursive conditions of possibility through which to form their online identities; viewing online as an enmeshed space with school and the subsequent impact on identity; and exploring embodied processes of self-commodification from the girls' perspectives. From this research, Ringrose contends that educators and policy-makers need to come to terms with how girls continue to be defined by their sexualized bodies online, and how these definitions structure social relations at school.

What implications do the ideas presented in *Postfeminist education?* have for curriculum studies? Jessica Ringrose makes substantial

contributions to the field through her media and policy, methodological, and curriculum analyses. In outlining the mediascapes and policyscapes Ringrose makes explicit the relationship between postfeminist media, discourse, and policy, ensuring that those working with educational policy understand the role of postfeminism in shaping the resulting educational context. The rich unpacking of girls' negotiations of postfeminist sentiments in the school context is highly valuable for broader explorations of postfeminism and gender in western society. Given that Ringrose conducted her doctoral studies in Canada, she is especially attuned to Canadian policies and practices, bringing examples from the Canadian education context that would resonate with Canadian scholars. It is noteworthy that the media and policy exemplars Ringrose uses to bolster her arguments are taken primarily from the global north (UK, North America, and Australia). Recognizing this pattern leaves me to wonder whether these postfeminist discursive trends are occurring elsewhere in the world as well.

For researchers, Ringrose's use of a psychosocial and affective theoretical-methodological approach expands the methodological toolbox used in qualitative research with youth. She successfully applies the theoretical to the empirical, demonstrating how to utilize this complex theory in a generative way in data interpretation. Furthermore, Ringrose (2013) advocates for a new way of analyzing agency: "Rather than always searching for easily discernable resistance acts (or revolts) through our research narratives, we need to track the regulative rhythm of the normative to find some spaces where gender 'undoings' emerge"

(p. 147). This form of analysis is key in the book's contributions to the field in demonstrating how to rethink resistance and agency.

Finally, *Postfeminist Education?* draws attention to gender and sexuality-related shortcomings in current curricula. For example, postfeminist panics about overly sexual girls result in sex education curricula that focus only on imparting "age appropriate" (Ringrose, 2013, p. 43) biological information. This singular focus in sex education results in girls (and all youth) failing to learn valuable skills in communication and critical analyses of relationships that will help them to navigate the sexual waters they actually live in. Ringrose argues against anti-bullying interventions, persuasively demonstrating how they are largely ineffective and how they fail to capture the nuanced dynamics of girls' conflicts. She also challenges both the 'boys at risk' narrative underscoring pedagogy, and the attempts to separate social media technology and schools for their ability to obscure ongoing issues of sexual difference and sexism that girls continue to experience in the classroom. This book would be very appropriate for scholars working with girlhood and postfeminism; education policy analysts looking for provocative interpretations of the discourses shaping gender within the schools; and curriculum scholars who wish to explore the enmeshed dynamics between media, policy, and schooling.