



**GELS**  
Gender Equality in Language Studies  
Comhionannas Inscne sa Léann Teanga



**Maynooth University**  
National University  
of Ireland Maynooth

# [DE-] / [RE-] GENDERING LANGUAGE STUDIES IN EDUCATION

6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2024, MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY

---

## Keynote

### ***‘Liaisons dangereuses?’ Teaching, gender and neoliberal ideologies***

**Prof. Marie-Pierre Moreau, Anglia Ruskin University**

In 1982, Dale Spender wrote in *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* about the processes which render girls and women invisible in classrooms and other contexts. Forty years later, discourses of gender have gained new prominence, including in education settings, policy and the media. While this newly gained visibility has been welcomed in feminist quarters and, in many ways, constitutes an important step towards addressing gender-based and other social injustices, it also appears that such discourses do not always operate in ways which advance gender equity.

Against this background, I set out to critically engage with contemporary discourses of gender which circulate in education and policy circles, focussing on debates about the feminisation of teaching. Drawing on my 2018 monograph, *Teachers, Gender and the Feminisation Debate* and on a range of related articles, I call for the deconstruction of these discourses – a social justice endeavour rather than just a rhetoric one, in the light of the performativity of discourses. I offer to distinguish between three main discourses of the ‘feminisation’ of teaching: teaching as ‘feminised’, ‘feminine’ and ‘female-friendly’.

Beyond their diversity, these discourses of feminisation concur in constructing the feminisation of teaching as a problem. I argue that such views do not hold to critical analysis and can be counter-productive in the quest for gender equity. I also argue that, in neoliberal contemporary times, concerns for gender in education often appear driven by instrumental motives, such as the desire to use (the) teaching body/ies as a quick fix to the problem faced by students. A compelling example of this can be found in the way the debate on boys’ underachievement has been framed in the UK since the 1990s. Within neoliberalism, gender and other equality matters are increasingly subjected to processes of objectification, commodification, naturalisation and individualisation which construct these as attributes or forms of capital wielding benefits for those who hold them (e.g., for men teachers performing the ‘right’ type of masculinity), for those who can purchase them (schools) and for those who will be exposed to them (students) (Moreau, 2018).

Rather than ‘fix’ women or tackle processes of feminisation, I argue that we need to challenge the deep-seated deficit discourses which devalue who and what is associated with ‘femininity’, as well as with those who do not neatly align with the gender binary. In the neoliberal educational ‘quasi market’, this requires moving away from constructions of gender and other equality matters as benefit-wielding attributes or capitals. This also requires resisting the neoliberal appropriation of equality matters such as gender - a ‘dangerous liaison’ in the words of Nancy Fraser – and tokenistic celebrations of diversity which ignore the structural inequalities compounded by neoliberal politics (Fraser, 2013). Instead, we need to call for a return to a conceptualisation of gender and other equity matters as social relationships of power which can only be addressed through collective action.