

A TRIBUTE TO AN ACADEMIC PIONEER

A few weeks ago I learnt of the untimely death of an American academic who had become, over the years, a good friend of mine. I would like to take this opportunity to pay her tribute as an immensely valued scholar and friend. Gail Kelly was, at the time of her death, professor of comparative education and the chair of the Department of Educational Organisation, Administration and Policy at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

I learnt of her death in the most awkward and yet very fitting way. I was attending an editorial board meeting of the *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*. We began to discuss whom we might approach either to offer contributions or suggest names of contributors for a special issue of the journal on the broad theme of poverty and education, covering issues not only to do with Britain but also North America and particularly developing societies. I immediately suggested Gail as a person we might approach to suggest names and also possibly contribute, given her pioneering work and vast range of scholarship on education in the Third World, from studies of Vietnam to Africa. Another member of the board announced quietly that Gail had died the week before. I was devastated by the announcement, having known of her earlier fight with cancer. I assumed that, since she had continued to write and edit, she had been successful in overcoming the illness.

A week after this meeting I received a formal notification of her death. It mentioned how she had continued to work both as a scholar and editor as well as remaining chair of her department until a few days before her death. This was typical of her unstinting devotion to her work as an academic fully committed to both researching and furthering the cause of education, especially for racial minority groups and women. Her range of scholarship was breath-taking, covering issues from the Third World to feminist perspectives on the academy in the US. Given the amazingly high quality of this academic endeavour, she was, and will remain, a major influence in a variety of fields of educational research throughout the world.

I first met Gail eight years ago when we were both teaching summer school on the theme of women's education and feminist pedagogies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto. Gail's plenary lecture to the whole summer school on the topic of women's education in the Third World made a lasting impression on me both for its rigour and its passion. At this point she had begun to combine



in her interests in education in developing societies with a growing interest in feminist scholarship.

Her earliest work stemmed from her involvement in the student peace movement against the Vietnam war. Her PhD dealt with the role of education in the anti-colonial struggle in Vietnam. Later she did research on the role of colonialism in education and became one of the pioneers of what has been called a "revisionist perspective" in comparative education. This has proved to

be of immense influence in stimulating a reinterpretation of the broader role of education in Third World nations.

Since we first met she had continued to pursue these concerns, particularly in giving consideration to education in Africa. About three years ago, as president of the Comparative and International Education Society, she was invited to give a lecture tour of South Africa. She agonised about visiting the country but eventually decided to go on the condition that she lecture only at ANC-approved universities and colleges. She was herself intensely moved by her experiences there. On her return, she stopped over in London, where she was able to give a lecture to my MSc students at their termly residential study weekend. Her lecture was another *tour de force* of compassion and insight into the situation especially for blacks in South Africa.

Her scholarship, however, had blossomed and grown in the period since I had known her. She had begun to develop a feminist analysis of education, especially higher education in the US. Her co-authored book, *Feminism in the Disciplines: Kindling in the Groves of Academe*,

has been highly acclaimed. So, too, have her co-edited books which attempt a critical appraisal of educational reforms in the US in the Reagan years.

A lasting tribute to her new kind of analysis is the journal *Educational Policy* which she was instrumental in setting up in 1987, with colleagues at SUNY at Buffalo. This journal has already received enormous praise not only in the US but also from two very distinguished English professors. Halsey has claimed that it "is now the leading forum for discussion of issues relating to policy and practice in education". And Harry Judge has argued that it "is unique among journals in this field. The articles . . . invariably address genuine and general issues of policy. . . . It is always a pleasure and a profit to read a journal with so clear a sense of direction."

Gail was a woman of integrity, energy, vision and passionate commitment to values that she held dear, especially the liberatory role of education. Given her enormous amount of energy she was able to accomplish in her sadly short life far more than most of us are ever able to contribute in a "normal" academic life-time. She will be enormously missed by her friends and colleagues because of her warm support which came from her wonderful Jewish heart. However, I am sure that her scholarly leadership will continue to be felt because of her vast array of significant publications.