

Coeducation: a risky venture still?

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Most students in Australia attend coeducational schools. However there has been widespread and ongoing concern about whether it is the appropriate school setting for girls (Gill 1989; Lewis and Davies 1989; Australian Education Council 1992; Australian Education Council 1993; Cuttance 1995; Office of Naval Research 1998) and, more recently, boys (New South Wales Government Advisory Committee on Education Training and Tourism (O'Dougherty Report) 1994; West 2001; Department of Education 2002; House of Representatives - Standing Committee on Education and Training 2002). These concerns are based on perceptions that coeducational schools are potentially risky environments. This notion has been argued by those concerned with the education of both girls and boys. Judith Gill (1989) has noted "there is still concern that aspects of the normal coeducational schooling experience of girls negatively affects them" (p. 6), while Peter West (2002) believes that schools tend to be more attuned to the needs of girls than boys, suggesting that boys may find coeducational schools "more enthusiastic about girls than boys" (p. 98). The implication seems to be that boys and girls need different types of schooling, and that single-sex schools therefore can be more appropriately targeted, more responsive to the needs of the segregated students. Much research into coeducation has been framed in the light of these concerns, with more recent research reflecting the attention currently focused on the educational performance and experience of boys.

Much of the research that has investigated coeducational schooling has been placed in a gender equity framework. It has measured outcomes for girls and boys, often drawing comparisons with students from single-sex schools (Foon 1988; Rowe 1988; Marsh, Owens et al. 1989; Lee and Marks 1990; Stables 1990; Young and Fraser 1990; Marsh 1991; Monaco and Gaier 1992; Miller-Bernal 1993). Despite many comparative studies carried out during the seventies, eighties and early nineties, simple answers about outcomes have not been forthcoming. There were two large-scale reviews of the coeducation versus single-sex debate published in 1998. The American Association of University Women "convened a historic roundtable" (p.7), and concluded that "there is no evidence that single-sex education in general 'works' or is 'better' than coeducation" (Office of Naval Research 1998 p.8). Mael (1998), in a separate review, concluded that the evidence was still inconclusive and that "much additional research is needed to clarify which individuals or target populations would gain most from such (single-sex) schooling" (p.121). This suggests that a more productive approach may be to move away from the coeducation/single-sex binary.

This comparative work has tended to regard gender as a given – an unproblematic binary. Feminist theory has challenged this focus on binary gender categories – arguing that "the biology assigned to one at birth has little connection to the gendered positions and attitudes we take up in our lives" (Francis 1998 p.1). Instead, it is argued that "girls both construct themselves and are constructed as feminine" (Reay 2001 p.155). Reay (2001) goes on to explain that there are a variety of "ways in which different discourses can position girls", since there are "many competing gender discourses" which are "taken up differentially" by people depending on their situation (p.155). There is a growing body of work that investigates the construction of gender identity (Davies 1989; Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997; Kenway, Willis et al. 1997; Francis 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Renold 2000; Reay

2001). Such work takes a very different approach to questions of gender. In place of working with gender as a simple binary category that reflects biology, a constructionist framework is employed that focuses on the ways in which individual gender identities are formed and re-formed.

This study is attempting to bring together these two strands of research – focusing on the issues identified in the comparative research and using the understandings developed in the construction of gender literature; it is a study of the practices and meanings of coeducation. It is currently being conducted in three Melbourne independent coeducational schools that are partners in an ARC SPIRT project (Australian Research Council industry partnership grant). The schools all came to coeducation in the mid-seventies, via different histories – one was a boys school, one a girls school and one was established as a coeducational school. The data collection is almost complete, but the analysis is only just beginning. Consequently the following discussion comprises preliminary thoughts, based on general impressions and the partial analysis.

A framework for looking at coeducational schools and construction of gender

When replacing the focus on outcomes that is implied by the gender equity approaches with a focus on the processes of gender construction, it became important to take a broad view of the schools. The collection of data has been loosely framed by four questions

What are the formal structures and documentation within the school, which articulate the schools position on issues of gender?

What are the practices evident in the school environment, including how are girls and boys positioned by staff and the organisational structures of the school?

How do students act in the school environment?

What do the students say about the construction of gender in their school?

This framework provided opportunities to explore the relationship between the institutional practices of the school and the way in which individuals within those schools were engaging with the project of gender construction.

What are the formal structures and documentation within the school, which articulate the school's position on issues of gender?

Each of the three schools in this study was sensitive to issues of gender, particularly in relation to the students. Policies, prospectuses, advertising etc. were very careful to use gender-neutral language, to include photos of both boys and girls and to extol a range of activities without suggesting that they might be more or less appropriate for one or other gender. The school that was previously a boys school, makes explicit reference to the presence of girls and boys, and explains why coeducation is desirable on its website and in its promotional material. The other two schools have taken a more low key approach, appearing to start from the position that coeducation is the natural approach to schooling and therefore does not need explicit justification.

All three schools ensured that boys and girls were equally represented in leadership positions. More often than not they worked as a male-female pair, for example, coming to the microphone together and taking it in turns to speak – At one of the schools the male school captain was referred to by his female co-captain and others as “her other half”.

While ensuring equal representation of girls and boys in leadership positions was an article of faith at these schools, the issue was regarded as more complex when it came to the staff in the schools. In this context, equal representation of males and females was seen as desirable, however, the leaders of the schools argued that decisions were made on the basis of the best person for the job, regardless of gender. This was not an unproblematic position.

What are the practices evident in the school environment including how are girls and boys positioned by staff and the organisational structures of the school?

In all three schools the first thing that struck the researcher was that the formal uniform for the boys and girls was different, with the girls wearing skirts and dresses and the boys wearing shorts and trousers. At two of the schools, there was an option available for the girls to wear trousers – which are of a very similar style to the boys’ trousers. On these campuses with more than four hundred secondary girls on site there were only ever one or two girls who took advantage of this option.

Each of the schools had more boys than girls enrolled. When students were allocated to homerooms there was an attempt to keep the numbers of girls and boys close to the ratio in the year level. This arrangement then flowed through to any core classes that they attended together. However, the general pattern was that as they moved through the school they did less and less as a homeroom group and the ratio of boys to girls became a consequence of subject choices and timetabling. For example, in one of the schools, dance and drama were timetabled against each other – there were no boys choosing to do dance and consequently the ratio tipped in the opposite direction in drama.

The allocation of leadership positions and placement in homerooms described above are two situations where gender was used as a formal organising principle within the schools. Another area where each of the schools organised students along gender lines was sport. While each of the schools played at least some sports with mixed teams, the majority of sport was still either the traditional girls’ sports and boys’ sports. In addition, one of the schools had separate PE classes from year 8 upwards and another of the schools had one semester of separate PE classes, at year 9 level.

It appeared that there was very little discussion amongst staff about gender issues in relation to curriculum development and delivery. The one exception that was raised was in relation to choosing novels and other texts to study in English subjects. In this context some texts were described as more appealing to girls and there was concern expressed that some boys would not be interested or vice versa.

How do students act in the school environment?

Remembering that these schools were independent private schools, it was not surprising that the general level of participation and engagement with school activities was relatively high.

At each of the schools, there were a small number of students who were seen as difficult to engage in schoolwork and occasionally as troublemakers; there were both boys and girls in this group. However, there were some differences in the way girls and boys enacted their resistance. These troublesome students, of both genders, were likely to be loud and sometimes argumentative, to arrive late to class without their books or homework and do very little work in class. In addition to this, some girls in this group also wore heavy makeup, teased their hair, wore their skirts very short and tended to be sexually precocious. On the other hand, boys in this group were more likely to be class clowns and/or indulge in physically risky behaviour, for example jumping off the roof.

From observing behaviour in a wide range of classrooms, it was clear that in most classes there were some students who rarely volunteered contributions to the class and other students who were comfortable with constantly engaging with the teacher and any other students who wished to participate. Frequently there were dominant individuals or subgroups, but contrary to expectations they were not always boys. Often they were a mix of boys and girls and sometimes girls alone dominated the airwaves.

Computers were one area of the curriculum where pervasive gender differences were sometimes observed. Two of the participating schools had laptop programmes. In one of these schools, in the year 10 class that was observed, all the boys except one would regularly have their computers out, whereas none of the girls used their computers on a regular basis. The primary motivation for the boys to use their computers was so that they could access multiplayer games that they played over the school's intranet. These boys had also developed relatively sophisticated strategies to hide their game playing from teachers and were able to remain remarkably poker faced during the fiercest computer simulated battles, conducted with other students sitting within a few metres of them. The post-game celebrations and analysis erupted after the teacher, but not the researcher, had left the room.

One of the potential concerns in coeducational schools is that students, perhaps particularly girls, will not want to participate in sport and physical education. Comparing participation at the school that organised PE into single sex classes with the participation at the other two schools where PE was done in mixed classes there was not a noticeable difference. In both formats, there would usually be one or two people sitting out for one reason or another, including occasionally a reluctance to participate in the particular activity. However, there were also many instances of girls and boys enthusiastically participating in activities such as water polo, soccer, table tennis and high-jump.

Linked to the participation in physical activity, was the use of physical space during recess and lunchtimes. The most striking aspect of this was the relatively small number of students who participated in informal games of football, basketball, soccer, etc during breaks. On campuses with up to 1000 secondary students, at lunchtime there were usually between 20 and 60 students on the ovals and basketball courts involved in games. The majority of these students were boys. There were rarely more than 4 or 5 girls participating and all-girl games were not observed. Furthermore, when these informal games included girls they tended to be played less competitively than if just boys were playing. However, this was not necessarily true when there were mixed teams playing sport during PE lessons and training sessions. While it was clear that boys outnumbered girls playing informal sport at recess and lunchtime, the fact was that the vast majority of boys preferred to socialise at lunchtime and recess in ways that have typically been characterised as female, they sat and chatted,

wandered around in small groups or played small-scale games such as haki-sac or four-square. They often participated in these activities in mixed groups.

The incidence of sexual harassment appeared to be low. The one time that a boy was observed apparently making unwelcome physical advances towards a girl, the pair were observed not long afterwards arm-in-arm, suggesting that the advances may not have been unwelcome. Students and staff alike reported that sexual harassment was rare. However, at one of the schools, amongst the year 10 students, the boys had invented nicknames for the girls, at least some of which related to their physical attributes. Both girls and boys regarded this as friendly and joking behaviour. However, the girls rather wished that it would stop, but were unwilling to tell the boys to stop for fear that it would appear “they couldn’t take a joke”. In contrast, when this scenario was described to the boys at one of the other schools, they assured me that they would not get away with similar behaviour; to quote, “You’d get your balls kicked in”.

One of the common stereotypes of coeducational schools is that they are a hot-bed of teenage romance, where students, both boys and girls, are distracted from the serious business of getting an education by the “rating and dating game”. However, at the year levels participating in this project there were very low rates of intra-school romance. Typically, participants in the focus groups struggled to think of more than a few couples in their year level i.e. less than five couples in a student population of 150 plus. What was also interesting was that these couples were not necessarily clearly identifiable. At each of the participating schools, friendships between students had a strong physical component; amongst girls and between girls and boys there was a good deal of hugging, linking arms, cheek kissing, back rubbing, and between boys the physical contact was of a more robust nature. Consequently, seeing a boy and girl hugging or wandering off to class arm-in-arm was no guarantee that they were “an item”, and the official couples tended to be no more overtly affectionate towards each other than many others in their peer group. It was also clear that at these coeducational schools there was less pressure to have a partner to take to the school formal or dance. A significant proportion of the students went with groups of friends or “just rolled up”, an unlikely scenario at an all boys’ or all girls’ school.

The vast majority of behaviour observed was low-key and cooperative. In classrooms, students discussed their work and gossiped, compared notes and exchanged emails, laughed and argued, borrowed pens and calculators, shared headphones, plugged in computers for each other and a host of other behaviours that seemed to be unrelated to the gender of the participants. Between lessons, they socialised in groups that ebbed and flowed, sometimes single gender and sometimes mixed, often chatting or playing small-scale games. Barrie Thorne (1993) in *Gender Play* argued “gender is not always at the forefront of their (girls and boys) interactions”(p.5). In these schools much of the student’s behaviour appeared to place gender in the background.

What do the students say about the construction of gender in their school?

The students interviewed tended to be very positive about their experience of attending a coeducational school. They reported that, for the most part, boys and girls were treated as individuals rather than on the basis of their gender. They believed that as students, they were offered the full range of opportunities regardless of gender, but acknowledged that the majority of students took up those opportunities in gendered ways – the examples of no boys

in the dance class and no girls taking up the option of wearing trousers fit these gender norms. They suggested that this was more a result of general societal expectations than specifically linked to the school.

In the focus group discussions, they described the treatment of girls and boys as even-handed. They felt that the system and the teachers in it were fair and there was no sustained sense of boys versus girls. They did identify some exceptions to this; at one school the boys thought that complaints about sexual harassment from boys would not be treated as seriously as complaints from girls, although they had no specific instances to support this belief. On the other hand there were reports of boys sport coaches being better and/or more demanding. On the few occasions that they reported instances of teachers favouring girls or boys, or appearing to have different expectations of boys and girls, they characterised it as the exception rather than the rule.

They also believed that the coeducational environment had an ameliorating effect on the behaviour of both girls and boys, with less physical fights between boys, less bitchiness and exclusionary behaviour amongst girls. They noted this in their own behaviour, reporting that girls intervened in boys' fights before they got too heated and that conversations in all-girl groups had a different tone, more gossipy and bitchy, than conversations in mixed groups. In each of the schools there were focus group participants who had moved into the schools after year 7 and who were thus able to make direct comparisons of life now compared to life at their single-sex school, but all of the students drew on their own experience or on stories they had heard from friends and family at single-sex schools to make flattering comparisons between their own coeducational experience and that of students in single-sex schools.

At one school the boys suggested that PE classes were conducted in segregated groups, so that the boys "could not perv at the girls in their sports uniforms". This was in marked contrast to the situation at another school, where students change into and out of their sports uniforms standing by their lockers, which were located throughout the school in public areas. The girls managed this by doing "The Wiggle", changing under their uniforms, or wearing singlet tops or camis under their uniforms, so that they could change the top layer without fuss. The boys wore boxer shorts in a rainbow of colours and patterns. Consequently, at this school, it was nothing to see bare-chested young men chatting with young women as they "wiggled" into or out of their dresses as they prepared for sport. These students did not characterise this situation as a possible site for "perving".

The students at all three schools described themselves as confident and relaxed in the company of young people of both genders. Individuals constructed themselves as people who are comfortable with the opposite gender and able to be friends without worrying about dating possibilities. Many had stories of friends and acquaintances from single-sex schools that were not so lucky. They described them variously as big-noting themselves, being tongue-tied, sex obsessed and desperate, and were grateful that they had escaped this fate.

So is coeducational schooling still a risky venture?

It seems that many of the potential risks that have been described in the literature and circulated in the community are fading, in the context of these three independent schools. There was very little evidence of overt sexism in these classrooms and gender is rarely used as an organiser – except in circumstances of ensuring gender equity. There appears to have been an increase in girls' participation in a wide range of educational activities. Both girls

and boys appeared to value academic success, which was not regarded as being incompatible with being popular or “cool”. There was a low incidence of sexual harassment reported or observed. In their relationships with each other, the students appeared to de-emphasise rating and dating, and placed a high value on being friends, even mates.

If these risks are fading, are there other aspects of these coeducational settings that might still be potentially risky? At this stage of analysis, four potential risks have been identified. Firstly, there were occasions when it was suggested that equity was no longer an issue, for example that leadership positions could be awarded without reference to gender balance. If this path were to be followed, it would be important to continue to monitor outcomes to ensure that there was no slippage. Secondly, there appeared to be very little questioning of the social order generally, or the gender order specifically. Thirdly, there were limited opportunities to challenge stereotypes and both students and teachers were inclined to fall back on the argument that the schools reflected the patterns of the wider society. Finally, although these schools were very aware that they needed to accommodate the needs of both boys and girls, assuming that two sizes fit all, risks leading to the reproduction of narrow and unhelpful stereotypes.

In summary, while many of the previously identified risks are fading, vigilance will be required to ensure that important gains are not lost. In addition, there is still much that these schools could do to address newly emerging risks as schools and the society they are embedded in continue to change.

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