

"Initiatives to change girls' perceptions of career opportunities:  
a School to Work Transition Program National Evaluation"

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*This evaluation project was undertaken throughout all States in 1982 in conjunction with the women's advisers in education. It examined initiatives undertaken between 1975 and 1982 which had as their objective the expansion of girls' perceptions of their future career opportunities. Findings indicated that many programs failed to counter social influences already experienced by girls; this was compounded by acceptance of a traditional role for women among young boys and many career teachers. Some innovative programs were found and 1983 Transition projects have changed dramatically in some States. Transition education expenditure for girls was concluded to be a classical example of the forces of social reproduction at work in all their complexity.*

That women and girls are at a disadvantage when entering the workforce was most recently emphasised in April, 1983 in a paper presented at the Economic Summit. No novelty attaches to this, since every national report on work or training in recent years has come to the same conclusion. The causes of this disadvantage for girls entering the workforce are ascribed in varying degrees to the very restricted occupations perceived as appropriate by females and to girls' apparent preference for a narrow range of non-vocational studies at all educational levels. Implicit acceptance of this reasoning was demonstrated by the original Commonwealth Guidelines for the Transition from School to Work Program which named an important focus as "the particular problems which girls have in making the transition from education to employment" (Minister for Education, Nov., 1979).

The national evaluation project reported here was undertaken with Transition funding in 1982 to assess the value of projects which had aimed to expand girls' career options, however its scope was expanded to include many activities between 1975 and 1982 whether Commonwealth or State funded, which had the same objective. Thus in discussing projects which have proved successful or otherwise and the nature of administrative and school reactions, this paper draws upon more than eight years effort to achieve changes in schools which would assist girls to complete more equally in the job market with their brothers.

An overview of the projects reveals two main objectives increasingly coming to be combined in funding applications. On the one hand, there has been the education of teaching staff and attempts to alter or influence the structures of schooling and the work community around individual schools and systems, and on the other, direct attempts to influence girls themselves. The former have potential to be more effective in the long term, hence more cost productive, but the latter are palliative, band-aid approaches, often appearing more attractive in emergencies such as the current state of unemployment, hence more politically productive. The entire Transition program as operated in Queensland, Tasmania and West Australia, and earlier, to some extent in all States, clearly fell into this category on the evidence of the disposition of funding, as discussed below.

Changing the school environment. Among projects designed to change the environment of schooling, the longest running and in my view, the most effective has been the combined provision of equal opportunity resources centres and personnel. Commonwealth funded International women's Year grants initially enabled the establishment of such centres and personnel within Departments or in Teacher Unions. Such centres have not always operated freely; in Tasmania, a limited resources centre has been subsumed under curriculum services, and in that State and Queensland, departmental equal opportunity personnel are strictly limited to this area of school needs - in Queensland and to some extent in West Australia the resources centre within the Teacher Union is suffering attrition typical of forms of resistance to change to which I shall refer in later discussion.

Where they have been supported by State policies and funding, the activities of equal opportunity officers combined with the availability of teacher resource materials have proved

effective long term strategies for overcoming the forms of obstruction commonly put up to counter any scheme which promotes advantages for girls and not boys. Despite their relative isolation and peripheral status, the women's advisers or equal opportunity officers in education have gradually informed and enlightened principals, teachers, parents and bureaucrats over the last nine years since the first appointment was made in 1975 in N.S.W. Over several years their efforts have highlighted the problems associated with girls' narrow subject choices<sup>1</sup>, their rejection of the relevance of technical or trade training<sup>2</sup>, the unequal allocation of school resources between girls and boys and the dysfunctional nature of students' (and many adults') expectations and assumptions about the lives of adult women in Australia, today.

Equal opportunity personnel have operated most effectively through in-service at all levels - from the most senior echelons of the service in South Australia and New South Wales (on issues such as sexual harassment in schools and girls' and mathematics) as well as by means of awareness raising conferences for teachers, employers and parents on the topic of girls' vocational options. In addition, by the use of electronic and print media, by negotiating the inclusion of sex-stereotyping issues in teacher education courses, and by collating and presenting data on girls' choices, and on the status of women in the work world, including in teaching, equal opportunity officers in most States have been influential in bringing school and departmental practices, policies and attitudes out of the sex-stereotyped nineteenth century world in which most still remained in the early seventies.<sup>3</sup>

Where these activities have been supported by sympathetic policies from governments, the initial Commonwealth funding (whether I.W.Y., Schools Commission or Transition) has proved much more effective. Thus shortly after Transition funding became available, the education systems, as a result of having a process which had already been working well for four years in South Australia, and later, New South Wales and Victoria were able to develop a range of projects, effectively planned and executed, with adequate support staff, to offer some chance of effectively expanding girls' career options. Outstanding among these have been a series of career-oriented curricula for primary grades, the formalisation of links between primary, secondary and technical schools, hands-on experiences for women teachers in trades, the development of innovative and pre-tested, published lesson materials for raising girls' self esteem, and Statewide or regionally based initiatives on girls and mathematics and on apprenticeships, involving media, employers, parents, and all levels of schooling.

Last but not least, one of the most positive consequences of these long term appointments has been their capacity to influence the cumbersome system of Federal-State funding arrangements so that guidelines have now been drawn up to prevent the repetition of the male-centredness of the first years of the Transition program. In South Australia, new requirements (specifically asking for information on how projects were intended to help girls) took effect in mid 1981, later followed by other State systems. These pre-existing system commitments of staff or resources, originally made only as a nominal acceptance of girls' educational experiences as a problem for their futures as adult women has emerged in this research as possibly the most effective predictor of the likelihood that Transition programs will be successful in expanding girls' career options, and thus increase the number of girls in the non-traditional vocations usually eschewed by female school leavers.

Whilst employment per se could not be adopted as a measure of success for this evaluation given the current economic situation for teenagers, the expansion of girls' subject choices in schools and colleges and their gradually expanding selection of courses for further training has been taken as an indication of a slowly improving correspondence between their experiences and the realities of employment in Australia, today.

Of course, to take just one example, enabling girls to take up apprenticeships in the 1980's just as that system appears in imminent danger of collapse, could be viewed as counter productive. I would argue that this is not the case, since even if current apprenticeships are superseded by more educational preparation for skilled work, the battle has begun to be won when girls, their parents, boyfriends and employers can more openly envisage female participation in these areas of work. Given the 1977 finding by the OECD that Australia had the most sex-segregated workforce in the world, even a modest enlargement of vision is a step in the right direction.

On this pragmatic estimate of cost-effective, successful projects, there were clearly some which foundered and some which were even dysfunctional. Among the latter could be numbered many relatively low cost school based projects which had vanished without trace by the following school year, when they might have been expected to continue, given the normal definition of Commonwealth grants as "seeding" money. Their demise was explained variously to the researcher as the result of lack of staff resources or actual hostility from other staff. For others, the time span had been much underestimated and for some, the personnel resources were simply too thinly spread to achieve anything. The effect of teachers being involved in project activities on top of a normal work load is often to alienate even those most initially committed. I am aware that this reaction is not exclusive to the projects I was reviewing but when coupled with the heightened tension between project co-ordinators and other staff who did not share their objectives, I formed the view that projects to ameliorate girls' educational disadvantage on entering the workforce were singularly vulnerable to disillusion and abandonment.

Short-term solutions. The present generation of school leavers have arguably experienced the most un-work-related childhood in human history, coupled with which they have been fed, for an unprecedented number of hours each week, a picture of a "dream" world via television. Thus the sex-stereotyped experiences they have encountered in school and media have prevented them understanding that the work of the world has always been shared between women and men. This is a tremendous handicap when it becomes necessary to expand girls' career options to fit a modern economy and family structure - or equally to enable boys and many adults to envisage girls as competent to perform a multitude of jobs. The situation I am describing has happened only recently in historical terms, but the entire absence of women's work and concerns from what passes for history or social studies in our schools, combined with a generation of teachers whose own socialisation and work experiences are often irrelevant or even dangerously traditional, given the world their present students will inhabit, has brought about a situation in which it is very difficult to persuade 15-19 year old girls to change the direction of their career choices. For these reasons, during this evaluation, I formed the opinion that the major part of Transition funds expended on short term goals in schools are almost totally ineffectual.

Work experience, much careers counselling in schools and the pooling of ignorance which often occurs under the euphemism of parent-teacher consultation has in my view entrenched many teenage girls even further in their prejudices about appropriate female vocations. Some notable exceptions are worth mentioning. A number of schools in several States have taken as a springboard the fact that girls choose to take up clerical work. They have taken Years 11 and 12 girls, enabled them to achieve commercial speeds of typing, and have made compulsory the addition of a range of expanded competencies - legal studies, accountancy, word processing skills or office management. Without exception, such courses taught to older girls (and a few boys) were claiming 100% employment success. Clearly with employment subsidies as well, these students were able to compete with the married women applicants who usually secured these positions. The girls themselves also had at least one or two strings to their bow not normally associated with secondary school commercial studies exit students. These projects were thus effective in enabling somewhat more mature school leavers to "jump the queue" in employment, however they represent a futile long term response since they continue to restrict girls' vision to this most traditional area, without altering one iota, the male power base in the business world.

More fruitful outcomes directly flowing from school-to-work Transition programs have occurred as a result of community initiatives. Examples of these are the Hunter and La Trobe Valley schemes to interest female school leavers in skilled trade training. The Hunter Valley scheme involved influential representatives of the media, employers, government schools in 1981 and until the local steel industry collapsed into recession, was judged highly successful. Ironically most girls who took up apprenticeships as a result of this campaign had been unemployed for some months - that is they did not come to the scheme as a consequence of careers counselling at school. Many of them reported that such work had never been suggested to them at school; their interest had followed from a really innovative series of television

advertisements by which their parents had also been influenced, and there had been a supportive response from employers.

A further example of short term projects which appear to have worked directly on school leavers and their parents has been the "Expanding Careers in Maths and Science" day long seminars held in several States. Their impact, at relatively low cost has been achieved with the aid of attractive young women working in non-traditional female jobs who have been able to demonstrate to teenage girls that beauty, brains and even marriage and children are not incompatible in modern women's lives! As a consequence the numbers of girls entering technological studies and Science and Engineering Faculties in several States are showing a heartening increase. (Firkin, 1983)

Finally a number of projects have successfully persuaded groups of girls at risk of unemployment to consider further schooling or training. In this evaluation I saw girls (and some boys) personally interviewing adults outside the schools, and returning to their classrooms with data which then permitted careers counsellors and teachers to help them come to conclusions about the reality of adult disappointments and employment problems as a result of inferior educational qualifications. These were fortunate groups. Other teenagers might have been enabled to rethink their career options as a result of a number of very effective poster series, and of much up-to-date factual information disseminated by the equal opportunity officers referred to earlier but even this basic resource was not perceived, in all States, as an essential function of the Transition from School to Work Program for either sex. In the hands of alert and committed teachers this research found that such information was invaluable for young girls and had the advantage of relatively low cost. Without prior in-service training for staff and the organisation of follow-up activities within the region, however, it is arguable whether it can be adequately used in schools.

#### Seeing the Wood Through the Trees.

Discussion to this point has shown that there were a number of unique aspects of attempts between 1975-82 to expand girls' career options. Education Departments are already organised to serve the needs of boys' entry into the male dominated workforce but even given the availability of quite generous amounts of money to effect more equitable outcomes for girls who have been experiencing difficulties in that process, these cumbersome systems have not altered the balance very much at all. This research indicated that there was little basic understanding within such systems of the different experiences of girls and women and the activities which would be needed to address this reality.

To begin with, the long process of countering traditional stereotypes of men's and women's work must begin as early as possible in schooling both to enable girls to see the variety of family and work options now available to them and so that boys can understand that smaller families, a longer life span and wives who go to work outside the home will be a reality in their futures, too. Despite more than ten years' publicity and debate on the sex-stereotyping influence of television, and family expectations and assumptions about female roles, schools have left these avenues of socialisation to make all the running. Even though Transition funding was deemed to be available for children in primary grades, few States have adopted this option though there has been some assistance for isolated programs which have quickly collapsed in the face of difficulties already discussed. With the exception of one regionally based project, primary schools have been able, not only to opt out of responsibilities for enabling their students to develop a realistic picture of the world, but to continue inculcating a totally static view of the roles of each sex in modern society. This must be seen as a failure of the Transition education program, especially for the employment prospects of girls.

Further evidence of the dead weight of conservatism exercised through departmental bureaucracies is apparent in the fact that despite the original guidelines for Transition programs some States have refused to accept that a problem actually exists for girls. This was evident in views reported to me such as "we have no evidence that problems encountered by girls are any worse than those of boys" and in the distribution of funds in another State on a per capita basis across all secondary schools. Equally, when opportunities for trades and other courses were made available and were not taken up initially, it was assumed that girls

were "their own worst enemies" and did not really deserve to be helped in moving into a wider range of employment. I would also argue that this reactionary attitude is responsible for the continuing extremely marginal nature of all work on equal opportunity and the insecure position and lowly status of the appointed officers. The poverty of resources available to project co-ordinators specifically for girls serves to further define the problem as unimportant or ephemeral.

Even the acceptance within any State system that girls have difficulty moving from school to work was insufficient to ensure that funding was directed to the problem. In all States, Transition funding initially merely reinforced the stereotyped nature of the workforce, and basically served the needs of boys without attempting to alter the directions of girls' aspiration or training. Since 1981, that is after two or more years of pouring funds into a multitude of ad hoc projects, three States have now rewritten their guidelines to ensure that applicants explicitly address girls' needs as well as boys' in their proposals. In all States there have been system wide attempts this year through major projects to initiate more effective action for girls. The conclusion remains however that the mere fact that funds are directed explicitly to solve the problems which girls experience in entry to employment (which I take as a milestone and an advance on anything that has happened previously) cannot be assumed to be sufficient to ensure that action results.

Theoretical considerations. Reflection upon this evaluation study has indicated some of the complexities associated with trying to change sex stereotypes in occupational choice which are an entrenched feature of the sex role system in Australian society and findings have also suggested some actions which are more likely to be successful than others. In trying to conceptualise what I had observed (rather than to merely criticise or make further recommendations) I began to perceive the similarities between events and reactions in different States - both in relation to successes and failures-among a variety of projects. In this final section, therefore, I wish to examine some of that evidence in the light of social reproduction theories, as a way of making sense of the pattern of events which I have detailed in my evaluation report.

When Bowles & Gintis (1976) were expounding the role of education in the reproduction of social advantage and disadvantage, the logic of their arguments had instant appeal for those concerned with social group differences in the outcomes of schooling. Now, their reasoning, whilst still accepted, is seen as simplistic, and the variety of ways in which life is experienced in schools and thus effects this social reproduction, is now known to be infinitely more complex than early arguments suggested. Research on the education of girls has followed much the same path as that on all other disadvantaged groups; by this I mean that it has proceeded from the delineation and discussion of large scale disadvantage to research and explanation of a more interactionist perspective which seeks to explain how social hierarchies are perpetuated by the actions, attitudes and perceptions of particular social groups - in this case, girls and women - to their own disadvantage (Sampson, 1982). In addition we now seek to understand the myriad ways in which a more powerful group - in this case, boys and men - is able to define reality such as what skills and learning are appropriate for each sex, which qualities of character and ability are to be rewarded, and importantly, the relative status of other groups. Thus that long period of socialisation (schooling) in which each sex ostensibly experiences the same reality has to be examined in detail, in order to see what exactly is happening when girls choose careers so narrowly from the wide range of training offered to them, thereby virtually ensuring unemployment and often poverty and dependence as adults.

It is my argument that there are two most important elements of the implementation of the Transition from School to Work program which have been responsible for the difficulties experienced in programs for girls. The first of these is related to the definition by administrators, teachers and others, of girls' experiences in moving into employment. In my view they are not yet perceived as a real problem, or if that is too harsh and sweeping a judgement, are still not defined as as important as boys' by most of the men and women who are responsible for the conduct of our schools. The second is that the processes of schooling which inhibit girls from making wider choices of education or training for a wider variety of careers

are still very little understood - thus, at the level of interaction within schools, very little has changed.

The first problem is basically one of assumptions about the nature of work and the family in Australia, today and in the future. I believe that women's work is still perceived as secondary, not an essential and important part of the life of adult women, to judge by comments I received, some of which I have quoted earlier. Thus problems of unemployment of women are apparently invisible, not seen as an important issue. Assumptions behind this myopia appear to be the result of an unspoken desire to turn the clock back to the Basic Wage era earlier this century, when men were provided with a wage to support women - even though, as we know now, laws did not force them to do so for a major part of that era, nor did that system provide for the dependents of women wage earners. Despite the well publicised rate of marriage breakdown of which teachers must surely be aware, there is a kind of woolly or wishful thinking which still assumes that girls will marry, be supported by a man, and live happily in that state, for the whole of their adult lives.

This explanation for what I observed happening in schools, was reinforced during the period of this evaluation by a number of newspaper articles published during 1980 and 1981 which discussed the issue of married women in the workforce along the lines that they were usurping teenagers' jobs. They were based on twin assumptions that teenage girls will move into women's traditional work areas in the main, despite the drastic decline in many of those areas (clerical, retailing etc.) and that women, once married, do not have an equal right to earn their own living. Teenage girls are thus perceived only as a new wave of employees to fill "women's jobs".

Certainly the transition problems of girls were defined as less important than boys. In one State, the woman Co-ordinator of the only school based project of any significance remarked to me that she was somewhat hesitant about undertaking her project for girls (innovative and successful though it was) because the boys really do have such difficulties finding jobs. In numerous schools hostile or obstructionist attitudes from other staff were reported. A less charitable explanation for some resistance to trade training for girls is that people believed that girls would be taking jobs from boys - girls' need to expand into new areas, given the decline of their traditional work was somehow not as important as the fact that some boys might be disadvantaged by the changes.

The second important difficulty encountered in the attempts to expand girls' career options appeared to result from ignorance on the part of many teachers and administrators of much recent research on the education of girls. Where supportive networks were established among girls beginning non-stereotyped training, recruits continued their courses and blossomed; where girls were left alone to cope with the heavy macho atmosphere of the metalwork shop or the Technical School yard, they either did not enrol at all, or dropped out. When significant others in their social scene were included in the media presentations, or conscious-raising exercises - the public T.V. Hunter campaign or concurrent single sex discussion groups for boys on family and work, in schools where girls were learning separately to think of themselves as competent, autonomous adults - girls' choices moved little by little towards more realistic careers and life expectations. Recognition that girls' own views were stereotyped and unrelated to women's lives today, produced many excellent programs where adults outside the school were used to provide data for school discussion. On the other hand, many schools where this fact, long reported in research, was not understood, complained of failure and described how you could tell girls how few babies families were having these days, or how many married women were in the workforce, and they just ignored it, secure in a rosy haze of marriage and happy-ever-after.

A similar situation exists with regard to maths and science studies. Research has clearly implicated the masculine content and orientation of these curricula. Whilst a few Maths texts and teachers have begun to alter this aspect of the social environment, as far as I am aware there is no significant attempt to alter the context of science - either by humanising places such as physics laboratories and examples and activities - or by relating success in these subjects to real jobs that young women can be seen to be doing. Instead girls have been taken to see men working in factories and laboratories or been talked at by male scientists who frequently compound the problem by addressing most of their information to the boys. I must

also report that I saw very few attempts to separate the sexes for such key subjects as maths and sciences, yet we know that when boys are present, girls cannot fail to get the impression that the study belongs to males. On the other hand, those schools, or groups of schools where girls were given separate confidence building teaching programs in these subjects were proving eminently successful at retaining girls into years 11 and 12 in these key areas. The importance of positive encouragement if girls were being invited to consider non-traditional options, was little understood; most careers counsellors appeared to be satisfied that they had done their best if they had simply provided information about different jobs for men and women. Many girls reported quite negative and unhelpful responses from staff, rather than being encouraged to try out new experiences and few were given the opportunity to do so, free of pressure from boys, the traditional "experts".

Conclusion. In reviewing this evaluation, I wish to conclude by reiterating the justice of the initiative which named girls as a group disadvantaged in the transition from school to work and recognised facts associated with the decline of women's traditional areas of work. It is the implementation of the original intent of Transition guidelines which has revealed serious resistance to social change. Success has been achieved only where that resistance had already been substantially confronted - that is, in States where equal opportunity activities were already in operation.

It appears symptomatic of the same male centred definition of reality about work, which has been discussed in preceding paragraphs, that teachers in schools and those involved in funding Transition projects in most States has so rarely taken the trouble to understand and interpret the well publicised findings of research on girls' lower self-confidence, on their perceptions of maths-science as irrelevant or too hard for them or essentially a masculine study, on their unrealistic expectations for their futures. This lack of real understanding on the part of schools, coupled with the forms of resistance I have described previously, has meant a paucity of effective school-based Transition programs in most States, so that even now it would be quite untrue to say that schools generally are helping girls to expand their career options away from the declining areas of the female labor market. As a consequence of researches last year, it is naturally pleasing to learn that Transition funding will now become part of the Commonwealth Schools Commission Program entitled Participation and Equity in 1984. It is to be hoped that some lessons will be learnt from the dead ends of the past.

#### Notes

1. Office of the Status of Women, Office of the Prime Minister April, 1983.  
Papers presented to the Economic Summit, Canberra.
2. See Sampson, 1982, below  
also "Sex differences in secondary subject choice". Discussion paper prepared by the Women's Advisers in State and Commonwealth Education Systems for the Conference of the Directors-General, June, 1980.
3. For details of these and other projects referred to elsewhere in this paper see Sampson, S. Initiatives to Change Girls' Perceptions of Career Opportunities.  
Dept. of Education, Canberra, 1983 (in press)

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