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Sex in schools: How gender functions in the school curriculum.

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Abstract

Gender functions in multiple, complex and fluid ways in educational discourse. Since the 1970s, gender equity issues related to girls, and more recently to boys, have been a focus of concern. However, linking the categories of equity and gender may be considered a relatively new connection in educational discourse. This paper will outline a genealogical approach to the construction of gender as a category of concern in education.

Among so many changes, the disappearance of differential provision for girls' and boys' education will be utilised as a 'phenomenological moment' that poses problems related to power, bodies and the imposition of power on bodies. Today we are rather inclined to ignore this disappearance; perhaps in its time it gave rise to too much inflated rhetoric; perhaps it has been attributed too readily and too emphatically to a process of 'modernisation' and increasingly 'sophisticated' community attitudes, thus dispensing with the need for further analysis. And yet the fact remains that a few decades has seen the disappearance of girls' domestic schools, boys' technical schools and the virtual elimination from the curriculum of certain forms of knowledge, such as home science and industrial arts.

This paper will explore descriptive possibilities opened up by a genealogical approach in an attempt to examine how what we know reflects how we came to know. The focus is not on the past but on the present as constructed through the descent of practices: practices as practised, and as seen in the surface of events, small details, minor shifts and subtle contours.

Introduction

I wish to speak to you about gender and education. That this is acceptable, marks these categories as intelligible and their linkage legitimate. That I speak and that you listen, marks our positions as subjects within a discursive field. That what I have to say carries the risk of marginalisation, reveals the power of discourse to silence. My desire to speak is a political act.

Occasionally, I will speak to you in this way. It is a reminder to you, and to me, that I am here. I hope that it will open lines of communication between us that otherwise may not be possible.

The field of gender and education is a strongly contested site crowded with 'experts', politicians and various stakeholders. In recent years, concerns about boys equity issues have been acknowledged and now frequently compete with concerns about girls equity issues for recognition and funding. It is not surprising then, that much of the recent debate has been taken up by arguments over whether girls or boys are most disadvantaged in education. This is reflected in newspaper headlines such as, 'Gender wars in class' (The Weekend Australian Review, 19.2.94, p. 1), 'Class actions: now the boys need help, too' (The Sydney Morning Herald, 20.7.94, p. 1), and 'Co-ed schools fail for boys' (The Daily Telegraph Mirror, 19.11.96, p. 5). Although constructing the debate as a battle between girls and boys may maintain the interest of the media, it is unlikely that it will

facilitate the achievement of equitable outcomes for all students. More importantly, we need powerful, coherent and accessible theoretical frameworks to inform political action. This paper presents some reflections on how this may be achieved and is framed by three questions: How did gender function in education in the past?; What is the relationship between what we know, and how we came to know it?; Does tracing the descent of discourse suggest alternative possibilities for intervention and change?

In response to the first question, historical records are used to suggest how we came to this place. It is claimed that gender has structured the provision of education in Australia since schools were first established at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is also argued that a shift in educational provision has taken place in the second half of the twentieth century. Prior to this shift, education sought to provide differential outcomes from schooling for males and females. However, since the beginning of the 1970s, education has sought to provide equitable outcomes from schooling for males and females.

Whilst historical readings, such as this, have the potential to reveal lessons from the past that may guide and inform current practice, they are limited by the scope and type of historical records available. Some gaps and silences exist because archival documents were never created, or never kept, or lost. The passing of time has limited the ability of oral histories to supplement historical records that do exist. And, as well as these issues of content, there are issues of process. This is the focus of the second question: What is the relationship between what we know about gender and education and how we came to know it? This question explores how alternative approaches to remembering and recalling the past may construct different ways of knowing. Historical accounts, such as that given in response to the first question, are structured by a linear and chronological sequencing of events. This tends to equate progress and development with succession. As a result, the period of differential provision in education appears quaint and unsophisticated, whereas, the period of equitable provision appears to reflect 'modernisation' and increasingly 'sophisticated'

community attitudes.

This type of history is generally framed by an understanding of 'truth' which is discovered by the correct application of reason. Since it is difficult to identify reason during periods of incoherence and uncertainty, this type of history tends to focus on periods of stability. Periods of instability are frequently characterised as periods of, uncertainty, uprising, unlawfulness and even anarchy. It is a break in the succession of ideas, leadership and authority that marks such periods as unstable. As a result, historical accounts tends to focus on the forces of de-stabilisation and restoration.

Alternatively, the shift in educational provision may be conceptualised as a discursive displacement, or the juncture between discourses, because the statements and claims that may be uttered now about gender and education, are vastly different to those that could be uttered before this shift. As Foucault suggests, 'discourse is constituted by the difference between what one could say at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said' (Foucault, 1991, p.63). Junctures that represent a change in what is actually said are important markers that trace the descent of discourse.

The descent of discourse is characterised by the search for discontinuities. It is far from silent about periods of transformation because it is framed by an understanding of 'truth' as constructed. Periods of discontinuity tend to be periods in which what constitutes the 'truth' is re-defined. New claims, new knowledge and new forms of power frequently arise during periods of transformation - how they arise is the focus of the descent of discourse.

The third question will explore alternative possibilities for

intervention and change that result from tracing the descent of discourse. Destabilising notions of truth and the certainty of historical accounts reflects a project arising out of a radical scepticism that theoretical work cannot avoid because of its widespread impact on diverse fields of knowledge. This project challenges the universalising, normalising and essentialising tendencies of metanarratives. It also opens up the 'the political possibilities for self determination inherent in a recognition that 'truth' is made by humans as the result of very specific material practices' (Bové, 1988. p. 55). The provision of education is such a material practice, and the third question will explore possibilities opened up by a re-consideration of how truth is constructed in the field of gender and education.

How did gender function in education in the past?1

For all non-indigenous Australians, our recent past is characterised by displacement. The story of our displacement is also the story of colonisation but this is not how it is usually told. The story that follows is full of silence.

Before the shift: the demise of differential provision in education

In 1902, G. H. Knibbs and J. W. Turner were appointed as Royal

Commissioners with the task of reporting on the 'existing methods of instruction in connection with Primary, Secondary, Technical and other Branches of education, and or recommending for adoption whatever improvements might with advantage be introduced into New South Wales'. Knibbs and Turner spent 12 months overseas before submitting two large volumes, one examining elementary education and the other secondary education.

As a result of the Knibbs-Turner Royal Commission and under the leadership of Peter Board, who had been appointed Director of Education in 1905, government schools in NSW underwent a reorganisation. Some of the principles which guided Board during this reorganisation are reflected in his submission to the Royal Commission, quoted below. In any complete organisation of secondary schools, special attention could be given to the education of girls. There can be little doubt that under the existing schemes girls suffer more than boys from the character of their higher education. The pressure of examinations is more felt by them in that their methods of study are, as a rule, more exhausting physically. At present the higher education of a girl is modelled too largely on that provided for the boy, too little regard being held for the great differences that are expected of their future careers. The subjects of instruction in the higher schools for girls should compromise more those studies that specially qualify them for duties of home, while at the same time, retaining those that make for the culture of a more intellectual kind. Courses of instruction in Domestic Hygiene, Home Management, Care of Children, Cookery and other Home Occupations might well take their place as studies alongside of English Literature and modern languages.. The general result of such training.of the girl would [be to] qualify her to meet the demands of her natural destiny

Board, 1906, p. 35

The reorganisation reflected a number of assumptions about society and children: (1) It was believed that New South Wales required a work force in the professions, commerce, industry, and the home; (2) It was assumed that certain types of people because of their mental ability or sex, were more suited to certain parts of the work force; (3) It was believed that by the time a child was about 12 years of age, it was possible to know which area of the work force he or she was most suited to. As a result, different types of schools were established to cater for differing vocational needs of pupils (DSE Library Management Information Services Directorate, 1993, p. 11). The following diagram indicates the school system that NSW established in 1913.

The system of government schools remained relatively unchanged until the next major reorganisation of secondary education which came with the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme in 1961. The intervening years were punctuated by two world wars (1913-19 and 1939-45), the depression (1930s), large scale immigration after 1947, expansion of industry and

technological advances such as the substitution of mechanical for many hand processes. Also, during this time the percentage of young people continuing on to secondary studies increased dramatically.

In the late 1950s, the tradition of providing domestic education primarily for working class girls was extended and included in the education of all girls.

The practices and policies of domestic education worked to suggest, then, that for young women, the affirmation of sexual difference meant the embracing of their specific destinies as wife and mother. To understand oneself as female in the context of the modern secondary school, according to these claims, required an understanding of the self in this form.

Johnson, 1993, p.149

The affirmation of sexual difference was not limited to the practices and policies of domestic education, it permeated the whole curriculum. As a result, the perceived specific and separate destinies of males and females shaped the provision of education as illustrated in the following extract. In the early 1950s, the International Bureau of Education (IBE) sent a questionnaire to the Ministries of Education in forty-seven countries. Their responses formed the basis for discussion at the XVth International Conference on Public Education convened by the UNESCO and the IBE in Geneva, 1952. The conference was titled, Access of Women to Education.

One of the IBE questions asked, 'Kindly indicate the factors impeding or favouring women's access to the various levels of education in your country.' (UNESCO & IBE, 1952, p.8). The following text is the response of the Australian Commonwealth Office of Education to this question.

Among the factors affecting women's access to education, is the prejudice against men being placed in subordination to women in employment, although this does occur occasionally, and more frequently than in the past. Vocational training for positions involving authority over men is thus limited for women.

In the professions, women have made their appearance comparatively recently. A number of women doctors, dentists and lawyers are practicing but there is still some prejudice against them in some sections of the community.

There is also a strong prejudice in both sexes against women engaging in certain types of heavy and dirty work. This attitude, combined with other factors, virtually closes all branches of engineering, other than architecture, to women.

A considerable (but probably minority) opinion still asserts the traditional attitude that a woman's place is in the home, and the view is widely held that the employment of married women damages the family. Large numbers of married women and mothers are nevertheless employed. It has become customary for men to assist in some household duties, but the bulk of these, and responsibility for food purchases and care of children, still fall to the woman in most families.

The fact that women marry relatively young also influences their access to education. The average age of marriage for women is round

twenty-four, and parents often feel it is not worthwhile to give a long and expensive vocational training to a girl who will not become a breadwinner. This attitude, however, is breaking down as more married women remain in employment or return to it after raising their families to school age.

There is no system of apprenticeship for women in most trades and women are not found in the heavy occupations, as for example, moulding. Women are thus largely excluded from vocational training of this kind. Women in agriculture are largely engaged in work associated with the homestead, such as caring for the fowls, cows and vegetable garden. The field work, on the other hand, is mainly carried on by men, and farms are generally administered by men. Women are thus at a disadvantage in securing agricultural training.

There is also in Australia a tradition of preference for men in employment, particularly in the public service, dating back to the period of mass unemployment when the family breadwinner was given preference in the national interest. This tradition militates against vocational training of women.

Women enjoy a virtual monopoly, however, of certain occupations. Males nurses are rare in hospitals, except mental hospitals and soldiers hospitals. Typists and stenographers are mostly women. Infant teaching, hospital almonry, and other social service professions are the preserve of women. Women thus have opportunities for vocational training in these fields.

There are virtually no educational factors differentially affecting women's access to education. In some remote and unfavoured localities, young women teachers are not employed, but this is at their own request and to their advantage.

UNESCO & IBE, 1952, p. 54-55

The document indicates that, in the 1950s, educational provision was explicitly designed to achieve differential outcomes for males and females. 'Prejudice' and 'tradition' determined that women would remain subordinate to males, be discouraged from certain professions, not engage in heavy or dirty work, give priority to their family over their career and be passed over or displaced by males in certain occupations. These were not simply restraints placed on the provision of education by society, they were taken up and actively produced through educational policies and practices.

However, less than ten years after the writing of the response to the IBE questionnaire, the shift away from differential provision in education was visible in the Wyndham reforms and supported by the growing Women's Movement. Dr. H. S. Wyndham chaired the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales. The reforms implemented as a result of this Committee's recommendations became known as the Wyndham Scheme. These recommendations included: the removal of an examination at the end of primary school, the introduction of four years compulsory comprehensive schooling for all

students, the establishment of numerous co-educational schools, the introduction of a core of subjects common to all schools, a progressive increase in the proportion of elected subjects, the issuing of a School Certificate based upon the result of an external examination after satisfactory completion of four years secondary education and the addition of one extra post-compulsory year (Wyndham, 1957, p. 72). Although no substantive mention was made in the Committee's Report of maintaining differential provision for girls' and boys' education, it did indicate that 'the teaching of Crafts and of Physical and Health Education could most effectively be carried out when separate classes are organised for girls and boys' (Wyndham, 1957, p.84). This statement was one of the last official statements which supported differential provision for girls and boys in education. Around the time the Wyndham Scheme was introduced, concerns about girls being disadvantaged in education were more widely recognised. The rhetoric of educational provision in Australia was overhauled to reflect concerns about equality and fairness for all students.

After the shift: the emergence of differential provision in education
In the second half of the twentieth century, gender related inequity in

education has become an issue of concern in Australia. The women's liberation movement of the sixties combined with the election in December 1972 of the Whitlam Labor government (after twenty three years of conservative leadership at the national level) contributed to an increasing focus on the education of girls. Sue Willis (1989) proposes that prior to this time, a problem was not seen to exist since it was generally accepted that girls were not 'naturally' suited to the study of certain subjects such as mathematics and science. Furthermore, Anne Gray (1991: 11) suggests that during the period of conservative government prior to Labor's election, women's groups had been occupied with issues other than the education of girls. These factors may begin to explain why, 'despite manifest inequalities, the subject of sex differences in educational qualifications . aroused little serious interest' in Australia prior to 1972 (Martin, 1972: 96).

Soon after its election, Labor established the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission. In May 1973, this Commission presented its report which became known as the Karmel report. Although this report made only brief mention of the educational disadvantages faced by girls, in the following year the Schools Commission was established and it initiated a more extensive inquiry focused on girls. This inquiry resulted in the publication of *Girls, School and Society* (Schools Commission, 1975). Over the next few years, each State and Territory developed its own policy aimed at promoting equal opportunity in education. A focus on girls' educational outcomes remained a priority area throughout the eighties and culminated in the first national policy in the area of schooling titled the National Policy for the Education of Girls (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987) . It is of relevance to note the significance of the achievement of a national policy in the area of schooling, since schooling remains

primarily the responsibility of Australia's six States and two Territories. Consequently, although the Federal Government allocates funds for this purpose, the development of a national policy in education is only possible if there is mutual agreement and collaboration between the Federal Government and the States and Territories. The consensus required to formulate the National Policy for the Education of Girls reflects the level of commitment of politicians at that time to improving girls' educational outcomes. In the seventies and eighties, the institutionalisation of gender equity reform within education systems in Australia was reflected in the allocation of resources for this purpose. Just as each State and Territory developed different policy emphases, so too were there variations in how they allocated resources (see for example Yates, 1993, p. 15-21). In NSW for example, a Chief Education Officer was appointed with specific responsibility for girls' education. Attached to this position were two Senior Education Officers and Regional Consultants. There was also a Non-Sexist Education Unit maintained by the NSW Department of Education which was widely considered to have one of the most extensive non-sexist library and resource collections in Australia.

However, in recent years there is growing evidence of a declining recognition of the need to continue to improve girls' educational outcomes and there are indications that it is becoming increasingly difficult to gain support for related reforms. Again using NSW as an example, after the election in 1988 of a Liberal/National Party coalition, all State funded positions with specific responsibility for girls were abolished except for one Senior Education Officer position. The Non-Sexist Education Unit and library were also disbanded. Increasingly, educators committed to gender equity reform are being challenged to justify their continued attention to girls' educational issues. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that some members of the community strongly oppose the continuation of reform initiatives which specifically target girls. A number of arguments form the basis

of this opposition which is most commonly reflected in the question, 'What about the boys?' As Sue Willis, Jane Kenway, Leonie Rennie and Jill Blackmore (1991) reported in their study of the reception of gender equity reforms in schools, some educators and parents believe that 'gender reforms in schools have 'gone too far' and are now unfair to boys' (p. 119).

Although gender equity reforms have always encountered some resistance, the need to improve girls' educational outcomes has up until recently been a broadly supported goal evidenced by previously mentioned government policy at both the Federal and State/Territory levels and widely reflected in school based reform initiatives. However, this goal is now at the centre of the contested terrain of gender equity reform in the nineties. Much of this terrain is taken up by arguments over whether girls or boys are more disadvantaged in education.

In NSW, MacCann (1995) has focused on sex-differences in achievement in

the NSW Higher School Certificate. Although he presents some fascinating data related to how girls are drawing level with boys on some indicators, passing them on others and continuing to lag behind them on yet others, the difficulties associated with interpreting and drawing conclusions from such complex statistical data have been frequently overlooked in the widespread reporting of these findings. For example, an article in the Board Bulletin (Board of Studies, June 1995) begins with the statement that 'Females are now outperforming males in increasing numbers at the HSC.'. The article could have also begun with another statement from the report which claims that 'Girls continue to be under-represented in the top 1000 students.'

The claim and counter claim illustrated above are characteristic of the current gender equity debate in education (particularly that generated by media reports). Such claims tend to position attempts to improve the educational outcomes of girls and boys as oppositional. Although such a construction of the gender equity debate may help maintain the interest of the print and television media, it is unlikely that it will facilitate the achievement of equitable outcomes for all students.

The shift in educational provision that has taken place in the second half of the twentieth century is evident in a recent statement by the Ministerial Council for Employment Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). The following is an extract from this statement which is titled Gender Equity: a Framework for Australian Schools: Patterns of participation in further education employment and levels of income . show differences in the experiences of men and women which can be linked to unexamined acceptance of the "gender divide". This is becoming increasingly outmoded as technology, work restructure and community views about participation and equality are played out in the daily lives of the community. These changes in the nature of work, and in the structure and nature of the family, all have implications for the lives of women, which have been widely commented on and which are now well known. Less attention has been paid to the fact that these changes have also had significant impact on the lives of men.

Women and men now must work alongside each other as subordinates, peers and supervisors in almost all areas of work, as women increasingly make inroads into areas never before available to them - as commercial pilots, as members of Antarctic scientific teams, in the military, and so on. Similarly, men are moving into areas of work previously the domain of women - for example, nursing and child care. Relations and expectations between women and men have been fundamentally altered by these new arrangements, and so too have women's and men's perceptions about what it means to be female and male in our society.

Changes in the community are accelerating and young men and women will be participating in a society which is characterised by both individual and systemic responses to those changes. Inevitably, responses will be centred on the reforming and reframing of structures in society as well as the personal lives of community members.

The community looks to education as one of the main agents in the

preparation of young people for participation in work, civic and domestic life. Gender Equity: a Framework for Action is therefore a response to the developing understandings about the demands of our society in the future, as well as to the growth in knowledge about the impact of gender and gender construction on human life in and beyond schooling.

MCEETYA, 1995, p. 6-7

Less than fifty years separates the publication of the Commonwealth Office of Education document and the Ministerial Council for Employment Education, Training and Youth Affairs document, however, in this time there has been a major shift in the provision of education in Australia. At the same time, in Australia, Europe and the United States, the entire economy of gender relations has been redistributed. This time was characterised by the Women's Movement and a second wave of feminism. It saw the expansion of feminist theory and the development of innumerable gender equity reforms at the international (eg., Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1981), national (eg., National Policy for the Education of Girls, 1987) and regional levels (eg., Participation and Equity Program Initiatives for Girls, 1984-1987).

Today we are rather inclined to ignore the shift from differentially providing to equitably providing for girls and boys in education; perhaps in its time it gave rise to too much inflated rhetoric; perhaps it has been attributed too readily and too emphatically to a process of 'modernisation' and increasingly 'sophisticated' community attitudes, thus dispensing with the need for further analysis. And, in any case, how important is such a change, when compared with the great institutional transformations that have resulted in the majority of young people receiving at least six years comprehensive secondary education and the removal of curriculum restraints which made early determination of a student's school and consequently post-school pathways. And yet, the fact remains that a few decades has seen the disappearance of girls' domestic schools, boys' technical schools and the virtual elimination from the curriculum of certain forms of knowledge, such as Home Science and Industrial Arts.

These changes did not come about at once, or as part of a single process and examples of differential provision in education remain. For instance, girls and boys continue to be disproportionately represented in certain subjects such as higher levels of mathematics (fewer girls) and higher levels of English (fewer boys); boys continue to be disproportionately represented in selective and technology high schools. Despite some lingering reminders of differential provision, policies and curricula based upon the belief that girls and boys should be equitably provided for in schools have taken prominence.

This account of how gender has functioned in Australian education since colonisation is a rough sketch of a complex story. But, within the context of this paper, it hopefully serves a number of purposes. Firstly, it recalls how gender has influenced the form and function of education since the early days of the colony. Secondly, it suggests

that the second half of the twentieth century has seen a significant (although frequently ignored) transformation in educational provision. And thirdly, it illustrates a type of historical account whose linear and chronological nature is assumed to equate with progress and development. The next section will explore how alternative ways of remembering and recalling the past may construct different ways of knowing.

What is the relationship between what we know about gender and education and how we came to know it?

I am a teacher committed to the politics of equity in education. One of my students once said to me, 'If I play sport, I'm accused of having balls; if I do well, I'm called a brain; if I don't go out on the weekend I'm called a nerd; if I don't have sex I'm labelled frigid, if I do I'm called a slut'. Before I can act, I need a way to think.

This section will discuss different ways of knowing. It will begin by outlining some of the problems that arise when historical accounts lack an acknowledgment of the limitations and constraints placed upon their product by their process. The systematic exclusion of women's voices from history will be discussed as a way of illustrating this point. The tendency of historical accounts to focus on periods of stability will be contrasted with descriptions of the past that focus on periods of discontinuity.

In her study of the centrality of history to a feminist analysis of education, Blackmore (1992) describes her university historical training in the 1960's. She recalls that, History was portrayed as a 'craft' or as 'science' or as a narrative, but rarely as informing theory or policy, other than offering us anecdotal lessons from the past or 'historical parallels'. As recently as 1985 history was not included in the multifarious list of disciplinary fields which have been seen to contribute to policy analysis. The reluctance for historians' involvement with policy arises from the fact that policy analysis draws from theory and from description. To do this was particularly problematic for historians, because theory was generally eschewed since it was seen to bias the historian who dealt only with 'facts'. It smacked of 'presentism' or the defining of historical problems through present-day concerns. Blackmore, 1992, p. 1-2

Although historians may claim to deal with 'facts', feminists (Blackmore amongst them), indigenous people and others whose memories and stories are systematically excluded from history, have challenged these claims by revealing that many of these 'facts' are fictions - predominantly male, middle class, white fictions. These fictions are yarns spun by historians that give meaning to the past and context to the present by explaining how events are related and how they have

contributed to what we experience today. There is an underlying sense of continuity and connection. The process involves spinning the stories that will form the yarn. Spinning imposes order, purpose, direction and function.

The process of spinning historical yarns records the march of progress and development. This progress is sometimes slow and difficult but nonetheless permeated by a continuous thread of development. This approach emphasises succession and how new forms of understanding are opened up by earlier 'ground-breaking' work. Documents, such as the Australian Commonwealth Office of Education response to the 1952 IBE question, would be considered now somewhat dated but nevertheless useful for showing how current ideas have evolved and become more sophisticated.

But spinning is more than a metaphor for history and the march of progress, it is a metaphor about how statements which claim to be 'true' are constructed. It is the reasoning subject, in the form of the historian, who tells the 'true' story about the past and reveals the 'truth' of the present. This metaphor makes visible the hand of the historian who operates and directs the spinning. The historians hand is frequently forgotten or ignored, and claims by historians that they only deal with 'facts' serve to eschew themselves as well as theory from history.

The process of spinning frequently loses or excludes many yarns. Feminist historians of education in Australia (see for example, Mackinnon, 1984; Allen, Hutchinson, and Mackinnon. (1989); Theobold,

1994 and 1996 and; Selzer, 1994) have restored a record of autonomous private girls' schools, 'dame schools', subscription schools and other schools which have been excluded from, or thinly woven into the yarn of Australia's education history (Mackinnon, p.4, 1984). This restoration does not only supplement more commonly told stories, it spins an alternative yarn about schooling in Australia. Mackinnon argues that 'examining women's experience at a particular juncture may well result in a quite different interpretation of historical events' (1984, p.2). For example, it is commonly stated that differential provision in education played an important role in preparing girls for domestic duties. This is clearly illustrated in a report on a debate in the NSW Legislative Assembly in the Newcastle and Morning Herald and Miners Advocate on Saturday February 28, 1890. The debate on the 24th Clause of the New Education Bill related to the establishment of high schools for girls in the colony. The following is an extract from the newspaper report.

Sir Henry Parkes. asked why should a female who could speak French, sketch a landscape, or play a popular song, be less capable of making a pudding or darning a stocking. We ask what greater blessing can a man have in this world than the companionship of a woman through life, whose educated intellect affords him encouragement, consolation, and strength in the daily battle of life?. It is going back to the dark ages to plead that by keeping a woman ignorant to a certain extent, you make

her subservient to the will of her lord and master, her husband. We know many goodwives and kind mothers, who are equal in every respect to most of the men in this community, but because it is contrary to the custom of society for an intelligent woman to take part in social movements, society at large loses, as a rule, the benefits of her wisdom and experience. We do not advocate high class education for women, at the cost of neglect of instruction in home and domestic duties.

Newcastle and Morning Herald and Miners Advocate , Saturday February 28, 1890

'As a rule' schools did prepare girls for domestic duties but this preparation varied according to class. Some girls were trained to become paid kitchen hands, domestic servants and governesses. Whereas, other girls were trained to become unpaid house managers and 'cultured' wives. There were also girls for whom this 'rule' has little relevance, such as: academically gifted girls who gained entrance to university and subsequently the professions such as law and medicine; women who forged a niche in the workforce, in small businesses and trades; lesbians, celibates and spinsters whose domestic duties were not tied to the roles of wife and mother, and; working class women who were both breadwinners and home makers. Unless factors such as class are taken into account, terms such as 'domestic duties' can obscure the diversity of women's lives.

Remembering these women has implications for how we measure and interpret the shift from differential to equitable provision in education. Even so, the project of restoration is potentially full of its own gaps and silences. As Theobald (1996) warns, 'legitimate concern for breadth and commonalities bleaches out the personal and the particular which are the life-blood of women's history' (p.4). It is the personal and particular that reveals the diversity of women's experience and that works against the tendency of terms such as 'woman' and 'domestic duties' to function as a unifying definitions. Elam (1994, p.4) states that: 'Definitions threaten to function like final answers which erase the fact that there were ever any questions asked in the first place'. Elam suggests (1994, p.5) 'to keep the act of naming and defining as a site of contestation, for the question that should continually be posed is: who gets to name what?'

Keeping the act of naming and defining as a site of contested meaning offers an alternative process to spinning the yarn of history. Although histories spun by historians may be aesthetically pleasing and useful,

there are alternative yarns to be spun. Spinning defines the limits of acceptable thought, speech and behaviour. It is so defining of how things should be, that it requires an act of imagination and courage to think differently. Such an act of imagination and courage is contained in the first edition of the High School Chronicle which was published by the Girls' High School (later known as Sydney Girls' High School) in May 1906.

That this letter was published anonymously, suggests that there may have been some risks associated with writing it. The author contrasts two different female subjectivities: the 'demure fainting misses' of the good old times and the 'sturdy self possessed school-girls' of the present times. Taking up the latter position is subject to sanctions such as accusations of imitating elders, or in other words, accusations of inauthenticity. A school-girl of the present times is also subject to abuse for 'playing with subjects', or in other words, not taken seriously.

These sanctions indicate that a 'girl of the present times' was a discursive transgression. It may be read that the author is attempting to reinscribe this positioning within discourse by constituting it as desirable and preferable to a school-girl of the good old times. At the same time, there is an attempt to distance and distinguish the school-girl of the present times from those who previously needed 'to make themselves hideous in order to be thought clever'. Perhaps this is a reference to the stereotype of the bluestocking who was depicted in nineteenth century cartoons as plain, boyish and poorly groomed (Theobald, 1996, p.21).

This letter reflects the complex, incoherent and multiple subjectivities of girls at the start of the twentieth century. Although there is a tendency to attribute the fight for equal rights for women to the Women's Movement of the second half of the twentieth century, the anonymous letter published in the High School Chronicle at the start of the twentieth century may be claimed as a feminist intervention and act of agency. We must continually remind ourselves of the bleaching effect of generalisations and the contextual underpinning of our speaking location. Since, the gender equity discourse is built upon the demise of the discourse of differential provision, it is necessary to be suspicious of narratives that construct the period of differential provision as quaint, old fashioned and unsophisticated. The importance of keeping the act of naming as a site of contested meaning is further illustrated by articles, images and information in the High School Chronicle that represented and encouraged hardworking and studious qualities in the school girls. The School News featured long lists of examination results and encouraging words for those about to undertake exams. Praise was strongest for those who had graduated and gained university entrance.

It is unlikely that the academic success and hard work of government secondary school girls (particularly those enrolled in selective schools) can be associated with the ideal of the domesticated woman for whom learning was intended to adorn the female mind. Records of parental occupations indicate that the extremes of colonial society were under-represented in government selective schools (Theobald, 1966, p. 123) and, whilst government school girls may have lacked the security of wealth, the privilege of a secondary schooling held out the promise of a professional career, or white collar job, even if for some

this was only until they were married.

The Commonwealth Office of Education's use of the term 'breadwinner' further illustrates the importance of keeping the act of naming as a

site of contested meaning. In its response to the IBE questionnaire, it reinforces limited representations of women through its unproblematic representation of women's lives. Women did not have the coherent, stable and uniform identity suggested by the Office of Education. For example, it uses the term 'breadwinner' with exclusive reference to men thereby constructing 'breadwinners' as only males. It assumes that women will marry a 'breadwinner' and it states that in periods of mass unemployment 'the family breadwinner was given preference in the national interest'. However, Windschuttle (1980) argues that
The presence of female breadwinners had been underrated because they did not fit the propaganda of the unions nor the ideologies of the employers in a 'man's country' such as Australia . Because women were poorly paid, then some openings for them would occur, of necessity, in depression and post-depression periods when job competition operated and the cheaper labour for the same work became an employing criterion. Windschuttle, 1980, p. 113

The Office of Education's use of the term 'breadwinner' sweeps aside any consideration of the lives of spinsters, lesbians and celibates who did not marry a 'breadwinner'. It also dismisses the need for most working class women to maintain paid employment once they were married. In this way, the Office of Education actively constructs an image of femininity that has limited reference to the lives of many women. The Office of Education was not simply a conduit for society's 'prejudices' and traditions', rather, it actively produced the differential positioning of males and female in society by differentially providing for males and females in education.

Keeping the act of naming and defining as a site of contested meaning is characteristic of the political project that has developed 'out of a radical skepticism about 'truth' and the correspondence of fact and concept' (Bové, 1988. p. 55). Among many challenges, this radical skepticism has challenged the notion of objectivity, the certainty of scientific truth and the stability and coherence of categories such as male and female. It has opened up the 'the political possibilities for self determination inherent in a recognition that 'truth' is made by humans as the result of very specific material practices' (Bové, 1988. p. 55).

Education is such a material practice and the shift in educational provision from differential to equitable illustrates how the 'truth' may be constructed. By using the term construction, I want to emphasise that the 'truths' about educational provision identified by research and addressed by policy are not self evident; they are the products of specific questions, instruments and conceptual frameworks (Volman, 1991, p.46). It was a shift in what was claimed to be 'true' about the educational needs of girls, boys and society, that gave rise to a shift in educational provision. The need for this shift and the direction in

which it developed were not apparent, transparent or indicative of reform.

More than this, these claims have given rise to a whole new form of knowledge, a specialised language and invested a group of experts with authority to speak about gender and education. Gender equity in education has 'joined in the general disciplinary project of producing and regulating the movement of knowledge, the forms of language, and the training of minds and bodies' (Bové, 1988. p. 52).

Like other disciplines, gender equity draws attention away from its disciplinary operations and effects (Bové, 1988. p. 52). It disciplines minds and bodies silently and anonymously through discourse. Discourse operates through the language of gender equity, its effects include what may be said and what is unsayable; discourse operates on the subjects of gender equity, its effects include what positions they occupy and the authority with which they speak; discourse operates through the practices of gender equity, its effects include what questions are considered legitimate and what responses are sanctioned.

The operation and effects of discourse are not immutable, fixed or coherent. Discourse and its disciplinary effects can be reinforced, exposed, undermined or transformed. The shift from differential to equitable provision in education reflects such a transformation in discourse and an opening in which to examine how power operates through discourse. This is the power of positive production that generates certain types of questions and responses. By tracing the transformation of discourse it is possible to trace the pattern 'in which an intellectually specialized language of a professional discipline is constellated and made functional; we can see it extended both into a broader coherence with other discourses constituting other fields and into the processes which institutionalize discourses' (Bové, 1988. p. 52). Some of the political possibilities opened up by such a tracing will be taken up in the next section.

Does tracing the descent of discourse suggest alternative possibilities for intervention and change?

In this section, I will discuss some of the political possibilities opened up by a tracing of the descent of discourse and contrast these possibilities with those opened up by a linear historical reading of the past. The need for action to be informed by effective and accessible theoretical frameworks is emphasised by Bunch (1983, p. 250) who suggests that the absence of theoretical frameworks can give rise to the 'action/no action' bind. In other words, resorting to attempting any action rather than no action, or feeling unable to act due to a lack of understanding of what is 'right'. Without wanting to detract from the spirit of Bunch's suggestion, an understanding of political action informed by the tracing of the descent of discourse transforms even inaction or acquiescence into a political strategy.

Tracing the descent of discourse conceptualises truth in a fundamentally different way to a linear account of history.

Discursively speaking, truth loses its essential and universal qualities that are gradually revealed through the 'correct' application of reason and truth is replaced by shifting claims that assume a temporary 'truth' status until they are transformed into new claims. This transformation frequently involves struggle and conflict between competing discourse communities.

For example, in the late 1980s under the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Dr Terry Metherell, the place of Home Science in the NSW curriculum was questioned. The 'immutable gender stereotyping of the subject' became an issue of concern, as did the identification of Home Science as a 'girls' subject' which 'not only excludes boys from important knowledge, but appears to downgrade the status of the subject.' (Metherell, 1989, p. 62). Despite strong opposition from Home Science Teachers, their subject was integrated into a new Technology and Applied Studies Learning Area which has resulted in the virtual elimination of Home Science from the curriculum.

That 'immutable gender stereotyping' became a matter concern reflects the degree of the shift that has taken place in educational provision. Prior to this shift, such a concern would not have been raised because it would not have made sense. Previously, immutable gender stereotyping was not a matter of concern but a desired characteristic of the curriculum. And, although this concern gained legitimacy in the context of equitable provision, it nevertheless represents a narrow range of concerns. It would also have been legitimate to ensure that both boys and girls had access to Home Science knowledge (as has been the case in Sweden and the Netherlands), or, to persist with measures that were already in place to make the subject more appealing to boys and upgrade the status of the subject. The virtual elimination of Home Science from the curriculum was not the only option available.

Metherell (1989, p.5) justified these changes as part of a stated agenda to 'improve educational standards in our schools and improve the

educational opportunities for each student'. With time, it is likely that it will be forgotten that there was significant disagreement about how this may be achieved and these changes will be incorporated into the story of reform and progress which underwrites linear accounts of educational history. As Nietzsche (1956) suggests, we make our claims to truth, then we forget we made them up, then we forget we forgot. Focussing on this transformation in educational provision opens up the possibility of asking questions such as: What claims were made about educational provision that led to its transformation? Who made these claims? and; What have we forgotten about the process of transformation? Conceptualising truth as constructed, struggled over and shifting, destabilises its authority to privilege certain claims and silence others. The authority of truth reinforces binary couples such as right/wrong, rational/irrational, good/bad - to name just a few. Typically one of the terms within the binary (in this list the first) is endowed with greater status and has associated normalising effects that are established and maintained by social divisions,

institutional practices and knowledge differentials that claim to be 'true'.

Destabilising 'truth's' essentialism and universalism weakens the borders between binary terms and challenges the normalising tendencies and status of one term over the other. This opens up the possibility for marginalised and silenced voices to assert the authority, value and 'truth' status of their own claims. As Davies (1996) suggests, recognising the binaries and valuing the 'lesser' term has the potential to disrupt the legitimacy of the category 'other'.

Associated with a destabilisation of the status of 'truth' is a destabilisation of the notion of a coherent and decidable subject. Subject positions such as 'school girl' and 'school boy' facilitate the type of advocacy that is strengthened by the ability to make definitive claims but there is a corresponding weakening in the type of advocacy that incorporates multiplicity and recognises the diversity and fluidity of identities. Any type of advocacy, involves the risk that the people we speak for, may not like the way we speak about them. This does not mean that we should remain silent because not speaking is also a way of speaking for others. But, we need to recognise the political possibilities and closures associated with our speaking position. Political action that is informed by an understanding of multiple subjectivity can utilise the fluidity of layers of identity. Movement between subject positions can involve the risk of transgression or the relative safety of acquiescence. Adopting different subject positions provides tools of negotiation, resistance, subversion, escape and avoidance. The ability to anticipate the effect of transgressions, to plan retreat and to negotiate new subject positions has the potential to destabilise 'truth' claims, produce new discourse, new relationships of power and new forms of self.

Whilst some theorist are critical of the destabilisation of the notion of a coherent and decidable subject because of its potential to weaken political agency, Derrida (1988) distinguishes the politics of undecidability from the notion of indeterminacy.

Undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations.

Derrida, 1998, p.148

The politics of undecidability does not require that we lose sight of the particularity of subjectivity or the strength of descriptive possibilities based upon individual experience. Rather it reminds us of the multiplicity of these particularities and experiences. In the field of gender and education, it keeps the act of naming and defining as a site of contested meaning. That we don't know the possible determinations of girls and boys becomes a concern in itself. Naming subjectivities or possible determinations is itself an important act of

agency.

An understanding of multiple subjectivities and the discursive positionings of these subjectivities opens up the possibility of

disruption and change through planned transgressions. Such an act of transgression does not require a mass movement but can result from an individual act of courage and imagination. But transgressions evoke responses and have associated risks. That the response may be anticipated and attributed to a shift in discursive positioning or an excursion through layers of identity, ameliorates tendencies to locate responsibility for political action in personal attributes.

Subject positions have unique potential to provoke, resist and acquiesce. Sometimes political action is simply an excursion through layers of identity. Some trips are more risky than others

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1 This overview is a version of a paper presented at the conference titled *School Days Past, Present and Future: Education of Girls in 20th Century Australia*, held at Magill Campus, University of South Australia, September 20-21, 1996. The overview presented here does not

include previously reported work related to the nineteenth century, but it does included new and re-worked material related to the twentieth century.