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Just how far *have* we come? A retrospective on girls' education and an analysis of the present situation.

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Abstract

Using data drawn from recollection and research into girls' schooling in the early 1980s this paper reprises the themes which guided action for gender equity in schooling. The focus is on girls' schools and the ways in which they sought to counter hegemonic male dominance in the relations of schooling. The paper presents a picture of teachers and students in girls' schools working across a range of fronts, united in a commitment to the furtherance of better outcomes for girls. Analysis of this work reveals different levels of success for girls and their teachers in terms of the realisation of girls' educational potentials. The argument put forward in the paper concerns the ways in which moves for greater equity in schooling outcomes for girls became overtaken through the 1990s by mainstream equity initiatives which themselves worked to disguise fundamental class differences in educational experience and achievement. Finally the paper offers an analysis of the ways in which the early debates around gender and education have been transformed by more recent developments in government policy and schooling practices such that their original liberatory intent has been marginalised and/or rendered powerless.

Introduction

With the recent return of the Liberal-National Coalition government for a further three years, we can expect to see the government schools policy agenda continue to include a focus upon 'a better approach to teaching boys' (Liberal Party of Australia 2004). This stated commitment appears to those of us who lived through the struggles over girls' education in the 1970s and 1980s as a deliberate policy manoeuvre whereby the privileges held by dominant groups are maintained. The portrayal of boys' education as in crisis is widely accepted despite inadequate supporting evidence. The media have played up the 'moral panic' about the issue and political pundits have joined the bandwagon. A common claim is that the press for improvement in girls' education has produced girls as an educational success story – so much so that they now 'dominate' in the end of school results. And so we are told, it's now time for the boys to have some special help.

Those who would argue that the problems for boys in education are similar to the situation of girls in the 1970s have not rigorously looked at the evidence. In the early 1970s girls as a group were significantly less likely to finish school than were boys. Consequently their chances of proceeding to higher education were slim indeed. While at school they were routinely overlooked in many aspects of the schooling process; they were less likely to be known by teachers; less likely to have the chance to speak in class; more likely to be channelled into non-academic courses and generally not regarded as serious students (Gill 2004). Girls from wealthy backgrounds were in a better position in terms of access to education than their working class sisters but they too, in their fee paying schools, were often subjected to an educational diet of polite accomplishments rather than intellectual endeavours. These gendered features of schooling were carefully documented in the Interim report of the Schools' Commission, *Girls School and Society* (1975) which was to have a great impact on schooling for girls.

Current lobbyists for boys' education have not produced a similar body of evidence to support the idea that boys need particular schooling treatments. Rather their argument proceeds from a demonstration of boys lower school retention rates coupled with their generally poorer performance on end of school examinations to claim that the schools must be doing something wrong – a weak *ad hoc* position. Careful study has shown that middle class boys tend to continue to do well in schooling, as they have always done, whereas the claims of low retention and poor achievement is much more typical of boys from disadvantaged backgrounds (cf Teese, R. & Polesel, J. 2003). In fact both girls and boys in low socioeconomic contexts continue to experience low school achievement and low retention when compared with their middle class peers. Hence all claims about gender differences in educational outcomes must be calibrated in terms of which boys? which girls? in order for a more accurate picture to be produced.

The ongoing phenomenon of class reproduction in educational outcomes has continued despite some improvements in girls' education over the past three decades. The current danger to emerge from the 'crisis' around boys' education is the gains that have been made for girls will be overturned if the boys' education movement proves to have a regressive orientation.

This paper aims to produce a picture of how it was for girls' education in Adelaide in the 1980s by revisiting accounts of two of the three government girls' schools operating at this time. One of us was a teacher in one of the schools and the other was researching for a doctoral study on the reproduction of gender in schooling practice. From our accounts of working at these schools at the time we develop the main lines of argument and analyses within which the feminist movements in education took shape. In this way we hope to demonstrate the different forces at work then and now and to show how the questions around girls' education were indeed very different from the ones now being addressed in the interests of boys.

Back to the '80's: Social outcomes and girls education

In the 1980s, educators in single sex girls' schools were pioneers of school reform for the education of girls (Walker 2004). Themes which guided action for 'girls' education' during the 1980s were based upon research that demonstrated schooling in Australia was fundamentally gendered (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1984). Gender stereotyping was seen as narrowing and impacting negatively on girls schooling, future lives, career options and life opportunities.

The concept of girls and boys gaining differing outcomes from school was based upon research that demonstrated:

- Girls and boys were choosing different subjects;
- Girls and boys were learning different things;
- Girls and boys were being retained in school at different rates;
- The subjects studied by girls and boys were of different value; and
- The post school options followed by boys and girls were different (cf Commonwealth Schools Commission 1975, 1984).

Further, as a result of these differences at school, young women were leaving school prepared for a society where inequities in their opportunities beyond school were also gendered.

Policy context

In 1973, an Interim Committee for the Commonwealth Schools Commission recommended an investigation into whether influences in schools contributed to girls' lower retention rates at school. As a result, the Commonwealth Schools Commission sponsored an inquiry into the educational requirements of girls and women. It was the first such investigation in Australian schools, and its report *Girls, Schools and*

Society (1975) argued that schools reinforce gender stereotypes by using gender-biased curriculum materials; not using resources showing women in valued social roles; failing to take account of non-stereotypical families; under-valuing interpersonal skills; and not appointing women to principal and executive positions in schools and school systems (McInnis 1995). This research was influential for some educators working in single sex girls' schools as it provided the basis upon which to argue for changes to the existing curriculum.

At the beginning of the 20th Century schools tended to segregate children along both class and gender lines and to provide them with separate curricula (Connell, R., Ashenden, D., Kessler, S. & Dowsett, G. 1982). It can be seen from the following two snapshots that vestiges of gender and class continued to influence the education of girls in the 1980s. It can be seen that the curriculum did indeed reinforce gender stereotypes.

Snapshot one

Since its inception in 1959 Midstone Girls High School (MGHS) had developed a proud tradition of educating Adelaide girls in ways befitting typical women's lifestyles and interests, featuring aspects of homemaking, sewing, cooking and child care. In the 1980s several of these subject areas were still visible in the school curriculum. The library contained showcases with doyleys which had won prizes at the annual Royal Show. The school was well equipped with established crafts area and kitchen fittings so there was opportunity for the girls to develop and practise skills in these areas.

The school was positioned at the intersection of gender and class such that the feeder primary schools were in the habit of advising less able girls to go to MGHS as the curriculum was understood to be less challenging than at the mainstream middle class coeducational high school. As a consequence the school had a higher than normal proportion of students with learning disabilities who came from feeder schools within its neighbourhood. Another large group of students came from the southern suburbs where the local high schools had a reputation for being rough. Parents who wished their daughters to have a more genteel education elected to send them to MGHS – 'it's almost a private school' as one girl said when asked how her parents had come to choose MGHS. These girls often had to travel up to an hour on the bus and were unable to participate in after school activities as their buses left promptly at the end of school hours. The school also had several language classes and maintained classes in Greek and Italian, a feature that appealed to parents from southern Europe many of whom consciously looked for a single sex environment for their daughters.

A new principal had arrived at MGHS in the early 1980s with clear ideas about education for girls, an education oriented to the traditional academic curriculum. Her position was the reverse of the earlier school philosophy in that she wanted the girls to be challenged, to strive for good results, to think about non-traditional careers and to take the maths science subjects in significant numbers. Her work was hampered to a significant degree by some of the older teachers who had been at the school for many years and whose philosophy of teaching had been constructed around the idea that girls were to be educated in womanly arts and crafts and little else. An additional complication related to the fact that the school had become seen as a soft option for teachers who had run into trouble in regular schools but were sent to MGHS as the work of teaching there was considered less arduous than many other schools.

The students were caught in between these conflicting philosophies and student life at MGHS was at times somewhat contradictory. For example in one class the year 9s were being taught about child care and in another they were learning standard science and maths and being urged to study hard in these areas. At times the girls saw themselves as being pushed into non-traditional roles while at other times they

were pointed in typically feminine directions. Not surprisingly students objected to what some saw as the overt message of the school 'This school is trying to turn us into macho women!' they confided. They resisted the new principal in a myriad of ways, not the least of which was denying her the position she had won. They refused to believe that the long serving male deputy had been beaten by the incoming woman principal. "Mr X could have had that job (of running the school) but he let Mrs Y have a turn." The atmosphere in the school at this time was one of deep-seated confusion about gender roles, about student and teacher expectations and about the limits of change.

Outwardly the school was a happy place with a good deal of bustle and activity and fewer overt rules than at some other schools. Girls appeared to delight in having the pool to themselves, many would swim before and after school and at lunchtime as they were encouraged to do. They used all the playground space, even if that meant sitting in circles on the grass rather than playing an organised ball game. Given that they had all come from coeducational schools some of the Year 8s had some difficulties settling in. When talking with a group of girls about how they felt about school the following conversation was recorded:

Anna: Oh we miss the boys!

Int Why? What do you miss?

Lina: Oh they used to get up to such naughty things it was such fun to watch them.

Int But don't some of the girls get up to naughty things here?

All : Oh yes but it's not as much fun as it was watching the boys!

Thus it seemed that the girls in their primary school experience had constituted themselves as watchers rather than actors and resented the situation in the girls' school in which the focus of their gaze was no longer there. It did appear that as they moved into the higher levels at the girls' school they became accustomed to the all girls environment and 'missing the boys' was no longer an issue (Gill, 1992).

Across the other side of Adelaide a similar story was emerging from another government single sex girls' school.

Snapshot two

Like MGHS, Northcross Girls High School was also proud of its' tradition of teaching girls and preparing them as competent mothers and home-makers. The Home Economics Centre was the pride of the school, with all visitors taken there as part of their tour of the school. Also like MGHS, Northcross had a higher than normal proportion of students with learning and physical disabilities.

Students attending the school were mostly drawn from the working class suburbs of northern Adelaide. Most girls left school at the end of Year 10 or Year 11 with only the 'brightest' staying on to complete 12 years of schooling.

Until 1985 all Year 8 girls studied a 40 lesson timetable comprising

- Four lessons of home economics
- Four lessons of needlework
- Four lessons of art
- Four lessons of craft
- Four lessons of music and physical education
- The remaining lessons were spread across English, Maths, Science and Studies of Society.

No languages other than English were taught.

In years 8-11 the subject choices narrowed so that the girls could focus upon specialist subjects. This meant that some students specialised in home making subjects, others in arts and crafts and others in business studies such as typing and shorthand.

In Year 12 the girls could not study any subjects that would provide them with a tertiary entrance score. The school leadership of the time considered it unnecessary for girls' post school pathways and expressed sentiments such as 'the girls would not benefit from such an education'. In essence, what these girls gained from their school education confirmed their class and social status.

In 1983 a new principal came to the school and she was successful in gaining a *Major Transition Education* grant to use action research strategies to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes available to the girls at the school. This initiative was conducted in 1984. The content and structure of the timetable; the nature of the curriculum, assessment and reporting processes; and girls' post school pathways were all examined and changes proposed. All the changes were debated across the school community, with some teachers in the school resisting changes and others promoting them.

Some of the girls took exception to the changes occurring and in particular, to the non-sexist styles of teaching and learning being introduced. One day a group of girls entered a classroom during the lunchbreak and wrote on the blackboard in very large letters, "we don't want to be turned into lesbians!" What now seem simple changes such as redressing sexist language, were issues hotly debated at the school level. One argument against changing sexist language revolved around the fact the school was a girls' school and therefore, so the argument went, language could not be sexist.

One of the most difficult changes occurring as a result of this initiative was from 1985 on, to combine the home economics and needlework classes into one subject and to reduce the total of lessons a week from eight to four. It was a difficult change because the school employed several fulltime specialist needlework teachers. The new timetable arrangements meant that only a fraction of the home economics and needlework teachers would be required.

Although many changes were recommended, the amalgamation of needlework and home economics into one subject area was seen as symbolic of the changes based around gender. The emphasis within the curriculum at this girls' school, to prepare the students to be good homemakers while limiting other pathways, mirrored some of the social practices exercised along class and gender lines occurring outside of school.

It can be seen from both these snapshots, that in the 1980s girls' education in single sex schools was undergoing significant changes. The differences identified between girls and boys experiences of school education were seen not only to be producing systemic outcomes which were resulting in girls having pathways to lower paid work than their male counterparts but where the nature of the use of sexist language rendered 'maleness' as the norm. Educators began being careful not to reinforce gender stereotypes by avoiding the use gender-biased curriculum materials; started using resources showing women in valued social roles; began placing greater value on girls' interpersonal skills; and both single and married women gained appointments to principal and executive positions in schools and school systems. 'Blaming the victim' phrases such as 'those 'girls won't benefit from any more education' started to be questioned.

Mainstreaming equity initiatives

Initiatives such as *Transition Education Grants* and the *Participation and Equity Program* provided funding for schools to redress the systemic disadvantages affecting girls' education. In 1987 the Ministers of Education endorsed *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (MCEETYA 2000). This policy was augmented in 1993 with *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97* (cf MCEETYA 2000). Then, in 1997 Ministers endorsed the national statement *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (MCEETYA 1996). This *Framework* addressed issues in both boys and girls education:

Narrow versions of masculinity and obsolete views of men's and women's roles restrict boys' opportunities in relation to their educational and social development, vocational experiences, and therefore their subsequent life chances (MCEETYA 1996: 6).

Although articulating high hopes for the education of both boys and girls, this *Framework* can be considered as the policy which formalised the 'mainstreaming' of equity initiatives. Between 1987 and 1997 issues concerning boys' education had been gradually included into gender equity initiatives, but the tone of *Gender Equity Framework* reflects the reactions to 'what about the boys' cries, and through this policy, those cries were legitimated. Nonetheless, in 1997, the *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* noted that "despite the fact that girls now stay longer at school than boys, they are not deriving the same post-school benefits from schooling" (MCEETYA 1996: 6). It will be seen shortly, that this situation remains the case. As such, the moves in the 1970s and 1980s for greater equity in school outcomes for girls were being overtaken by 'mainstream' equity initiatives which have worked to disguise fundamental class differences in educational experience and achievement. Since 1997, the backlash to funded 'education of girls' initiatives has seen 'boys education' issues increasingly gain media attention and federal government funding. As 'girls education' seems to have gradually disappeared from sight, 'boys education' has increased in dominance.

What's happening today?

If we are to believe the Howard Government and the media, Australia is suffering from a 'crisis of masculinity' (cf Walker 2004). Questions concerning 'gender equity' have been all but removed from the frame and the emphasis for policy and funding at the national level is fully focused on the 'education of boys'.

In the *Foreward to Meeting the Challenge* (2003) Dr Brendan Nelson (Minister for Education, Science and Training) summaries the sorts of comparative statistics used to justify programmes specifically targeting the education of boys:

Between 1975 and 1995, the literacy achievement of fourteen year-old boys declined. In 2000, 9 percent of boys in Year Three and 15 percent of boys in Year Five failed to achieve minimum reading benchmarks. This compares with just 6 percent of girls in Year Three and 10 percent of girls in Year Five. Year 12 retention rates are 11 per cent higher for girls, driving a 6 per cent higher rate of university entry. In some cases, the Year 12 gap between boys and girls is up to 19 percentage points with girls outstripping boys in almost 90 per cent of courses (DEST 2003a: iii).

A focus within the Howard Government's approach to the 'education of boys' is to address "the growing concern that boys are significantly underperforming in key educational areas, especially literacy" (Nelson 2004: 1). On 10 June 2004 Dr Nelson announced a further \$1.3 million in funding to expand *Boys education lighthouse schools* (Nelson 2004). This funding formed the second stage of the *Boys education lighthouse schools* initiative and brought the (then) total funding for the education of

boys package by the Howard Government to \$8 million (Nelson 2004). An election commitment of a further \$19.4 million to 'boys' education' initiatives now brings the total funding commitment for the next three years, to \$27 million (Liberal Party of Australia 2004).

One approach to 'boys' education' championed by Dr Nelson is that scholarships should be provided for men to become primary teachers.

The Coalition is also concerned about the absence of male role models in our schools. ... The Coalition has recognised the problem and has acted. We have introduced legislation to amend the Sex Discrimination Act¹ to allow education authorities to offer male only teacher scholarships. In addition, once the legislation passes Parliament we will invest \$1 million to provide 500 scholarships to men training to become primary school teachers in 2004-05 (Liberal Party of Australia 2004: 8).

Yet, as Professor Sally Walker (Vice Chancellor Deakin University) has mused: do we see government scholarships offered for women to become pilots, engineers or astronauts? (Walker 2004). The answer is 'no', but why is this so? To shed some light on this question we revisit the assumptions that underpin the 'education of girls' initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s, and the assumptions underpinning the 'education of boys' in the 21st century. It will be seen that the themes that emerge from this revisitation of the assumptions underpinning the respective gender equity initiatives include that hegemonic male dominance continues, where hegemony (Gramsci 1971) is understood to refer to dominance of one group of people over others, achieved through their consent, and maintained through the commonsense or normal reality of those subordinated in the hegemonic relationships. Furthermore class differences in schooling continue to be disguised; and girls' educational potential remains an ideological battleground.

Revisiting assumptions

The assumptions underpinning reforms in the 'education of girls' and the 'education of boys' differ. Transforming the educational privileges held by dominant groups to make education a right for all has underpinned arguments promoting democratic schooling. The 'education of girls' reforms were based upon emancipatory assumptions about sustaining a democratic society by broadening the otherwise gender-based options available to girls at schools. It was assumed by de facto that by equalising the opportunities available, Australian society would be a more cohesive and democratic place. That is, the assumptions that underpinned 'girls' education were seen as collective ways to balance power and to improve society.

'Education of boys' reforms are based upon individualistic, competitive assumptions where selected statistics are used to make comparisons about the progress of boys compared to that of girls. A 'deficit' assumption sits behind these approaches to boys' education, characterising all boys as the same and that boys are doing badly, particularly in relation to literacy. The assumption underpinning such an approach portrays students as 'opposites' pitted against each other, where the assumption is made that boys and girls compete as equals for the educational and social capital² available. As such, the 'education of boys' is conceptualised outside of the broader objective of the democratic reform of schooling. Simple oppositional approaches however, are unhelpful to addressing issues of gender and education and ignore questions of class.

¹ Details of this Bill can be found at <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/BD/2003-04/04bd110.pdf>

² Intended in the sense developed by Bourdieu (1975)

Hegemonic male dominance

Girls' schools in the 1980s embraced the idea that they offered an environment most conducive to girls' learning. In many cases they were likely to insist that girls learning could only proceed effectively in an all girls environment. Certainly this philosophy underpinned a good deal of the practice at both the schools described above. By having girls as student leaders, by offering a wide range of physical activity, by having all the school grounds open and available to all the students these schools provided their girls with an education much less overtly gendered than typical experience in coeducational schools at the time. However there were problems too.

The schools were hampered in their liberatory intent by the tradition of girls' schooling which was seen as less academic and more oriented to domestic skills. Teaching staff were not all committed to the new ideas about girls' education and at both sites some teachers openly yearned for the good old days when there was less pressure to perform emancipatory teaching and learning. Even the timetabling had been struck in an earlier mode. At one school, in response to a query about the number of maths lessons in the junior high years the reply came: 'Well these girls are not very keen on maths and so we don't make them suffer more than they have to' which meant that the girls had one lesson less per week than did the neighbouring coeducational school. Not surprisingly, by the end of year 9 the girls were way behind their peers at the coeducational school. The dominance of 'boys' subjects' had been denied, but at some cost to the girls who might have wanted to pursue these areas.

The difficult task for these schools was one of working out what would be the best way to produce an educational experience through which all the girls could fulfil their potentials. At times the idea of constructing an education as close as possible to that of boys' schools seemed the ideal, but at other times celebrating the girls' own interests and orientations which were often in predictably feminine guise appeared most desirable. For instance one school had a cadet corps led by a very keen and committed male teacher. A troop of girls joined the corps and trained regularly and proudly but as many of the teachers remarked: 'Is this what we want for our girls?'

The fact of being all girls always runs the risk of celebrating the absent males in ways that glorify them in their absence rather more than is possible were they present. Certainly at MGHS there was much talk about boyfriends, and the few male teachers were much in demand by the girls, especially if they were young and attractive. Meanwhile the official message that girls can do anything worked to render the girls highly aware of the gendered composition of their class and their school. Thus the girls' schooling practice constituted gender in the absence of male students just as surely, albeit in different ways, as did the practices of the coeducational school. In the absence of boys girls were inclined to generalise about males "boys always get the attention ...", "boys are always mucking around .". These girls understood the rationale for girls only schooling in ways that added to the picture of a student world divided into two distinct gender groups, an understanding in which they positioned themselves in need of the protection of an all female environment so they could proceed with their learning. While the practice of girls schooling officially worked to counter masculine dominance there was a sense in which it also worked to construct it – at least in the minds of the girls.

Gender and class

Any account of gender in Australian education has to take account of class as the two dimensions interact and coexist within the system. The interaction of gender and class varies with other aspects of the particular time. As we have seen in the foregoing scenarios, the educational situation for girls and women in much of the 20th century was such that they were marginalised from intellectual work and precluded from academic achievement. While this situation was true for girls as a group, it was less restrictive for the minority of middle class girls whose parents supported girls'

education and for the even smaller minority of girls whose academic brilliance had been recognised by their primary school teachers and who were supported by family and school to complete their education. By 1973 in *Schools in Australia*, the national report on schooling, Karmel had noted that being a girl was an educational disadvantage unless it was accompanied by high social status, thereby indicating the nexus between gender and class as constitutive of certain educational outcomes. From the mid 1970s two themes operated in girls' education. First the established middle class girls' schools began to offer an increasingly academic curriculum much more like the curricula of the boys' schools (Connell et al 1982). Secondly the girls in education movements working through all the government schools lobbied successfully for more attention to girl students and more recognition of their achievements at all levels. While girls' schooling outcomes continue to show class differences in terms of retention and broad achievement levels, the opening up of the University system and especially the inclusion of the faculties of nursing and teaching at University level have meant that the once striking gender differences in tertiary entrance have broadly diminished. More girls now proceed to University, although the majority flow through to the female dominated awards of nursing and teaching.

Compared with much of the last century, tertiary entry is also less class determined. A significantly higher proportion of the age cohort complete school and go on to University. At the other end of the achievement spectrum the class distinction continues however. Young men and women from working class or the new non-working underclass are less likely to finish school, much less enter further education. This situation is of course a genuine concern for Australian education – and part of this feature, the non-performance of working class boys, constitutes the basis of the furore around boys' education. Although the girls are more likely to finish school than the boys in this group, there are aspects of post school trajectories that suggest girls continue to be disadvantaged. For instance the boys who leave school early are still more able to find full time work than the girls who stay on and complete school (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000). Moreover by age 24, males are more likely to be in some form of education and/or training than are females (Collins et al, 2000). In terms of the school to work progression the girls are not being well served by staying on at school. And yet the plight of these girls is not recognised in the current press for improvement for boys' education, the worst extremes of which see the schools as 'failing boys'.

In this story educational achievement relates much more clearly to class than gender – however the publicity around the issue has concentrated on the gender aspects. It is rather like a re-run of the old story about the boys always getting more attention. Other forces are at work here too. It seems to be too difficult to name class as a clear discriminant in educational outcomes even though the evidence is in that this is the case (Teese et al 2003). A similar picture arises when looking at the outcomes for Indigenous students in education which has only very recently been raised as an issue for public concern. The publicity devoted to the issue of boys' education serves to mask the continuing class differences in educational outcomes. In a society which is fond of talking up the 'fair go' it is easier to talk about 'gender wars' than the more incorrigible questions of race and class whose impact on educational outcomes is demonstrably more stark. In fact the 'gender wars' publicity can be seen to mask the class effect by calling up one aspect of popular culture through which the structures of class and race are rendered invisible.

Girls' educational potential

Through the media and Australian Government policy, girls' educational potential has been constructed as an ideological battleground. As outlined earlier, in the 1980s, boys were more likely to complete school and had higher levels of participation in higher education. These outcomes contributed to gender-based inequalities in the

labour market, and to differences such as income and occupational status (Marks, McMillan & Ainley 2002). Since the 1980s achievements in relation to girls' education however, have included:

- Increases in the rates of girls' participation and retention in schooling, where now more girls than boys stay on at school; and
- On performance measurements such as Year 12 final scores the 'average girl' is performing better than the 'average boy' (cf Cresswell, J. Rowe, K., Withers, G. 2002; McKenzie 2001).

Yet even with the changes to girls' education that have enabled girls' participation and retention rates to increase; girls' choices of subjects to widen; and on selected performance indicators show that girls are achieving well at school, in the 21st century, post school, women are earning about 84% of men's fulltime salaries (Pocock 2003) and in relation to men, women are earning less than they did a decade ago (Summers 2004). Women and girls continue to carry a greater share of unpaid work, while boys and men continue to have less involvement in caring and family roles (Pocock 2003). It seems that while girls are participating in school and generally achieving well on selected performance measures, the power and economic imbalances which have existed between women and men, and the different relationships of power and privilege in our society, remain in tact.

Sitting behind some of the public comments made about gender equity issues is that male failure in education is presented as a corollary of female success. For example, in the *Foreward to Meeting the Challenge* (2003) Dr Nelson states that

Methods adopted to achieve long overdue progress in relation to the educational needs of girls under the national policy document Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian schools, written in 1996, may have come at the expense of boys (DEST 2003a, iii).

By pitting generalised groups of girls against generalised groups of boys however, continues male hegemonic struggles to maintain dominance through 'boys education' policies by constructing girls' educational potential and their outcomes from school, as fodder for an ideological battle.

As foreshadowed earlier however, and what is often not taken into account when comparing girls' and boys' outcomes from school, is that girls who do not complete high school are less likely than boys to find full-time employment. Collins et al (2000) commented upon this phenomenon and in 2004, and according to Peter Gardiner, Chief Operating Officer of Anglicare Sydney, little has changed.

The recent focus on the needs of boys in education has overlooked the fact that girls who do not complete Year 12 face worse prospects than boys who do not finish school (Anglicare 2004a: 1).

The Anglicare report *Non-completion of Year 12 schooling: incidence, reasons, impacts and programs* draws on research from the late 1990's showing that while 80 per cent of boys who did not complete school had found full-time jobs two years later, only 58 per cent of girls who left school in Year 9 were in full-time employment within a comparable timeframe (Anglicare 2004b). Findings such as these beg the question: 'boys are falling behind ... in comparison to what?' Furthermore, to reiterate an earlier point, such findings confirm the necessity that claims about gender differences in educational outcomes must be calibrated in terms of which boys? and which girls? so that a more accurate picture to be produced.

So... how far have we come?

Education of girls' initiatives in the 1980s were put in place to address questions identified in the 1970s, such as why did girls' have lower school retention rates, make narrower choices of subjects, and receive fewer Commonwealth Scholarships than

their male counterparts? And why is that teachers in girls' schools and that of women in general, were educationally less well-qualified than men (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1984)?

Over the past decade the emphasis in national gender equity policies for Australian schools has shifted away from focusing upon the education of girls to focusing upon boys' education. While the Liberal-National Coalition government has committed substantial funds towards initiatives such as *Success for Boys* (Liberal Party of Australia 2004), there has been no specifically funded intervention strategies identified for the education of girls. The Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) website can be considered one of the 'public faces' of the Australian Government, and in November 2004, from the 'Schools' icon on the DEST website, while there is a selection choice for 'Boys education' there is no corresponding selection option for 'Girls education': girls education has become invisible.

Acceptance or silence to current policies however, only makes us complicit in those positions. On a brighter note, we are seeing some signs of response to the policy silence concerning the education of girls. The initiative Security4Women (which is funded by the Commonwealth Office for the Status of Women) recently made several recommendations concerning girls and women's education which included the recommendation that

a critical appraisal of the needs of girls in schools which looks beyond the "gender divide" and assesses the needs both of all girls, and most particularly, of those groups of girls most at risk of not completing school, or of not completing school with access to secure and financially rewarding pathways (Security4Women 2004: 2) should be undertaken.

Such recommendations have a sense of *deja vu* for some of us, but are absolutely necessary to counter hegemonic policy directions and to reclaim territory for the education of girls.

Recognising the limitations of reproduction theory then, this paper has taken the position that ideological views of society are translated into its institutions, where the processes of reproduction tend to be symbiotic, and the complexities of the relationships between social class, families and education systems make contributions to the reproduction of inequalities in society. Our contention has been that as a result of these current policy directions, the role of schools in the production of inequalities will be accentuated. Revisiting our understandings about how inequality, and in particular gender inequality is produced and reproduced through schools therefore, again becomes important so that it is possible to monitor examine and challenge the implications of the current Government's school education policies, and the outcomes all students gain from their education, not only that of boys.

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