

Inside School Explanations of Differences in Gender Attainment

Inside School Explanations of Differences in Gender Attainment/4/2/2000/P.Covington/

Introduction: The Impact of Feminism

As with outside school approaches to gender differences in attainment and subject choice, the impact of **Feminist theory** and research has been influential in shaping various explanations offered. Feminists claim that a powerful **hidden curriculum** operates **inside schools** and reinforces the gender-stereotyped socialisation they experience in the family and wider society.

Kessler (1985) describes the way in which the whole life of school is permeated with messages about that is correct and masculine or feminine behaviour in the school's 'gender regime'. **Arnot** suggests that schools use the '**gender code**' to endorse or attack particular forms of **masculinity or femininity**, in other words, schools are involved in a legitimisation process concerning appropriate gender behaviour and outcomes.



The Fragmented Nature of Feminism

However, it is important to note that Feminism has become somewhat fragmented as a whole, therefore the solutions to gender inequality vary according to different types of Feminist you ask.

Different Types of Feminism

Liberal Feminists according to **Yates** seek to change girls feelings and attitudes towards schooling by recommending 'girl friendly' schooling. **Yates** is critical of policies such as encouraging girls to take up Chemistry because this is putting forward a model of girls as '**deficit boys**'. The implication of this policy is that, by making girls' experiences in education as much like that of boys as possible, equality will be achieved.



Radical Feminists on the other hand tend to advocate more **fundamental changes to the educational system** to ensure equality, such as girl only schools or positive discrimination policies.

What is perhaps more significant about the *hidden curriculum* is the way that it ensures that **science and technology** have **masculine images**. This is of consequence because the masculine packaging of science and technology greatly deters female participation and interest.

Exercise One

Look at the statistics what trends do you notice. Make out a table with these and put these of sugar paper.

Sexism Subject by Subject

Let us now consider the different ways the *hidden curriculum* affects educational attainment and *subject identity*.

The aspects to be covered include ...

- 1) School Books
- 2) Students
- 3) Teacher Expectations and attitudes
- 4) Lack of Positive Role Models

1. School Books

From Fairy Books to School Books

A traditional Feminist view of schoolbooks is that they **reinforce** a view of females as **passive and dependent** upon men. Particular focus has been placed upon fairy tales and messages about gender roles that they contain in their **imagery and language**. Some sociologists have emphasised the way that **fairly tales** reflect the dominant and **sexist views of society** in which they have been developed. (**Bottigheimer**, 1987), Such views have not gone unchallenged, with sociologists such as **Bettelheim** (1991) arguing that children identify with characters regardless of the gender involved. Thus neither the gender of the reader nor the character is important in the decoding of a fairy tale. However, Feminist Fairy tales, which seek to represent females in different ways, have not been displaced by the traditional stories, which continue to sell in there thousands.



School Textbooks

Science

In terms of textbooks, **Kelly** (1987) argues that there is a **masculine bias in science texts**, in which women are either **passive or invisible**. Thus examples used in these texts tend to utilise **males images** and **ignore famous female scientists**. Similarly,

Computing

Culley (1986) argues that **computing textbooks** tend to show men in decision making positions and females carrying out deskilled tasks such as inputting data.



In the 1980's many feminists sociologists **reviewed the way that fairy tales and other teaching material has studied and rejected a simple 'reading'** of them that **cast** the female reader as **passive recipient** of the sexist images of the text. Rather, research in the 1980's sought to determine readers' **reactions** to such literature and expose the many **different functions** that such text could have for different readers. **Taylor**, (1989). The conclusion of this reassessment is that specific effect for fairy tales cannot be taken for, but rather that 'romantic fiction' has many functions for the female readers, not just a gender socialisation response.

Exercise Two

Look at the following **science and technology** books in pairs.

- 1) Identify the number of times females and males are used in the pictures.
- 2) Identify the roles taken by each sex in them.
- 3) The gender of famous scientists mentioned.
- 4) The degree to which examples are gender specific.
- 5) Contrast newer books with older ones.

2. Students in the Classroom

Science and Technology: The Uncomfortable space for Women

Many Feminists writers, for example, **Kelly**, have focused upon the ways in which boys **take control of science and technology lessons**, for example by **monopolising equipment** for experiments and creating a **male dominated space**. This has affected female students' abilities to **participate fully** in science lessons. **Culley**



noticed the same process in **computing lessons**, where male domination of the computers created an **uncomfortable social space** for those female students who wished to participate. Attempts to empower females in science and computing lessons have not always been received with good gone by those in the classroom. (Especially males) ...

General Attitudes: Often Entrenched in The Students Themselves

Hostility towards **equal opportunity programmes** has often come from the **students themselves**, both boys and girls. While girls **may not care less about such initiatives**, they often see that some benefits might result from them. Boys on the other hand, have only things to lose and therefore **tend to be much more against any attempt to redress the gender disadvantage**. However, the attitude of boys in everyday classroom life has also been a focus of feminist research.

Everyday Classroom Life

In her excellent book *Invisible Women* Spender attacks the educational system. She claims that men who use this power to **male knowledge as more important than female knowledge** and experience **largely control education**. For instance, in Science, **female contributions** are often **passed over in favour of men**. In **economics**, for example, the contribution of **women's often-unpaid work** is usually ignored and not included in figures of National Income. Indeed, Spender sees the whole system and curriculum as being riddled with sexism, which is bound to undermine girls', **self - confidence and hinder their progress**.

Female Students Receive Less Attention than Male Colleagues in Class

Quoting from a number of studies **Dale Spender** goes on to argue that girls get **less attention** than **men** in the **classroom** and argues that this is a reflection of the domination that they have in society as a whole. Those without power are always the most vulnerable and tend to play a submissive role. Girls learn these attitudes in the classroom (it is part of the hidden curriculum) They discover that by **avoiding a dominating role** and that of an intellectual, they become **less of a threat to their male peers**. She notes that how in one-study girls thought it **natural** that **male students should ask questions and make the protests**. The females should 'just get on with it' even though the work was considered tedious or pointless.

Even Feminist Teachers Give Less Time To Girls

Quoting from a number of studies Spender goes on to argue that girls get much less attention in a classroom. Even when **she went into the classroom** (obviously she is a committed Feminist) and tried to give **equal time** to females, and males in the classroom, she still found that **38% of the time** was spent with the girls. Spender argues that they have to wait **longer** for what attention they do receive in the classroom, and that females are usually treated **dismissively** by the males present. Boys often **insult girls, yet teachers fail to tell them off for doing this**.

Spender believes that males play an important part in 'damaging girls education'. Boys do not like girls and

Find them inferior, unworthy, and even despicable.

Girls Reaction to This

Girls react to this by keeping a **low profile**. However, Spender does not just blame the educational system, she sees the domination of males in society as the basic cause of the problem, but **schools help to reinforce this dominance and continuance**. Spender concludes that...

Mixed sex education is a preparation for 'real life'... for in real life it is men who dominate and control, but this is not equality of educational opportunity, - it is indoctrination and practice in the art of domination and subordination.

Evaluating- This Work

This area is a **minefield** of gender relations, with opposing sides either claiming its widespread existence (**Jones and Mahoney**) or denying its extent or importance. **Halson**, (1989)

Girls and Boys and Ethnicity-

The activities of boys in class as mentioned above, are important aspects of the **identity construction of males**. Conceptions of masculinity in school are forged in relationship with females (and for white children, in relation to black and Asian children' **Weiss** (1992) shows that white working class males in USA define themselves in terms of **not wanting to be like blacks for females**. Their construction of their own sexuality and ideas about what is acceptable behaviour are therefore forged in opposition to other groups, at least in part. Schools are therefore not neutral in the process of identity construction, but they do operate in contradictory ways. While schools tend to **encourage a dominant male ethos**, they conversely **allow females to explore their own identities**, in an environment that encourages questioning as well as conformity. Schools can thus allow the possibility of an extension or **alteration of gender identity** as well as a reinforcement of gender construction within the family.

3. Teacher Expectations and Attitudes. Much Hostility

Individual Choice

There has been a great deal of sociological interest in **teachers' attitudes** towards **equal opportunities for women**, with teachers often being seen as one of the main stumbling blocks to the achievement of equality for girls in school. As **Weiner** (1985) points out, school based attempts to combat inequality have been met with **hostility from teachers themselves**. The conclusion of such studies tend to accept that there are a number of **teacher ideologies** and operating principles which regulate the issue of **gender equality to a relatively low priority** in schools. For example, teachers are often in favour of individual choice of subjects as a matter of principle. They do not consider the outcomes of those choices in terms of gender equality, but accept a gender-differentiated curriculum **as the natural result of individual choice**.

The Problem with 'Choice': Not the Schools Fault but the Family's

According to **Riddell**, this ignores the **social (peer pressure)** and **ideological**, (ideas about proper work for women) **constraints** within which individual students have to make choices. Moreover, there has also been a belief among teachers that sex-stereotyped attitudes are the product of **family socialisation** and that there is little, if anything-, those teachers can do to **alter or counteract such socialisation**. Indeed many teachers remain opposed to the concept of even trying, seeing equal opportunities as ultimately political and therefore unacceptable in schools. This corresponds closely to the New Right attacks of the 'political correctness' of such policies, which they see as undermining the natural order of things.

Individual Resistance

However, resistance to gender inequality also operates to the individual level. **Hicks**, has found that many female teachers are in two minds about their dual role as worker and housewife, and as a consequence they often see male teachers as better educators than females, because men are able to concentrate on their careers more than women. As for male teachers, **Spear**, (1985) has found that many science teachers are hostile to equal opps and express traditional attitudes supporting a subordinate role for women, both at work and at home

Empirical Research

Boys receive more criticism but More praise.

Empirical research into gender relations in the classroom has shown a remarkable degree of **consensus** about the different classroom experiences of boys and girls. The conclusion seems to be that **boys behave in a more assertive way**, are given **more teacher time** and are generally more prominent in classroom interaction than girls. This is so irrespective of whether the researcher is looking at teacher pupil interaction or pupil-pupil interaction. For example, **Sadker (1991)** has found that **boys receive more criticism** of teachers than girls, **but also more praise**.

Opposing Views

While other sociologists have reported that boys and girls receive equal amounts of praise, **Stake and Katz** (1982), some such as **Whyte** (1984) on the GIST project, have found that in some subjects girls receive more attention than boys.

Resistance by Girls

However, **Ohrn** (1993) argues that these studies **underestimate the resistance many girls exhibit** in the classroom to their relative invisibility. The resistance, she argues, often takes the form of over-accommodation to the rules. By making very **public displays of conformity** to the rules of the class, girls may achieve a situation where **minor infringements are ignored or not seen by the teacher**. But when it comes to examining the allocation of jobs in the classroom to boys and girls, sociologists are more in agreement that these are distributed in sex stereotyped ways. For example, **Platt and Whyld** have found that boys are asked to move furniture by teachers, while girls are asked to make tea and wash up afterwards.

The Patriarchal Curriculum

The Problem with Progressive Teaching, 'choice'

While the ideas associated with progressive education would seem to favour gender equality, some sociologists have argued that the **liberal approach in schools** of the 1960's and 1970's ironically had the opposite affect to that intended. For example, **Clarricoates** argues that the result of child or progressive styles of teaching, where children are given freedom of choice, and speech, has been to **promote gender differences**, as young children re-enact gender power struggles from outside school.

The National Curriculum. A Step in the Right Direction

There has also been a debate amongst sociologists about the impact of the national curriculum on gender differentiation in schools. **Riddell** explores the issue of subject choice in terms of way that allowing **free choices tend to reinforce gender stereotypes**. Thus the impact of parental and teachers expectations about the future roles of children tends to steer girls away from high status subjects such as science tow" those who value is lower in the labour market. Therefore for some Feminists, such as **Bryne** the introduction of the **National Curriculum**, in which girls are constrained to study science to the same level as boys, at least until they are 16, is a **step in the right direction**. Kelly agrees with this.

The need to Grab girls Attention and End Male Aggression in the Class room

In looking at girls in science, equal opportunities, such as WISE (women in science and engineering) have focused on the number of women participating in these curriculum areas and ignored the content of the curriculum. **Bentley and Watts** suggest that three different approaches to science curriculum should be recognised. Firstly that there **is girl friendly science**, which seeks to make the **science curriculum start with issues that grab girls attention**. Secondly that there is feminine science, which seeks to replace masculine aggressive and competitive behaviour in the class with a collaborative approach. Third there is Feminist science, which challenges the ways in which science is carried out

Positions of Power in School

Women and Exioloitation in the Workplace: Elliot and Powell

Feminist criticism of the **national curriculum** has focused on the **simplistic solution** to gender inequity it seems to offer. Rather these critics argue that the case for more girls doing science, which the national curriculum demands from schools needs to be placed within the context of **larger developments in society**. For example, **Elliot and Powell** suggest that **de-skilling of jobs** is occurring in all sectors of the community, including occupations associated with science and technology. As it is women, who tend to fill the most lowly **and least skilled jobs in all sectors**, encouraging girls to take science and technology may result in yet another of the labour market in which they could be exploited as women. Indeed **Elliot and Powell** argue that encouraging women to move away from the aesthetic and creative worlds in which they have so often excelled and towards the world of science, **reinforces both the deficit model of women's achievements** and the masculine view that these worlds are somehow less important than the world of science.



Differences between the Classes: Deem

While the most **blatant cases of gender segregation** in the school curriculum **have been tackled**, often with some success and often involving across the board improvements of girls' achievements, there are still many areas in which underachievement has not been redressed. **Deem** points out that it is mainly white **middle class girls** who have **benefited from the changes so far**, but this leaves many working class boys and girls and blacks and Asian girls, at a disadvantage. **Scranton** argues that the most gender-segregated subject of all PE has not seriously examined the concerns of those concerned with equality. The debate has yet to be resolved between those who advocate girl only teams and those who support mixed teams.

Power in the School : More Reinforcement

As the table below shows it continues to be the case that women are **severely under-represented in the senior management of schools and colleges**, particularly so in **primary schools**, where the overwhelming majority of teachers are female. It is also the case that **black women teachers** are few and far between. This lack of women in positions of power within school is argued to be detrimental to female schoolchildren, who **conic** to see male domination of organisations as the natural order of things. For **example** the often-quoted figure is that ...

70% of all teachers in Primary schools are women, but 70% of the head teachers are male.

Exercise Three

Match the work with the author.

1. Dale Spender
2. Riddell
3. Alison Kelly
4. Arnot
5. Culley
6. Elliot and Powell
7. Weiss
8. Deem
9. Bentley and Watts
10. Weiner
11. Clanicoates
12. Sadker

1. Gender code is used to endorse or attack particular forms of masculinity or femininity.
2. This researcher unfortunately found that teachers saw sexism in the classroom as being a relatively low profile subject.
3. Unfortunately the progressive ideas of 'choice' in the 1970's and 1980's may have led to increased gender segregation.
4. This study showed that boys receive more criticism than males but also receive greater praise.
5. Science needs not only to have more &ls doing 'male subjects' but also to recognise that science needs to be girl friendly grabbing the attention of females, whilst also fostering co-operation, and assessing methods of research from a female perspective.
6. We must ensure that the advent of more GCSE female scientists does not lead to the development of yet another labour market where women are exploited by low wages, and poor working conditions.
7. This theorist noted that although schools did lead to gender identities being reinforced, they also allowed females to develop their own identities, in an environment, which encouraged questioning as well as conformity. Schools can thus allow the possibility of an extension or change of gender identity as well as reinforcement. Thus studies need to be not just seen at face value.
8. Computing books tend to show men in decision-making positions, and females carrying out deskilled tasks.
9. Even Feminist writers when tinting their lessons have found that less than 38% was spent asking girls questions.
10. Whilst more modern research shows females doing better at both A level and GCSE, white middle class students seem to have most benefited from the changes so far.
10. This writer believes that teachers see sexism as the result of socialisation and that there is little that teachers can do to counteract this.
11. Boys appear to 'take control' of science lessons by monopolising equipment and creating a male dominated space.

Exercise Four

Look at the staffing in your school / college. In which faculties are women the Heads. Make comments about the general trends in gender and staffing at your school / college

Exercise Five

Below are a number of partly completed statements related to strengths and weaknesses of inside school explanations. Your task is to complete the statements by selecting the appropriate finishing sentences from those offered to you ...

Strengths

1. They offer a counterbalance to earlier structural explanations.
2. They reveal the ways in which educational ...
3. They explanations have had a major impact on social policy....
4. They have opened...
5. They also emphasise some...



Weaknesses

1. They offer an over-socialised view of people....
2. They emphasise some social forces....
3. They are often based on small-scale qualitative research....
4. Despite the claim that they are interactionist in approach...
5. There is a tendency in some of these approaches to end up...

Matching- Strengths Sentences....

1. Success may be socially constructed.
2. Wider social world and the way these influence what goes on in the classroom.
3. It is reasonable to consider factors within schools as well as outside.
4. Up the 'black box' of schools.
5. For example on the way teachers are trained, equal opportunity initiatives in school and so on.

Matching Weaknesses Sentences ...

1. Blaming the teacher for all that is ill in education.
2. Many of these studies offer simplistic and deterministic views of the classroom.
3. But do not consider other important structural causes that may influence the school
4. Which is low in reliability.
5. Not all females are put off science in the way suggested.

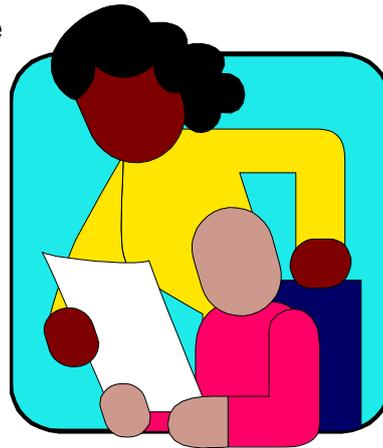
Inside College Explanations

Michelle Stanworth. Gender Differences in Further Education

Looked at a Further Education College by interviewing teachers and pupils from seven different classes in the **humanities department**. She found that teachers' attitudes impeded the success of young women in the college. Unfortunately these attitudes were not just confined to Male teachers.

She concluded that...

- ✗ Teachers found it more **difficult** to remember the **names** of **girls** in their classes, quiet boys were remembered but not quiet girls.
- ✗ Teachers held **stereotypical** views about what the girls would be **doing in the future**. Only one girl
- ✗ Was seen fit to enter a **professional** occupation, interestingly she was the most assertive but not the most intellectual. The most intellectual was seen most likely to become a 'personal assistant for somebody important'. Even for this &1 marriage was seen as one of the most significant aspects of her future, as was the case for two ~ of the rest of the girls.
- ✗ The **pupils** themselves were aware that **boys** receive a **lot more attention** in class, even in classes where girls outnumbered boys. In their opinion boys were 4X more likely to join in **classroom interaction**, X2 more likely to **ask for help**, X2 to **ask questions**.
- ✗ Girls underestimated their abilities whilst boys overestimated theirs.



From this **Stanworth** concluded that **classroom interaction favoured** boys. Although teachers played a large role in this the **pupils** contributed to their own **downfall** by

Playing an active part in the re-generation of sexual hierarchy, in which boys are the indisputably dominant partners

Exercise Six

Carry out a **participant observation study** of each class you attend. To do this you will need the co-operation of a sympathetic teacher. Note down

- Subject
- Number of Males and Females
- Count the number of times females males are addressed by the teacher
- Which sex talks most in discussion?
- Which sex is more disruptive?

Note: Teachers can be sensitive if they are aware their performance is being assessed. If teachers agree to observation, they may alter their normal behaviour knowing they are being observed. If you decide to proceed, unknown to the teacher, think carefully about the ethics of covert observation.

How could be criticise this methodology9

Exercise Seven

Role-play what it would be like if role identities were reversed in any one particular subject.

Resources Used in this Handout

Investigating Education: Paul Trowler
Education and Training. Tim Heaton and Tony Lawson
The Sociology of Education: Karen Chapman
An Introduction to Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, 0 Edition.
Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al
Sociology an Interactive Approach: Nik Jorgensen
Sociology, Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos, 4th Edition.
Sociology in Focus: Taylor et al