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Gender Equity and the Boys Debate: what sort of challenge is it?

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ABSTRACT:

Recently public and policy discussions about gender equity have become strongly concerned with boys. This article discusses some aspects of the form, the context and the implications of these developments in Australia (and notes some points of similarity and difference with developments in the UK). It focuses on three main areas: the ways examination and other 'indicators' have been used in public policy constructions of gender inequality; secondly the issue of what types of reforms constitute gender equity as a project; and thirdly, the issue of research agendas and the entry of masculinity to gender research.

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Gender Equity and the Boys Debate: what sort of challenge is it?

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At a conference on *Gender and Education - Into the 21st Century* held in mid-1995 in Sweden, speakers from around the world commented on the rise and new dominance of the 'what about the boys?' issue in public and policy discussions on gender and education. In Australia, policies on gender equity are being hastily re-written to give more prominence to the needs of boys; conferences devoted to the issue are being mounted; books and academic articles are appearing; and vivid headlines and supplements in the press track the new concerns. This article is concerned with some aspects of the form, the context and the implications of these developments.

Two phenomena are most widely discussed in relation to the emergence of the boys issue: evidence of changes in achievement patterns for girls and boys, and discussions of social 'backlash' against feminism and feminist reforms. The present article offers neither a detailed investigation of the former (such as Arnot, David and Weiner, 1996; Powney, 1996; Kemal, Leonard, Pringle and Sadeque, 1996; Teese, Davies, Charlton & Poslesel, 1995; Foster, 1994; Yates and Leder, 1996) nor does it attempt to contribute to the debate about the latter (cf. Faludi, 1991; David, Arnot & Weiner, 1996; Weiner, Arnot & David, 1997). Rather, by focussing on some specific aspects of the shifts in Australian policy, reform projects and research, it intends to suggest ways in which the focus on boys instead of, or as well as, girls raises a number of issues about gender reform as a project for policy and research. (In passing, too, the article offers some support to the recent discussion by Moore (1996) which is critical of the construction of gender as a simple 'disadvantage' project. But my article will suggest that his argument itself has an over-simple and over-unitary conception of what

disadvantage looks like, what gender reform projects have been concerned with, and what constitutes change.)

In Australia, the most common story about gender equity in schools (according to the media and government bodies) would go something like this (see also Yates, 1995). *About twenty years ago, governments became aware that girls were being disadvantaged in schooling. They developed policies and funding to improve girls' career aspirations, to make curriculum and pedagogy more 'girl-friendly', and to ensure equal spending on girls and boys. At the same time a huge amount of research and writing (academic and professional) was carried out on girls, their development and their needs. Over this period we have seen a large increase in the proportion of girls completing school as compared with boys, and their increasing success in 'non-traditional' subjects such as mathematics. Now it is time for more attention to the boys. Boys' retention rates, learning difficulties, delinquency, suicide rates and general self-esteem are all cause for concern. We don't want to take away from the girls' programs, and more needs to be done in relation to issues such as sexual harassment in schools, but there is a real dearth of good research and professional support for boys, and this is what should now occupy our urgent attention.*

This widely-repeated story gives rise to a number of interesting questions, both conceptual and 'factual'. What **are** the 'facts of the case' regarding sex-based inequalities and schooling - and to what extent have these changed in the past two decades of reform activity? And just what sort of project is gender-focussed reform in schools? In school reform agendas, what leads to certain claims (the needs of girls, say) being prominent or being no longer prominent?

In what follows, I want to look at some aspects of why as well as how boys and masculinity have become the interesting topic for policy-makers, media, and, indeed, for researchers such as myself. I will begin by revisiting the matter of inequalities, and will show that some elements of the story I have just outlined are quite misleading. However, I will argue, the

particular form in which the concern about the boys is now being heard does point to some interesting issues about school reform and gender issues. These relate to the treatment of inequalities within the shaping of public policy; to curriculum and pedagogy matters of just how 'gender' is to be 'reconstructed'; and to research methodologies, and what frames our interests and interpretations as researchers.

What follows, then, is not an attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the developments in relation to boys. It is an attempt to illuminate some aspects of these developments. And it is specifically grounded in an Australian context, where gender equity has been a very prominent reform program and where current discussions about boys are more strongly concerned with 'equal opportunity' and men's movement concerns than with fears about gendered and racial patterns of poverty and violence in society, which seem to have been more prominent in public discussions about boys in the USA and in the UK. The present discussion is not intended to suggest that the issues I raise are the only matters of relevance in current debates and in the changing agendas, but, to discuss one specific set of developments and to add some areas of discussion to the interpretation of the new developments.

Policy and politics: debates about inequality and equal opportunity

Just how much was the policy attention to girls a response to facts about inequality and disadvantage, facts that have now changed and justify a new attention to boys on the same grounds? The answer is complex.

In the mid-1970s, in one of the government inquiries in Australia which investigated and justified the need to give more attention and support to girls in school, one member insisted on producing a Minority Report in which she argued that to see girls rather than boys as the disadvantaged group was a distortion of reality:

Those who have experienced racism know how false are the analogies drawn between sexism and racism, and the equation of female 'liberation' with models of liberation from colonial rule. When assessing the status of any disadvantaged or under privileged group, e.g. the blacks in the U.S. or Aboriginals in Australia, a number of criteria are used: infant mortality, life expectancy, incidence of disease, alcoholism, violence, involvement with drugs, crime, imprisonment, level of literacy, retention rates at school, success rates in examinations, employment and income levels. Applying these criteria to males and females in Victoria, on **every** count except the last, it is males who emerge as the disadvantaged group.

(Victorian Committee on Equal Opportunity in Schools, 1977b, piii)

Now we might complain about the way the list of 'indicators' here is loaded (literacy but not mathematics; alcoholism but not those on welfare payments; imprisonment rates, but not rates of those in political office, etc.), but I want to draw attention to something else. In the 1970s, the statement just quoted was very much a minority voice. It was circulated, but otherwise, for school reform purposes, effectively ignored.¹ Yet, in terms of its 'factual' underpinnings, and for the categories that are included, the case made in this statement is, broadly, correct - **both two decades ago, and also today.**

Then, as now, males rather than females predominated among those falling behind in school and being sent to 'special education' classes. Then as now, teenage boys were much more likely to commit suicide than teenage girls. Then, as now, girls' overall broad retention and success rates in school were not of the pattern that was previously associated with 'disadvantaged' groups². But then, as now, women went on in later life to have much poorer incomes and employment achievements than do men. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1993; Yates, 1986, 1993; Kenway, Willis and Junor, 1995; Yates and Leder, 1995) Equally, none of these 'indicators' have an unproblematic meaning, but that is an issue for other discussions.³

I am not suggesting that either the education pathways, or the social and cultural contexts and outcomes for girls and boys have remained unchanged. In Australia as well as in the UK and Scotland (Arnot, David and Weiner, 1996; Powney, 1996) there has been both absolute and relative improvement in the educational achievements of girls. In the world economy too, there has been a significant re-shaping and re-locating of work, involving the loss of many areas of traditional male employment. But a number of the grounds on which the case for attention to the boys is now being justified existed and were known at the beginning of the wave of reforming policy directed to girls. Yet at that time it was widely accepted that, insofar as policy reforms needed to deal with 'gender' and 'sex equity', then they were an issue about girls and women, not boys and men, whereas today they are taken as a legitimate, indeed compulsory, concern for gender equity programs (O'Doherty, 1994; Browne and Fletcher, 1995; West, 1995; MCEETYA, 1995; and the mid-90s redrafted versions of Victorian and Australian policies on girls and schooling).

So it is not, after all, a simple story where the 'disadvantage' of girls was discovered, attended to, at least partially fixed up and then replaced by some of the same processes in relation to boys. The 'facts of the case' are a useful reminder that the discourse, the broad context of action and research ('sex equity', 'gender-based reform') assumes a taken-for-grantedness that hides the politics of what is being taken up, and whose definitions are being taken up.

Who is disadvantaged and what does inequality look like? What is 'sex equity' and 'gender-based reform' about?

Projects of gender equity in schooling, though by no means uniform in their politics or their framing assumptions, have been broadly concerned with inequalities and also with re-assessing and changing school's part in the formation of gendered identity (student self-perceptions, values, ambitions, skills, social relationships)⁴. The current concerns about boys pose a challenge to elaborate at a public level the broad agendas framing both enterprises.

The projects and discussions concerned with boys are not unitary. Some writers such as Connell (1989, 1994, 1995) and Maclean (undated) have contributed complex analyses and research on the subject. But public and popular accounts of the need to reform schooling for boys most commonly draw on two simple themes: that it is boys who are now 'losing out' at school, as evidenced by changing patterns of results in the final examinations; and that what is needed is to take over strategies that have been successful for girls, and apply these to boys.

In the next sections of this paper I want to look at some assumptions and implications of those commonly heard themes. This popular form of the challenge to focus on boys, I will argue, sets aside the actual social/economic significance of the examination results which are the focus of so much attention; sets aside the historical construction of schooling as the site of gender reform; and, above all, fails to deal adequately with power and with masculinity and femininity as relational phenomena.

Inequalities and Examination Results as a Benchmark

Current Australian discussions about some changes in the patterns of final examination results of girls as compared with boys, have led to some detailed debate about which groups are and are not successful here, and which groups are and are not advantaged by current assessment and ranking procedures (see Foster, 1994; Teese et.al., 1995; Davy, 1995). What is less remarked on is the assumptions being made about the significance of year 12 results as the benchmark for assessing inequalities. (cf Yates and Leder, 1995)

The specific event that sparked a major Australian inquiry into boys and education (O'Doherty, 1994) was the publication of some final year school statistics in which girls, for the first time, gained some of the highest mathematics results. The results that drew the

debate concerned a minority of students, those students doing the very 'hardest' subjects, and getting the very highest results. The newspapers in NSW, which have a long-standing pre-occupation with the top results in the annual examinations, seized on some results where girls, for the first time, were top students in the highest level mathematics subjects, as evidence both of an enormous turnaround in gender patterns in school, and as a signal that something now had to be done about the 'underachievement' of boys. (This debate is discussed more fully by Foster, 1994.)

The results under discussion **were** a change in the patterns of school success, in that, for a long time, although girls had been successful in many areas, success in the 'highest' levels of the very 'hardest' subjects had eluded them. But the emphasis given to this particular change very much narrowed and abstracted the focus on gender and inequality.

For almost twenty years, girls' overall retention and success rates in Australian schools had been higher than those of boys - but, in relation to girls, those examination statistics had never **sufficiently described or accounted for** the patterns of sex related inequality in schools. Although girls' lesser participation and success in mathematics contributed to their more restricted educational and employment paths beyond school, the latter went far beyond what could be accounted for by the former. (see Yates, 1993a) And the concerns about gender reforms for girls in schools had been concerned about inequalities in the curriculum and processes of schooling, about how schooling was contributing to different futures for girls and boys by what they learnt there, how they developed there - and not just by what examination score they obtained. (That is, relative to a particular level of actual school success in mathematics, girls, on average, would make less of it in terms of future educational career and in terms of eventual career pay-off.)

The research and government reports on girls of the 1970s and 1980s had certainly drawn attention to disparities in mathematics participation and success rates, but this had been part of a broader discussion of the form in which women's inequality in school and beyond was

manifested and produced. Reports on girls and inequality drew attention to the different **outcomes** of schooling for girls, to the ways school **directed and limited** the paths taken by girls (stereotyping women; directing girls to a narrow range of post-school courses and jobs); and to ways curriculum and pedagogy **was biased** in taking men and not women as actors in the world, and in treating women and girls as 'other'.

Given this background, to argue that it is boys rather than girls who now need to be seen as the focus for sex equity work should require some attention to (a) whether the 'pay-off' of schooling for girls has now been turned around, and (b) whether school curriculum and pedagogy is now focussed on women and girl's ways of knowing and their interests. Simply showing that girls' retention rates have continued to grow, or that some girls have increased their participation in mathematics and their success in this, is not enough.

(Weiner, Arnot and David, 1997, make a similar point about the debate as it has been shaped in the UK: 'Significantly, this pattern of *male advantage* in employment which is common in both the public and private sectors, is not alluded to within the current educational discourse of male disadvantage.' David (in Kemal et.al, 1996, p.69) also makes the point that 'It is a comparative statement that boys are doing less well than girls. However, all boys and all girls are doing better than they did five years ago.')

In fact, in Australia, the picture regarding what has happened to males and females as a result of school reforms and labour market changes is mixed. While there has been change in some 'outcomes' areas (more women now undertake degrees, and more enter medicine and law; and there has been some decline in women's unemployment rates), there is also evidence of lack of change in others: overall, women in Australia still enter a relatively narrow range of jobs, are a minority in the senior ranks of most areas of employment and particularly in business, and their average weekly incomes relative to men improved steadily from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, but have remained static since the late 1980s at around 83%. (Australian Bureau of Statistics,1993; Kenway, Willis and Junor, 1995; Walpole,1995)

So the continued focus on a small section of the year 12 results as if they are a straightforward indicator of what schooling does for girls and boys is misplaced⁵. This popular way of taking up examination results gives undue emphasis to what is happening to a small group at the top and re-frames the agenda for schooling away from a consideration of the *form* of girls' inequality, but it also deals poorly with masculinity and with how gender contributes to some patterns of failure for boys and to the restrictions in 'pay-off' for high-ability girls. The suggestion is that if there are some lesser results of boys, then it must be due to girls having been given special assistance in recent years, or to school and assessment authorities now having adopted 'girl-friendly' strategies and failing to institute 'boy-friendly' equivalents. Conceptually, the issue of girls and boys, pedagogy and outcomes is treated as a rather mechanical process, in which discrete advantages are bestowed on groups through techniques of particular kinds.

Richard Teese's work however suggests that it is possible to look at the broader patterns of subject-choice, success and failure with more subtle assumptions about gender as a phenomenon - assumptions that see gender as relational, and subject choice and success as being embedded in broader discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity (and class and ethnicity).(Teese et.al., 1995) From a major survey of Australian year 12 subject-choice and assessment results, Teese argues that gender contributes to a much broader failure of boys than that picked out by the focus on a few top students - in that it persuades boys to 'over-enrol' in mathematics, and thus to produce a greater overall proportional failure for boys in this area - a pattern which has been evident for some time. Similarly, Teese argues, gender (in conjunction with the structure of the assessment system) contributes to a phenomenon of high ability girls not getting the rewards and outcomes which accrue to high ability boys (in that humanities choices bring penalties in relation to maximizing one's score and one's post-school career rewards).

Gender Reform Strategies

Just as the public discussion of year 12 results in Australia has tended to detach 'sex equity' comparisons from the broader social location and effects of schooling, some of the reform strategies now being suggested for boys also take up the issue as if it were about abstracted technologies for success, rather than related to historical and social constructions. The quote which follows, taken from the foreword to a new book on *Boys in Schools* intended for teachers, takes up the rhetoric earlier applied to reforms for girls:

Boys will change when they are helped to understand themselves better, are affirmed and valued 'as they are' and are given the tools to feel safe and equal around girls. [...] It's time we honoured and put a positive value on the unique qualities of boys.

(Biddulph, in Browne and Fletcher, 1995, pp.ix, x)

This quote takes up the rhetoric of the earlier reforms directed to girls, but ignores both the institutional history of schooling and the concern about gendered power relations that formed their social foundations. For the past decade or two there has been, in Australia, some funding, research and professional development specifically focussed on girls, but this does not reproduce for boys a mirror image of the situation in which girls were earlier seen to be disadvantaged. Textbooks today are not full of women and silent about men; the 'reproductive' aspects of society (cf Martin, 1982; Foster, 1995) are still a minor and low-status element of the curriculum; and pedagogies which benefit girls have not made boys invisible to the teachers.

Even the concern about school practices limiting students by the ways they construct femininity and masculinity is not a mirror image argument for boys and girls.(as Connell,1989, 1994 and Maclean, undated; Maclean,1995 have well argued). Individual boys (or classes of boys) may be distressed by their failure to measure up to desired masculine attributes such as

sporting prowess, size, technical and scientific achievement; but those characteristics of 'hegemonic masculinity' (to quote Connell) were ones that bring social power, status, financial reward. In the case of girls, however, a starting point agenda was that even what schools promoted for girls was socially disabling:

An observer not raised with our cultural assumptions would be struck by the fact that one half of the population was assigned by birth to activities which, whatever their private gratifications and social importance, carried no economic reward, little public status, and very limited access to public power.

(Schools Commission, 1975, p.8)

The distinctions here are of considerable significance in terms of reform strategy and of policy in relation to public schooling. Both girls and boys may be made unhappy by their failure to measure up to what is ostensibly promoted and valued by schooling, or their peers, or the media. But a strategy whose aim is to explicitly extend the public power and status outcomes of the group in question is very differently located than one whose aim is to reduce or redirect that group's share of public power or is to challenge more broadly what is currently valued and rewarded in the broader society. The problem here is one which affects both the public policy formulation level of gender reform, and also micro level strategies of gender projects.

Reform agendas and their limits within public policy

Earlier in the article, I suggested that the recent taking up of boys' issues as a key concern in gender equity work was not simply a response to changes in patterns of school success or of social inequality. I now want to consider further why the boys' agenda may have arisen at this point, and the issues that this raises in relation to gender matters and school reform.

In Australia, the debate about boys' results took off not when it was discovered that boys, proportionally to those doing it, failed mathematics in higher numbers than did girls - that had been the case for some time.⁶ It was a response to boys beginning to lose out to girls in the very top categories⁷. I would argue that the way in which this debate broke out, and the way it has been handled, point to some features of the sources and the discursive form of public policy.

In Australia, one notable feature of reforms concerned with girls has been that many of the beneficiaries have been middle-class girls. Private girls' schools have taken up feminist agendas even more strongly than public schools (Connell et.al., 1982; Abbott-Chapman et.al., 1991, and annual reports on *Girls in School* produced by the national Department of Employment, Education and Training since 1988). There has been an articulate and strong middle-class lobbying for women's interests in education. So, one might argue, for some time, the gender agenda has represented an extension of middle-class interests without threatening middle-class interests.

The NSW results however introduced something new onto the scene: the issue that there *is* some zero-sum aspect to schooling achievement patterns. Now it is becoming apparent that it is not only working class boys and men who are being affected by the changes of recent years (many manual jobs were the first to disappear) - it is middle class boys who may be being 'deprived' of a place in medicine because a girl has done better; or who may be being 'deprived' of optimum learning conditions because girls are going off to single-sex classes rather than being a supporting influence on their own learning environment (Foster, 1995). So two things are happening here: a threat to the group whose power has been greatest, and also the beginnings of an inkling that gender reform programs cannot just go on improving the competitive outcomes of schooling for some students without, in relative terms, affecting the outcomes of others.

What I have been suggesting in these sections is that the coming into force of the challenge to look at boys in gender work in schools raises more far reaching problems than the problem of 'what to do about the boys'. It raises the problem of how gender equity in general can be maintained as a public policy issue. Schooling is a selecting mechanism in relation to post-school power, income, privilege, but the policy discourse is one in which it is only possible to talk about improving outcomes for groups without acknowledging that it is not possible for all students to get the good jobs, and that it will not be politically acceptable to pursue a policy where those who already have power see the chances of their own children being overtly undermined. Debates of this kind have been seen already in relation to 'Affirmative Action' programs in employment, but, until recently, in Australia, the idea that the increasing success of girls might have implications for boys, and for particular groups of boys, was not explicitly discussed or obvious.

'Understanding the boys' and feminist research

One of the aspects of the present debate that is most irritating to those who have been working in the gender area for the past two decades is the charge that there is a desperate need for research about boys because research to date in the gender area has been feminist research which is only concerned with girls.

A consideration of gender, by its nature, has involved the development of theories and frameworks for investigating how women *and men* and how femininity *and masculinity* work: their discursive construction, their patterns of achievement and life patterns, the meanings and implications of 'gendered subjectivity' and so on⁸. The lines of research and strategy being discovered and 'created' by those working on boys (West, 1995; Browne & Fletcher, 1995) often directly borrow earlier frameworks and findings of feminist gender research: concerns about role models, consciousness-raising, concern for boys who are teased because they are not sufficiently masculine, etc.

And yet it is also true that the great bulk of empirical qualitative work on gender, pedagogy, subjectivity and schooling in the past two decades *has* studied girls rather than boys. Frameworks and theories might have been concerned with both, but the substantive 'findings' and insights were not equally spread.

This issue and its implications have been brought to my own attention by my experience of embarking on a new empirical study after some years of focussing mainly on theory and documents. The study (undertaken with Julie McLeod⁹) is a qualitative, interview-based, longitudinal study of girls and boys at four different schools from the beginning to the end of high school.

In the project we are interested in some things that have been the focus of a great deal of research in the gender area - including the development of gendered subjectivity over the secondary schooling years, and the workings of gender in relation to schooling and out of school life over that time. What we found when we were looking at and attempting to interpret the tapes from our first round of interviews was that the boys in our study seemed interesting and our findings there 'unexpected', whereas (for the purposes of research publication) we could find little to say about the girls. But, being good postmodern reflexive researchers, we were equally aware that this reaction was as much a comment on us and what we were bringing to the research as it was on what we were 'finding'.

To take one example, the boys' responses (at the end of primary school) to how they would describe their friends (being interviewed with them) spoke much more about caring and supportive relationships than we had expected. (Yates and McLeod, 1996) The boys fantasized about sport, but also (in a number of cases) about their future married life. As well, we noticed considerable differences between the boys in our study. Now we could describe findings about the girls which parallel the points crudely summarized here: many girls in the study were widely and intensely interested in sport and fantasized about future stardom in

that arena; they too differed markedly in their values and hopes. As feminist researchers however, we expected the latter - a legion of books had now told us not to see girls in an essentialist way. We also expected boys not to be a uniform group - in principle. But in practice, we became aware that much of the feminist literature on schools with which we were familiar (particularly the literature directed to school-based action) did treat girls in sensitive detail, while leaving boys as a more shadowy 'other'; and treated masculinity as a more crudely sketched out discourse against which femininities were examined.

The experiences in this project, and the ways in which the 'findings' about boys seem to be interesting and more readily publishable also, however, touches on ways in which as researchers we find ourselves driven by some of the same forces that can be seen in the press debate. An area of research and action (girls and gender) can begin to seem like 'old news', in Thomas Kuhn's terms to be a paradigm that is providing fewer rewards, or in the harsh context of funding decisions, to be less attractive to funding bodies than the new public concerns about boys. (Here I think there is some parallel with the way class issues have become a less prominent area of sociological research on education since the 1970s.)

For feminist researchers then, the current interest in 'understanding the boys', does raise some challenges about the adequacy of work on boys in the empirical and theoretical research to date - but also raises challenges about how to maintain and develop the research on girls once a large body of work has been done in this area, and it is no longer such a ready source of new insights and findings.

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¹ I need to make a qualification here. As lobbyists for more funding for girls in school have justifiably argued, funding was being spent on areas such as remedial education, delinquency, etc which gave heavy attention to boys. (Indeed one of the problems spawning backlash responses to funding of girls' and women's programs over the last two decades is that these are always very explicitly tagged as such, whereas the funding which goes to boys and men often has more innocuous labels.) But, in contrast to the present debate, such funding was not seen as connected with concerns about gender, masculinity, or sex-based equal opportunity in schools. A recent study in the UK has found some similar issues in the allocation of special needs provision and makes some interesting points both about how such provision is unequally distributed along gender and race lines, and about how different school-based conceptions of the field influence the gendered patterns here. (Daniels, Hey, Leonard & Smith, 1996)

² For example, school retention rates were a traditional indicator of (class-based) inequality, but, in the statistics quoted in the 1975 Australian report which launched the reform projects for girls, the gap between the overall retention rates of girls and those of boys was extremely small (boys: 34.1%; girls 31.7% - and girls' retention rates passed those of boys in **1976**), whereas class-differences at the same period were extremely large (as a crude indicator, the retention rates of private schools were 90.3% and those of government schools, 27.3%). There were significant differences in patterns of subject-choice and success in mathematics and science, but to some extent the dramatising of these rather than overall retention as indicators was a consequence rather than source of the concerns about what happened to girls. And there were very significant sex-based differences in entry to higher and further education. There were certainly grounds for being concerned about what happened to girls through schooling, but what I am trying to show is that the pattern of what is taken up as

significant shifts. Some broadly similar interpretations could be made about the US report, *How Schools Short-change Girls* (AAUW, 1992), which is *not* simply a story that girls do badly at school.

³ Yates and Leder (1995) is a major index, review and critical discussion of the categories and indicators used in national data-bases in Australia.

⁴ In other writings (especially Yates, 1993b and Yates, 1995) I have discussed differences and changes in the ways girls have been conceptualized as an object of educational research and reform and, implicitly, the fallacy of Moore's (1996) reductive portrayal of this as a simple and self-contradictory project concerned with 'disadvantage'.

⁵ On this issue there is a significant difference between Australia and England. In England (but not Scotland, cf Powney, 1996), there have not been yet the same extent of achievement in relative success by girls at A-level; and the 'turn-around' in achievement patterns that underlies much discussion is more strikingly seen at GCE (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1996), and is more commonly discussed in relation to working-class boys (David, Arnot & Weiner, 1996) But in each case, my point remains: that patterns of school achievement need to be read in the context of other social indicators.

⁶ Though boys had proportionally higher failure rates, many more boys were taking higher level mathematics, so despite the higher proportion failing, the actual numbers of those passing it were still considerably greater than the number of girls.

⁷ It was also influenced no doubt by the steady growth in the numbers of girls taking these subjects, though they are still distinctly outnumbered by boys. (see Teese et.al., 1995; Foster, 1994) Again, the discursive contexts of Australia public and policy discussions have some differences from those in the UK. The dominance of mathematics as the indicator of prestigious intellectual achievement is much stronger in the former than in the latter.

⁸ Feminist research has not been the only way into these issues. Paul Willis's important 1970s study of working class masculinity developed from an interest in class-focussed ethnography; and many studies (more commonly in the USA and the UK than in Australia) have developed research on gender as an outcome of a focus on race.

⁹ The 12 to 18 Project, funded by the Australian Research Council. An initial discussion of this project can be found in Yates and McLeod (1996). The project is now in its third year (and will continue until 1999).



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