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Single-sex educational strategies challenged

Are girls-only science and mathematics classes a good way to challenge gender inequality? Perhaps in some cases. Many feminists in WISENET and elsewhere have looked with hope in this direction. But there are problems too, which are effectively described by Jane Kenway and Sue Willis in their article 'Feminist single-sex educational strategies: some theoretical flaws and practical fallacies', *Discourse*, volume 7, number 1, October 1986, pages 1-30. *Discourse* is an education journal published in Brisbane.

Kenway and Willis start by outlining the sources of the 'single-sex strategy'. They see its origins in the history of schools for girls, in women's consciousness raising groups and in the feminist critique of co-education. They also note shortcomings with these experiences as a basis for the single-sex strategy. For example, the successes of middle-class schools for girls are, arguably, more the successes of those in the dominant class rather than of sex segregation.

The authors next present a detailed critique of the theoretical basis for the single-sex strategy, focussing on the liberal feminist version of the strategy. They argue that in the theory for this strategy, all girls are treated as over-socialised victims, that society is treated as monolithic, that social change is seen to occur through social mobility and that the bodies of knowledge provided to all-girl classes are not challenged. In each case they see deficiencies. For example, they say 'Challenging the style and content of all the curriculum should be the central plank of any solution to sexist education' (pp. 13-14).

Finally, and most tellingly, they present results from a study by Kenway of two schools in Western Australia, one for boys and one for girls. Both schools are high status and have high fees. They argue that the outlook for any feminist goals in the girls school is bleak because parents are opposed to feminism, few teachers promote it (and those that do may not be attractive role models), the orientation is towards the examinable curriculum,

relationships with boys are glamourised in their absence from routine interactions, the goal of sisterhood is impossible due to class and image-based status games, and social class divisions are reinforced. They conclude that the liberal feminist single-sex educational strategy reinforces a type of education which confirms rather than challenges class and sex-based social divisions. They show that 'high-status, high-fee private schools for girls prepare their students to occupy a woman's place within the privileged classes' (p.25).

Is there any hope? Kenway and Willis's critique is mainly of liberal feminist approaches. To avoid the pitfalls it is necessary to go beyond liberal feminism. They conclude that if single-sex strategies 'are to have any educational and social impact they must draw upon the spirit of consciousness raising, must be conducted as much for males as for females, for teachers as for students, and must operate in a dialectical way with other aspects of the school (and with families), i.e. they should respond to and feed into the educational and social mainstream where the heart of the problem exists' (p.25).

Brian Martin

Did you know that . . .

- 50 per cent of girls now complete year 12, compared with only 34 per cent in the early 1970s. More girls than boys complete post-secondary schooling. Almost 47 per cent of university students are women, compared with 30 per cent in 1971. Women comprise over half the students in colleges of advanced education;
- almost half of Australian women are now in the workforce, compared to only 42 per cent in 1983; and
- in 1986-87 the number of women employed grew by 4 per cent, compared with 2.3 per cent generally. Part-time employment grew by 5.6 per cent.