

Preconceptions, Misconceptions and the Truth
of Gender Equity in a
Private Co-Educational Lutheran School
in Toowoomba

Task 3

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1.0 Introduction

Education Queensland is “committed to ensuring that any aspect of schooling which leads to differential educational outcomes for male and female students is identified and addressed to guarantee that no student in Queensland's state school system is disadvantaged on the basis of gender” (CS-01). This is an admirable goal, and is representative of governmental (and broader) recognition of gender as an ‘equity’ issue and more specifically, of the role of schools in addressing gender inequity in Australia. It is one thing, however, to clearly define departmental intentions in a ‘generic’ catch-all policy statement, but it is another to actually get it implemented where it counts, in every school in the state.

This report will discuss three major elements in the gender equity debate for schools in Queensland. First it will reveal the extent to which gender is an issue in schools and in the broader community, and hence, why gender is a relevant concern for schools. This will include an assessment of the various policy responses and academic debate on the gender equity, to determine how much recognition the issue has received in these areas.

Second, the factors that have contributed to gender becoming an equity issue in school will be discussed. In this section, the role of school in creating, continuing or exacerbating the problem will be determined. Finally the question will be answered, why is it important for educators to be aware of this issue? The discussion in this instance will be supported by a number of observations made during a five week period of observations and teaching at Concordia College, a Lutheran coeducational college in Toowoomba, country Queensland.

Two points remain to be addressed. First, education can be just one part of the ultimate goal of broader, societal recognition of the principles and realities of gender equity. Hence, this focus on gender issues can, in no way be interpreted as recognition of primacy of this issue in the social justice/equity debate in Australian schools. The second issue is the effect to which this exposition of gender equity and the approaches to achieve it, can have on a pre-service teacher, in particular, the one

conducting this investigation. To this extent, I have found it useful to record both my pre-investigative opinions as to gender equity issues and the role of the school, and a list of 'guidelines' or considerations that someone in my position should be aware of as they enter into the profession. This step in itself will go a long way in responding to the three major considerations of this paper, especially in revealing the role of the teacher 'individual' in the process.

2.0 Description of the Social Justice/Equity Issue

In this section I will discuss the extent to which gender is an issue in schools and in the broader community, and hence, why gender is a relevant concern for schools. This will include an assessment of the various policy responses and academic debate on the gender equity, to determine how much recognition the issue has received in these areas. Through both an analysis of the content of the policy, and a recognition of its mere presence, the extent to which gender equitable education is a target for social justice will become evident. It has been taken for granted that gender as a consideration for educators is a valid target for social justice.

2.1 ‘Dreams’

The social justice/equity debate is a two-pronged ‘beast’. The problems and ‘facts’ described above are to be weighed in the context of education policy. After all, it is within the framework of the policy of Education Queensland, that all exclusionary forces and inequitable outcomes reside. Of paramount relevance here is their equity policy CS-01. Elaborations on policy here are a necessary to delineate the restrictions within which any equitable outcomes may be achieved. As far as schools are concerned, the debate is only as extensive as the relevant policy allows it to be.

In CS-01 Education Queensland have described both desirable outcomes, and what can best be described as a principal’s equity checklist. However the former is in no way reconciled by the latter. It will be evident that the valid equitable outcomes that are the ultimate goals are not supported by adequate or proportional practical responses. As such, this framework should be considered as potentially a contributing factor in gender inequity in schools, in its failure (potentially) to address the issue. Here this analysis merely resides in the ‘content analysis’ research paradigm, and a more complete and applied approach would be required to substantiate this supposition.

The “development and implementation of educational programs in schools should reflect the following shared educational values and principles” (CS-01, s.2):

- (a) Schooling will affirm that gender does not determine the capacity to learn.
- (b) Schooling will value female and male students equally in all its aspects.
- (c) Schooling will recognise that providing for equality of opportunity and outcomes in education for female and male students may require differential provision.
- (d) Schooling will educate female and male students for satisfying, responsible and productive living, including work inside and outside the home.
- (e) Schooling will assist students to understand the importance of the relationship between public and private responsibilities, including paid and unpaid work in terms of increased equality between men and women.
- (f) Schooling will encourage the development of attitudes and behaviours in female and male students which promote social responsibility, empathy, and sensitive, equal and non-violent relationships.
- (g) Schooling will ensure a supportive learning environment which discourages all forms of sexual harassment (verbal and physical).
- (h) Schooling will assist students to understand the construction of gender identities, and to explore their own attitudes to gender roles and the implications of these attitudes for their adult futures.
- (i) Schooling will provide a curriculum which, in content, methodology and language, meets the educational needs and entitlements of female as well as male students and which recognises the contributions to society of the full range of women as well as the contributions of diverse groups of men.
- (j) Schooling will recognise that strategies to improve the quality of education for female students need to be developed across the P-12 spectrum. The school community should be involved in establishing appropriate strategies to deal with inequities identified by local data collection and analysis.
- (k) Schooling will recognise that gender intersects with class, culture, ethnicity and disability, and hence that the diverse educational needs of particular groups of female students must be addressed.
- (l) Schooling will prepare girls as well as boys for their rights to personal respect and safety, to economic and social independence, and to participation in and influence over decisions which affect their lives. Schooling will prepare all students to show respect for diverse life pathways, and a variety of forms of masculinity and femininity.
- (m) Schooling will have organisational structures and practices which are congruent with the principles and values in the Gender Equity Policy.

These ‘goals’ can be compared with the actual specific approaches that are recommended (CS-01). Principals should:

- (a) support the development of school policy and annual operational plans that reflect the Gender Equity in Education policy;
- (b) address the needs and interests of the full range of female and male students at all levels of schooling, in:
 - (i) curriculum content and resources;
 - (ii) learning teaching and assessment strategies;
 - (iii) classroom and school management; and
 - (iiii) organisational practices and resource allocation.
- (c) support differential provision as required to achieve equality of opportunity and outcomes in education for girls and boys;
- (d) take appropriate steps to ensure a learning environment which discourages all forms of sexual harassment and violence; and
- (e) provide opportunities for all students to critically examine the construction of gender and its impact on gender relations and life pathways through curriculum processes.

These approaches are broad indeed and do not give the poor principal much to go on. How do you build a car? You make all the parts and put them together. Lets hope the vehicle for improving gender inequity in Queensland's classrooms would be better than the vehicle we would make based on these inadequate instructions.

Section 4.1 (CS-01) is a somewhat more helpful. It provides a list of questions that "represent a number of issues that should be considered in each school:"

- (a) Does the school have a Gender Equity Policy Statement?
- (b) Does the Annual Operational Plan reflect the principles of the Gender Equity Policy?
- (c) Has student participation in subjects and school activities been analysed by gender?
- (d) Is there a system of keeping track of school-leavers to build a profile of their post-schooling options and choices?
- (e) Has the use of playground space, sporting equipment and computers been analysed on the basis of gender?
- (f) Does the school have a Gender Equity Committee?
- (g) Is the book A Fair Deal: Equity Guidelines for Developing and Reviewing Educational Resources used when buying or evaluating resources?
- (h) Do school documents use non-sexist and non-discriminatory language?
- (i) Is classroom interaction being monitored to examine the proportion of teacher time and attention directed to girls compared with boys?
- (j) Does the school provide the means by which parents and students can gain an understanding of how the construction of gender limits life's leisure and career choices?
- (k) Are home and family responsibilities included in curriculum areas for female and male students?
- (l) Do students have a choice of uniforms which are not only comfortable but enable female and male students to participate fully in sport and games?

Of course, when all of these are in place the issue of gender inequity will be immediately solved.

MCEETYA (1996, p.9) provides a similar list of recommended 'best practice' approaches, but with some interesting variations. These "principles for action" have "been developed to encapsulate best practice in education for all students, and to link the best practice to the demands of a vigorous and changing community." They are:

- Equitable access to an effective and rewarding education, which is enhanced rather than limited by definitions of what it means to be female and male, should be provided to all girls and boys.
- Girls and boys should be equipped to participate actively in a contemporary society which is characterised by changing patterns of working, civic and domestic life.
- Schools should be places in which girls and boys feel safe, are safe, and where they are respected and valued.
- Schools should acknowledge their active role in the construction of gender, and their responsibility to ensure that all organisational and management practices reflect commitment to gender equity.

- Understandings of gender construction should include knowledge about the relationship of gender to other factors, including socio-economic status, cultural background, rural/urban location, disability and sexuality.
- Understanding and accepting that there are many ways of being masculine and feminine will assist all students to reach their full potential.
- Effective partnerships between schools, education and training systems, parents, the community, and a range of other agencies and organisations, will contribute to improvement and change in educational outcomes for girls and boys.
- Intervention programs and processes should be targeted towards increasing options, levels of participation and outcomes of schooling for girls and boys.
- Anti-discrimination and other relevant legislation at state, territory, federal and international levels should inform educational programs and services.
- Continuous monitoring of educational outcomes and program review should inform and enhance decisions on the development, resourcing and delivery of effective and rewarding education for girls and boys.

This set of provisions occupies a space somewhere between the other two, and constitutes a good mix of well intentioned ‘motherland’ statements and semi practical advice.

3.0 Contributory Factors

Second, the factors that have contributed to gender becoming an equity issue in school will be discussed. In this section, the role of school in creating, continuing or exacerbating the problem will be determined. The discussion in this instance will be supported by a number of observations made during a five week period of observations and teaching at Concordia College, a Lutheran coeducational college in Toowoomba, country Queensland

3.1 Preconceptions and Observations

Surely ‘the lot’ for female students has improved in recent years, at least in the 10 years since I exited secondary education? A recent sequence of careers lessons which I taught at Concordia College, revealed many valuable insights into the extent to which gender is a differentiating force. In general female students did not identify any potential career paths in a purely scientific or applied science/engineering field. While their own insights into the issue did not extend beyond the simple recognition that they “didn’t like science” or that they would not want to do it as a job, they still reveal a trend away from scientific endeavours in the female population of that class.

Despite the irrelevance of a science career to these girls, they did perform to a standard equivalent to that of the boys. Over a five-week period, the degree to which they participated within the class was also determined to be equivalent to that of the male population of the class. During non-teaching phases of the time spent at Concordia College, observations of the regular teaching staff revealed to noticeable differentiation in approach when dealing with male or female students. Interviews with the relevant staff members revealed no specific consideration of gender issues in the development and delivery of lessons in this science class.

The setting may well have skewed the milieu under observation in that gender, as one part of a multitude of compounding factors in educational inequity, may not have affected negative responses. Indigeneity, locational, cultural and linguistic differences, isolation and poverty all have a role to play in creating disadvantage in

educational outcomes. While a ‘traditional’ (nee archaic) setting, Concordia College, a private school was immunised from many of these compounding factors.

3.2 Causes

Education Queensland (CS-01, s.1.8-1.9) recognise that:

Inequities for female students in the participation in and outcomes from schooling have been widely documented in a range of research and other data. A range of factors contributes both directly and indirectly to the quality of female students' education with serious implications for female students' opportunities at school and in life beyond the school.

Of most significance of these contributory factors is the “current invisibility of gender inequity in all areas and at all levels of schooling [that] needs to be challenged.” There is little or no visible or immediate outcome of inequitable education. The failure to provide equitable education to girls (and boys) is only evident through a continued inequitable trajectory once they depart the sheltered school environment.

Similarly Education Queensland (CS-01, s.1.5) view the role of the Queensland public education system is to contribute “to a socially just society by ensuring equal and fair access to, participation in and outcomes from the education provided for female and male students.” From in class observations and through recognition of the conventional wisdom of the role of education in imparting specific gender roles and the corresponding outcomes and opportunities, it can be concluded the policy statements such as these represent an admission of guilt, or rather the causative relationship between education practice and outcomes differentiated by gender.

4.0 Significance for Educators

Finally the question will be answered, why is it important for educators to be aware of this issue? The discussion in this instance will be supported by a number of observations made during a five week period of observations and teaching at Concordia College, a Lutheran coeducational college in Toowoomba, country Queensland. The significance for educators in this issue lies in the extent to which the failure to provide equitable education on a gender basis leads to negative schooling and post schooling experiences and outcomes.

4.1 'Realities?'

It has become conventional wisdom that there is a problem out there. Education Queensland statistics (Lecture Notes) reveal an irregular distribution of the sexes between subject areas. Boys are over represented in the abstract subjects of chemistry, physics and the 'real' mathematics subjects. Girls do participate in the sciences and maths, and tend to be over represented in the more applied areas of biology, applied maths and geography.

This differentiation is in itself not a problem. The problem stems from two things. First, this differentiation is resulting from both an inequitable delivery of foundations maths and sciences in the early years on school. Second the selection of certain subjects, and generally the ones in which girls are over represented in, impacts on subsequent learning and employment outcomes.

Employers and formal tertiary education providers place greater weight on the subject in which boys are over represented. While more boys than girls leave school early, those boys that leave school do so with the opportunity provided by greater rates of employment. Girls who either leave early or go down 'traditional' subjects paths, face a more uncertain employment future.

4.2 More Realities

MCEETYA (1996, p.7) conducted what they describe as an “examination of current participation rates in school subjects, activities and programs and of the post-school lives of girls and boys.” This study clearly demonstrates the significance, of the issue of gender inequity for both schools and the wider community. The study showed the following:

- while girls are increasingly entering many traditionally male subject areas and some are achieving better results, overall they are participating in these at significantly lower levels than boys
- boys’ participation remains concentrated in subjects traditionally seen as ‘male appropriate’
- boys continue to predominate in literacy, reading and other learning support programs, as well as in those for students with emotional or behavioural disturbances
- the interactive effects of gender with other factors, such as cultural background and socio-economic status, have differential impacts on particular groups of girls and boys
- sexual harassment and sex-based harassment including homophobia continue to have an unacceptable impact on the school experience of girls and some boys
- schools and communities increasingly acknowledge that violence in schools is related to limited understandings of ‘appropriate’ femininity and masculinity
- there is a greater likelihood of male involvement in violence, risk-taking behaviours, and behaviours destructive of emotional and physical health
- the consequences of girls and boys continuing to narrowly define gender may be reflected in more limited post-school career options for girls than boys, and in boys being less likely to experience positive and active involvement in family life
- school achievements in gender equity do not necessarily translate into reforms in the workplace or the wider community, and schools do not always teach those skills necessary to overcome post-school barriers to equity
- despite the increasing number of women entering occupations that are identified as masculine, women remain under-represented in management and executive positions and within the full range of decision-making forums which shape society
- women and girls carry the greater share of unpaid work, while boys and men have less involvement in caring and family roles
- women predominate in lower-paid and part-time occupations and therefore have lower incomes than men.

5.0 Discussions

In a number of instances, the observations which I made above, merely show a continuance of these trends, with a significant cohort of those classes likely to experience at least some of these negative impacts (or some to a certain extent) throughout their school and post-schooling careers.

The importance to educators lies in their ability, or rather, potential role in turning around a number of these outcomes. Measures of success will probably not recognise a simple change in school environment. While the ‘principals checklist’ above, identifies what should be in schools and how teachers should approach the gender equity issue, success will not be achieved if these measures are merely implemented. Success means an altered trajectory for disadvantaged and other students towards more equitable participation in the ‘real world’.

The question must be asked then, how can the school community ensure that their own ‘best practice’ truly does result in real world improvements. I believe the answer is, unfortunately, that there is little that they can do to ensure continued equitable outcomes. Perhaps through engaging the community more, involving employers, industry and governmental representatives and community leaders in the educative process, these external players may have more ‘investment’ in the issue and be more responsible in their actions.

The home and the media must also be recognised as significant players in the issue as well. Parents should be indoctrinated into the gender equity paradigm and together pressure should be applied to the media to not continue inequitable representations of males and females, or at least to provide a more balanced representation. In this regard, analyses of media representations of gender, would be a valuable addition to any curricula.

The sceptical, and especially those that have viewed prior ‘social justice strategies’ may question whether Education Queensland have simply picked up, and are running with a fashionable, flavour of the month policy. Observations demonstrated no clear response or even recognition of these policies, beyond a basic understanding of sexual

harassment guidelines, where the teacher's own career and professional outcomes may be in question. For these or any subsequent policy/strategy to work, "three categories of opportunity to learn" (Yackulic and Noonan in Jefferson 2002, p.2) must be identified and addressed. Their three categories are:

1. Personalological factors, such as student ability, motivation, persistence, experience, or parent support.
2. Classroom variables, including learning time, level of curriculum implementation, learning environments, teacher expertise, assessment practices or access to materials.
3. Policy and resources allocation factors which are related to issues such as funding or equity policies.

Bennett (2003, p.7) identifies a very important consideration, in that although schools are "very aware that they need to accommodate the needs of both boys and girls ... assuming that two sizes fit all, risks leading to the reproduction of narrow and unhelpful stereotypes." Essentially Bennett is warning against deconstructing the issue into simply boys versus girls dichotomy, where one thing is provided to one group on the basis of supposedly realigning the balance or equitable apportionment of educational opportunity.

The 'New Basics' strategy may offer much promise in this regard. On look at the New Basics statement within the QSE 2010 (Education Queensland 2003, p.59) document reveals a clear recognition of the holistic approach that is necessary:

An integrated framework for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that defines essential areas of learning, appropriate and effective approaches to teaching, affiliated modes of assessment and standards and assurances about student development at key points of schooling will be negotiated with teachers in schools. The framework would prepare students for flexible and adaptable life pathways, for participation in the future economy and in cohesive social communities. The New Basics can be understood as essential areas of learning — critical thinking, problem solving and lifelong learning across four new areas of interdisciplinary learning: Life pathways and social futures, Communications media, Critical citizenship, and Environment and technologies.

QSE 2010 (Education Queensland 2003, p.29) shows that this approach will be supported by addressing four areas. They are the “learning framework” (curriculum and pedagogy), the “learning environment” (school structure and policy), “workforce capability,” and broader “school services.”

6.0 Conclusions

A number of factors, both initiated and perpetuated within the school environment have led to gender inequity of educational experiences and outcomes. Observations of Concordia College have identified a continuation of these practices and realities in the classroom. While a number of general direction statements and checklists have been provided, a reductionist approach will ultimately fail to address this broad issue. An holistic approach along the lines of the New Basics Strategy, with greater consultation with all the key players, will ultimately lead to the most thorough contribution schools can make in redressing problems of inequitable outcomes within and outside of the school environment.

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