

GENDER AND EDUCATION: WHERE ARE THE WORKING CLASS GIRLS?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Table of Contents	ii
Synopsis	iii
Statement of Authorship	iv
Chapter One	
Introduction	1
Chapter Two	
Girls and Education	5
Chapter Three	
Boys and Education	12
Chapter Four	
Class and Education	22
Chapter Five	
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	35

SYNOPSIS

My contention within this thesis is that there is an absence of literature on working class girls within both the gender and education and social class and education literature. I draw on issues related to girls and education and on more recent issues on boys and education, to determine what has been said about working class girls. It became apparent that there was very little written on working class girls within the body of literature. Then I chose to explore social class and education to find out if working class girls are discussed. It was also found that not much had been written on working class girls in social class and education literature. In my final chapter I suggest ways to address the absence of working class girls by recommending some questions that can be addressed in future research, so that a real understanding of what is happening with working class girls within the education system can be achieved.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis will consider issues related to gender and education. There has been considerable discussion on this topic in recent years, however the concern here is for working class girls within education as there has been very little research done in this area. My contention is that there is an absence of literature on working class girls within the literature and research on gender and education and social class and education.

It should be noted that even though there seems to be an absence of working class girls in this particular body of literature there has been research conducted on working class girls within the wider context of social class literature. However this literature does not focus specifically on working class girls and education.

My interest in working class girls arose from what I perceived to be a lack of discussion of this group within the literature on gender and education. Through out my investigation into the literature on gender and education and social class and education, I became increasingly interested in which girls and which boys were doing well at school. It appears that most of the literature surrounding girls and education focused on middle class girls. I also found that the literature surrounding boys and education most often focused on working class boys. Thus my interest and focus became working class girls within the education system. While my concern within this thesis is to examine working class girls, this thesis is not about class per se. I do not engage with class debates but draw on feminist literature related to gender and education.

Feminist thought, policy and research has had a great impact on women's lives. Many of the simple things we take for granted, would not be possible if

our forewomen had not paved the way. In the 1970' feminists began to look more closely at gender and education. This lead in 1975, to the first commonwealth policy on girl's education and numerous other polices in subsequent years¹. The policies on girls' and education were concerned with girls' achievements at school this lead to programs being created for schools to include into their curriculum. With this feminist intervention in education, girls began to do increasingly well at school.

As a result of this 'sudden' success, many became worried about boys' apparent educational 'underachievement'.² As these concerns increased interest in the difference between girls and boys achievements arose. Researchers who were concerned with boys underachievement at school also became concerned with dominate ideologies of masculinity and the effect that this has on boys' educational success. This debate is not just confined to Australia countries such as the UK, Canada and the US were also paying attention to these issues. This topic is still important as it is still unclear as to why girls are doing better than boys, which girls are doing better than which boys and if girls successful year 12 marks are really beneficial to them in the future.

The one thing rarely discussed by the literature on gender and education is social class. Social class in general is a widely studied area, especially in Britain, social class and education is also widely studied area. Social class

¹ Schools Commission, *Girls, School and Society*, Canberra, 1975; Commonwealth School Commission, *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools*, Canberra, 1987; Australian Education Council, *National action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993 – 97*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton, 1993.

² W. Martino, 'Cool Boys', 'Party Animals,' 'Squids' and 'Poofers': Interrogating the Dynamics and Politics of Adolescent Masculinity in School', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1999. W. Martino, and B. Meyenn, B., *What about the Boys? Issues of Masculinity in Schools*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2001: W. Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myth of Boyhood*, Scribe Publications PTY LTD, Australia, 1999.

studies have established that generally middle class children are doing better than working class children.³

The one major issue that is often absent in social class literature is gender, there are very few comparisons made between working class boys and girls, working class boys and middle class boys or working class girls and middle class girls.

In chapter two the foundations of the arguments are laid. The aim of this chapter is to discuss what has happened in girls and education literature over the past 30 years. I outline three of the major policies on girls and education that were developed for the education of girls in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's. Then I consider if these policies have improved girls' education.

Chapter three considers the literature about boys in education. There is concern that boys are underachieving at school. Firstly it was thought that feminist policy reform was hampering boys educational performance, however more recent concerns are for the way that boys develop their dominate ideologies of masculinity.⁴ The purpose of this chapter is to find out which boys are underachieving at school.

Chapter four discusses educational success in relation to social class to see if this literature discusses working class girls and education. Middle and working class relations to educational success are discussed and then gender, social class and education are considered.

The final chapter draws together all the information gender and education and social class and education. This chapter clearly shows that there is an absence of working class girls within the body literature on gender and

³ H. Dekker, R. Basker, and G. Driessen, 'Complex Inequalities of Educational Opportunities: A Large Scale Longitudinal Study on Relation Between Gender, Social Class, Ethnicity and School Success', *Educational Review Research and Education*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2000; H. Van De Werfhorst, A. Sullivan, and S. Cheung, 'Social Class, Ability and Choice of Subject in Secondary and Tertiary Education in Britain', *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 29, 2003.

education and on social class and education. Recommendations are then made to address this absence.

CHAPTER TWO

Girls and Education

This chapter outlines issues on girls and education. The research, policies and literature are related to girls' achievements in education. First the three major policies that were developed over the past 30 years to help the educational achievements of girls are discussed. Then the success of the policies are analysed, by looking at girls achievements and success in year 12.

In Australia, feminists have made many advances and are continuing to do so, for instance, going into a hotel, enabling women to driving a car and the gaining the right for women to vote. With the rise of second wave feminism in the 1960's many things began to change, such as, equal pay in some job areas, effective control of fertility, more women in the work force and awareness of sexual discrimination and harassment.⁵ Education has long been a concern to feminists in Australia. They have been concerned with issues such as, educational attainment, equality of access within education and educational outcomes for girls. This concern has lead to the development and introduction of policies that looked at the education of girls. These gender reform policies, when applied, have been beneficial to the educational experience of girls.

The work of the British feminist educators was being noticed by Australian feminists and educators, this work focused on changing educational policy to help benefit girl's educational achievements.

⁵ B. Barker, 'Girls' World or Anxious Times: Whats Really Happening at School in the Gender War?', *Education Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 1997; B. Francis, *Boys, Girls and Achievement: Addressing the Classroom Issues*, Routledge Falmer, London, 2000.

Many Australian educators took up the work of the British feminists educators and loudly and repeatedly pointed to the ways in which traditional schooling in Australia has operated to marginalise girls and privilege boys.⁶

The feminist education lobby in the early 1970's discussed ways that girls were being marginalised within the education system. Girls were less likely to receive equal attention in the classroom, which meant boys were getting more of the teachers time devoted to them. Girls were less likely to be recognised as intellectuals and they were less likely to take high status subjects (maths, science and physics) in senior school. This hampered girls chances of getting into university as high status subjects are often prerequisites for most university courses. High status subjects also tend to lead to higher paying work.⁷

Feminists have placed great demands on governments over the past thirty years to change educational experiences and outcomes for girls and women in the school system. Governments have responded to this pressure by introducing policies, such as, *Girls, Schools and Society* (1975), *The 1987 National Policy for the Education of Girls* and *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls, 1993- 97*.

The 1975 Girls, Schools and Society policy, was the first national report that was written directly about the education of girls. Before this report there was not a substantial amount of research done on sexual discrimination or gender issues in schools. From this time onwards, there was an explosion of feminist writings and research that has discussed, the topic of gender and education.

⁶ J. Gill and K. Starr, 'Sauce for the Goose? Deconstructing the Boy – in –Education Push', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2000, p. 324.

⁷ R. Teese and J. Polesel, *Undemocratic Schooling: Equity and Quality in Mass Secondary Education in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003.

The basic aim of the 1975 report was to make governments and the public aware that girls were not doing as well as they could be doing at school. The report emphasised what the education lobby was saying. It also noted that girls were also less likely than boys to stay on to complete secondary school. The report also notes that 'by 1974 a 2.4% difference existed in favour of males between the proportion of males and females retention rates to the final year of schooling'.⁸ These figures clearly show that there was a difference among boys' and girls' education and that something needed to be done for girls to improve their educational and learning opportunities. The report also urged that the government to take action and to put a stop to sexual discrimination in schools and to make sure subject choices were equally available to both boys and girls. Between 1975 and the next national policy on girls and education many other reports and research were carried out by individual states and scholars on gender and education.⁹

The next major national policy, *The 1987 National Policy for the Education of Girls*, was developed to improve the educational experience of girls by eliminating gender bias at school and promoting equal opportunities. This was a vast improvement on the 1975 policy aimed only to make teachers, parents and more importantly governments aware of the problem of inequality in schools. The 1987 policy, claimed that:

Research and other information relating to outcomes from schooling confirm that there are deficiencies in the relative resources available to girls, the amount and quality of interaction with teachers and the quality and relevance of teacher education. These contribute both directly and indirectly

⁸ Schools Commission, op. cit..

⁹ See for example Commonwealth Schools Commission, *Girls and Tomorrow: The Challenge for Schools*, 1984. (full bibliography details unavailable); Quality of Education Review Committee, *Report Quality of Education in Australia*, Canberra, 1985. (full bibliography details unavailable).

to the quality of girl's education with serious implications for their opportunities both at school and beyond.¹⁰

The 1987 policy aimed to ensure that both girls and boys can participate equally in the school curriculum, which in turn would lead to full and equal participation in economic and social life. This could be achieved by changing the curriculum so that it could 'provide more comprehensive perspectives to broaden girls' understanding and options'.¹¹

The 1987 national policy aimed to change gender-stereotyped areas of the curriculum and change particular curriculum areas to enhance girls' participation and achievements. As a result, girls were encouraged to undertake maths and science classes, which had previously been male dominated areas of the curriculum. It is important for girls to take on these subjects in their final years of school because if they are not encouraged they instantly become disadvantaged compared to boys, in their plight for a university placement. Reasons that girls did not take these subjects, were because they were not encouraged to do so, and the subjects' content was male dominated. For instance, subjects such as, history did not included any history of women and maths cantered around things like carpentry.¹²

In 1993 another policy *The 1993-97 National Action Plan for the Education of Girls* was written as a follow up to the 1987 policy. The 1993-97 policy noted that girls still needed to be considered in government policy even though improvements had been made since the 1987 policy on girls and education. The main objectives of the report were:

...raising awareness of the educational needs of girls, to promote equal access to participation in appropriate curriculum, a

¹⁰ Commonwealth School Commission, op. cit., p. 9.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 71.

¹² J. Kenway, and S. Willis, *Answering Back: Girls, Boys and Feminism in Schools*. Allen and Unwin, NSW, 1997.

supportive school environment and equitable resource allocation.¹³

The action plan claimed that these four points needed to be addressed, as equality between boys and girls still did not exist in schools. 'Education which leads to equality of outcomes for girls and boys has not yet been achieved in Australia'.¹⁴

The three policies addressed were adopted into schools', as girls were not achieving to their full potential due the number of factors that have already been stated. At no stage were these policies implemented to directly or indirectly undermine the achievement of boys. These policies set about change in the education system, they helped develop programs for girls and introduced into schools things such as, supportive environments for girls to learn in, strategies to monitor girls who are at risk of not completing school, and some single sex classes in co-educational schools.¹⁵

In accordance with these programs and strategies many things began to change, for example girls' retention rates began to improve. In 1991 76.7% of girls who were studying full time stayed on to complete school increasing to 79.1% of girls who were studying full time completing school in 2001.¹⁶

As a result of these policies girls are performing very well and topping classes in some subjects, in the fields of maths and science.¹⁷ '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.'¹⁸ However with encouragement to do subject that they had not previously done and the

¹³ Australian Education Council, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁴ ibid., p. vii.

¹⁵ J. Kenway and S. Willis, op. cit.

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of statistics, 2002, 'Australian Social Trends', [online], Available: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs>. [02, May 2003].

¹⁷ R. Teese, and J. Polesel, op. cit., 2003.

¹⁸ L. Yates, 'Gender Equity and The Boys Debate: What Sort of Challenge is it?' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1997, p 340.

change of subject content, some girls scores in 1995 matched those of boys in maths and science.¹⁹

It can clearly be seen that over recent years' girls appear to be doing better at school compared to boys. As a follow on from their success at school it is also recognised that more women go to university, enter law and medicine and that women's overall employment rate has slightly risen.²⁰ Having said this it is males who still do seemingly better than girls after school.²¹ No matter how good girls do at school boys are still doing better than girls after school. For instance girls' career choices are limited, whereas for boys this is not the case, as males hold down more managerial and full time positions where females make up most of the casual and part time positions.²² These part time and casual positions do not lead to personal financial security, hence women's income has remained 'static since the late 1980's at around 83%²³ of men's income. High achieving girls may not have the same options open to them as high achieving boys.

The reported rise girls of retention rates and year 12 marks can also be misleading in a way that make out girls are gaining higher marks in all subjects as a direct results of these polices, however this is not the case:

Then, as now, males rather than females predominated among those falling behind in school and being sent to special education classes ... then, as now, girls overall retention rates and success rates in schools were not of the pattern that was previously associated with disadvantaged groups.²⁴

In reality it is still boys who are taking up more of the teachers' time in class and gaining wider social benefits no matter how hard or little they

¹⁹ R. Teese, M. Davies, M. Charlton, J. Polesel, *Who Wins at School? Boys and Girls in Australian Secondary Education*, Australia Government Publishing Services, Australia, 1995.

²⁰ L. Yates. Op. cit.

²¹ J. Kenway and S. Willis, op. cit.

²² L. Yates, op. cit.

²³ L. Yates, op. cit., p. 340.

²⁴ L. Yates, op. cit, p. 339.

work at school.²⁵ The boys' lobby is ignorant of many policies and feminist research that have been done on girls' education. The lobby willingly turns a blind eye to feminist issues when putting forward their arguments, however most feminist studies have discussed masculinity. 'Research continues to show that the interests of girls are subordinated in schools. School culture is still very masculine and becomes more masculine as students get older'.²⁶

It can be seen that these policies have changed some things for the better of girls' education. However it is not clear which girls are reaping the benefits from these policies, as most of the literature discusses middle class girls and their success at school. My concern is that it may not be all girls who are doing better at school and this is not fully considered in most of the literature on girls and education. The following chapter discusses boys and education, because there is an increasing concern for boys in the education system. The chapter also tries to assess if all boys are underachieving at school.

²⁵ R. Teese, et. al, op. cit., 1995

²⁶ J. Gill and K. Starr, op. cit., p. 319.

CHAPTER THREE

Boys and Education

Boys and education will be discussed throughout this chapter. Many arguments have been put forward to explain why boys are not doing as well as girls in their final years of schooling. One argument put forward is the lack of male role-models in schools,²⁷ another argument is that boys are complacent and do not see the need to put much effort in to their school work²⁸. The main concern for some is the way that boys are developing their masculinity, as dominate ideologies of masculinity usually conflict with academia.²⁹

One would expect that the success of girl's achievements would be welcomed with open arms, that they would be congratulated for all of their hard work. However girls' achievements should not be a cause for concern nor should girls be blamed for the so-called underachievement of boys. One would also assume that girls' achievements would be celebrated alongside the general improvement for all students, instead these trends are viewed by many commentators as cause for great concern.³⁰

Chris Woodhead, the British Government's Chief Inspector of Schools, has argued that the failure of boys, and in particular white working class boys, is one of the most disturbing problems we face within the whole education system.³¹

²⁷ S. Biddulph, *Raising Boys: Why Boys are Different and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well Balanced Men*, Finch Publishing PTY LTD, Australia, 1997.

²⁸ N. Cortis and E. Newmarch, *Boys in Schools Whats Happening?* 2000. (full Bibliography details unavailable).

²⁹ W. Martino, op. cit., 2001; W. Pollack, op. cit., 1999.

³⁰ S. Heath, 'Watching the Backlash: The Problematisation of Young Women's Academic Success in 1990's Briton,' *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1999, p. 249.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 249.

This 'disturbing problem' is often looked at in simplistic terms, that boys are failing because of girls rather than looking at why boys are having trouble at school or in particular which boys are having trouble.

The underachievement of boys is not new.

'When seen through the lenses of class and ethnicity, the recent 'discovery' that not all boys are doing well at school is hardly news at all, yet many advocates of boys' education act as if no one had ever realised it before'.³²

The underachieving boy only became central to the discussion because it has been argued that girls are outperforming boys and that feminist policy reform has focused on helping girls to improve their educational experience through the introduction of programs in the education system to directly help girls rather than boys.³³ 'As far back as the seventeenth century, the English philosopher John Locke, amongst others expressed a concern for boys' problems with language and literacy'.³⁴ The problem of the underachieving boy is rather entrenched, and not because the last thirty years has seen the rise of female success in the education system but rather a fault in the education of boys itself over a long period of time.³⁵

The media has also played great attention to this issue. 'Media stories have given increasing weight in recent years to the view that girls are now more successful at school than boys'.³⁶ One example of how the media is fuelling the issue was shown on a BBC TV program. The program at was entitled "Men Aren't Working", 'the rhetoric of the program was that young

³² M. Mills, 'Troubling the Failing Boys' Discourse,' *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2000, p 240.

³³ Foster, V., M. Kimmel, and C. Skelton, 'What About the Boys? An Overview of Debates,' in W. Martino, and B. Meyenn (eds), *What About the Boys? Issues of Masculinity in Schools*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2001.

³⁴ V. Foster et. al., op. cit. p.2.

³⁵ M. Mills op.cit. V. Foster et. al., op. cit.

³⁶ R. Teese, op. cit., 1995, p. v.

women's success was brought at the expense of the young men's failure'.³⁷ Many people saw, and many media outlets showed, that male underachievement was a direct result of female success:

The program is dominated by an undisguised assumption that young girl's success has had a devastating effect on the psychological well-being of young men: that their low self-esteem and lack of confidence is entirely due to the rising confidence of their female peers.³⁸

According to the program more women are holding down jobs, there are more high achieving females than there are males in the area that the documentary was made. These are just some of the ways in which the program illustrates how women are leaving men behind. Through this type of media coverage women are constantly being placed directly in competition with men. Nothing will be achieved if the discussion surrounds the mentality of girls versus boys, and that girls are achieving at the expense of boys.

Some feminist academics and researchers are suggesting that a backlash is occurring against feminist and feminist policy.³⁹ For instance boys' education only became a concern when some girls were gaining better year 12 marks. 'The backlash has only arisen as girls have started to do well in male curriculum areas'.⁴⁰ With the help of the media, the concern for girls' educational opportunities slowly began to be pushed off the political agenda and was being replaced with a concern for boys' underachievement at school.⁴¹ This sort of backlash and media portrayal of female success and male underachievement is occurring both in Britain and Australia. 'The start of each school year in Australia is regularly heralded in by media reports

³⁷ S. Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁹ J. Gill and K. Starr, *op. cit.* S. Heath, *op. cit.* M. Mills, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ S. Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

⁴¹ S. Heath, *op. cit.* M. Mills, *op. cit.*

lamenting the supposed underachievement of boys in the previous year's matriculation results'.⁴²

This of course is not entirely true as boys are not failing as a result of girls success in fact most boys are doing quite well at school and it is only some boys who are underachieving. 'Many boys are reaping significant benefits, academically and socially, from the schooling system'.⁴³ This is where the concerns for boys has changed, as they are now concerned with things such as, a lack of role models in schools.

The lack of male role models within schools is believed to be one important key as to why boys aren't doing as well as girls at school.⁴⁴ It has been stated that in schools girls have more role models than boys:

Girls need role-models at least as much as boys, but girls get far more role-models in school, and those women teachers often seem to share more of themselves. Consequently, girls drink in more data on how to be a woman than boys do on how to be a man.⁴⁵

A conclusion can be drawn that more role models means greater success at school. How about role models in the wider community? Boys have more role models in the wider community, for example, sports stars, top businessmen, fictional characters, super heroes, and so on. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that boys in the end have more successful lives due to the amount of role models they have to look up to in their everyday lives.⁴⁶

Boys' complacency has also been noted as a reason to why they are not achieving as well as girls in their last years of high school. It has been said that girls feel they need to invest more time and effort in to their education

⁴² M. Mills. op. cit., p. 237.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴⁴ S. Biddulph, op. cit.

⁴⁵ S. Biddulph, op. cit., p148.

⁴⁶ S. Biddulph, op. cit.

to be competitive in future employment, whereas boys feel that they do not have to, as they think there will be work for them anyway:

Girls are now more ambitious concerning their future working lives than ever before. It therefore seems reasonable to argue that many girls feel they must be better than males in order to compete in the labour market on equal footing.⁴⁷

Research has also suggested that, boys' development stages may have something to do with literacy, as their literacy development differs at different stages of their schooling.⁴⁸ To further elaborate on this suggestion, it has been made that, it is the way boys' brains work that hampers them from having good literacy skills.

Boys' brains are wired in a way that makes it harder for them to take feelings and impressions from the right side of their brain and put these into words on the left side. They need extra help to master written language, express themselves verbally and learn to enjoy reading.⁴⁹

It was usually women's brains that were considered to be different or lacking in some way or another that disables them to do something.

Nineteenth century neuroanatomists and craniologists, for example, diligently measured and weighed females' brains to prove women lacked a talent for the tasks of scientific reasoning.⁵⁰

This way of thinking about women is still apparent as ten years ago girls were alleged to be inferior at logical and spatial reasoning, so there was no further need to investigate a lack of women from the

⁴⁷ B. Francis, *op. cit.* p. 121.

⁴⁸ N. Cortis and E. Newmarch, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ S. Biddulph, *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁵⁰ A. Eisenberg, 'Women and the Discourse of Science,' (full bibliography details not available).

areas of math's and science.⁵¹ This is absurd because it is now widely recognised that girls can and do achieve quite well in these areas. So how can we really accept the above argument and take it seriously as 'numerous studies have failed to show difference in brain structure'.⁵²

Aside from boys brains being 'wired wrong' social factors are also said to play a role in boys' underachievement at school.⁵³ The way boys are socialised in particular has been linked with them having low literacy rates. In 2000 a national literacy study was conducted, which found that boys and girls in grade three did not differ significantly on reading and numeracy (boys' literacy skills 91% and girls 94%⁵⁴). However at the age of 15 a significant difference in literacy and numeracy was found, with girls achieving higher on literacy tasks than boys. This maybe because 'girls put more time into reading, the arts, and music than boys ... overall many boys confine their out-of-school activities to T.V, sport, and, for about half, play with a home computer'.⁵⁵ It has found that boys aged eight to fourteen mainly only read in school while girls do most of their reading at home.⁵⁶

Subject choices may also have an effect on boys' overall achievement in year 12. Boys tend to stick with more traditional subjects with higher benefits, however, they are easier to fail, whereas girls are willing to broaden their subject choices. Not only does subject choice effect boys overall achievements. Subject choices also have strong links to the way that they develop their masculinity. Masculine traits are developed in direct opposition to feminine traits. Thus boys are less likely to do things they see as feminine characteristics, reading being one of these.⁵⁷

⁵¹ B. Barker, op. cit. p. 223.

⁵² J. Buckingham, 'The Trouble With Boys,' *Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2000, p. 12.

⁵³ S. Biddulph, op. cit. W. Pollack, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Cortis and Newmarch, op. cit., p. 10.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 10

⁵⁷ S. Biddulph, op. cit. W. Martinio, op. cit., 1999.

Boys develop their masculinity 'within a set of cultural or social practices which involve a rejection and denigration of what they consider to be feminist attributes or behaviours that often serve as markers of homosexuality in the policing of ascendant forms of masculinity'.⁵⁸ It is un-cool (unmasculine) for boys to participate in education especially in English, as English is seen as a feminine subject.⁵⁹ It is still un-cool for boys to be seen reading as most boys regard reading as a feminine thing to do. Some boys do not read outside of school as they worry about what might be said about their (inauthentic) masculine pose.⁶⁰ A study of Western Australian high school boys, found, that if boys are caught or seen as acting in an unmasculine way (reading a book) they would be considered 'outsiders' and be harassed by the other students.⁶¹

A case study done on working class boys in Britain also confirms what is happening in Australia. The study highlights the conflict that some boys experience between masculinity and schoolwork. One boy's (Shaun's) experience in the British school system is discussed. Shaun is a poor, white, working class, boy trying to get a head academically and deal with the conflicting ideologies of masculinity. Shaun is trying to carve out a space where he can have two personas, one where he is seen as tough in the playground and the other as academic in the class room, while still trying to remain an insider with his peers.⁶²

It is argued that combining the two, working class masculinities and educational success will have costly psychiatric effects.⁶³ Boys have serious emotional problems, which are caused by the false ideology of masculinity,

⁵⁸ W. Martino, op. cit., 1999, p. 244.

⁵⁹ S. Heath, op. cit.

⁶⁰ S. Heath, op. cit. V. Foster et al, op. cit.

⁶¹ W. Martino, op. cit., 1999.

⁶² D. Reay, 'Shaun's Story: Troubling Discourses of White Working-Class Masculinities,' *Gender and Education*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2002, p.227.

⁶³ D. Reay, 'Finding and Losing Your-self?: Working-Class Relationships to Education', *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 16, 2000.

these emotional problems are hidden by a 'mask of masculinity'.⁶⁴ The ideology of masculinity is false and this false representation is powerful and many boys adopt it. These serious emotional problems that are caused by false ideologies of masculinity are hampering boys in the way of education and other things in life such as relationships, work and so on.⁶⁵

In Britain the concern for the notion of masculinity has coincided with the fact that girls are doing better on the GCSE (final year of schooling). Over the years girl's construction of femininity has changed, this has had a positive effect on their achievements, whereas boy's construction of masculinity has by and large stayed the same, this has apparently had a negative consequence on the achievements of boys. A possible reason for the change in women's roles and construction of femininity could be due to the fact that women need to compete in a male dominated world. As Naomi Wolf put it, 'the world view taught to young women is male'.⁶⁶ This may also be why males find no reason to change the way they construct masculinity.

Boys' construction of desirable forms of masculinity remain predominantly unchanged because these reflect those of the broader society, in which constructions of desirable masculinity are also unchanged.⁶⁷

The orientation of masculinity and masculine behaviour should be more of a concern to the 'boy's in school lobbyists' than the feminist educational polices in relation to why some boys are not doing as well at school compared to some girls.

However all is not as bleak as it would appear, as boys are not falling by the wayside as many of the things that have been stated as a cause for boys disadvantage may not disadvantage their futures. For instance low literacy

⁶⁴ W. Pollack, op. cit.

⁶⁵ W. Pollack, op. cit., p. xxiii.

⁶⁶ N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How images of Beauty are used Against Women*, Chatto and Windus LTD, London, 1991, p.210.

⁶⁷ B. Francis, op. cit., p. 128.

rates in young males may not lead to literacy problems in the future.⁶⁸ The older males get the more likely it is for them to participate in education and 'males who leave school early do achieve successful path ways of employment through apprenticeships'.⁶⁹

In 2000, a report was written by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the focus of the report was to identify areas of under achievement in Australian high school students, with its primary focus on gender.⁷⁰ The report found that there are still inequalities surrounding gender in schools. However they claim that pervious debate around this topic has been too narrow:

All recent major statistical and other studies on topics germane to this report have either implicitly or explicitly pointed to the limitations of considering the issue of education performance through simple comparisons between all girls and all boys, or primarily around questions of over or under representation and participation and balance.⁷¹

This issue is not a simple one; there are many factors that need to be taken into account when discussing gender and education. For instance, it can not be assumed that all girls are doing extremely well at school, nor can it be said that all boys are the 'new disadvantaged' or that boy's are failing as a direct result of feminist education policies that were designed to help girls succeed at school. There are a number of different things that are effecting boys educational 'underachievement', but none of them are directly related to the gender reform polices that were introduced throughout the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's.

⁶⁸ N. Cortis and E. Newmarch, op. cit.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁰ C. Collins, J. Kenway and J. Mcleod, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Female in School and Their Initial Destinations after Leaving School*, Deakin University, Victoria, 2000.

⁷¹ C. Collins, et. al., op. cit., p. 60.

In reality boys underachievement at school is a problem, but which boys are these? Many boys are doing better at school and in the labour market compared to girls but when middle class and working class boys are compared it is also the case that middle class boys are doing better than working class boys, for instance in 1994 88.6% of middle class boys completed year 12 compared to 59.2% of working class boys.⁷²

When these statistics are considered this is where we finally found working class girls as they are often used as a measure to show how poorly the working class boys are doing at school. 9.5% of working class girls finish school compared to working class boys this illustrates how poorly working class boys are doing at school.⁷³ When looking at these statistics it has been noticed that, 94.9% of middle class girls are completing school compared to 68.7% of working class girls.⁷⁴ This is where we can see that it is not all girls who are doing exceptionally well at school. It is here that we can see the working class girls are doing a little better at school compared to working class boys and that working class girls are not doing considerably well compared to middle class girls.

Gender and education literature may not discuss working class girls because one would expect literature on social class and education to discuss working class girls. As working class girls are mostly overlooked in gender and education literature, the next chapter discusses social class and education literature to see if working class girls are discussed in relation to education.

⁷² C. Collins, et. al., op. cit.

⁷³ C. Collins, et. al., op. cit.

⁷⁴ C. Collins, et. al., op. cit.

CHAPTER FOUR

Class and Education

As pointed out in the last two chapters, most of the literature surrounding girls and education only considers middle class girls and most of the literature surrounding boys and education concentrates on working class boys. One would assume then that work on social class and education would have more information on working class girls. The focus of this chapter is on social class and education to determine if in fact working class girls are considered. First the literature on how social class effects educational outcomes for working class and middle class children is discussed, and then working class and middle class relations to education are examined.

Social class has been and still is a widely studied area. It should be noted that there is a limited amount of research on social class in Australia. Most of the research is conducted in Europe, with a substantial amount of it done in Britain. Hence this chapter will rely heavily on British research. There are a range of approaches that can be taken into account when studying social class, from an economic prospective to a cultural capital approach (for example theories of Marx and Bourdieu).

As it has been noted in the previous chapters, the claim that girls are by far out succeeding boys at school, is rather narrow as a number of factors such as social class have not been taken into account when considering this debate. Numerus studies and articles have found that social class has a profound effect on peoples' lives.⁷⁵ There have also been numerus studies

⁷⁵ D. Reay, op. cit., 2000: V. Walkerdine, H. Lucey, and J. Melody, *Growing up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*, Palgrave, Hampshire, 2001: B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.

done on the relationship between social class and education.⁷⁶ These studies have found that class is a major factor in determining one's educational success. For instance it is middle class children who have more successful educational experiences and they generally do better at school than working class children.⁷⁷

There are many different ways to define social class, and as society changes it becomes increasingly harder to define as many people do not clearly fit in to rigid class structures (working class, middle class or upper class). Maguire gave a good example of how hard it can be to define class and to define what class she herself belongs to.⁷⁸ For example if class is defined 'historically in relation to her socio economic origins then she is working class, if she define class culturally in relation to her current occupational status then she is middle class'.⁷⁹ Another reason as to why class maybe hard to define is that people do not want to be placed into a particular class. People have no trouble looking at the wider social picture in relation to class but are very reluctant to put themselves into a particular social class group.⁸⁰

Not only is social class hard to define, there are a number of class theorists and theories. Marx is one of the main contributors to the study of class structures and saw social class in terms of economic capital.

A persons' class is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations, however difficult it may be to identify such places neatly. His consciousness,

⁷⁶ D. Reay, op. cit., 2000. H. Dekkers, et. al., op. cit.

⁷⁷ H. Dekkers, et. al., op. cit.

⁷⁸ M. Maguire, M. 'Missing links: Working-class Women of Irish descent' in, P. Mahony and C. Zmroczek (eds), *Women and Social Class: Class Matters: Working-class Women's Perspectives on Social Class*, Taylor and Francis Publishing, 1997.

⁷⁹ M. Maguire, op. cit, pp. 87.

⁸⁰ Savage, M., Bagnall, G. and Longhurst, B. 'Ordinary, Ambivalent and Defensive: Class Identities in the Northwest of England' *Sociology*, Vol. 35, 2001, pp. 875.

culture, and politics do not enter the definition of his class position.⁸¹

Bourdieu on the other hand saw cultural capital as the main difference between classes. Bourdieu's 'analysis of class does not depend on objective economic or indeed political criteria alone for its foundation, but on a broad-ranging account of class practices which includes food tastes, clothing, body dispositions, housing styles and forms of social choice in every day life'.⁸² In other words cultural capital is various linguistic and cultural competences that middle class people possess.

Social class is very important and it does have a profound effect on people lives, in particular to education. As it can be seen social class analysis can be complicated so it is understandable to see why they may not focus on gender education and social class in one study.

There was a vast amount of research after the Second World War done on class and the sociology of education. 'A primary focus of educational research was the social distribution of educational opportunity'.⁸³ When looking at social class and education, England is a good place to start as England has deep rooted class hegemony and substantial amounts of research have been conducted in England relating to class and education.

When the English state schooling system was set up in the late nineteenth century the intention of the dominate classes was still to police the working classes rather than to educate them.⁸⁴

Thus education was never meant to educate the working class. It is argued that this is still the case today as 'we still have an education system in which working class education is made to service middle class interests'.⁸⁵

⁸¹ A. G. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History, a Defence*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2000, pp. 73.

⁸² C. Wilkes, 'Bourdieu's Class' in R. Harker, C. Mahar and C. Wilkes (eds), *An Introduction to the Pierre Bourdieu: The Practice of Theory*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1990, pp.109.

⁸³ C. Chitty, 'Reports and Surveys: Education and Social Class', *The Political Quarterly*, 2002, p. 208.

⁸⁴ Reay, D., op. cit., 2002, p. 334.

Over the years the British government has tried to intervene and make education as accessible to the working class as it is to the middle class. The government introduced a specific scheme to benefit bright but social disadvantaged inner city children. However, when this was examined closely it was discovered that, 'the four children who were on these programs were all from professional middle class families and three of these had failed to get into selective schools'.⁸⁵ This is an example of education working to service middle class interests.

Schools in Australia had also introduced strategies to help socially disadvantaged children achieve at school. One major strategy in particular was the introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in the early 1980's. The VCE included vocational and general subjects into the curriculum that were solely school assessed and not recognised by university.

The introduction of vocational and general subjects into the lower end of the curriculum in the 1980's enlarged that space available for low achievers and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁸⁷

This meant that the students who were low achievers or socially disadvantaged, were able to stay on at school and prepare for future work or training. The down side to this is that because those subjects were not recognised by universities they were valued as low subjects and not supported by student or their parents. This was reviewed in the mid 1980's and changes were made so that all subjects would lead to university thus

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 334.

⁸⁶ Lucy, H. and Reay, D., 'Carrying the Beacon of Excellence: Social Class Differentiation and Anxiety at a Time of Transition', *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 7, 2003, p. 327.

⁸⁷ R. Teese et. al., op. ct., 2003. p 40.

giving each subject equal prestige.⁸⁸ A change of government occurred in Victoria by the time the changes were made so:

...conservative reactions that had built up in the 1980's was quick to restore much of the old examinations regime the difference scaling of high value and low value subjects, greater prescription of subject content, and the reduction in weight of school assessment.⁸⁹

So a space that was originally created to service those who are socially disadvantaged did not eventuate.

It is assumed that children, both working class, and middle class have equal access to education. A liberalist view is often taken, if you want it bad enough, work hard enough you will eventually get it. This is not always the case, as working class families are disadvantaged from the start. Schools assume that each child has a certain amount of knowledge before they start school, for example it is assumed that children have some reading, drawing and writing skills. This may not be the case for all children as some may not have access to books until they get to school. Parents may not have the luxury of being able to spend time with their children (due to work commitments) and prepare them for school.

This is where Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital theory can be applied. The more cultural capital that a child is exposed to before school, the more of a head start that the child has compared to a child who are not exposed to dominate ideologies of cultural capital. Bourdieu sees cultural capital as important in determining school success for instance:

...he argues that the possession of cultural capital varies with social class, yet the education system assumes the possession

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

of cultural capital. This makes it very difficult for lower-class pupils to succeed in the education system.⁹⁰

Thus middle class students gain higher educational credentials than those students from lower class positions. As they are more able to fit into the education system due to their cultural capital.

In Britain it is also assumed that parents are free to choose what school their child goes to but:

Research has consistently shown that these choices have to be made within a complex and unequal context of constraints, some of them structured, some of them cultural and familial education markets are also spatially specific and not only the number of successful comprehensive schools but where a family lives in relation to them is crucial in determining options and outcomes of choice.⁹¹

Families of the middle class see no room for educational failure. They go to extreme lengths to see that educational failure does not occur and that their children get into high schools with pristine academic records. For instance they may:

... insist that the primary school curriculum prepare children for selective entrance exams; campaigning for setting and streaming to be introduced; employing private tutors; and buying properties within catchment areas of high-achieving secondary schools (and when that latter strategy is too expensive, lying about addresses).⁹²

Working class families don't have such options open to them, as they may not be able to afford some of the measures (such as private tutors or buying

⁹⁰ Sullivan, A. 'Cultural Capital and Educational Attainment', *Sociology*, Vol. 35, 2001, p. 895.

⁹¹ H. Lucy, and D. Reay, op. cit., p. 324.

⁹² Reay, op. cit., 2002, p. 341.

property in specific catchment areas) taken by middle class parents to get their children into exclusive schools, regardless of how bright their child is.

There is a lot of emphasis placed on 'being successful' at school and this is problematic for working class children, as:

'...the working class are constantly being left behind in this performance culture precisely because they are the failures against which middle class success is produced.'⁹³

For working class children, this leads to feeling of never being 'good enough', or not 'fitting in' because they are nearly always seen as failures.⁹⁴

The working class also have to deal with complex emotions about discovering and reinventing themselves, unlike the middle class. This can have a negative effect for the working class students as they have to deal with ambiguous feelings about what sort of self they are seeking, for example, leaving their working 'classness' behind to take on a more middle class persona. They have to contend with 'tales of ambivalence and uncertainty but also tales of stronger more urgent motions of treachery, collusion, tokenism, disloyalty and guilt'.⁹⁵ So if they finally bet all odds and get into a selective school then not only do they have to compete academically, they also have to deal with the above complex emotions.

Social class and educational advantage or disadvantage is still very much intact.⁹⁶ They claim that most of the research in class and education has concentrated on level of achievement and not the importance of field of study or subject, which their article does. They argue that:

'...students choice of subjects must be economic and cultural stratification, as children, choose subjects that corresponded to

⁹³ Ibid., p. 332.

⁹⁴ D. Reay, op.cit, 2000, p. 337.

⁹⁵ H. Lucy, and D. Reay, op. cit, p. 339.

⁹⁶ H. Van De Werfhorst, et.al., op. cit.

their parents positions in both the economic and cultural hierarchy.⁹⁷

So it is more likely that middle class children will have more access to economic and cultural capital which in turn will lead to success. Not only do subject choices have class connotations, but reading levels do to. 'Reading levels at age 11 shows that social class is very important and that those from more advantage social classes scored better than those who were not. Their attainment at age 11 is highly associated with attainment at age 16 plus, the better they are at reading at age 11 the better success at their O levels/ CSE's'.⁹⁸

The government would have you believe that social class is not an issue and if your child works hard or is bright enough then there is no stopping them, this is the case for some, but it is certainly not the case for all children. Social class inequalities lie in the distribution of cultural capital. This cultural capital consists of familiarity of the dominate culture, thus working class pupils find academic success very hard. For instance working class children unlike middle class children are on the back foot to start with as they do not attain cultural capital, which the education system values. Economically elite children are more likely to develop skills that lead to areas of high profit. While working class children are more likely to develop technical skills which leads to security in the labour market.⁹⁹

Gender has not really been considered in the research on social class and education, even now there is a minimal amount of research done in relation to social class and gender and education. However some studies have devoted a small paragraph on gender, but most ignore the fact that gender also has an effect on educational outcomes.

⁹⁷ H. Van De Werfhorst, et. al., op. cit., p. 50.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 58-59.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

When studies have looked at social class and gender in relation to education, research has mainly focused on working class boys more than on working class girls. For instance one study done in the Netherlands¹⁰⁰ focused on all variables, but only devoted one paragraph to gender in there whole report. They found that when looking at gender and social class it is boys from middle class families that out perform those from working class families at school, and this is the same for girls respectively. However the difference in the performance of the middle class boys to that of working class boys is significantly larger than the difference between middle class girls and working class girls. 'The advantage is almost a full school year for high SES boys, whereas for girls it is only two-thirds of a year'.¹⁰¹ In other words, middle class boys are a head of working class boys by a full school year, whereas middle class girls are only a head of working class girls by two thirds of a school year.

The effect social class has on subject choice is that middle class girls have slightly less tendency to choose gender specific subjects compared to working class girls. 'Only 1 out of ever 25 low-SES girls opt for a technical or agricultural specialization, whereas for high-SES girls the ratio is 1 out of 7'.¹⁰²

Working class students' selection of subjects usually leads them to post education and training of low socio-economic status and low achievement, which severely restricts their career choices. In general boys are disadvantaged by poor literacy rates. This prevents them from 'participating in a wide range of school and post school subjects and fields of work'.¹⁰³ Another disadvantage (but not always) is, early school leaving for boys, as they may become less employable than boys who stay on at school.

¹⁰⁰ H. Dekkers, et. al., op. cit.

¹⁰¹ H. Dekkers, et. el., op. cit., p. 71.

¹⁰² *ibid*, p. 72-73.

¹⁰³ Collins, et al, op. cit, p. 6.

However it does not mean that boys who leave school early are less employable than girls who stay at school. For instance, there are numerous, VET, TAFE and apprenticeships for boys to enter into compared to those available to girls. 'Boys who leave school early are more likely to get full-time work and further training on leaving school than girls who leave school early due to wider range of employment options available to boys in the lower skill occupations'.¹⁰⁴ Girls on the other hand are generally disadvantaged by things such as the type of employment available to them or inability to secure full time employment. 'Girls' post compulsory pathways are less likely to lead to successful labour market outcomes and this is an obvious disadvantage now that women frequently have to be more economically independent'.¹⁰⁵

The next chapter will try and account for why working class girls appear to be overlooked within gender and education literature and social class and education literature. It will also make recommendations for further research.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 7.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In conclusion within this thesis, reading the literature I found a number of interesting things within the literature on girls and education, boys and education and social class and education.

In the second chapter it was noted that the policies that were implemented over the past thirty years have had mostly a positive effect on girls' education.¹⁰⁶ For example more girls are now completing year 12 and some girls are gaining top marks in subjects that they have tended not to take in previous years. It was also found that even though some girls are performing better at school than they had previously done success school does not always lead to successful career paths.¹⁰⁷ For instance girls make up most of the part time and casual positions, which means that they have less job security and lower income.¹⁰⁸ Boys make up most of the full time and managerial positions, thus leading them to better job security and higher income.¹⁰⁹ The most interesting thing that has been brought to light in this chapter was that the literature mainly focused on middle class girls. This left me with the question of, where are the working class girls within the girls and education literature.

The third chapter showed that there is a serious problem with boys' education, however according to some this is not new and boys for a long time have not been doing well at school.¹¹⁰ Some suggest that the main concern for boys' education is the way that they develop their masculinity.¹¹¹ Research on masculinity has shown that masculinity conflicts

¹⁰⁶ R. Teese, and J. Polesel, op. cit., 2003.

¹⁰⁷ L. Yates, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ L. Yates, op. cit.

¹⁰⁹ L. Yates, op. cit.

¹¹⁰ W. Martino, op. cit.

¹¹¹ W. Martino, op. cit.

with academia, for instance, boys see reading as a feminine thing to do. So boys tend only to read at school, whereas girls are much more likely to read outside of school for pleasure. The lack of boys reading has also attributed to their low levels of literacy boys find it increasingly difficult to do well in classes such as English due to their low literacy skills. The interesting thing about boys and education literature is that its main focus is on working class boys and this is where I found some mention of working class girls, but they were only mentioned as a measure to show how badly working class boys are doing.¹¹²

The next chapter looked at social class and education. One would have expected to find some literature on working class girls and education. This chapter found that middle class children generally did better at school than working class children. Research in Britain and Australia found that when programs are implemented into schools to help social disadvantaged children, the programs usually end up helping more middle class children.¹¹³ Other research has found that if working class children are successful at school they usually have to deal with complex emotions, for instance they may feel that they have to leave their working 'classness' behind, thus leading to feelings of treachery. The social class and education literature discussed and made comparisons between all middle class children and all working class children. They rarely looked at gender within these groups, but when gender was considered it was only minimal. However one study found that working class girls chose very gendered subjects such as home economics, art drama and so on. This in turn leads them to very gendered careers which are usually low paid and unstable. So working class boys although very disadvantaged in the education system may have better

¹¹² C. Collins, et. al., op. cit.

¹¹³ H. Dekkers, et. al., op. cit.

labour market prospects, compared to working class girls due to the amount of apprenticeships and unskilled labour available to them.

So it can be seen that there is a considerable absence of working class girls in the literature on girls and education, boys and education and social class and education. Future research needs to pay particular attention to working class girls so we can see how they are performing within the education system.

Some recommendations for future research questions would be: to see exactly how much better working class girls are doing at school compared to working class boys. If working class girls are doing better then working class boys are they staying on to complete school? If they are do they then go straight into the labour market or do they go to university. If they go to university are they finishing their degrees? If they are finishing their degree do they then find professional work or become academic's.

Comparisons should also be made between middle class and working class girls to find out if there is a huge gap in their performance and achievements at school. If their performance and achievements are relatively the same at school what happens after school. If the performance and achievements are different then this should be addressed in education policy. These are just some suggestions that may help to overcome the absence of working class girls in the girls and education, boys and education and social class and education literature.

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