

Sociological debates in education (gender)



Sociological debates in education (gender) My study follows the male dominated sociological line of researching only into male adolescent activity...girls.... suffer a series of multiple oppressions which are beyond my experience and, like being adolescent in a black ghetto need researching and writing about by someone who has experienced these oppressions. Corrigan, Schooling the Smash Street Kids, 1979 Women's aspirations and their image of themselves have profoundly altered in the past quarter of a century.

Seventy per cent of the women surveyed say that they want to develop their careers or find employment, while only 50% regard having children as a goal. Less than a quarter of young women between 18 and 24 feel that women need a stable relationship to be fulfilled. Helen Wilkinson, 1994 Concern about gender and educational attainment focuses mainly on the extent to which females and males perform differently in different subjects and their tendency to study different subjects given the choice. However, it is not true that males generally attain more qualifications or higher grades than females at school, in fact the reverse is the case.

When gender first began to be investigated by sociologists of education, the focus was largely on female under-achievement at every level of the educational system, and the ways in which traditional ideas about the proper role of women in society prevented them from achieving their full potential. However, females have markedly improved their educational performance during the 1980's and 1990's, so that the contemporary situation, while not without its problems and issues for girls in schools, or one where the educational opportunities open to females have possibly never been greater.

Wilkinson (1994) argues that this is part of the Genderquake in which fundamental changes in attitudes towards female role in society has been achieved. Prominent among the 'transformed circumstances' of women is a more positive attitude towards education as a means of improving chances at work. Gender was investigated as a mainstream issue relatively late in the sociology of education. Prior to the 1970's, sociological discussion focused mainly upon class differences in attainment.

However, with the impact of feminist research during the 1970's and 1980's the educational experiences of female students increasingly came to the fore. Three Sets of Explanation have been put forward to account for the observed variations in educational attainment and subject choice. There are genetic explanations, outside School Factors, which emphasize childhood socialization factors based upon external cultural and structural differences and inside school explanations, which look at the sexism inherent in the hidden curriculum.

Genetic explanations of gender differences in attainment were influential in psychology during the 1970's, though the biological determinist approach has a long history. The crucial belief of biological theorists is that gender differences are natural and therefore unalterable. Educationally, then, it would be right and proper to treat boys and girls differently in schools, because their natural inclination are towards different adult roles. Any socially constructed differences between men and women were built upon and constrained by these natural differences.

For example, theories were advanced that females excelled at language based subjects because of their greater verbal and reasoning abilities, yet

under-performed in Maths and science based subjects because of lower levels of innate spatial ability, which restricted their understanding of shape and form. These biological theories of innate intelligence have been strongly criticized. Kelly suggests (1982) that gender differences in spatial ability may be attributed to the types of toys children play with rather than their genetic make up.

Furthermore, genetic explanations cannot adequately account for the narrowing of gender differences in Maths and Science based subjects since the 1980's - if the differences were biologically determined we would expect them to remain constant over time. A variation of this theme is represented by The New Right ideologies as put forward by Roger Scrutton, which suggests that the Biological and natural instincts of the sexes determine a particular sex division of labour in the home and the gender segregation of the male dominated public sphere and the female world of the private home.

These gender arrangements are seen as a 'natural necessity'. During the 1980's a series of research studies challenged the assumptions that girls were socialized into one particular form of femininity, or that girls did not challenge the notions of feminine roles with which they were presented. For example, Cornell (1986) argued that feminism itself had helped to bring about radical changes in the ways girls perceived themselves, so that they no longer constructed their identity in mainly domestic terms.

Rather women now saw themselves as much as workers as homemakers. More recently Riddell (1992) found that schoolgirls had a dual notion of their futures, linking their subject choices at school to the local labour market (especially working class girls) whilst also accepting that motherhood and

domesticity were important parts of their identity as women. But the girls in Riddell's study were not passive in this process of socialization. Rather they absorbed both accepting and undermining messages about traditional female roles.

In addition working class and middle-class girls expressed different gender codes, with middle-class girls opting for academic education and thus gaining the approval of the middle-class female teachers who they most closely resembled. We all know that for the past 18 years up to 1997 The Conservative Party has been in power. Until the GERBIL (1988) Conservative central government intervened little in gender matters in education. Thus local authorities and individual teachers and schools were largely left to pursue their own policies within the existing framework of legislation.

To that extent the Conservatives accepted the liberal framework of equal opportunities set up by the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act. The establishing of a legally compulsory national curriculum did have profound implications for gender and education. Henceforward, girls (as well as boys) would be required to take science to sixteen and boys would be required to take a foreign language as well as English up to sixteen. These requirements remained in place even when the compulsory national curriculum for the years 14-16 were trimmed back to five subjects back in 1991.

Ironically these reforms could be interpreted as a move in the direction of the firms action demanded by many socialist feminists to establish a compulsory curriculum in which girls could not 'opt out of' and avoid 'hard sciences' and Maths. However, there is a proviso in the Act referring to science which allows students to study either 25% or 12.5% of their

timetable, with only the former providing a route to A level. However, many feminists see this act as merely related to the 'national economic need' rather than any real attempt to reduce female inequality.

A Post-Structural Perspective Gaby Weiner's *Feminism in Education: An Introduction* (1994) accepts that in the future, feminism is likely to be of various ideological hues. Even so, she considers that Feminists are likely to be more effective in education if they share certain broad strategies. 'It is crucial she argues the feminist educators maintain their critique of existing school practices and offer new challenges to meet the ever-changing circumstances of educational practice'. She goes on to suggest a number of possibilities for feminist action in education.

For example challenging the universalities and certainties of predominate male curriculum adopting Feminist teaching/learning approaches, which allow for discussion, group work, etc. and allowing Feminists to work with parents and colleagues to change school curricula or organization. Although not new, it is clear that this book is aware that what has seemed like fragmentation in the Feminist movement can, instead be viewed positively as a variety and difference (i. e. in a poststructural way). Resources Used

Investigating Education and Training: Paul Trowler Sociology for GCSE: Pauline Wilson and Allan Kidd Think Sociology: Paul Stephens et al Education and Training: Paul Heaton and Tony Lawson The Sociology of Education: Karen Chapman, Society Now Series of Books Introduction to Sociology: Mike O'Donnell, Fourth Edition, 1997 Sociology in Perspective: Mark Kirby et al, 1997 Sociology an Interactive Approach: Nik Jorgensen, 1997 Sociology

Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos Gender/26/2/97/P.

Covington/Yellow 1996 Gender/6/1/98/P. Covington/Yellow 1996