

Feminism in education: gender equality

People



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Prior to 1870 education was not formally recognised and only available to the elite few who could afford to educate their children privately or at private schools. The poorer people of society would have to rely on the education of the church and its moral teachings rather than academic teachings. Although the 1870 Forster Act was to bring education to all children between 5-10 years old, it was not welcomed by everyone. Some thought it would lead to the masses 'thinking' for themselves and see their roles in society as unfair, causing them to revolt.

Others such as the church were funded by the state with public money to provide education for the poor and these churches did not want to lose that influence on youth. Although this gave children a few years of formal education, still only the richer children had the opportunity to further their education until they were 18/19 years old, thus education still being based on social class until the 1944. The 1944 Butler Education Act saw the introduction of a three stage structure that is still in place today and gave all pupils an equal chance to develop through education.

It introduced primary education, up to the age of 11, Secondary education, from 11 to 15, and further education which was non-compulsory after the school leaving age. One of the ground-breaking results of the Act was to educate and mobilise women and the working class. It opened secondary school to girls, and the working class, and as a result, a far higher percentage attended higher education after secondary school. This newly found education increased working class awareness of their disadvantaged social position and created a bitter class division between the working and middle class.

The most present act of education is the New Labour. The Labour government famous with its motto, “ Education, Education, Education” focused their campaign on a better education system but kept many old policies such as consumer choice league tables and competition. They mainly focus on market choice and value for money in today’s education. Education, since is formal existence, has always seen a gender divide in the achievement of young people and there is many studies that link gender to education and achievement.

Feminists analyse the school curriculum from a gendered perspective. Feminist argue that education plays a major role in promoting gender inequalities in society through classroom interactions, labeling and school curriculum. They highlight the existence of a gendered curriculum within schools. Since the 1944 Butler Act they have been concerned with the discrimination of girls and the difference in exam results between boys and girls. The different branches within feminism offer different degrees on how this is.

Liberal Feminists see that sex discrimination should be tackled through education legislation and policies and has had some success in highlighting these inequalities through the work of the Equal Opportunities Commission. They see this as being enough to combat the problems within education due to gender but Radical and Marxist feminists feel this is only the surface of the problem and it is much deeper. Radical feminists emphasise a conflict between men and women.

They see men as in the dominant position within the education system to further their own interests and this patriarchy is their main problem. Their

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main goal is to eradicate patriarchal control and free women. They believe that inequality will be brought to an end when women are free from physical and emotional suppression. Marxist feminists believe that social class has its part to play in inequalities and that education is there to support the needs of the ruling class.

As the ruling class do this the women's role is therefore to support men so are the lowest rung of society within a Capitalist society. They agree with Marxist about the hidden curriculum but they feel that both the formal and the hidden are ways of enforcing these unequal roles within education. A study that supports the feminists point of view would be Sharpe (1976) 'Just like a girl: how girls learn to be women'. This study involved interviewing 249 working class girls who lived in London.

It found that many of the girls held traditional views of their role within society- motherhood, marriage and family life. Through the education system they were being set up for these roles or for jobs that were classed as women's work, ie shop assistant, office work, work with little or no promotion opportunities or job satisfaction. To support this study, Kelly (1982) also found differences with regards to gender in the toys that were being given to children.

Although these studies did prove there was some equality between the sexes with regards to the way they children were being educated, they really investigate more the issue of stereotyping. As it is from a feminists point of view it fails to recognise that males were also underachieving at the time of Douglas's study. It also may be a bit dated as it was conducted again in the

1990's with vast differences. Females were now placing much more emphasis on their career and independence.

This emphasises the way society has moved on and there is less of a role perception today. Also the data may have been subjective and open to interpretation as they used the method of interviews. As the studies do show some equality between the sexes, I think these theories may be a bit dated. When these studies were conducted boys were achieving more than girls, roles have changed in today's society and feminists fail to recognise this or offer an explanation.