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**DIFFERENCES IN THE MAKING:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN AUSTRALIAN
SCHOOLING.**

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Date submitted: July, 1991

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with schooling process. Its central focus is on the connection between institutionalized schooling and the constitution of gendered subjectivity in students. The particular contribution of this work lies in its

- (a) demonstration of the gender-laden nature of currently accepted pedagogical practice;
- (b) analysis of the connection between such practice and educational theory ; and
- (c) proposal of a theoretical framework which allows for the contradictory and contested nature of process, a perspective previously lacking in much of traditional educational theory.

Starting from a review of the literature showing evidence of gender differences in schooling outcomes, it is demonstrated that schooling has been implicated in producing these gender differences and hence the construction of gender, but the ways in which this occurs have as yet been only sketchily identified. Neither has there been an adequate theoretical formulation of the process.

My argument begins with a review of psychological theories of gender and sociological accounts of the school's role in the reproduction of social inequality. I propose a framework for an analysis of gender relations in education which utilizes some aspects of psychological and sociological theory approached through recent work in poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, with its focus on discursive practices, affords a theoretical entry into the lived experience of schooling in ways which reveal individuals positioning themselves as well as being positioned within the multiplicity of meanings available in any given situation. In this framework the determinism of the earlier theoretical approaches is avoided.

The substantive focus of the work is on an ethnographic study of a group of middle class children in the upper primary years of schooling. The girls and boys in the group were participants in interviews, questionnaires and testing as well as being the subjects of the ethnography. The research continued through the following year when the focus group of children entered high school. Some of the children attended a coeducational high school whereas others went to an all girls' high school. Part of the ambit of the research has been to contrast the experiences of the students in terms of the school's gender context and to comment on the merits of mixed as opposed to single sex schooling for girls. Other contrasts and comparisons built in to the design include boys' experience as compared to that of girls, primary school as compared to high school, mathematics classroom processes compared to those in other subjects, student classroom behaviour compared to behaviour outside the classroom. More generally the research aimed to identify those commonly accepted features of schooling practice which give rise to students' understandings of the world and their place in it in terms of gender division.

Ultimately gender relations are seen to be a continuous feature of the environment of the school and the classroom, even, albeit differently played out, in the single sex situation. While such gender relations are in some respects similar to processes in the wider society, it is here argued that there are important ways in which gender relations occur in the classroom and the school which are not simple replications of forms to be found in the world beyond school but are peculiar to the process of organized learning and instruction. This thesis deconstructs and reveals the gendered nature of concepts that are commonly found in analyses of schooling processes. These include, among others, the autonomous individual as learner, the problem solving experience, the practice of social skills and the negotiation of group membership. In this respect the process of schooling plays a crucial role in producing and maintaining the gender differences that characterize the total social formation.

I conclude that :

(i) the school is a critical site in the process of constituting gendered subjectivity;

(ii) the discourses which attend and constitute the academic study of education, emanating principally from educational psychology and sociology, have been shown to be less than adequate as a basis for a theory of gender in education. At the same time these discourses have been taken up in the daily practice of teachers and students in ways which relegate the issue of gender to being either a variable of individual psychology or else an attribute of a certain disadvantaged group. In this way gender becomes either an ineluctable fact or a "social problem" or both. And gender as an issue becomes constituted and re-constituted in these terms within schooling. The analysis of gender as problematic presented here reveals the limitations of traditional discipline boundaries and suggests that a post-structuralist approach offers a way out of the theoretical tangle that has hitherto constrained the study of gender in education.

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PhD thesis abstract
Adelaide University
April, 1991.