Everyday Life in Today's Schools: the Female Pupils' Experiences.

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Introduction

On November 1st 1991 *The Times Educational Supplement* published a letter from a school governor querying the activities of the headmistress of a primary school. Among the problems was:

> Finally, we had put in our behaviour guidelines that no punishment should be embarrassing to the child. Now we've heard that she's made girls wear boys' caps if they're caught fighting.

If this disciplinary strategy has been accurately reported, the gender stereotyping is marked. Not only does the school have uniform, with different headgear for boys and girls, but fighting is seen as a 'male' pastime, and discipline is partially based on shaming one sex by comparing them to the other. Managing boys by comparing them unfavourably with girls, or *vice versa*, were common control strategies in British middle and comprehensive schools in the late 1970s (see Delamont, 1990, p. 29 and p.59) and in lessons for slow learners in some Welsh comprehensives in the mid 1980s (Delamont, 1990 p.60) but to hear of them thriving in 1991 is a shock. This paper examines what is known about everyday life in British schools as it is experienced by female pupils, drawing on the research done in the last twenty-five years. There are five sections, on the research background, on teacher-pupil relationships, on same sex pupil relationships, on male-female pupil relationships, on myths and fantasies, and on an agenda for future research.

The Research Base

Research on everyday life inside schools and classrooms is a relatively new branch of educational research. In Britain the pioneers were Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1970) and Lambert (1977 and 1982). In the USA, educational anthropologists were first to study classroom processes, both inside the USA Canada (e.g. Wolcott, 1971) and abroad (Spindler, 1974). Gender was not a focus of the early work. In the USA anthropologists were interested in describing minority cultures that came into conflict with dominant values inside schools, while in the UK researchers focused on social class and school achievement (see Atkinson and Delamont, 1980, 1990 for details).

Various methods have been used to study school and classroom processes: questionnaires, interviews, observation by non-participants and participants (working as teachers or role-playing pupils), audio-visual recording, and the collection of documents such as pupils' diaries, essays or life-histories.

The rise of the contemporary feminist movement produced educational researchers who wanted to examine sex differences in school outcomes (such as exam results), to explore how female pupils experienced schooling, and to try and change both the experiences and the outcomes. The work on school experiences has not been extensive but there are British and American studies of girls in nursery (Lloyd, 1989; Paley, 1984), infant (King, 1987; Serbin, 1978), primary (Clarricoates, 1987; Best 1983), secondary (Measor, 1989; Grant and Sleeter, 1986), and further education classes (Cockburn, 1987; Valli, 1986), as well as a much greater sensitivity to gender issues in school process studies generally. However there are still many gaps in our knowledge; many aspects of the schooling of girls we know little or nothing about. Before reviewing what is known in the rest of this paper, these gaps in the research need documenting.

The British research is, first, lacking in coverage of Northern Ireland. There is no monograph on the school experiences of young women in Northern Ireland either in Catholic or Protestant institutions. As Northern Ireland has many single sex schools *and* maintains academic selection at 11, comparisons could be drawn between Northern Ireland and other regions of the UK if research on women were carried out. The lack of data on gender and schooling in Northern Ireland is not the only gap in the regional coverage of our knowledge of the issues. Wales has not yet had much research carried out on gender and education. There is a brief overview of the statistics in Jones (1988) but no process studies have been

published. In particular, the lack of research on girls' experiences in the fast-growing Welsh-medium sector is unfortunate. There is an evaluation of one innovation aimed at broadening young women's experiences: the Women's Training Roadshow programme (Pilcher *et* al., 1989), but little else.

Scotland has yet to produce the range of school process studies focused on women that its unique education system deserves. The impact of moving to secondary education at 12 rather than 11 on girls, and the comparative success of Scottish comprehensives at reaching working-class teenage girls and harnessing their educational potential (McPherson and Willms, 1987) both deserve Scottish-based process studies.

Most of the British research on girls' and young women's schooling has actually been done in England, especially urban England. Like most of the British ethnographic research it has concentrated on pupils in state schools.

There is a shortage of work on girls' experiences in denominational schools (especially fee-paying ones), and in elite 'public' schools. The young women I studied at 'St. Luke's' are now 36, and mine is still the only published research on the processes of schooling in the high prestige, high cost and explicitly *feminist* independent sector (Delamont, 1989). Because of the sexist biases in the sociology of education in the 1960s and 1970s (see Acker, 1981) there are gaps in the historical record of girls' schooling in Britain. The only data on young women in single sex grammar schools were collected by Lambert (1977, 1982) and Llewellyn (1980) and are mostly unpublished. There are no data on young girls' experiences of the 11+ or 12+ exams, or of streamed primary schooling; none on young women in the few Technical High Schools established after the 1944 Act, and none on life in secondary modern schools before CSE and the raising of the school leaving age to 16. All these experiences are now past and therefore lost, and sociologists failed to collect data on them when they existed. There has also been a pattern of research on male adolescents being published in monographs, while equivalent data on young women has been only available in journal articles or research reports, which have lesser impact (see Delamont, 1989, Appendix 1). Hargreaves (1967), and Lacey (1970) are frequently described as pioneers of school ethnography, while Lambert (1977, 1982), their contemporary, is ignored, because her study of the girls in 'Lumley' and 'Hightown' was never a monograph.

There is also a shortage of research which compares the lives of females in mixed and single sex schools or classes of otherwise similar types, which means we are often unable to determine whether findings are due to the dynamics of schooling *or* the presence of males and females in the same rooms.

The arguments advanced by Hammersley (1990) could only be addressed by such comparative research. Race and ethnicity are also topics where the data on gender are still too few in number. There are a few studies of British West Indian and South Asian women in education, but not enough, and some other ethnic groups (e.g. Greek and Turkish) have not yet been the focus of published research. The school experience of a female pupil of Chinese origin are unlikely to be 'the same' as the British West Indians studied by Furlong (1976), Fuller (1980) and Mac an Ghaill (1988). No one could suggest our data on the latter were adequate, but we do have a few studies of British West Indian women in school, whereas we have nothing on the Chinese.

Bearing these limitations in mind, the paper now considers what is known about the school experiences of girls in contemporary Britain, in the next three sections on teacher-pupil, same-sex pupil, and opposite-sex pupil relationships. Because most of the studies conducted in the last fifteen years have been done in mixed schools, the findings reported here are from mixed schools. The feminist calls for the reintroduction of single-sex schooling (see Deem, 1985) have not yet produced a body of research on interaction *in* girls-only schools.

Teacher-Pupil Relationships

Female pupils in Britain are likely to be taught by women most of their classtime before the age of 11 or 12, and by women and men thereafter. The head of their school, however, is likely to be a man, and so are senior teachers such as deputy heads. Whether their teachers are men or women, however, the female pupil is likely to be viewed as *naturally* more compliant, more nurturing, more verbal, and more dependent than male pupils. Most teachers hold stereotyped, determinist views of sex differences, believing males and females to be biologically distinct: and the effects of such beliefs are conservative. Teachers who believe boys who are biologically

programmed to be more talented at maths and science are unlikely to spend time and trouble on developing scientific and mathematical prowess in girl pupils (see Delamont, 1990 pp. 25-26 and 75-78). Believing phenomena to be natural has doubly conservative effects: not only are believers unlikely to try to change the phenomena, they also fear that attempts to tamper with the *status quo* will be damaging to individuals and the social fabric.

When pupils hold stereotyped views about male and female behaviour, then the school teachers' reinforcement of them makes classrooms uncomfortable places for the pupil who diverges from the stereotype. Wolpe (1977) and Abraham (1989a and 1989b) have both reported teachers' repulsion when faced with boys they saw as 'effeminate', (see also Mac an Ghaill, 1991) and Hargreaves, Hestor and Mellor (1975) and Llewellyn (1980) report similar distaste for girls who behaved like boys.

Ironically, some studies have shown teachers reinforcing the behaviours in girls that they dislike. Serbin's (1978) research showed nursery school teachers objecting to girls 'clinging' and keeping close to them. Yet, when observed, it became clear that girls could only get teacher attention and responses when physically close; unlike boys who received teacher attention wherever they were in the nursery, girls beyond touching distance were ignored. Lloyd's (1989) observations in the South East of England in reception classes at two schools show teachers similarly trapped, as do Hilton's (1991) data on playgroup workers. These latter two studies found no evidence that Serbin's conclusions had reached teachers of young children.

Other studies of teachers (see Delamont, 1990), and of recruits to the occupation (e.g. Sikes, 1991) reveal an occupational group unaware of feminist perspectives, ideas of gender as socially constructed, and unconscious of the school's role in reinforcing conservative messages about sex roles.

The only British study which runs against the trend is Smithers and Zientek (1991) who surveyed 218 infant teachers and 84% said that they tried to encourage both sexes to try activities traditionally associated with the other sex. The introduction of the National Curriculum was also thought to have potential for lessening gender stereotyping by 63% of the respondents.

There has not been very much research into sex differences in teacher-pupil interaction, and the interest in the topic has not led to large-scale projects such as ORACLE (Galton, Simon and Croll, 1980) or the American Beginning Teacher Study (Denham and Lieberman, 1980). some of the best known and most frequently cited studies have been based on very small numbers of teachers and tiny amounts of classroom interaction (see Delamont, 1989, pp. 270-272). Hammersley (1990) has challenged the conclusions of two previous sets of researchers both philosophically and in terms of the small size of the data bases used to draw conclusions that there are unjustified gender imbalances in talk in primary classrooms. The available data on primary classrooms in Britain has been reviewed by Croll and Moses (1990), who conclude that 'there is a consistent tendency for girls, on average, to receive slightly less individual teacher attention than boys' (p. 197). This is largely, but not entirely, because boys are reprimanded more than girls. Croll and Moses are able to come to this conclusion in part because there have been a series of large scale observational studies of primary classroom in Britain. The data on secondary classroom are sparser and do not allow for such generalisations to be made. Claims have been made that boys take two-thirds of the dialogue in secondary classroom, but that data are not robust.

It is easy to blame teachers for the conservative and conformist sex roles routinely reported from schools. However teachers who wish to challenge conventional male and female behaviour, dress or speech patterns can find themselves pilloried by colleagues, *and* facing resistance from pupils, who can be upset and angered by such challenges. Pupils' adherence to stereotyped sex roles is one striking finding of the research on pupils and sex roles which needs reiteration here. Study after study has shown that there is a triple standard in operation as far as children's and adolescents' sex stereotyping is concerned. Children and teenagers are relatively relaxed about their own gender-related behaviours, relatively stereotyped about their same sex peers, and highly rigid about opposite sex peers. Thus Tom believes it is fine for him to learn ballet, dubious for Phillip to want to be a nurse, and outrageous for Mandy to aim for veterinary medicine. Mandy feels confident that she can be a vet, doubts whether Pauline should strip down motorbikes as a hobby, and is *sure* Philip should not be a nurse and Tom should not learn ballet.

Such beliefs were reported by many of the respondents to the Smithers and Zientek (1991) survey. As one teacher reported:

(Boys) never turn round and say that boys can't do cookery when we have cookery activities but they turn round and says that girls can't play with the Lego with them, or girls can't play with cars (p12)

The conservative perspective on sex roles held by pre-adolescent pupils shows up in the research on scarey stories told before transfer to secondary school (Measor and Woods, 1984; Delamont 1991), and in pupils' response to teachers who try to be different (see, for example, Beynon, 1987). Guttentag and Bray (1976) discovered that teachers who tried to challenge pupils' stereotypes *could* actually accentuate and reinforce them. A wholehearted and well-conducted intervention could change pupils' ideas, but a half-hearted or badly constructed intervention had the effect of exaggerating pupils' stereotypes. Many of the projects designed to widen pupils' horizons about the labour market, or change their ideas on sex roles, have run up against such ingrained prejudices (see Delamont, 1990, chapter 5 passim).

For the female pupil, relationships with teachers are important, but equally central to school life are peers.

Same Sex Pupil Relationships

Young women at school place a high value on their same sex friends. In *Jackie* for May 25th 1991 the problem page carried eleven problems, four of which concerned relationships with female friends. One girl complains her friend is nice when they are alone but horrid when others are present; one fears her long standing relationship with her best friend is breaking down; a third has one friend who is unpopular with her other 'mates'; the fourth suffers because her friends think she is too well behaved in her school where her father is head of year. The co-ordinators of the problem pages in all the teenage magazines report a similar bias in the letters they receive: relationships with same sex peers matter a great deal to young women. Nilan (1991) has discussed the moral order of two cliques, one in a middle class Sydney school, one in a more working class rural Catholic school in New South Wales. In both contexts, survival in a friendship group depended on 'fairness', 'honesty' and on 'obligation to show caring', and in both settings, the maintenance of the friendships was extremely significant to the young women. For twenty years researchers have been chronicling the peer group structures of schoolgirls in mixed and single sex institutions. Lambert (1977), Meyenn (1980), Llewellyn (1980) and Delamont (1989) all found girls' peer groups in schools during the 1960s and 1970s which functioned as important parts of their members' lives and mediated school experience through group attitudes. Meyenn (1980) found that the twelve and thirteen year old girls in an English middle school did have groups of friends rather than one best friend, and their groups were important to them. One girl, Diane, is quoted as saying 'if we had to say somebody was our best friend you wouldn't say one person. It would be all this lot'. Meyenn found that the sixteen girls were in four groups, which he called 'P.E.', 'nice', 'quiet', and 'science lab'. The quiet girls saw themselves as 'dunces' and were in bottom groups for lessons. Yet they were not anti-school, but accepted their low status and co-operated to have fun. The 'nice' girls were apparently concerned to go through school unnoticed, neither excelling nor failing. The two more visible groups were the 'P.E.' and 'science lab' girls. Both these groups wore fashionable clothes and make up, but differed in the relationship to the school. The P.E. girls were noisy and aggressive, and helped each other with schoolwork. The science lab girls were regarded by the teachers as mature and had internalized the idea that schoolwork was competitive and individual. Their 'maturity' meant they were allotted the task of caring for the animals in the science lab and recognised the value of their privilege. The science lab and P.E. girls did not get on very well together, for as Diane (a science lab girl) says, 'When we get good marks they all say "teacher's pet" and things like that', while a P.E. girl, Betty, told Meyenn about the science lab group, 'They're always trying to get round the teachers and everything. They're always teachers' pets, them four'. Meyenn's data are very similar to mine on upper middle class fourteen year olds collected in Scotland (Delamont 1984a, 1989). At St Luke's there were similar distinctions between girls who had adopted fashion and makeup and those who had not, and between those who accepted the school's ideas about intellectual effort against those who saw schoolwork as a task to be completed by fair means or foul (e.g. copying).

The interaction between the girls in any particular friendship group can be important for the academic involvement and achievement of all of the members. Solomon (1991) is the latest in a series of observers to follow a group of 11 and 12

year old girls through their first months of science. One clique, Karen, Sheila, Mary and Anna, begins science with Karen very keen on the subject. Within two months the whole quartet have decided that they cannot 'do' science, their experiments do not work, and they are directing all their effort towards writing beautifully neat accounts of other children's successful experiments rather than trying to do their own practical. There are not enough studies of how peer group membership can influence school performance yet, but those we do have routinely show girls valuing unanimity and consensus in their group over controversy and innovation. Boys' groups are less concerned to reach consensus and argue more enthusiastically. Because even in mixed schools, co-educational friendship or working groups are rare, pupils get little school experience of cooperating with those of the other sex.

Male-Female Pupil Relationships

In mixed schools, although boys and girls are taught in the same rooms and spend their leisure time in the same playgrounds, the evidence is that males and females avoid each other. Pupils do not sit together or work together, unless a teacher forces them to do so (Delamont, 1990, pp. 38-40). The features of pupil culture which produce this avoidance have been most sympathetically described by Raphaela Best (1983). She followed a cohort of pupils through childhood and into adolescence, learning about their culture and simultaneously confronting them with the illogicalities in their sex role stereotypes. Her central argument is that schools teach children three curricula, one overt, two hidden. The academic curriculum and the official school rules are manifest, but behind them, and largely invisible to adults were the rules of appropriate male and female behaviour learnt from peers and enforced by them. Concealed behind that first 'hidden' curriculum was a third, even more secret children's, culture, where sexuality and obscenity were crucial. The third area was the most carefully hidden from adults.

As Bauman explains:

> The free peer group activity of children is by its very nature a privileged realm in which adults are alien intruders, especially so insofar as much of the children's folklore repertoire violates what children understand to be adult standards of decorum.
> (Bauman, 1982 p. 178)

Fine (1987, pp.238-40) reports the complex process of getting pre-adolescent boys to trust him with the vulgar-obscene aspects of their culture, as does Canaan (1986), and Measor (1989). This deeply concealed pupil culture is revealed in the scarey stories told about school transfer (Measor and Woods, 1984; Delamont, 1991), and researchers can gradually gain access to it, if, like Best, they reveal themselves to be unshakeable and trustworthy. Such things as sexual harassment (Mahoney, 1985; Herbert, 1989), attacks on cissies as 'poofters', and accusations about young women being sexually immoral flourish in this arena.

In adolescence the sexual double standard becomes an important element in male-female relationships. Paul Willis (1977, pp. 43-46) stresses how sexist the beliefs about women held by the 'lads' he studies in Hammertown. They operated a double standard between the steady girlfriend (virtuous and sexually faithful) and the 'easy lay' (cheap and promiscuous). One of his informants claimed that 'once they've had it, they want it all the time, no matter who it's with' so that the 'easy lay' is damned by the whole group. Willis suggests the girls have no scope to be assertive or sexual, and are forced into romantic silliness. This double standard was clearly recognised by the girls studied by Deirdre Wilson (1978), Lesley Smith (1978) and Sue Lees (1986). Wilson's sample of young women between thirteen and fifteen in northern England divided girls into virgins, 'nice' girls who had sex when in love with a steady, responsible boy, and 'lays' because association with a bad girl could tarnish their own reputation. Lesley Smith's sample of fourteen to sixteen year old in Bristol held similar views, even when they doubted the justice of them. For example:

> Liz: Look I don't believe there should be one standard for a boy and another for a girl. But there just is round here and there's not much you can do about it. A chap's going to look for someone who hasn't had it off with every bloke. So as soon as you let him put a leg over you, you've got a bad name.

Similarly, Sue Lees was told a decade later:

> When there are boys talking and you've been out with more than two you're known as the crisps that they're passing around.... The boy's alright but the girl's a bit of scum.
> (Lees, 1986, p.40)

Girls have to avoid being 'slags' themselves, and they must not associate with other girls who have bad reputations. Lees was told

> If someone for whatever reason has got a bad name...can't go with that girl. Because you get called the same name and if you're hanging around with a slag you must be one. (Lees, 1986, p.49)

Adolescent girls are careful to maintain their reputation as 'nice' girls and avoid being labelled 'slags' and 'sluts'. The latter can be spotted by a variety of signs, but one of them, in the boys' eyes is a girl's knowledge and use of contraception. In mixed schools girls spend considerable time and energy avoiding behaving either as too clever and hard working or as a slut. There is not much space between the two negative roles.

Research Priorities

Despite the research done in the last twenty years there are many areas of female pupils' school experience which are not yet properly investigated. Apart from the lack of studies in Northern Ireland, and in Wales, some research on young women in rural areas of England is needed. The school experiences of females in fee-paying schools, both single sex and co-educational, need studying. The percentage of 16 year old women opting to stay into the sixth form has risen over the last decade without any research on why these 16 year olds are staying on rather than leaving as their predecessors did. Many of the initiatives designed to change women's experiences of education, such as Women Into Science and Engineering courses have not been evaluated by researchers (see Delamont, 1990, pp. 114-115).

Most serious, however, is the lack of a large, reliable database on classroom interaction patterns from 4 to 18 in all subjects, which compares females' experiences of classroom interaction in mixed and single sex classes. It is a matter of urgency to discover whether girls are routinely receiving less teacher attention, and/or teacher attention of different kinds from boys, and how their learning experiences are different when only girls are in the room. Only when we have this large body of data can we really claim to know what the female pupils' experiences of schooling are.

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