DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 192 UD 033 123

AUTHOR Foster, Victoria
TITLE Education: A Site of Desire and Threat for Australian Girls.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19- 23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Academic Aspiration; Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Secondary Education; *Females; Foreign Countries; *Sex Differences; Sex Discrimination; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Masculinity

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an international backlash against the status of girls as learners, with many people asserting that boys are suffering from new forms of educational disadvantage as girls achieve academically. This paper develops the notion of the space-between, a heuristic device to analyze and explain girls' experiences of contemporary events in education. It explores the lack of change in post-school outcomes for girls, the insignificant degree of change in the participation of girls in male-dominated curriculum areas, the endemic nature of sexual harassment, and the inequitable use of school resources by girls. Women's experiences in the space-between revolve around the conflicting discourses of equality with men and of male supremacy in which women are constructed as transgressors on male territory. Desire for achievement and threat to masculinity are dialectical experiences of girls' schooling in the Australian context. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

# Education:A site of desire and threat for Australian girls

*Dr Victoria Foster*
*Faculty of Education*
*University of Wollongong*
*Australia*

*Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April 1999*

# Education: A site of desire and threat for Australian girls

**Victoria Foster**

A 1998 publication with the evocative title, *Education into the twenty-first century: Dangerous terrain for women* (in Mackinnon, A. Elgqvist-Saltzmann, I and Prentice, A. Eds.), reminds us that the 1999 AERA Meeting marks ten years since the mass murder of fourteen female engineering students at the University of Montreal.

This paper presents research which contributed to the author's chapter in this international collection, which documents the current worldwide backlash against girls' and women's equal participation in education.

In a trend common to most western countries, Australia has in recent years experienced an *apparent* move towards sexual equality in schooling, offering the possibility of a significant change in girls' lived experiences of schooling (Foster, 1995; 1998; Weiner, Arnot and David, 1997).

## An international backlash: girls' status as learner citizens

Over the past few years, in most western countries we have witnessed what Weiner et.al. (1997) refer to as a "moral panic" over claims, largely promulgated through the media, that boys are suffering from new forms of educational disadvantage. Common representations are "girls are outperforming boys"; "girls are succeeding at the expense of boys"; "boys are struggling"; "boys are in deep trouble". In Australia, attempts to achieve greater educational equality for girls have centred on positioning girls within a deficit framework, as lacking in relation to male norms of the educated person, and encouraging them to measure up to those norms (Foster, 1992).

However, since 1993, Australian equal education policies and programs have increasingly been contested as girls began to be erroneously constructed as beating boys in the prestigious male-dominated curriculum terrain of mathematics, science and technology. The hostility on the part of some to equality in schooling for girls has taken the form of a refrain around *What about the boys!* in an attempt to reassert male educational interests as prior (Foster, 1994; 1995). This refrain is echoing internationally (Mackinnon, Elgqvist-Saltzman and Prentice, 1998). For example, Elgqvist-Saltzman reports that an international conference on gender and education held in June, 1995 at the University of Umea, Sweden

> resulted in a strong feeling of unease around the topic. Why did we feel that gains made were insufficient, were painfully slow, and furthermore were vigorously contested? Common themes emerged which highlighted continuing tensions between girls and boys, men and women, in a range of educational settings. When females approach male performance levels and access, a discourse of male disadvantage reverberates through the research literature and the popular press. "What shall we do about the boys?" trumpet the headlines in Australia, Great Britain, Canada and Scandinavia.

The largely unexpressed subtext of this refrain is that notions of educational equality for girls entail taking something very crucial away from boys: their supremacy as learners, as well as the caretaking resources of women and girls, to which boys are assumed to be entitled. By contrast, male interests had earlier been strongly bolstered by a construction which emphasised girls as lacking, rather than viewing boys themselves as being advantaged (Eveline, 1994). Moreover, at the same time that priority is given to boys' learning problems, there has been a failure to date to address comprehensively within the curriculum, the problem of sex-based harassment of girls as an endemic feature of schools, and its effects on girls' learning (Australian Education Council, 1992). This paper presents the Australian case as an example of this international phenomenon.

## The space between

The paper develops the notion of the space-between: a heuristic device to analyse and explain girls' experiences of contemporary events in education. In particular, it explains the lack of change in post-school outcomes for girls, the insignificant degree of change in girls' participation in male-dominated curriculum areas, despite their successes in those areas, the endemic nature of sexual harassment and the inequitable use of school resources by girls. Elsewhere (Foster, 1997), I explore the implications for the emerging field of citizenship education of the failure to address issues of public and private life in education.

For women and girls, pursuing equal educational and citizenship rights, entails entering a particular space - social, psychological and existential - between and beyond that which is prescribed for women, that is, women's "place", and that which is proscribed to women. This is a space of lived experience, mediating between private and public spheres, where women and girls attempt to negotiate the conflicting, contradictory (at best), or violent and destructive (at worst) demands of a neo-liberal framework of equality, a framework which retains a masculinist subject at its centre (Leck, 1987; Martin, 1991). Both the individual learner-subject and the epistemological foundations of the curriculum are male-defined (Martin, 1981a, b; 1988). Girls are to be given equal opportunity to achieve parity in an education system which is normatively masculine.

The notion of a space is particularly applicable to a discussion of educational equality reforms. This space embraces both the actual, physical space of social relations, and a conceptual space which has cultural, ideological and experiential dimensions. "Space" evokes meanings of sexual politics, of interconnection, and of positionality. It has a further sense of physical admission: allowing entry or access, and making room for, in an enclosed space. This is the sense inferred in equal opportunity provisions for women and girls, for example, in employment and education. There is a second more conceptual sense of space as representation and validation: to be admitted is to be fully recognised, acknowledged, and further, accepted as legitimately having a place. Feminist theorising of difference, however, has shown that the first sense of admission in no way guarantees the second sense, of actually having a place.

Women's lived experience in the space-between revolves around two conflicting discourses: first, the neo-liberal discourse of equality with men—'a woman's place is everywhere' and, second, the discourse of male supremacy which constructs women as transgressors on male territory—'this is *not* your place'. The conflict of these two discourses makes the space-between a site of both desire and threat for women: the desire evoked by the promise of equal opportunities in a man's world, and the threat of punishment and violation which inevitably accompanies women's attempts to make that promise reality, to *live* the discourse of equality. The Montreal massacre was an extreme example of women's experience of these conflicting discourses. Schoolgirls are aware of this contradiction when they make statements such as 'I believe that girls can do anything' and 'I believe in equality for women', but I wouldn't want to do it', speaking of careers in traditionally male-dominated fields (Foster, 1984). Of course, now many young women will easily say, 'sure women have equality', believing in 'presumptive equality' (Foster, 1995).

As Jane Roland Martin argued in her John Dewey lecture delivered to the 1998 AERA Meeting, education itself is "gender-coded".The patriarchal power relations of schooling, and their connection with the public-private dialectic in society make the lived curriculum of schools a complex site of both desire and threat for girls. Equality-directed curriculum reforms require of girls that they attempt to transpose themselves from private realm status to a relatively different position as the equals of males in the public realm of the school. In this process, girls' status is defined and redefined as the "other" in relation to males, in various ways which frequently define girls physically or sexually in terms of their bodies, and constitute reminders of difference. This central aspect of the space-

between is a phenomenon distinct from, although clearly related to, the issue of girls' experience of a paradigmatically male-centred overt curriculum (Foster, 1992; Gilligan, 1990:6; Rich, 1977:232;), and distinct also from the "malestream" epistemological foundations of the curriculum (Martin, 1981a; O'Brien, 1984).

Both the idea and the concrete reality of public woman violates public-private norms, requiring women to give up the (dubious) protection of the private sphere, and expose themselves to the threat of violence in the public sphere. Similarly, for girls to take up the promises of reforms towards equality in education, in their present form, entails the threat of violence in one form or another. The space-between describes the relationship between women's attempts to gain equal entry to male terrain, and the prohibition exercised against these attempts. There is also an important epistemological dimension concerning the implications of women's and girls' experiences in the space-between for issues of knowledge and curriculum change. And finally, the space-between is an analytic construct developed to concretise and explore girls' experiences of schooling, and to give them a place. This construct has several themes or dimensions, which include both normative and behavioural aspects, and which are reinforced by ideological and symbolic structures of power, and relations of ruling which alienate women and their experience (Smith, 1990). These themes are elaborated in Foster (1996; 1997). The paper takes up one theme in detail, and it is the idea that girls' and women's place in education fundamentally centres on the expectation that they will be caretakers of males (Lewis, 1990), and of masculinity, supporting the maintenance of male primacy and privilege in education.

The injunction placed upon girls to be caretakers of the learning environment, as well as persons in it, has a further *normative* sense which results in adverse consequences for girls and women when the norm is flouted. Furthermore, the equality discourse in girls' education produces what I describe as *desire* for equality which is tantamount to a flouting of the caretaking norm.

**Desire and threat as dialectical experiences in girls' schooling**

The paper offers an interpretation of girls' experiences of the curriculum and the school setting, drawing on Grosz' (1989) discussion of two philosophical traditions relating to the question of desire. In the second tradition which Grosz (1989:xvi), sees as encompassing Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault and Deleuze, desire is conceived not as a lack but as a positive force of production and self-actualisation. In this second sense, at the level of the subject, desire functions insofar as the subject "desires the expansion or maximisation of its power... it is not an unactualised or latent potential; it is always active and real".

A crucial question is: *what desire(s) do girls actually experience in and of schooling*? There are very good reasons to believe that girls desire to learn, that they value their schooling and the learning environment. During the past decade in Australia, there is no doubt that this desire has been encouraged and nurtured by girls' education policies which in particular have stressed the need for girls' greater achievement in male-dominated subjects. Policy discourse concerning the desirable educational achievements of girls has at different times philosophically encompassed both the senses of desire which Grosz has delineated. Earlier, girls were constructed as lacking the necessary masculine learner subjectivity as well as the necessary male-defined knowledge. The very meaning of "girl" included a negativity or lack (Jones, 1993:12). In this construction, the lack was to be removed by increasing girls' access to masculine knowledge areas, but not it transpired, by enhancing their achievement relative to boys in those areas. This first platonic sense of desire as lack resonates with the philosophical and social construction of femininity as "other" to the masculine. Thus, it could be argued that for girls, the philosophical construction of desire in this first sense would have a logical consistency to which they could relate, given the normative climate of the school in relation to its curriculum, and its material-ideological practices

The second sense of desire referred to by Grosz is, however, much more problematic for girls, because it invokes a more inherently masculine orientation to desire, that of actively seeking and pursuing achievement, and to an extent, power. To date, even more problematically for girls, that achievement has centered specifically on masculine curriculum areas and subject domains. Although the discourse of reform is couched philosophically in Grosz's first platonic sense, the implications for girls of following that discourse, as well as the outcomes, relate directly to Grosz's second sense of self-actualisation. In concrete terms, this has resulted in the perception that girls are interlopers or "space invaders" (Foster, 1996) in male educational terrain, depriving boys of their rights. The crucial point here then is that for girls to desire in this second sense places them not only in a contradictory position as "educated women" (Martin,1991), but also in a position of threat, which is both actual in school, and potential in relation to post-school life. It is significant that the*What about the boys!* movement emerged at the precise moment (and not a moment earlier) that girls were perceived to be outstripping boys in the the areas of male power and privilege. Prior to that, boys' education was only an issue for feminists and educationists concerned with improving gender relations. This point is obvious if one asks whether there would have been such concern about boys and their schooling if the contested areas had been different. What if the newspapers had reported, "girls beating boys at childcare and home management!"?

The first construction of desire as lack, and girls as lacking masculine learner subjectivity, can be seen to pose no particular threat to hegemonic masculinity. In fact, it could be argued that the construction of girls as lacking in relation to hegemonic masculinity might have the effect of reinforcing that hegemony. It might further be argued that the earlier construction of girls as lacking essential knowledge in a paradigmatically masculine curriculum would have the effect of reinforcing that paradigm in the curriculum. Until mid-1993 in Australia, that was the case. It is the second self-actualising sense of desire in the educational setting which, by challenging male privilege, becomes threatening for girls and women. This is the sense which comes into play when women refuse to be constructed as lacking as in the first sense of desire and actively pursue their educational and occupational goals, as the Montreal massacre graphically illustrated.

The mere existence of policies on girls' education in Australia has begun to provoke indignation about the harm they may do to boys' interests. These policies together with their success in terms of girls' improved participation and performance in specifically male-defined areas, have produced a subtle shift from the perspective of girls as lacking, into Grosz's second sense of desire, in which girls can be seen to be actively seeking educational success. It might be predicted, then, that this shift could prove in the near future to be a threatening one for girls. Indeed, in Australia as in other countries, the rush to develop compensatory programs for boys is the beginning of a threatening response to girls and to policies concerning their education.

**Correspondence:**
Dr Victoria Foster
Faculty of Education
University of Wollongong
NSW 2522 Australia

email victoria_foster@uow.edu.au

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