

*facts about ...*

# Gender, difference, and equity in education

*Amanda Keddie, Griffith Institute for Educational Research,  
Griffith University*

Over the past 35 years or so gender equity and schooling debates in Australia have undergone significant ideological shifts. Reflecting developments in gender politics, theory, and research, these shifts have produced a range of contradictory ways of understanding and addressing gender inequities in education. Earlier gender reform focused on sex-role socialisation, sex-stereotyping, role modelling, and attempting to make schools more girl-friendly. Later reforms have concentrated on gender differences and constructing inclusive curriculum. Most recently, the emphasis has been on boys' academic underperformance relative to girls, and on making schools more boy-friendly.

While such reforms have been productive by addressing gender equity and schooling, many have been counterproductive because of their oversimplification of gender difference. In particular, girl-friendly and boy-friendly reforms have perpetuated stereotypical and inequitable views about gender. Equal opportunity remedies, used around the mid-1980s, that focused on improving girls' post-school prospects through encouraging them into traditionally masculine domains (e.g., science) reinforced a view of girls and femininity as being inferior to boys and masculinity (see Yates, 1998). Boy-friendly reform in schools from the mid-1990s focused on improving boys' academic outcomes. This led to an increase in masculine curriculum content, resources, and teaching styles, which also reinforced inequitable views of gender.

It is true that there are differences in gender achievement between girls and boys in Australia (as in other Western countries). For example, girls tend to outperform boys in literacy while boys tend to enjoy greater post-school opportunities when compared with girls, despite their generally lower levels of academic achievement and their tendency to leave school earlier than girls (Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000). These differences, however, tend to be dwarfed by the much more considerable effects of social class and race. It is not gender, but socioeconomic status and Aboriginality that are the most accurate predictors of educational disadvantage.

It is clear, then, that any attempt to address gender and disadvantage must adopt a "Which girls?/Which boys?" approach (Collins et al., 2000). Such an approach must disaggregate the categories "girl" and "boy" to consider the complex ways in which gender intersects with other identity markers (such as social class, race, ethnicity, rurality, and sexuality) to compound academic and social disadvantage for particular groups of boys and girls. We must be aware of, and challenge, the enduring gender inequities within the broader social world.

On just about every social indicator—whether it be in relation to economic, political, or cultural equity—males remain in a privileged position relative to females. Such privilege in schools is seen in classroom/school interactions that have changed little over the past three decades in relation to power and control (see Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005).

Most gender theorists and researchers argue that the key to achieving gender equity in schools is through quality teaching and learning that challenges the narrow constructions of masculinity and femininity. Decreasing the differentiated behaviours and expectations that constrain the academic success of boys and girls requires intervention from early primary schooling onward (MacNaughton, 2000).

### TEACHING TIPS

- Reject simplistic understandings and approaches to gender in schools that reinforce gender inequity.
- Be aware of gender inequities. Whenever you perceive a gender inequity, you must challenge it.
- Identify genuine disadvantage; that is, "Which girls?/Which boys?"
- Implement quality teaching and learning that challenges the narrow constructions of masculinity and femininity that hinder student learning.
- Understand that inequitable gender relations are socially constructed. Critically reflect upon how your own gendered assumptions might reproduce students' gendered behaviours.
- Encourage students to question gendered knowledge through, for example, critical analysis of popular texts and contexts such as mass media, video games, sport, visual art, drama, and dance.
- Create learning experiences that connect with the interests and preferences of boys and girls in ways that do not restrict ways of being a boy or girl.
- Support the recognition of gender diversity, for example, by legitimising learning interests, experiences, and activities where many different kinds of gender knowledge and performances are valued.
- Promote a non-hierarchical classroom culture of mutual respect and support that disrupts gendered relations of authority.

### REFERENCES

- Collins, C., Kenway, J., & McLeod, J. (2000) *Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and their initial destinations after leaving school*. Retrieved from [www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school\\_education/publications\\_resources/profiles/](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/)
- MacNaughton, G. (2000) *Rethinking gender in early childhood education*. St Leonards, Allen & Unwin.
- Martino, W., & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2005). *Being normal is the only way to be: Adolescent perspectives on gender and school*. Sydney, NSW: UNSW Press.
- Yates, L. (1998) Constructing and deconstructing "girls" as a category of concern. In A. Mackinnon, I. Elgqvist-Saltzman, & A. Prentice (Eds.), *Education into the 21st century: Dangerous terrain for women?* London, UK: Falmer Press.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AMANDA KEDDIE is one of Australia's foremost researchers on gender and boys' issues and has written extensively on those topics. She moved from Griffith University to The University of Queensland in 2011 as a research fellow.