

The University of Western Australia
Graduate School of Education
Degree of Doctor of Education

Proposal (973)

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PROPOSED STUDY

Title: From Finishing School to Feminist Academy: The impact of changing social constructions of gender on education in a private girl's school in Western Australia 1945 –97..

Aim: The aim of this study is to investigate the social construction of gender, changes in that construction in an Independent Christian girls' school over an historical period (1945–1990), and the ways in which those changes impacted on the educational experience offered by the school.

Abstract

Gender refers to the social roles ascribed to men and women in a particular historical and cultural context. The social construction of gender has been a subtle and pervasive force constantly subject to minor transformations in response to economic and societal pressures.

This study is set against a background of significant change in Western Australian education where the social construction of gender and changes in that construction have shaped the models of education offered to girls and boys in state and private schools. A broad overview of the types of education offered to girls in this period reveals that schools have played a critical role in perpetuating and entrenching the models of femininity already apparent in society. Strong feminist leaders have consistently interrogated socially ascribed gender roles based on the crucial intersection of gender and class. They have sought to provide girls with a more

robust, “masculine” curriculum offering equal access to tertiary and workplace opportunities

The main focus of this study is to examine the impact of gender on the type of education offered to girls in a private, elite Protestant girls’ school with particular emphasis on the period from 1945 to 1990. The case study of the school in Perth will provide a rich source of data to deconstruct in terms of gender stereotypes and expectations.

1. RATIONALE FOR STUDY

Introduction

Adrienne Rich argues that the education historically offered to girls has kept women in a state of ignorant collusion with patriarchal power structures. She asserts that without a knowledge of their own history, creative roles and feminine resistance against the patriarchy at different times, women “live and have lived without a context, vulnerable to the projections of male fantasy, male prescriptions for us, estranged from our own experience because our education has not reflected or echoed it” (Rich,1980:240). This study takes cognisance of the view that historically formulated patriarchal structures have shaped the construction of gender roles which, in turn, have impacted on the type of education offered to females. It acknowledges the essential difference between “egalitarians” (those advocating equal opportunities) and feminists (those advocating anti-sexist or girl-centred education). As Weiner (1985) asserts “whereas the former failed to address the relationship between patriarchy, power and women’s subordination, the latter place it at the centre of their thinking” (9).

Background

A number of quantitative and qualitative studies have explored an emerging educational policy in Australia after the second world war designed to address gender inequities in education. 1945 proved to be a watershed year for change with a new social and economic order in place. This study tracks some of the broad international, national and local policy initiatives at the federal and state levels related to gender equity in education. It notes some of the critical “moments” in the history of

curriculum reform in a Western Australian Independent girls' school in order to examine whether or not rhetoric and practice converged to produce gender equity in education.

The study examines some of the ways in which private schools were influenced in both spirit and practice by Commonwealth policy initiatives to implement educational changes. Could they be seen to be delivering a "cutting edge" curriculum that justified student enrolment in preference to state schools? What other gendered cultural practices did these schools offer in contradistinction to state schools? In what ways did they perpetuate private, middle-class notions of femininity that conformed to many essential aspects of the "accomplishments" curriculum emanating from the Victorian era? To understand the construction of gender and changes in that construction it is also useful to note some broad ideological differences between Protestant church girls' schools and their Catholic counterparts.

In reality, educational "equity" in a patriarchal society meant shepherding girls and boys into mathematics and science denoting the importance and significance attached to these "masculine" subjects. Although purporting to offer a rigorous, balanced, curriculum foregrounding gender equity, schools did not necessarily empower girls in their professional or vocational fields nor dismantle gendered practices beyond schools. In addition, research done on retention rates for boys and girls shows that, despite the negligible differences in this area, the subjects chosen by females coupled with lower career aspirations, did not really challenge the patriarchal status quo. The very fact that boys have not historically excelled to the same extent as girls in the humanities at the secondary school level is testimony to the fact that these subject areas have been associated with specific notions of femininity and have hence been devalued in the patriarchy. In this context the study examines the type of education offered to girls in a single site case study.

Statement of purpose

Elite, single sex private schools currently are expected to provide their high fee-paying clientele with the best preparation and opportunities for success. Their ability to deliver first class academic results is evidenced in the state-wide media reporting of General Exhibitions, Subject Exhibitions and Subject Distinctions with a strong bias

in favour of private Independent schools with single-sex girls' schools recording particularly outstanding results. In their aggressive marketing of schools, many Private institutions use outstanding results as an indicator of an innovative curriculum, excellent facilities, and best practice in teaching. It is therefore not unreasonable to conclude that, in conjunction with academic excellence, Independent Girls' schools would empower their students to challenge patriarchal norms and to achieve considerable success in the academic, professional and business worlds.

The single site case study is intended to make a contribution to the area through the study of documents, archival material, and semi-structured interviews to determine changing gendered expectations of school and life beyond school. The study also hopes to investigate whether the changing construction of gender had a different impact on the urban versus rural clientele of the private school case study.

Central question

The main focus question of the study is: ***How did social constructions of gender and class impact on the type of education offered to girls in a private elite Independent girls' school from 1945–1990?***

From the main focus question a number of ***other guiding questions*** include:

1. How has Commonwealth policy conceptualised education for girls in the post-war period?
2. In what manner did Policy on this issue emerge?
3. How have these policies impacted on the curriculum offered at the case study site?
4. Were there class-related ideological differences in educational provision for girls in private and public sector schools?
5. Is this Independent girls' school perceived to have taken a leadership role in the education for girls? If so, in what respects?
6. Were there ideological lags in philosophy and practice in implementing change at the school specifically related to notions of femininity within a religious context?
7. What kind of 'slippage' occurred between the "content" level of the curriculum offered to girls in this school and gendered expectations linked to social roles beyond school education?
8. In what ways did the "accomplishments curriculum" inform 'lived' experience and practice in this private Independent girls' school?

9. In what ways, if any, was there a disjunction between this “lived” experience and formal educational policy statements adopted at the National Council of Independent Schools’ Association?

Significance of the study

It is envisaged that the study will make a theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge related to education and gender in Australia with a particular emphasis on girls’ private school education.

The significance of the study is that it should provide the richness of a case study scenario to underpin the impact of the social construction of gender and class on the type of education offered to girls from 1945 to 1990. Significant understanding about the school and the social values it embodied will be gleaned from those who have indicated a desire to participate in the project. Some of these include past teachers who were also scholars at the school, their daughters who attended the same school and their daughters, many of whom have recently graduated from tertiary courses. In this way it will be possible to track inter-generational perspectives on and changes in notions of femininity and the ways in which these gendered changes were reflected in both policy and practice. Interviews with surviving Headmistresses, Deans of Curriculum and Deputy Heads will also yield profitable information. The interviews will be semi-structured and collaborative and are intended to generate data, which will contribute to an understanding of the ways in which gendered expectations impacted on “lived experience”.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study takes place in a historical context and, as such, is a retrospective examination of the impact of gender on educational institutions. However, any reading of gender underpins a fluid, constantly changing social construction grounded in particular cultural contexts. Hence, a postmodern conceptual framework is useful for understanding the changing way the term has been constructed within a broad historical period (1900–1990). Postmodernism sees knowledge as “dependent on socio-cultural contexts, unacknowledged values, tacit discourses and interpretive

traditions” (Punch, 1998:146) and it recognizes the significance of language, discourse and power in any knowledge claim (Usher et al., 1997:207). The inability of language to pin down fixed meanings and representations of reality is well suited to postmodernism’s stress on the “constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation by which social reality is created and maintained” (Punch 1998:146). The innocent view of language as a medium for the transparent representation of external reality is replaced by a view of language as centrally implicated in the construction of knowledge in its inevitable political context. This overriding conceptual framework is particularly relevant to a case study placed in an historical context where the meanings attached to notions of masculinity and femininity have changed considerably over a particular time frame.

Usher et al (1997) usefully reflects that “[p]ostmodernism reflects a decline of absolutes... What we are left with is not an alternative and more secure foundation but an awareness of the complexity and fragility of the practices through which knowledge is constructed about ourselves and the world... To do research in a postmodern way is to take a critical stance towards the practice of sense-making and sense-taking which we call research” (1997:210-11). Hence, a postmodern framework is particularly useful for examining the impact of the social construction of gender on the type of schooling offered to girls as the study invites multiple critical perspectives such as feminism, Marxism, social semiotics and discourse analysis. The approach reflects the postmodern interdisciplinary perspectives of social studies.

Feminist criticism is useful for deconstructing the gap between rhetoric and practice in attempts to achieve gender equity in educational reform. It is concerned with the way gender assumptions, particularly about women, operate in the reading and writing of texts. Feminist perspectives attempt to expose the way texts either perpetuate or challenge the structure of the patriarchy (Moon, 2001) and are concerned with the unequal distribution of power in a social system that supports the interests of white, middle class males in the Western world. Feminists point out that even an holistic approach (in an ideal world) adopted at the systems level and translated into educational practice, cannot in itself ensure equal educational outcomes. A productive model for change needs to review and transform “the structure of the economy, politics, legislation, employer attitudes and behaviours at

the macro level...This presents a problem endemic to a patriarchal society and illustrates that sexism in education systems is only one manifestation of the inequality which pervades Australian society” (Lustig-Selzer1988: 99).

Where the intersection of gender and class acts as a determinant in the construction of notions of masculinity and femininity, Marxist criticism is a useful tool to examine the role played by educational institutions in maintaining values and beliefs which support economically empowered males in the patriarchy (Moon, 2001). In capitalist societies “there are divisions in the social fabric between rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited: such societies exhibit characteristic structures of domination. In order to sustain these structures of domination the dominant groups attempt to represent the world in forms that reflect their own interest, the interests of their power” (Hodge and Kress: 1988:3). Since economic power has traditionally been concentrated in the hands of men in the patriarchy, this imbalance has impacted on the social expectations of females and the type of education appropriate for them.

Within a postmodern conceptual framework, social semiotics is another useful method of analyzing texts. Because “schools are important arenas of power where masculinities and femininities are acted out on a daily basis through the dynamic process of negotiation, refusal and struggle” (Giroux and McLaren 1994; Martino and Meyenn 2001:xi), social semiotics provides a flexible and appropriate framework for interpreting the impact of gender on education. This approach examines “the complex interrelations of semiotic systems in social practice, all of the factors which provide their motivation, their origins and destinations, their form and substance” (Hodge and Kress: 1988:1). Most significantly, it attributes power to meaning” (2). Social semiotics becomes an invaluable tool for deconstructing gendered power relations. The term “gender” automatically connotes a focus on cultural processes and the function of masculinity and femininity in the public domain of schooling and work and the extent to which social practices have created differences and inequalities. “Sexual inequality” refers to the notion of specific female inequality in education as a reflection of broader social practice (Yates, 1993:3-4). Social semiotic notions of metaphor, metonymy and opposition (Punch,1998:230) are useful tools to deconstruct the hierarchical nature of school organisation, which encouraged

patriarchal “competitiveness, authoritarianism and selection” (Weiner 1985:10). The social practices related to schooling have historically entrenched and perpetuated patriarchal structures.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The topic for this study cuts across more than one substantive area in the review of the literature. However, its framework is premised on a strong thematic organization based on the social construction of gender and its impact on the type of education offered to girls from 1900–1990.

Postmodern writers such as Moon (1992), Martino and Meyenn (2001), Weiner(1985) and Spender (1982) assert that one of the more productive readings of postmodern practices that produces a clear reading of gender practices in society is to examine oppositional thinking in terms of binary oppositions. Gender assumptions based on class and gender construct fixed, immutable categories that have far-reaching consequences for the distribution of power. The female stereotype holds that girls and women are passive, nurturant, emotional and impractical. The characteristics of the male stereotype are activity, aggression, logic, dominance and technical proficiency (Weiner(ed)1985:135). One cannot exaggerate the extent to which the gendered practice of categorising man as rational and logical and women as intuitive, emotional and irrational have been culturally naturalised to justify the type of education offered to boys and girls. Mac an Ghail (1994), Connell (1987;1995), Eveline (1995), among others, have examined the way the social construction of gender has created antithetical notions of masculinity and femininity. In this context it is useful to address broadly the histories of boys’ schools to examine the impact the construction of gender had on type of schooling offered to boys. These writers foreground the significance of schools as sites for the perpetuation of socially constructed masculinities. Brice (1999), Pike (1957), Vance (1995) and Mangan (1990) show the extent to which the hegemonic Protestant culture (modeled on the British) impacted on the construction of masculinity and further entrenched gendered and class assumptions. Interestingly, Munro’s (1993) identification of the crucial aspects of social inequality and militarism pertaining to male domination in a class based society helped to shape models of masculinities in both Protestant and Catholic

boys' schools and against which female binary oppositions were established and maintained.

A review of the literature shows that schools have played a critical role in perpetuation of the social constructions of masculinities and femininities from 1900 to 1990. A broad overview of the literature provides a contextual understanding of the way the intersection of class and gender underpinned the social, psychological and physiological construction of gender. This, in turn, shaped the type of education offered to girls and boys in the Anglo-Australian context. Connell (1989), Brice (1999) and Vance (1975) identify the ways the hegemonic, Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture in Australia and Britain and Scotland moulded the type of education offered to boys that were premised on particular notions of the social roles attributed to men and women impacting on post-school pathways. Similarly, Hamilton (2001), O'Donoghue (2004) and Trimingham Jack (2003) have examined the way Irish Catholic educational institutions with their distinct theological underpinnings were reflected in Catholic boys' and girls' schools in Australia.

By the time educational reforms were undertaken in Britain and Australia in response to social and economic pressures in a modern, industrialised post-war world, an entrenched brand of education that reflected patriarchal institutions needed structural dismantling. In the British context, Weiner (1985) and Lustig-Selzer (1983), examine how the "first" wave of feminists in the 60's and the "second" wave in the 80's highlighted sexism and inequity in education. They advocated some models for change that were given theoretical lip-service in educational policy, while in practice education still benefited white, middle-class males. Miller (1989), McIntosh (1978), Purvis (1992), Wolpe(1988) and Deem (1992) discuss the vexed issue of feminist intervention in education and draw attention to men as makers of history where education was seen as a commodity mainly for boys while girls and women's experiences have been trivialised or marginalised. McIntosh (1978) and (Miller:1989) assert that the "two key mechanisms through which the state perpetuates the patriarchy are the family household and wage labour" (Miller:1989:273).

Commonwealth initiatives, published in the *National Policy*, Annual Reports *Girls in Schools* and DEET reports (1975 -1990) provide useful material for analysing the implementation of Federal policy in each state Australia-wide. Despite “illustrative” strategies for action in the *National Policy* which were only included in an appendix, specific strategies for action were not part of the policy and were seen as the responsibility of the various education authorities acting according to espoused principles. Documents and state educational reports reveal that states had very different understandings about the issue of sex inequality in schools as well as differences in the way issues were treated. Decentralisation meant different terminologies and perspectives impacted on female education. In most cases “new” policies and practices adopted simply reflected historical gender biases by constructing and blaming the female “victim” who needed to be treated as a special case (see Meyenn and Martino, 2001).

In Australia a body of literature emerged in the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s examining the impact of Federal policy on eliminating “sexism” in education and on achieving gender equity. Feminist writers saw girls as operating historically in a “deficit” framework and exposed the limitations of education that have impacted on the type of curricula offered to girls, the choice of subjects, retention rates and post-school aspirations. Most of the research in this area centres on the value, validity and authenticity of females’ “real” past and present life experiences as opposed stereotyped patriarchal constructions. The positions adopted in this area represent various degrees of feminist awareness with strategies relating to educational policy ranging from a “feminist” model, to a “sexually inclusive” model and a “non-sexist” or “neutral” model. Authors who have contributed to the body of research in this area include Yates (1993), Weiner (1985), Lustig-Selzer (1988), Blackburn (1988), Bem (1974), Ord and Quigley (1985), Kenway and Willis (1986), Foster, Kimmel and Skelton (in Martino and Meyenn 2001), Teese *et al.* (1995), Yates and Leder (1996), Lamb and McKenzie (1999). Foster (2000) and Willis (1990) represent recent Australian research that “shows that gender differences have emerged in students’ use of schooling as a credential, and in post-school rewards... in fact, there is no clear nexus between school achievement and post-school pathways for girls in the way there is for boys” (in Martino and Meyenn: 2001:9).

The implications for sexual equality beyond school is even more significant in noting the ways in which educational policy interrogated and contested established patriarchal hierarchies. Much empirical research (involving gathering statistics on school retention, subject choice and success rates) in late 70s and early 80s was undertaken, mapping girls' aspirations. Research on retention rates were undertaken, for example, by Carpenter and Hayden (1988) and Fowler (1984). Bone (1983), Steedman (1983), Carpenter and Hayden (1988) and Finn *et al* (1979) have examined the issue of whether the gender composition of a school has any effect upon the likelihood of a girl entering higher education with better career prospects. Research by Sampson (1975), Sinclair, Crouch and Miller (1977), Russell and Smith (1979), Leder and White (1980), Currie (1982), Saha (1982) and Poole and Low (1985) covering the period 1979–1985 also showed that girls had much more limited and stereotyped career aspirations than boys, dominated by concerns about marriage and children. Leder and Sampson (1989) point out that generally “expected” occupation was more sex-stereotyped than “preferred occupation” while girls' occupational aspirations occupied a narrower spectrum than those of boys and diminished as they grew older. Powles (1987), Yates (1989) and Johnson (1990) show that in the case of girls, a greater participation rate in the final years of school had been associated with a higher youth unemployment rate than boys, a lower transition rate to further and higher education, as well as a continued large differential in average weekly earnings.

The literature covering educational reform along gender lines in private schools suggests a two-pronged initiative was occurring: while attempting to introduce a more rigorous, “masculinized” curriculum after the 1970s, these schools still felt the need to offer a learning environment that underpinned a major “point of difference” for girls. They ostensibly emphasised the need for a curriculum that could extend and enhance female expectations beyond formal schooling while, at the same time, unconsciously hampering those social and economic expectations by retaining and inculcating entrenched notions of femininity that colluded with female roles related to marriage, child-bearing and feminine behaviour. Trimingham Jack (2003) and O'Donoghue's (2004) historical accounts of Catholic education in certain schools in Australia, in conjunction with The National Catholic Education Commission's response to the *National Policy* (1987), showed the extent to which gendered

expectations of females in education and their future roles in society were bound to ecclesiastical ideology that further diluted and complicated the type of education that evolved.

A brief review of the history of The National Council of Independent Schools' Associations by Hansen & Hansen (1989) reveals not only its response to Federal educational policies but its shared notions of femininity that had their roots in socially ascribed gender roles. DEET documents and reports reveal that Private Independent girls' schools both colluded with feminist advances while maintaining the strong "humanist" focus of the original "accomplishments" curriculum. They acknowledged the significant aspects of gender equity related to the *National Policy* while retaining and perpetuating specific notions of femininity related to middle-class female identity in a patriarchal world.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodological framework

The aim of this study is to examine the social construction of gender and its impact on female education with a specific emphasis on the period 1945–1990. For this purpose a qualitative rather than a quantitative research method of investigation is chosen. Yates (1993) points out that research "which attempts to uncover patterns of difference in how schools treat girls as compared with boys has been undertaken more by qualitative and school-based studies than by traditional quantitative comparisons and surveys. One reason for this is that teachers and students are unreliable reporters of the extent to which they are unbiased" (1993:39).

As part of the qualitative approach to the study using interdisciplinary postmodern methods of "reading" and analyzing data, the role of the researcher is "reconceptualised" or "decentred" (Usher et al., 1997). The researcher is "not an objective, authoritative, politically neutral observer standing outside and above the text, but instead is historically positioned and locally situated as an observer of the human condition" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The broad methodological framework for this qualitative study is interpretivist which is compatible with both an historical as well as a post-modern framework for analysis. Within this framework other methodological strategies for analysing an unfolding, multi-vocal and multi-narrative

account include “inductive” analysis (Miles and Huberman: 1984), feminist and Marxist criticism, social semiotics and discourse analysis, a fruitful combination of interpretative strategies to “read” the educational environment in the case study.

The postmodernist “displacement of grand narratives is grounded in deconstruction” (Lather, 1991:13). Some researchers (for example, Parker *et al.*, 1995) use deconstruction to look for “suppressed and/or multiple meanings in a text, and to expose the ideology in all forms of communication, including texts” (Punch, 1998:147). Feldman (1995) also points out the assumptions behind deconstruction, : “that ideology imposes limits on what can and cannot be said, and that writers write and actors act from within an ideology, bounding their texts and actions by the limits of their ideology. Deconstruction aims to expose those limits” (1998:147). This is particularly relevant to an understanding of how the notion of gender, located as it is in cultural specificity, impacts on educational institutions. While “noting that it cannot be frozen conceptually, Lather (1991) delineates the parameters of deconstructive inquiry (1991:13). It denotes a shift in emphasis from general theorizing to problems of interpretation and description. This is in line with the postmodernist “resistance to conceptualizing, abstracting and universalizing (Waugh, 1992), in favour of concrete and local concerns” (Punch, 1998:147).

In particular an interpretivist, meta-theoretical approach provides the most appropriate and fruitful method of exploring the social construction of gender and its impact on educational policy and practice. Such an approach is expansive in scope and subtle in its application for investigating a complex topic that is premised on social values and attitudes (Patton, 1990:14; Zeming, 1999:proposal:5). The approach may be simplified into the notion of “perspective” (Punch 2000) which basically means a “set of assumptions about the social world and about what constitute proper techniques and topics for inquiring into that world” (35). This meta-theoretical approach that aligns itself with postmodern perspectives is “heterogeneous and pluralistic’ rather than the “relatively homogeneous” approach that might be adopted in quantitative study (36).

The overriding value of an interpretivist approach is the efficacy with which it can elicit detailed information from a small sample of people. This contrasts with a

quantitative approach that measures the reactions of people to a limited set of questions (Patton, 1990 p14; Zeming, 1999:6). Because this study provides a multi-vocal and multi-generational representation of “lived” experiences of girls and women, the interpretivist approach is appropriate because it is multi-method in focus and can use a wide range of data gathering strategies. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue “the multiple methodologies of qualitative research may be viewed as bricolage and the researcher as bricoleur” (1994:2). Keedy (1992) considers that the adoption of an interpretivist methodology based on this position “enables the researcher to visualise how events or phenomena are perceived differently from multiple perspectives and from across similar events” (1992:162). Because of the qualitative nature of the study it is important to emphasise its “unfolding” nature. The need to “preserve flexibility” and to “follow a path of discovery” is seminal to the success of the project (Punch, 2000:42). An interpretivist is primarily interested in the way participants construct versions of reality in an attempt to understand their world. The approach allows the researcher to try to understand someone else’s understanding and perspectives. These “perspectives” refer to frameworks by which people make sense of the world and in the light of these perspectives how they act on them. Hence perspectives related to notions of masculinity and femininity are grounded in a particular cultural context that impacts on the type of educational institutions constructed in line with these perspectives.

Researchers adopting an interpretivist approach are concerned with revealing the meaning behind empirical observations. This reflects a tradition in social science that fundamentally depends on “observations undertaken in people’s natural settings, interacting with them in their own language and on their terms” (Kirk & Miller, 1986:9). The interpretivist approach, then, correlates with the postmodern debunking of the researcher as the unquestioned “expert”. Instead, the researcher is primarily a “data-gathering instrument” using carefully constructed questions aimed at understanding constructions of reality through interviews with the people involved and in their context (1986:9).

This approach deepens in significance when viewed from a feminist critical perspective. Feminist research significantly redefined the interview. The masculine notion of interview is premised on an hierarchical, patriarchal paradigm that stresses

masculine traits and excludes “sensitivity and other traits culturally viewed as feminine” (Punch, 1998:179). Oakley (1981) differentiates between scientific positivist research privileging objectivity and detachment and feminist interviewing “requiring openness, emotional engagement, and the development of trust in a potentially long term relationship” (quoted in Punch, 1998:179).

Feminist researchers exhibit a preference for non-hierarchical research relationships. The traditional interview is seen “not only as paternalistic, condescending in its attitudes towards women and not accounting for gender differences, but also based on a hierarchical relationship with the respondent in a subordinate position” (Punch, 1998:179). Feminist redefinition of the interview “transforms interviewers and respondents into co-equals, who are carrying on a conversation about mutually relevant, often biographically critical issues” (1998:179; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:354).

Case Study

In this case study of a private Christian Independent Girls’ school, the focus of the interview questions is derived from the central research question: *How did social constructions of gender and class impact on the type of education offered to girls in a private, elite Independent girls’ school from 1945-1990? A Case Study of one Christian Girls’ School in Perth.* Case studies “generate rich subjective data, can bring to light variables, relationships and processes that merit further investigation and provide good stories, human interest and a more humanistic method of delivery compared to the quantitative method” (Burns, 1994). In keeping with other approaches in qualitative research, the case study “aims to understand the case in depth, and in its natural setting, recognizing its complexity and its context. It also has a holistic focus, aiming to preserve and understand the wholeness and unity of the case. Therefore the case study is more a strategy than a method” (Punch, 1998:150).

The study is based on the case study of a traditional private Girls’ School in Perth with a strong religious and cultural tradition. Apart from an analysis of data from school magazines, bulletins, newsletters, curriculum and archival material the study will rely largely on responses from a range of past and present students and staff from the school. Feminist research makes profitable use of semi-structured interviews:

“the use of semi-structured interviews has become the principal means by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives” (Graham, quoted in Reinharz, 1992:18).

Position of researcher

The researcher is the lens through which data are gathered and interpreted which immediately connotes the danger of bias. I taught at the school for 10 years and continue to conduct extra-curricular seminars and tutorials for senior girls. Because my location as researcher is one that involves intimate knowledge of the school, its culture, staff and many of its students, it is necessary to note some the ethical implications associated with “insider status” that, to some extent, aligns itself with elements of the ethnographic researcher. In a similar way to the ethnographic researcher as “social actor” in “naturalistic research” seeking to gain some “theory of culture” (Spradley, 1980: 5), I will be “describing a “culture and way of life from the point of view of its participants” (Punch, 1998:157). In line with Spradley’s view of the role of the “participant observer”, I will be using “descriptive questions, structural questions and contrast questions...as part of the step-by-step account” (Punch, 1998:189). Because of my long-term involvement with the school I am placed in a privileged position of trust with a personal network for recruitment of participants. However, despite the advantage of researching a familiar group or setting it is still necessary and possible to “construct an account of the culture under investigation that both understands it from within and captures it as external to and independent of, the researcher” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:9 –10). Because of the implicit position of trust it is crucial that the researcher continually takes into account the potential for breach of trust. Controls need to be constantly in place to negate the implicit levels of bias in data collection and analysis. This can be achieved by relying strongly on documents and the voices of others in a multi-vocal study and by deliberately seeking participants with divergent pathways since leaving school.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

Data collection

Data collection will comprise documents (school magazines, bulletins, newsletters, policy statements, prospectuses and more informal artefacts, for example) and responses in interviews.

Documents: intentional, unintentional, artefacts.

Document analysis is something that will happen concurrently with interviews as they will provide the basis for refining interview questions and possibly varying them across generations.

One should note the richness of documentary data for social research. The approach to document analysis defers to the point that “all documentary sources are the result of human activity, produced on the basis of certain ideas, theories or commonly accepted, taken-for-granted principles, and these are always located within the constraints of particular social, historical or administrative conditions and structures (Macdonald and Tipton, 1996; Finnegan, 1996). Discourse analysts point out that meaning varies according to social and institutional setting. Therefore documents studied in isolation from their social context are deprived of their real meaning. Thus an understanding of the social production and context of the document affects its interpretation. Similar considerations apply also to the social production of an archive: what is kept, where and for how long, and what is thrown away (Macdonald and Tipton, 1996:189; Punch, 1998:231).

Another aspect of documentary and textual analysis is the more “direct” analysis of texts for meaning. Analysis can focus on the surface or literal meaning, or on the deeper meaning, and the multi-layered nature of meaning” (Finnegan, 1996:149). The surface meaning has often concerned historians, whereas sociologists have been more interested in ways of uncovering deeper meaning. Methods used range from interpretive understanding following the ideas of Dilthey (Macdonald and Tipton, 1996:197) to more structural approaches, especially social semiotics. (Punch, 1998: 232).

Archives/Artefacts

Maykut and Morehouse (1994:80) have made a useful distinction between “intentional documents” and “unpremeditated documents”. According to this classification, intentional documents are those that serve primarily as a record of what happened, while unpremeditated documents are those intended to serve an immediate

purpose without any thought given to their future use in the recording of an event. In this study it is possible to obtain documents from these categories. One source of data that loosely fits the category of “intended documents” are recorded oral histories and transcripts, biographies, school magazines, keynote addresses at formal occasions, bulletins, curriculum initiatives, newsletters, memoirs, diaries and correspondence. The unpremeditated documents consist of actual artefacts such as uniforms, report cards, memorabilia and gifts. Goetz and LeCompte (1984:153) have used the term ‘artefact’ to describe the assortment of written and symbolic records which have been kept in the school and have been used, viewed or experienced by participants in the sample group. Merriam (1998: 109) has pointed to the limitations as well as advantages of analyzing these “artefacts”. In view of the fact that they are generated independently of the research, artifacts can be fragmentary and not fit the conceptual framework. However, their independence from the research agenda can also be considered an advantage because they are thereby non-reactive. However, the point of them having been prepared in one historical or conceptual framework, or read or interpreted in another still holds.

Participants and recruitment

The study will recruit past and current students from both rural and urban homes as research may show differing attitudes to and expectations of education depending on location. It will also seek participation of current and past members of staff who have been both students and staff and some of whom have placed their own daughters in the school. Thus an inter-generational and multi-vocal narrative will be constructed creating a sense of values and attitudes based on “lived experience”. Punch (1998) asserts that feminist-based research has “modified social science concepts, and created important new ways of seeing the world:

“By listening to women speak, understanding women’s membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience” (Reinharz, 1992:44).

The sampling in this study will rely on recruiting respondents based on personal knowledge and contacts. It may be possible to identify family generations from

students already known to myself and from school magazines and regular Bulletins. In addition, recruitment will rely on the “snowball” rather than the “purposive” method of putting together respondents. In the case of “snowball” sampling, the interviewer gets leads from an original group of interviewees on further appropriate people to add richness and diversity to discussions and data gathering. As Punch asserts, “snowball” or “chain” sampling means identifying “cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (Punch, 2000:546). An “*aide memoire*” (Lancy, 1993) will be developed for this purpose, adopting a set of headings reflecting the approach of Lemert (1951). These headings take into consideration such factors as social class, rural or urban home settings, age, occupation of parents etc.

However, it needs to be noted that analysis and deconstruction of responses may offer a completely different “reading” than that intended by the respondents. This relates to the postmodern view of language that it does not offer a transparent rendering of reality. The meaning of words derives largely from their use in a particular socio-cultural situation. Hence, different generational perspectives will offer different readings of gender and feminine and masculine traits that have been naturalized in a particular cultural context. This reflects the view that any reading of a “text” (both written and oral) depends on the dynamic interaction between the respondent, respondent’s context and the interviewer and the interviewer’s context.

Interviews

All the interviews will be conducted over an 8 month period in 2005, during which the researcher will make repeated visits to the school, to the homes of interviewees in the metropolitan and country areas. Semi-structured interviews will be held with the participants at times as a group or as individuals if greater detail is necessary. The main function of the interview within the research agenda is to reveal the informants’ understandings, expectations and perspectives relating to the type of education they received at this private school. It is therefore necessary to provide the opportunity for a discourse between interviewer and interviewee which “moves beyond surface talk to a rich discussion of thoughts and feelings” (Maykutt & Morehouse, 1994, p80). Using a cassette recorder, all the interviews will be recorded with the consent of the participants. The researcher will then transcribe the recorded interviews. Reinharz

(1992) points out that “feminist researchers are likely to continue to refine and elaborate the method of interviewing, as more and more experience with it is built up” (quoted in Punch, 1998:179). Hence, initial questions will be loosely based on the guiding questions and subsequent questions will be asked which would be pertinent to the study as the opportunities arise. As Punch points out, “in some respects...interview data are problematic, since they are never simply raw, but always situated and textual” (1998:182). If responses need further clarification or elaboration, further interviewing will take place.

In order to elicit this depth of response from the informants, two important elements of interview technique will be adopted. First, each interview will be sufficiently long for a rapport to be established between the two parties, usually between one to one-and-a-half hours. Secondly, because the interviews should allow informants the freedom to recall and expound on events from their perspective, there will be no need to rely on standardised lists of questions. Derived from the central question are a number of key sub-questions, which will form the basis of the enquiry and to initiate discussion. These questions are framed as follows:

Data collection questions

1. Why did you attend this school?
2. What type of curriculum did you expect from your school? ie. what subjects did you expect to study?
3. What extra-curricula activities did you participate in?
4. To what extent were your expectations met? (Curriculum, sport, hobbies encouraged, extra-mural activities and generally the wider life of the school—clubs, fairs, fetes, old Scholars’ activities etc)
5. What did you hope to do immediately once you had finished school?
6. Did the subjects you studied and your extra-curricula activities prepare you for your expectations beyond school?
7. In what ways?
8. Did some/part of/bulk of your school life prepare you for a different type of life to the one you experienced after leaving school?
9. What were these differences?

10. Can you identify the main values and attitudes inculcated in your school?
11. Were these values tied to gendered expectations? ie what type of person did the school want you to become and what role was encouraged in your life beyond school?
12. What did you hope to achieve once you had left school?
13. Did your schooling differ in any way from that of your mother's? In what ways?
14. Did your experience of uniform, teacher attitudes and curriculum expectations differ to that experienced by your brothers? (if applicable)
15. Did conversations at home about education differ in relation to the gender of sons and daughters? (if applicable)

Data analysis

Interviews

The initial analysis will involve noting patterns and consistencies in the “subjective” data, while also observing similarities and differences between individual narratives. A further stage involves getting the participants to comment on the reading of their data in a subsequent interview. Hence the data becomes available for comment and reinterpretation (Middleton, 1993) which provides an understanding of the participants’ culture as “multi-voiced dialogue” (Quartz, 1992a, p.190). The analysis will foreground any contradictions or tensions within individual narratives, which may denote simultaneous positioning and ideological “slippage” within contradictory discourses of femininity. In this instance, oral and other personal information are woven into the main narrative text of the project (Quartz, 1992).

The Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis will be used which is consistent with the interpretivist approach. This approach offers a systematic approach to collecting, organising and analysing data from the respondents. The three components of this approach which occur concurrently throughout the data analysis are “data reduction”, and “data display”, which rests mainly on the operations of “coding and memoing” and “drawing and verifying conclusions” which assist in developing propositions (1998:204). Initial coding that involves “putting tags, names or labels against the pieces of data” is referred to as “descriptive” codes. These codes are valuable in initiating analysis, in enabling the researcher to get a “feel’ for the data

(1998:205). These less abstract, more descriptive codes are brought together at the second level of “inferential” or pattern coding (2000:205). From this second level of coding it is possible to put together propositions for further discussion and analysis. Memoing is another operation that happens simultaneously with coding and may be “substantive” and “theoretical”. These memos “may suggest still deeper concepts than the coding has so far produced” (1998:206). They may also “elaborate a concept or suggest ways of doing that, or they may relate different concepts to each other. This last type of memo produces propositions” (1998:206). Instead of simply describing data, substantive and theoretical coding relate to conceptual analysis. One important methodological practice encouraged by Glaser (1978:83) is to constantly record ideas as they occur as memos. Punch concurs by stating “when an idea occurs during coding, stop the coding and record the idea” (1998:207).

The third stage of analysing data involves developing propositions from the process of drawing conclusions and verifying. The three stages of the Miles and Huberman approach in reality happen concurrently. The aim of this stage is to “integrate what has been done into a meaningful and coherent picture of the data” (2000:208). Essential intellectual tools in the conceptual analysis are the processes of abstracting and comparing (Punch, 1998). The general nature of this type of analysis is constantly “developing higher-order concepts to summarize and integrate more concrete levels of data” while comparing concepts at their first level of abstraction “enable us to identify more abstract concepts. The systematic and constant making of comparisons is therefore essential to conceptual development at all levels in the analysis of qualitative data” (1998:209).

By analysing the rhetoric, discourse and culturally constructed symbols and images of the informants’ anecdotes it is possible to see gender as a complex, fluid construct that has constantly been reinforced, interrogated and modified over a long period of time. In this way it may be possible to gain insights into the processes involved in the construction of gendered subjectivity through the categories and concepts put forward by the participants.

The aim is to create an historical narrative into which are woven the life experiences of individual women and their experience of school life, practice and policy, thus interrelating description and analysis at a number of levels.

Documents

Documents are a product of a given context and are grounded in the “real” world. Because schools are seen as important arenas for contesting or reinforcing gender stereotypes it is hoped that an analysis of a diversity of artefacts will provide evidence of culturally available symbols. Symbolic representations of femininity from 1900 were premised on gendered “othering”. In Protestant girls’ schools this translated into much less “robust” curriculum and extra-curricula activities that effaced “masculine” subjects like science and mathematics and foregrounded subjects and skills that underpinned “ladylike” behaviour and domestic usefulness. Women had to be appropriate figures of purity, religious integrity and passivity. These gendered expectations were also adhered to in Catholic girls’ schools although the Catholic religion offered to women the simultaneously empowering and circumscribing Madonna cult of matriarchal worship that was denied to Protestant girls. However, common to both schooling systems for girls were culturally determined codes of feminine behaviour.

Strategies for analysing documents include social semiotics, discourse analysis and feminist criticism in order to understand their social production and their context and the extent to which these aspects have shaped the construction of gender. Headings for analysis will coalesce around the following questions based on Punch (2001) and Hammersley and Atkinson (1995): How are documents written? How are they read? Who writes them? Who reads them? For what purposes? On what occasions? With what outcomes? What is recorded? What is omitted? What does the writer seem to take for granted about the reader(s)? What do readers need to know in order to make sense of them? (Punch, 1998:231-232; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:173).

Collectively, the interviews and document/artefact study will provide detailed accounts of the sensations, experiences, expectations, knowledge and understandings of life in a particular educational institution and will enable the researcher to examine changes or shifts in philosophy across the historical periods of study.

6. VALIDITY/LIMITATIONS

The case study approach holds an ambiguous place in social science (Reinharz, 1992). A common criticism concerns its generalizability (Punch, 1998:153. However, Punch (1998) asserts that “properly conducted case studies, especially in situations where our knowledge is shallow, fragmentary, incomplete or non-existent”, have a valuable contribution to make (Punch, 1998:155). These include:

- i. what we can learn from the study of a particular case in its own right.
- ii. only an in-depth case study can provide understanding of the important aspects of a new or persistently problematic research area. This is particularly true when complex social behaviour is involved, as in much social research. Discovering the important features, developing an understanding of them, and conceptualizing them for further study is often best achieved through the case study strategy (1998:155).

Therefore, because of the diversity within case study research it is critically important to develop a clear rationale and research questions to frame and guide the study (1998:155-6).

This study acknowledges the academic and historical limitations of experience based on recall and subjective filtering; however, it is still possible to note and record the salient features of the ways in which a feminine identity, a life, a set of relationships and values, and gendered expectations of life beyond school were constructed. A combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews with present and past teachers, heads and scholars coupled with document study will provide rich data about the impact of gender on girls’ education which may or may not have underpinned “lived experience”. The methodology defers to what Weiner asserts as “the often forgotten struggles and achievement of women. For those reasons, women will need to re-write history to tell future generations ‘her-story’, and already feminists, historiographers and researchers have done much to restore women to their rightful place in the search for social justice and equality” Weiner (ed) 1985).

7. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As Punch (2000) asserts, “all social research involves consent, access and associated ethical issues, since it is based on data from people about people” (75). Interviews of participants will meet the general protocols and procedures for interviewing and oral history (Douglas, Roberts & Thompson (1988)). The proposed study will ensure that informed consent is obtained from participants. They may need full information about the research including the reasons they have been chosen to participate. Participants’ privacy, confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed. Consent forms and a covering letter will be provided.

Similarly, the school being used for the case study will need to give permission for access to archival material and documents useful to the study. The school will be assured that findings will be used appropriately, as will their reporting and dissemination.

8. RESEARCH TIMETABLE

2005 : *January - April:* Permission of school, access to archives, attempt to identify main historical periods, set against Commonwealth Policy developments. Recruitment of participants.

May - July: First round of interviews, transcribing data. Check participants against matrix, identify further participants (if necessary).

August - October: Second round of interviews (staff, Headmistress, Dean of Curriculum etc). Complete document analysis identifying key markers of change.

November – December : Completion of transcriptions.

2006 : *January – March :* Develop coding, identify themes.

April – June : Relate themes from interview data to documentary data (this may be problematical because of the ‘lag factor’ both in actual change and participants awareness of change).

July – September: Draft of the analysis chapters.

October – December : Draft of the theory chapter; implications and conclusions.

2007: *January – March* : Revise first three chapters : Rationale, Literature Review, Research Methods and Design.

April – June : Revise Data Analysis and Theory chapters. Revise for final submission..

Budget

Tapes - \$80

Photocopying \$200.00

Travel - \$1000

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