

by Carole Ford

Boys are doctors; girls are nurses

Sustaining the stereotypes in career aspirations



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A group of parents arranged a hospital tour for a class of 20 pre-schoolers. At the end of the tour each child was presented with a cap: doctors' caps for the boys, nurses' caps for the girls. The parents, outraged at the sexism, requested that the hospital administration change their policy. The next year a similar tour was arranged and at the end parents returned to collect their children. What did they find? The exact same thing as the previous year! They went to confront the director and demand an explanation. The director responded by assuring the parents that this year *had* been different. "This year we offered them whichever hat they wanted."

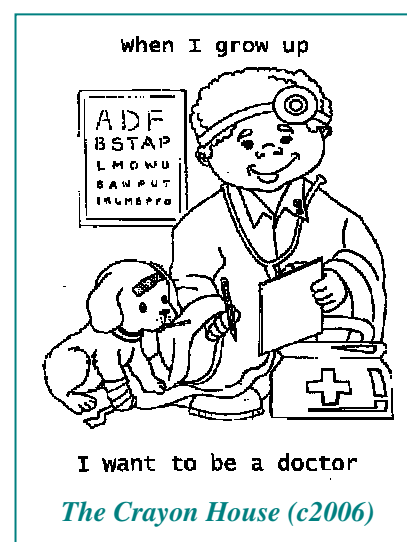
Hofstadter (1986)

A history lesson

For any teacher working in the area of gender equity in the Australian school system of the 1980s and 1990s, scenarios similar to that quoted in the introduction were often the basis for awareness-raising. Agitating for change under the lofty banner of 'girls can do anything', equal

opportunity practitioners ensured that issues of inclusivity, gender equity, social justice and level playing fields were central to the discussion: but of course not everyone was listening!

The Commonwealth Schools Commission (1975) released a report which "...presented a case that on the basis of societal and economic changes and on the basis of the requirements of good education, schooling in Australia was in need of



reform". The tardy nature of educational reform contributed to the *National Policy for the Education of Women and Girls* (1987), which was the first of many government documents that acknowledged the category of girls as central to reform.

Strategies for change included revising and reviewing texts used in classrooms; encouraging girls into non-traditional subjects and occupations; appointing more female staff; and developing equal opportunity working parties, support centres and teacher networks (Weiner, 1994). Despite sustained research and action designed to promote and improve the educational and occupational experiences of girls and women, many of the processes and structures that oppressed and constrained girls remained unaltered (Clark, 1989:2). Lyn Yates (1993:109) questioned the effectiveness of a conceptually narrow definition of 'equal opportunity'. She thought it notable "...just how much attention has been devoted to topping up supposed inadequacies of girls, and how little to addressing the education of boys and its contribution to sexual inequality".

The contemporary climate, with discourse of male disadvantage embedded in the gender politics debate, has the potential to undermine the somewhat modest gains achieved for girls and women in the past three decades. The *What about the boys?* backlash exists as a definitive marker that there were positive advancements in the provision of more equitable education.ⁱ While I perceive it as important to avoid the 'competing victims' syndrome so eloquently described by Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas (1995:125), it is nonetheless valuable to consistently reinforce a focus on women and girls within the educational agenda.

The impact of popularism surrounding the schooling crisis for males has resulted in a redirection of political energy away from equity issues for females. The reinterpretation of what was once implied by gender inequity has resulted in the "G" word (gender) compromising the voice of females. In this post-everything era, where individualism is celebrated, the educational circumstances for many women and girls remain entrenched in a narrow and restrictive definition of educational participation, while the affirmation of the relative success of some females reassures the masses that reform has been achieved. And we still exhort all girls that they can do anything!

Deborah Rhode (1997:3) comments that:

...a common response to gender inequality is to deny its dimensions. A widespread perception is that once upon a time, women suffered serious discrimination, but those days are over. Barriers have been coming down, women

have been moving up, and full equality is just around the corner. If anything, many men believe that women are getting undeserved advantage.

This perception has resulted in a diversion of resources away from feminist studies at many universities, including through post-graduate research. While there are exceptional women who continue the rigorous pursuit of gender inequality in a diversity of social and political contexts, inequalities in the classroom are replicated in the workplace and compounded by women's disproportionate domestic responsibilities. I would argue that there is some urgency for research that returns to grassroots, identifying with the majority of women and girls, including those with the cumulative disadvantage of gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background, cultural group, geographical location and/or (dis)ability, and clearly demonstrating the deleterious impact of most government policy and funding. The concept of mainstreaming girls' and women's issues within broader policy development has very frequently resulted in tokenism, invisibility or 'downstreaming' (Aller, 1989).

Developing a perspective

The theme for my research evolved, as topics so frequently do, from past experience, personal interests, contemporary discussion and opportunity. As a very active participant in the EO movement of the 1980s and 1990s, I had created a range of awareness-raising opportunities, which included the preparation of reports for staff, school council members and the regional EO unit. My unpublished report, *Don't Step on My Shoes*, focused on a school-wide analysis of career aspirations: and the results were a pertinent indicator of the prevailing gender stereotypes. The gendered nature of the responses recorded for both girls and boys were evident at the Prep level (five-year olds) and persisted through all grade levels. And while a number of girls nominated 'mother' as their prospective career of choice, there was no evidence of aspiring fathers.

Obviously, such an informal study raised numerous questions, some of which have been addressed in ongoing research studies:

- How accurately do career aspirations in primary-aged children relate to eventual career outcomes?
- Would similar information be gleaned from studies in locations which were, for example, socio-economically and geographically different?
- Was there evidence of change in career aspirations when compared to previous decades?
- What factors influence the 'choices' children make?
- And does it really matter?

However, at that stage, other issues crowded my agenda, and I did not actively pursue the topic.

My interest in the theme of career choice was predominantly rekindled by two factors: the introduction of the new Federal Government *Work Choices* legislation, and employment at Tropical North Queensland TAFE. The connections that linked education, employment and career counselling seemed startlingly at odds with the urgency for girls and women to attain economic security and independence. An article in *The Gen* more than a decade ago, titled 'Take twelve girls', presented a persuasive case incorporating *Bureau of Statistics* data:

Girls now at school will be likely to work in paid employment for at least 30 years. Yet many schoolgirls still regard work as something to fill the gap between getting married and having children...

The Gen, 1992

The article further indicated that of twelve girls:

- ☐ three will need to work alongside their partner to keep their family going;
- ☐ three will get married and divorced soon after;
- ☐ one will have a partner who is physically violent and/or a substance abuser who is unable to sustain employment;
- ☐ one will need to work because of her partner's unemployment;
- ☐ one will never marry or be in an ongoing relationship;
- ☐ one will be widowed;
- ☐ one will never have a child; and
- ☐ one will be supported by her partner for her entire adult life.

(ibid)

While it may no longer be considered necessary to defend women's right to income security gained from paid employment, women's connection to the paid workforce can be tenuous. Despite the emphasis on equal opportunity and gender equity reforms which have resulted in significant changes in workplace participation by women, gender differences – in pay, status, security, access to training, promotion and working conditions – persist. Striving for rights in paid employment is frequently represented as a struggle of previous generations, obsolete on the political agenda, but there has been an erosion of women's equality over the past decade which may be difficult to reverse (Summers, 2003:263).ⁱⁱ

Nevertheless, the participation of women in the labour force is more than just a financial enterprise. As Anne Else emphasises (1996:57):

...that's not the whole story. Women want paid work for

the same reason as men do. They want to earn money, be with other adults, use their skills, and be part of the world beyond their own family circle.

For many women participation in the labour force develops self-esteem, fosters independence (not just economic!) and results in a range of other tangible and intangible personal benefits. Yet despite an incredible increase in their participation rates, the Australian labour market retains its reputation for gender segregation. Heather Davey (2004:1), a consultant in career development, acknowledges an increase in women entering non-traditional occupations, but highlights that this is reflected mainly in a few professional career strands. Her observations, while focusing on the Canadian labour market, are mirrored by recent data cited in Australia (eg. Morley, 1998) which identify the minimal gains in the scope of careers pursued by women. It is certainly evident in the vocational educational and training sector in which I am involvedⁱⁱⁱ, with female apprentices accounting for only 14.9% of the total in 1996 – and over half of those apprenticeships held by women in hairdressing (ibid).

A number of factors therefore underpin the imperative for change:

- Social justice and the recognition of everyone's right to develop their capabilities and achieve professional and career outcomes commensurate with their ability and aspirations (*Human Rights Commission*, 2006).
- The promotion of women's right to economic independence and addressing the intergenerational cycle of poverty.
- The current 'skills crisis' where labour force demands in many areas remain unfulfilled.
- The effective utilisation of labour force potential to maintain productivity growth.
- Outlining the need for systemic policy and processes that recognise the urgency for lifelong learning in a rapidly changing workplace.

Rather than dismissing gender as peripheral to the discussion I would argue that it is essential to clarify how and why equity and diversity are integral to the workplace, and the manner in which such principles should be included in any national industrial relations policy. Such an approach necessitates an understanding of the constructs of gender, as well as race, ethnicity, social class, family structures and educational opportunity.

Policy about and for women and girls must come from a clear focus on women, acknowledging the full diversity of realities and experiences of Australian women.

Joy Taylor, Elaine Butler and Robyn Woolley, 2005

Occupational attainment, which is directly linked to educational outcomes, is a major determinant of individual levels of consumption, self-esteem and societal position (Brown et al., 2004:2), and it seems self-evident that occupational attainment has its foundations prior to reaching 'working age'. Simplistic analysis of senior level examination results and tertiary education conceals the evidence that, despite the programs and the rhetoric, education at all levels sustains traditional notions of gender construction that are reflected in the labour market (Arnot, 2002; McLeod, 2004).

An editorial in *The Gen* (1993) identifies how schools are a microcosm of society which shape attitudes, values and expectations that contribute significantly to gender inequities. In my research on career aspirations, it was this 'microcosm' which I sought to understand and clarify. I consider my perspective feminist, as intent to start from personal experience clearly identifies my standpoint (Reinharz, 1992) and the subjectivity associated with the construction of knowledge – the facts. In developing a framework for this project I am attempting to connect research and action as "[F]eminist research must not be abstract and removed from the subject of investigation, but must instead have a commitment to working towards societal change" (Brayton, 1997).

The research project: a work in progress

Despite three decades of equity policy in education a range of factors continues to contribute to differential outcomes for girls and women in the labour market. This research aims to demonstrate how the intersection of socialisation, curriculum and education practice impacts on career aspirations and the implications this has for pre-vocational education, classroom practices, career counselling and curriculum development.

While there is an extensive literature on educational choices, career aspirations, career counselling and transition from school to work, the emphasis is generally on students at the secondary school level (eg. Lewis, 1992; Teese et al., 1995; Colley, 1998; Wyn, 2001). However Roger Herring (1998) points out that the "...importance of the elementary school years as a foundation for children's later career decisions underscores the necessity of planned attention to the elementary student's career development". As a practising classroom teacher I was immersed in the gender politics of the early childhood setting, and I observed first-hand what Glenda McNaughton (2000) describes as the resistance to pedagogical innovation and the marginalisation of gender constructs at this level.

To comprehend the potential for intervention thorough 'critical

collectivism' (McNaughton, 2000:181) it is necessary to extend existing theoretical frameworks of just how young children perceive self, work and career aspirations, and consequently contribute to an expanding knowledge base. I aim to:

- describe how children understand concepts such as work and career;
- define children's gender-role beliefs and attitudes regarding specific occupations;
- demonstrate children's awareness of women's and men's competencies in gender-typed occupations; and
- illustrate informal connections between children's occupational aspirations and aspects like family background, parents' occupational location and family structure.

There are two major elements in my research:

- A survey activity in which girls and boys at Years 1, 4 and 7 will work individually with me to classify a range of occupations according to gender suitability [See Appendix 1 for list of occupations].
- Individual interviews, using a semi-structured approach, with children chosen randomly from the preceding survey groups [See Appendix 2 for possible interview questions.]

Children's understanding of gender roles and their adoption of what is perceived as appropriate gender role behaviour is multi-dimensional, including aspects of socialisation, cognitive development and social class inclusion (O'Brien et al., 2000). While much of the research in gender construct and gender related schemas in the area of vocational choice focuses on the post-primary student, analyses of sex-role stereotypes demonstrate that gender is already salient amongst pre-schoolers (Kimmel, 2000; Marshall & Reinharz, 1997). Remember that introductory story? "Developmental research by Linda Gottfredson found that children begin to eliminate career choices because they are the wrong sex-type between the ages of six and eight" (WEEA Resource Center, 2002). As Michael Kimmel (2000:151) argues, children's gendering experiences precede school attendance, but schools are organised to 'produce gendered individuals', both through the official curriculum and what is referred to as the hidden curriculum.

A number of thematic issues are emerging from the preliminary results of this research, which may problematise the structure and organisation of career counselling. The implications for counselling in elementary settings, the development of curriculum materials and guidelines for pre-service education are within the scope of this study. Thinking critically about gender relations and cultural expectations is part of children's evolving life skills for which schools share a responsibility (Gatskell, 1992:146) and

which includes experiences “...designed to develop self-understanding and a realistic, positive self-concept” (Emmett, 1997). Enhancing the career development process for young children has significant advantages for both girls and boys to realise their potential and contribute to personal well-being unconstrained by gender imperatives. There is a need for further research and pilot programs “...to examine strategies for incorporating gender equity and basic careers into primary school curriculum” which was identified in *Careers Education for Girls: A Good Practice Review* (Equity Research Centre).

The resilience of sex stereotypes is demonstrated constantly, through a range of sources including media, movies, literature, the judiciary system, government policy and the gender segregated workplace. The evidence also suggests that children continue to learn the lessons of socialisation most effectively, and the cultural context replicated in schools compounds the lessons learned in the broader community (eg. Sadker, 1999). I surmise that the influence of teachers is a vital determinant in the direction of children’s future career aspirations. This suggests that pre-service education is fundamental to preparing all teachers to acknowledge, accommodate and address issues of gender. However as Jo Sanders (2002) describes, teacher education proceeds in a virtually gender-free vacuum^{iv}.

Leaving the issue of gender equity in teacher education up to committed individual faculty members is not an adequate professional response to the need to prepare students. Leaving students’ learning about gender equity up to their assorted gleanings from television or the newspapers is even worse.

(ibid)

My research, and indeed this paper, is an encouragement to reintroduce gender equity to the education profession’s agenda. While girls are still being exposed to sexist ideas in both the home and the classroom, despite their influx into paid work (Clark & Horan, 2000: abstract), arguing that “Girls can do anything” is somewhat a moot point. What we must do, as informed and dedicated teachers, is demonstrate irrefutably that gender stereotypes are alive and well and flourishing in a primary school near you!

APPENDIX 1: List of occupations

SURVEY SHEET

Directions: I am going to read to you a list of jobs that people may have. For each job, I would like you to say whether it is a job for both women and men; a job for women; a job for men; or you don’t know. If you are not sure about the job, you may ask for more information.

List of jobs:

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| ■ farmer | ■ nurse |
| ■ prime minister | ■ news reader |
| ■ librarian | ■ plumber |
| ■ model | ■ computer operator |
| ■ judge | ■ vet (veterinary surgeon) |
| ■ doctor | ■ kindergarten teacher |
| ■ school principal | ■ basketballer |
| ■ pilot | ■ shop assistant |
| ■ police officer | ■ hairdresser |
| ■ truck driver | ■ firefighter |

What would you like to be when you grow up?

APPENDIX 2: Interview Questions

POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Do you know anyone who goes to work?
- What does it mean that they ‘work’?
- Why do people work?
- Do men have to work?
- Do women have to work?
- How do people know what work they would like to do?
- Do you think you will work when you are grown-up/adult?
- What do you want to do?
- Why did you choose that job?
- Would you choose something different if you were a girl/boy?
- Why/why not?
- What will you need to do to get that job?
- What work do the adults/grown-ups in your family do?

Thank you for talking to me today.

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ⁱ See eg. Alan Barron, convener of the Institute for Men's Studies (1989/9: various websites) who made such edifying comments as "Not only are men missing out on places at university, they are also subsidising higher education for many women ... men pay around 70% of the total income tax collected. Thus men are subsidising higher education for many women"; "With women and girls getting preference in education and employment, is it any wonder some boys feel like second rate citizens?"

ⁱⁱ Initiating actions to reverse the changes is not to suggest that we simply need to reinstate what existed: recreating the past will not address today's issues. However reflecting on past strategies may provide an initial framework (see Summers, 2003 for an expansion of this discussion).

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example: Carole Ford (2006) 'If she was a boy she could do an apprenticeship', *The Australian TAFE Teacher*, Spring 2006.

^{iv} In fact she challenges teachers to survey teacher education faculty members to describe the extent of their teaching and learning in the area of gender equity (Sanders, 2003:3). Such a survey may certainly prove illuminating!