Girls and Education 3-16: Continuing Concerns, New Agendas
Edited by Carolyn Jackson, Carrie Paechter & Emma Renold

*Girls and Education* is a collection of research papers about girls aged 3-16 years, which were presented at a British seminar series in 2007. The seminars and book evolved “from a shared concern that issues relating to girls’ schooling and femininities were sidelined and depoliticised in British education agendas” (p. 1). Although these papers relate to British girls, many of the same issues and problems are universally experienced by girls who live in any western democracy.

Jackson, Paechter and Renold start with the premise that “studies of boys’ schooling experiences have… dominated recent gender and education research” (p. 2). *Girls and Education* attempts to swing the balance, by presenting research on three areas: girls and academic achievement; girls’ experiences in the schooling system; and the relationships between girls’ out-of-school experiences and school life. Each section challenges “the seductive discourse of successful girls and failing boys [which] remains dominant” (p. 4).

Two studies from the text were particularly notable. The first explored how girls’ academic achievement was often positioned in a contest relational to boys’ underachievement.

Becky Francis explored achievement patterns for girls and boys in England “to highlight the error of perception of boys as uniformly ‘underachieving’, and girls as achieving” (p. 29). She concluded that this simple dichotomy disguises the struggles of many girls at school who are not achieving top results, while educational resources are thrown at boys in the same position. “The silencing of such inequalities by the exclusive focus on boys reflected in recent policy making and media commentary constitutes an important issue for (lack of) gender justice” (p. 35).

Carrie Paetcher and Sheryl Clark researched the interesting area of schoolgirls and power; “how economies of knowledge are used by girls to mobilise power within and between friendship groups” (p. 117). After studying classes of 9-11 year olds in two schools in London, they concluded that three broad forms of knowledge are mobilised by schoolgirls.

Girls use hierarchical knowledge, “knowledge about who is where in the social hierarchy and why” (p. 119) to position themselves and others in their groups. Understanding knowledge as a form of capital was also utilised by girls “as a commodity, as something that [could] be accumulated, traded or given away” (p. 121). Finally, performing knowledge, or “the performance of knowledge ownership and exchange was central to power/knowledge relations in the class as a whole” (p. 124). Paetcher and Clark concluded that “power/knowledge relations in and between girls’ groups have complex and multiple effects on girls’ friendships, their social standing, and their happiness at school” (p. 127).

*Girls and Education* also raises some interesting findings about the “unrelenting pressure on ‘successful’ girls to maintain high achievement in all aspects of their lives” (p. 12).

Together, the text sheds light on what many girls in British school are thinking, feeling and experiencing. The writing is informative, blending theoretical perspectives with practical
research findings. While some chapters may not be relevant to particular schools or educators, *Girls and Education* is an important addition to the literature about girls in our educational institutions. “All of this means that, as researchers and teachers, we need to continually remind ourselves that all girls, and their concerns, matter, despite the relative academic success of some of their number. This will require us to sustain our focus on the social and cultural aspects of girls’ lives, both in and out of school, while maintaining a watchful eye on their academic performance and curriculum choices” (p. 13).