

Why a Girl's School? So Much Less to *Unlearn*

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Two momentous events occurred in my life on 11 September 2001. In the afternoon I was promoted to professor at the Queensland University of Technology, and that evening the Twin Towers came down in New York. At the time, the pleasure of the former was, of course, overwhelmed by the horror of the latter. Yet I have often reflected since then on the significance of the professorship as an achievement against the odds.

I had a number of strikes against me. I was female, and in 2001 less than one in five university professors were female. I attended government co-educational schools. I grew up in a Housing Commission home in a low income suburb. And as a teenager I was much more interested in music and sport than in study.

Now it might seem at this point that I am laying the foundations for an argument *against* single sex schooling for girls. After all, I 'got there' without having attended a girls' school. The storyline could well be: 'Girls can make it if they try hard enough — it's the disposition to learn that really matters, not whether they attend a single sex school.' But I want to insist that it could have been much easier. I could have had *so much less to unlearn*.

It is harder to unlearn something than it is to learn it. Once we feel we know the truth of something, something that life experience has taught us, it is difficult to seek a more useful view, let alone throw that life-script in the bin. If we 'know' that it is normal to have many more boys than girls in STEM classes, and if we 'know' that it is normal to expect girls to be subjected to 'body image' taunts in the co-ed playground, then we either have to unpack that knowledge sack or carry it with us when it comes to negotiating our own future. In a world where "female managers [are] paid \$100k less than men in [the] same role",¹ some co-ed school experiences are unlikely to be a promising start.

¹ www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-03/gender-pay-gap-among-managers.../7215784, accessed 10 Dec, 2016.

There is, of course, much to unlearn about femaleness that is not the fault of school. I sang 'Where the boys are...' along with Connie Francis, and 'You don't have to say you love me...' with Dusty Springfield, without knowing how much I would have to unlearn in their messages about relationships. Flash forward to 2017 and many girls experience pressure to 'relate' to boys by sending naked photos of themselves on-line, with failure to do so taken as a failure to be appropriately loving or giving. There can be catastrophic consequences for those who give in to this sort of relational blackmail. So much for today's girls to unlearn!

At a recent conference for girls' schools, I heard a recurrent theme from the senior girls – that their single sex school was one of the very few places they could escape the intrusion of vulgar sexualisation into their lives. Their schools gave them spaces to occupy all the student leadership positions, to be 100% of the STEM enrolments, to play bass guitar and drums in school band. In such a context, these girls were able to value themselves and each other as independent entities. In their school environment they were not subjected to the sort of male scrutiny and gender stereotyping that can diminish a girl's identity and sense of a possible future, and for that they expressed genuine gratitude.

Cultures can shift but it takes persistence and time. It would be too easy to presume that co-ed schools have now picked up their collective act when it comes to teaching girls alongside boys, because teachers are now much more aware of the research on gender and schooling. We still have research findings of gender bias in teacher Interactions with students, with boys continuing to receive more teacher attention than girls.² In other words, the 'teacher attention' trends we hoped to see overturned have persisted in many co-ed classrooms.

Of equal concern is the persistence of findings that teachers' differential use of feedback from the earliest grades plays a key part in determining how girls and boys receive feedback in their later years, with girls more likely to attribute

² See Litosseliti, L (2014) *Gender and Language Theory and Practice*, Routledge: London & New York, <https://books.google.com.au/books?isbn=1444116592>, accessed 23 Jan, 2017.

negative feedback on performance to their own perceived lack of ability, while boys attribute the same to lack of effort or other external sources.³

In summary, co-education still has boys coming out in front. Moreover, no 'well-being' or 'positivity' program can fix a culture that continues to frame girls as less visible, and less capable, than boys.

Girls' schools alone can provide classrooms where gender wars, tacit or tangible, are absent from the teaching and learning culture. It follows that their graduates will have less to unlearn than their counterparts in co-educational settings. And that is why the experience of life in a girls' school has so much to offer the next generation of Australian women.

³ See Moskowitz, G. (Ed.) (2013) *Cognitive Social Psychology: The Princeton Symposium on the Legacy and Future of Social Cognition*. Taylor & Francis eLibrary, p.66, <https://books.google.com.au/books?isbn=1135664250>, accessed 23 Jan, 2017.