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Girls Education in NSW: Where have we come from and where are we going?

This extract seeks to help parents of daughters appreciate the origins and future of girls' education in NSW, with an emphasis on academic performance and schooling experiences.

The education of girls in New South Wales and their performances in final, secondary school examinations has always fascinated me. In 1996 I began a PhD Thesis which traced the academic performance of girls in New South Wales from 1884, the first time they were allowed to sit for a final, secondary school examination, to the end of the twentieth century.

In essence, my aim was to contribute an historical perspective to the ongoing debates about the quality of education for girls and the differences between girls' and boys' academic performances in those final examinations in New South Wales. Furthermore I wanted to investigate school settings and if girls performed better in single sex or coeducational environments.

My secondary aim was twofold; to determine whether the success of girls in final, secondary school examinations was a recent phenomenon or whether in fact they had always outperformed boys and also, what factors could their success be attributed to? The Equal Opportunity Programs of the 1970s? Or was it something else entirely?

When I completed my thesis, I had indeed worked out many answers to questions that I had thought of along the way. At the end of the day it is important to recognize the past in shaping the future of educating our girls.

1884–1915 : 'Humble Beginnings'

This period witnessed both a development of and expansion in secondary education. For the first time, a tiny number of girls, most from the middle class, were eligible to sit for the Senior Public Examinations and matriculate to the University of Sydney. During this period there was a lack of substantial difference in the overall performances of girls and boys in the Senior Public Examination results. Research findings showed, however, that during this period,

- Girls performed proportionately better than boys in four of the seventeen subjects investigated – these were History, English, Geography and French
- Boys excelled in three of the seventeen subjects, Latin, Algebra and Geometry.

For the remaining ten subjects, very little could be deduced due to very different participation rates. For example, girls experienced great difficulty in being able to study Mechanics, Greek, Chemistry and Physics. The success of girls in the final secondary school examination would manifest itself in the next period investigated.

1916–1945 : 'Growth'

This period embraces significant global change – World War 1, the Great Depression, the rise of Communism and Fascism and World War 11. Australia and New South Wales in particular witnessed much urbanisation and industrialisation. There was much continuity from the previous period to this period regarding secondary schooling and performance in final secondary school examinations. During this period, there was some difference in the overall performance of girls and boys in the Leaving Certificate Examination. Of the eighteen subjects investigated in terms of performance by gender:

- Female candidates achieved proportionately higher pass rates in nine subjects (English, Latin, Mechanics, Modern History, Music, Economics, Physiology, Geology, Art)
- Male candidates achieved proportionately higher pass rates in seven subjects, (Physics, Geography, Chemistry, Ancient History, Botany, Mathematics 1, Mathematics 2)
- In two subjects (French, Zoology), female and male candidates performed equally well.

Overall, female candidates achieved more passes proportionately in the Leaving Certificate Exam during these years; proportionately, girls performed better than boys in Government *and* non-Government single sex environments.

1946–1966 : ‘Expansion’

This period ends when the final Leaving Certificate Examination was administered. The examination system in this period, as was the case in the previous ones, determined much of what was possible for girls and boys to study in the secondary school setting if they wished to matriculate.

Throughout this period, as in the other ones, large numbers of students left school as soon as they were legally able to do so. Performance by sex at the Leaving Certificate Examinations for the years 1946–1966 saw girls achieving exceptional results in a range of school settings but especially in urban, non-Government single sex environments.

- Girls performed proportionately better than boys in sixteen of the seventeen subjects investigated. These were – English, Latin, French, German, Modern and Ancient History, Mathematics 1 and 2, General Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Biology, Geography, Music and Art
- In Economics, boys and girls performed equally well.

From my data I could conclude that regardless of the size or balance of female and male candidates and regardless of the subjects studied, that:

- Girls were on average more successful than boys in the Leaving Certificate Examinations throughout this period.

1967–1980 : ‘Unparalleled Success’

Although this period was the shortest investigated in terms of years, many significant changes occurred in secondary education in NSW between 1967, when the first Higher School Certificate Examinations were administered and 1980, the last year in which no analysis of examination performance by sex exists.

This period highlighted both the increase in literature and government reports regarding gender, schools and the HSC, as well as the escalation in public interest regarding gender, schools and the HSC Examination.

There were ten subjects investigated during this period.

- Girls performed proportionately better than boys in all ten subjects investigated during this period. The subjects were, English, Modern and Ancient History, Geography, Economics, French, German, Art, Mathematics and Science.

Girls had every opportunity to remain at school and then move into a range of post-school destinations.

Single sex schools continued to enjoy unparalleled success, although the Government coeducational secondary school cemented its place in the New South Wales education system.

1981–1995

In this period the Higher School Certificate Examination marked the completion of secondary schooling and provided the most common means of entering higher education. In this period, extensive statistics on examination results were produced by the New South Wales Board of Studies. Again, as in the previous period, girls performed better than boys in the Higher School Certificate, both in the ten subjects investigated and in overall results.

Student perceptions coupled with academic results such as the Higher School Certificate Examination results were reported religiously throughout the 1990s.

The media, reported in great detail the results of the students, their scores, their schools and their university choices. Girls were especially praised for having outperformed boys in the majority of Higher School Certificate subjects and in the merit lists, mainly in single sex environments, both Government and non Government.

Conclusions of Dr Kamperos’ PHD Research

Having traced more than a century of final secondary school examination performances by girls and boys in individual subjects, in the type of school they attended and in overall results, I demonstrated that the sudden interest of the mid-1990s in the comparative performance of girls and boys in the Higher School Certificate Examination, and the idea that girls had quite recently and quite suddenly begun to perform better than boys, is based on a belief about girls’ and boys’ examination performance but is factually incorrect.

From 1884, girls have performed and continue to perform, proportionately better than boys in final secondary school examinations, largely in single sex schools.

The ‘discovery’ in the mid-1990s that girls had seemingly, for the first time, performed proportionately better than boys in the Higher School Certificate Examination was no discovery at all. It was instead, a media construction, created especially by the print media to argue that it was time to concentrate on the problems that boys faced in the school setting*.

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* One of the earliest contributions to a re-examination of boys’ education in the school setting came from Richard Fletcher, ‘Non-Sexist Education for Boys’, Education Journal of the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation, 30 May 1988. Also see New South Wales Advisory Committee on Education, Training and Tourism, Challenges and Opportunities: A Discussion Paper: A Report to the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs on the Inquiry into Boys’ Education 1994, Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, Sydney, 1994.