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Educating Boys at Girls' Expense; the experiences of girls educated in elite boys' schools in Britain

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Abstract

This study focuses upon girls educated in fee-paying former boys' schools in England, many of which have been boys' schools and sites of male privilege for centuries. There has been an initiative to recruit girls to the schools which began in the late 1960's, since when further boys' schools have become similarly 'co-educational'. The research reported here is based mainly on interviews with young women who are former pupils and compares their expectations and their reflections on their experiences.

We identify two distinct waves of admitting girls to the boys' schools, each of which was influenced by events within the state education system, and each of which keeps girls in a minority. Evidence from our interviews suggests that whilst the girls' expectations of the initiative were not fulfilled, boys in the schools received a number of benefits from it ; we claim that this is at the girls' expense.

Context

Approximately seven per cent of the school population in England attend fee-paying schools, most of which are single-sex, that is, for boys or girls only. These schools are mainly boarding and traditionally recruit from the upper classes; they provide a disproportionate percent of 'leaders' however defined. Single-sex boys' schools have greater prestige than girls' schools, even though they recruit from the same social class. This paper examines initiatives in England to recruit girls into these elite boys' schools.

There have been two main waves of recruitment of girls, first in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and much more recently, in the mid-1990's. Those former boys' schools that have recruited girls describe themselves as co-educational even where, as is usually the case, girls are in the minority.

Although our research focuses on schools in England, we are aware that similar initiatives have taken place in Australia and Canada.

Our Study

Our study involves interviewing women who have attended former boys' schools; parents of such girls, and staff in the schools. In addition, we have analysed school prospectuses and other material produced by schools to discover what they claim to offer their pupils (see Fuller, Dooley and Ayles 1997).

This paper draws on our interviews with women who were pupils, four in particular. Their experiences are typical of the many in our study who transferred into a boys' school from another school.

Promises

The girls expected, or were led to expect, a better educational experience at the former boys' school than they had received in other schools. Their expectations included finding an environment which was 'more natural' and which offered them greater 'freedom'. They **e**xpected that this environment would be a sound preparation for university and the real world. They also expected better teaching

then they had had previously, and better facilities, especially for sports, computing and the sciences. The girls further anticipated that they would gain access to the networks (the 'old boy network'), that such schools give rise to.

In contrast, the parents of the boys already at the schools were led to expect that girls would provide a civilising influence on the boys - a rationale that is common to both eras of recruitment.

Girls' Experiences

The voices of four interviewees, Katrina, Samantha, Rachel and Imogen, who attended different boys' schools, tell of girls' actual experiences.

The girls had high expectations and looked forward to going to the school.

> I thought it would be wonderful ... I was quite keen to go to something completely different, the change. You know it was all boys which was intriguing because in a girls' school you were kept so apart from the boys' school ... what are they? You know, they were like alien beings when you've been to a girls' school ... I expected some good teaching, I expected to get to university from it, and I expected that it would be a little bit more fun than being with all girls. *Katrina*.

They discovered some real limitations in that opportunities were fewer than expected.

> Sport was really good ... but I could not find anyone else willing to play [tennis] the rest of the year. There was one boy I played with for a bit, but when I started winning he refused to play with me any more and there was one of the old sports teachers teaching me, but he was hopeless. *Samantha*

> I was going to do Economics but they couldn't physically fit a timetable around Economics, English and Biology which is why I did Geography. Some of the subjects were very poor ... some of the results I think were below par ... there was actually very poor advice on the school's part. *Katrina*

> I did have the opportunity to do these three separate subjects .... That was an opportunity for me. But because I was the only girl doing chemistry in about a class of may be about 7, and the same for physics, I would always be left out ... when it came to partnering for like experiments or something. *Rachel*

At the schools they felt always on show.

> There was something about Woodvine [School] which made you feel very insecure and you felt like you were being watched and laughed at all the time. *Samantha*

> I was very reticent in class. I could write like made on paper but I didn't want to talk in class, so I didn't. I think my confidence in that respect did take a bit of a battering, and [the male teacher] was always pushing me, completely the wrong way, I mean he didn't help, in a way he made it worse, made it completely no way in class,... he was saying 'What do you have to contribute?' It's like 'great, thanks'. So you know that was pretty chronic. *Imogen*

> We were very aware that there was just ten of us and that all eyes were on us. *Katrina*

At the same time they could be rendered invisible.

> ... there was a couple of really old teachers, generally chemistry department, who really annoyed me - they were a bit condescending, they couldn't be bothered to explain anything, and just generally looked for the high-flying boys. *Samantha*

> There was a lot of bullying by the boys to the girls, you know, verbal bullying. I don't know whether the staff were really aware of what was going on and chose to ignore it or whether they really didn't have a clue. *Imogen*

Their social horizons and networks were somewhat restricted.

> I didn't have that many blokey friends, I don't know if it was [because the school was] all-boys, or just at boarding school they're not so interested in being friends with the girls. All the girls were much more precocious, and want to talk to the boys, but they don't necessarily want to talk to the girls. *Samantha*

> There was some though that were very stuck-up, and didn't really want to associate with people like me... I don't think it was just me that felt this, but some were OK. I ended up having a few friends, not very many though. *Rachel*

There were pressures and stresses.

> When I just think back, when I think about the facilities, I know that it was brilliant, and I know that I was a lot happier there than I was at home, but at the same time there was quite a lot of emotional stress. *Samantha*

> You had to carve your own identity. I felt pretty low by the middle of the Upper Sixth.... the pressure could give grief and heartache. *Imogen*

They never felt fully accepted.

> Oh it was a boys' school at the end of the day, yes, yes that's how I've seen it. ... When I began I felt I was going to a boys' school with girls, and wasn't particularly changed by my experience. It was a boys' school with ten girls in. *Katrina*

> It didn't feel like a mixed school at all. It felt like a school for boys with just me tagging along, if you like, for some lessons. I don't think it even made an effort to make it feel mixed. *Rachel*

What the women in our study didn't talk about, what they wouldn't have known because they didn't have the broader picture, is that the schools targeted girls who wanted to study arts subjects rather than sciences, to make up the numbers in small groups. And they didn't know that girls' academic achievements, in science particularly, are poorer than if they had stayed at their old school (Fox and Creeser 1985). Nor did they realise that schools rarely altered their provisions and pedagogy in anticipation of the girls' arrival and commonly didn't change them once girls were there (Price 1993).

Explanations

This causes us to question why the schools recruited girls at all, and why at those particular times. In our view there is a link between what was happening in the state education sector and in these fee-paying non- state schools, a link which created anxieties and amplified problems in the elite schools.

First-wave recruitment of girls

In the late 1960's and early 1970's left-wing policies to remove social class privilege and create more equal opportunities in state schools lead to the reorganisation of secondary schooling and the setting up of non-selective, that is comprehensive schools, in the state sector. Gender equality was not central to these changes, though comprehensive schools became incidentally co-educational.

This view that selection on the basis of social class was undesirable, created a climate in which the socially and financially selective elite schools felt pressured to be seen as more open. Their short-lived initiatives to attract able working class boys gave way instead to recruitment of upper class girls and upper class overseas boys. This avoided their addressing the social class issue, yet did give them a 'more open' appearance. However, girls were always kept in a minority, sometimes a very small one, in the schools, and usually recruited to the sixth-form, the two years of post-compulsory schooling, only.

Second-wave recruitment

In the 1990's, many elite schools are now taking in girls from the first year of secondary education. Right wing policies, ostensibly about raising standards in schools have given rise to an emphasis on competition between schools (embodied in league tables) and on parental choice.

Elite schools link into this discourse of choice in the practice of extending recruitment of girls. With existing parents they can be seen to be accommodating to parental pressure to have daughters and sons in the same school; this may be because it is convenient, as the nature of boarding has altered, or it may be a genuine desire for co-education on the parents' part.

However, the rhetoric of 'widening participation' high on the current government's agenda can also be used to the elite school's advantage, as they attract non-traditional users into their schools because of the discontent about state schools fomented by the discourse of choice.

It so happens that increasing the number of girls will raise the academic profile of elite schools since girls' attainments generally outstrip those of boys.

Benefits for Boys

As the title of this paper suggests, our interviewees indicated a number of academic and non-academic benefits which accrued to boys as a result of the recruitment of girls.

Many boys gained access at 'A' level to Arts subjects that they might not otherwise have had. Subject choices made at this level, in the sixth-form, post-compulsory stage, are a crucial influence on later study at university. Commonly, in boys' single-sex schools, arts subjects are chosen by a minority of pupils only and therefore it is not always economic for the school to provide for them; the presence of girls in the schools ensured that group sizes in these subject areas were viable.

The entry of girls often resulted in an expansion of cultural activities in a school, such as drama and orchestras. This enabled boys to participate and enhanced the reputation of the school. Furthermore, the schools saw an extension of acceptable notions of masculinity which had previously

depended upon success on the sports field, and particularly in rugby. There was, as one teacher put it, 'more of a role for softy boys' to shine outside that culture, in areas such as music and the arts.

Academic competition between pupils was fuelled by sexist notions that boys should do better than girls so boys' achievements rose, to the benefit of the individuals and the school.

There was also a redirection of bullying towards girls as a group. For example, a number of interviewees told us of a 'game', prevalent in a number of schools, in which boys held up score-cards to indicate the physical attractiveness of girls as they entered the dining-room. This was to the advantage of some boys who escaped bullying as a result.

Conclusion

These initiatives give boys real-life preparation - but not quite along the lines of the discourse that brings girls into the school. 'Real life' for boys means readily available opportunities to practice exclusion, intimidation, criticism, superiority and the trading in assessing the sexual desirability of girls. In other words the recruitment of girls was and is a cosmetic, superficial change to elite male education, which leaves the organisational culture essentially unchanged. This is recognised by schools themselves; as we read in the prospectus for Cranleigh School:

> 'Founded in 1865 as a boys' boarding school, it continues to follow that pattern, which the presence of girls in the Sixth Form has enhanced but not fundamentally changed'.

Bibliography

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