

Book Reviews

Learning to Lose: Sexism and Education Dale Spender and Elizabeth Sarah (Eds)
Women's Free Press 1980 ISBN 0 7043 386 37 £3.25 216pp

Schooling for Women's Work Rosemary Deem (Ed) RKP 1980 ISBN 0 7100 0576 8
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Education for What and What Education

In the present economic climate with severe cutbacks in public expenditure, educational establishments are beginning to show signs of wear and tear. Uncertainty prevails about the future of schools and institutions of further and higher education. Nor is it at all clear at this stage just how much of our educational facilities will be damaged irrevocably through these cuts. What is known is that, although the country as a whole is likely to suffer on a long-term basis, certain sections of the population will be more adversely affected than others. Since women are likely to be the main victims, the two books which are being reviewed in this article (*Schooling for Women's Work*, edited by Rosemary Deem (*Schooling*), and *Learning to Lose*, edited by Dale Spender and Elizabeth Sarah (*Learning*)) are of particular interest.

These two books with their thirty-four different chapters are a welcome addition to the work on education and gender, and raise several issues on which there is on-going debate. Rosemary Deem's book covers a wider range, with articles on the labour force and higher education – and there is a particularly useful chapter by Margherita Rendel with up-to-date statistical information. Spender and Sarah's book concentrates on different facets of schooling, including teachers' experiences within both schools and the profession.

This review cannot deal with the large number of disparate contributions but will instead concentrate on two problems that emerge. The first is the notion that boys' and men's education is *per se* superior to that of girls' and women's. The second, and this is a point which Deem makes in her introduction, concerns the contribution which subjective descriptions and studies make to the understanding of the specificity of girls' and women's position in the educational system. Both these points have repercussions on the manner in which educational issues are conceptualized and analyzed.

Discussions of education in the feminist movement are almost always premised, either explicitly or implicitly, on the notion that the education of women *in general*

can be counterposed against that of men *in general*. It then becomes possible to argue that the education of women is inferior to that received by men, a view which is advanced in both these books. Deem in the opening pages of her introduction, makes the point quite explicitly. While recognising that working-class men may be disadvantaged, she nevertheless says that:

... the educational experiences of the majority of men are likely to be *superior*, both while at school, and in terms of the consequences of those experiences, to those of most women (p1 *Schooling*, my emphasis)

Likewise, Jennifer Shaw (*Education and the Individual: Schooling for Girls, or Mixed Schooling – a Mixed Blessing, Schooling*), writing about single-sex versus co-educational schooling, says quite emphatically that '... the history of girls' education is largely the history of straightforward opposition to women getting a good education' (p67, *Schooling*). Yet the history of education is by no means, as Shaw suggests, a general one, but is rather one which is highly differentiated on a class basis. During the nineteenth century there were on-going struggles over educational facilities but the nature of these varied according to class membership in the first instance, and only secondly according to gender. For example, as Shaw points out, middle-class women battled to establish schools for girls which could replicate the new advantages that the middle classes had only recently acquired on behalf of their sons. These struggles by women were conducted in the face of vehement opposition to the education of middle-class girls on the grounds that it might prove injurious to their reproductive capacities.

On the other hand, facilities for the working classes did not make such clear-cut distinctions between boys and girls. There were widely held views that working-class men and women, were sadly lacking in knowledge and practice of moral values. Their way of living was a constant source of great concern: their language, forms of recreation, and drinking habits were all regarded with abhorrence by many members of the middle class. Schooling was seen as a means to combat these social evils. The charity schools were designed to train children in 'piety', and in 'habits of virtue and industry'; the Newcastle Commission in 1861 asserted that education for the working classes was 'to provide a sound and cheap elementary education for children', an education which would ensure the training of those desirable 'habits'. However, the nature of schools for the working classes did vary according to whether the children lived in urban or rural areas, whether the children were members of the indigent poor, or whether they were already employed and attending factory schools (the last one of which closed as late as 1918). In no way could one claim that historically educational provision is distinguished between boys and girls.

The major divide was, and indeed still is, class; the education of middle-class girls, whether they attended school or were schooled at home by governesses, was in no way comparable with that of working-class girls or working-class boys. The arguments regarding the general superiority of male education over female are extended to a consideration of more specific differences: these include a number of different claims relating to overall performance, or particular abilities, such as mathematical skills, or 'interests' and so on. For example in arguing for single-sex schools, Sarah *et al* (*The Education of Feminists: the Case for Single-Sex Schools, Learning*) make several claims: 'boys are expected to achieve better results than girls and they fulfil this expectation' ... 'boys who expect to be better at mathematics can also maintain their beliefs' ... 'interests of girls are passed over' and so on. These claims are also widely held and will be examined as they appear in the texts.

Sarah and her co-authors accept, uncritically, the 'considerable data' that 'in simple terms boys are doing better at the traditional tests according to traditional

measurements,' and yet they still assert that those who expect to excel at mathematics do so. However, these tests have been subjected to severe criticism and their use even rejected. For example, Griffiths and Saraga (1979) point out that such tests have been derived from a position which accepts the importance of biological differences. The measurements employed are taken from 'ad hoc empirical investigations of chosen sex differences' which results in the 'theories which in turn are derived from post hoc theorisation.' Finally they argue that such tests which are formulated in capitalist societies need to be understood within a context in which the occupations of men, and their relationship to science are highly specific.

Sarah *et al* continue their claim that boys have an advantage over girls by examining 'the means by which this is achieved'. A major part of their argument is located in terms of the expectations of each group. In mathematics for example they suggest that 'Girls don't think they should be as good at mathematics and they can maintain this belief despite their results: if their marks are good they have been lucky . . .' (op. cit. p59).

Mathematics is an area which is often examined in terms of these general comparisons. It is accorded a special place for a variety of reasons; mathematical ability is regarded as an indicator of overall intelligence; it is a prerequisite for the pursuit of a number of subjects in higher education, technology in particular. The absence of women from technological careers is thus often linked to the examination results of mathematics and mathematical performance at school.

Gaby Weiner (*Sex Differences in Mathematical Performance: A Review of Research and Possible Action, Schooling*) considers mathematics in schools and reviews a number of findings. Unlike Sarah and the others, she concludes that the factors involved in determining different performances are multi-varied and it is impossible to pinpoint any single explanation for gender differences. 'It is difficult to quantify the extent to which any one of these factors modifies the expectation, attitude and ability of girls and boys in mathematics . . . there is no simple answer to why sex differences in mathematical performance occur' (op. cit. p84). While there may be problems associated with girls' general expectations, this cannot account for differences in performance, as Sarah *et al* would suggest.

The claim that these differences occur does not rest on the grounds of performance alone, according to Sarah *et al*. They say that 'in many subtle ways boys are deriving benefits from an educational system deliberately established to replicate inside the school the "normal" social environment which functions outside the school' (op. cit. p58). These subtle ways include the neglect of 'the interests of girls'. Nor are these authors alone in holding this view. Shaw argues that 'mixed schools are essentially boys' schools which are dominated by boys' interests.' Speaking of interests does however, raise a number of problems. I have argued elsewhere, (1976) that a number of official policy statements and other official documents, in considering how best to tackle curricular innovations and combat the growing alienation of pupils towards the educational system, have deplored the fact that education is often irrelevant to pupils' lives and interests, and recommended that various subjects should be taught with boys' and girls' interests in mind. It has even been suggested that mathematics is likely to become more interesting to girls if mathematical problems are related to an activity like dressmaking! To concentrate on girls' interests would be extremely limiting, particularly as for many their focus of attention was, and still is, largely on themselves, their appearance, and their self presentation as the sexed but passive objects, waiting for marriage. The interests of many schoolgirls centres on marriage and future motherhood. So, therefore, to focus on girls interests' could mean focusing on this aspect of their lives which would maintain and reinforce these particular attitudes and thus limit the opening up of new possibilities to them. What

constitutes boys' interests, is also far from straightforward. The reports above characterised boys as if they were all committed to science. This is far from the case, as all the Manpower Planning Reports over the past three decades have shown. Indeed, educational policy has been concerned with the very problem of stimulating an interest among boys, and to a far lesser extent girls, in scientific and mathematical subjects.

To talk in terms of boys' interests or girls' interests in abstract general terms is also to ignore the different cultural milieux in which young people grow up. This question has been raised, more usually in relation to boys, in recent years. The disaffected young men who in various ways reject conventional school values, who neither study nor attempt to pass public examinations, have been a focus of some concern. Paul Willis (1977) describes in detail such a group of young men who inevitably land up in dead-end jobs, and whose interests in no way correspond with those of boys who espouse the school culture.

Nor is such counter-culture restricted to boys. There is growing evidence that girls also adopt counter-school values, although the form this takes differs from that of the boys. This is not a straightforward issue as Mary Fuller's article (Black Girls in a London Comprehensive School, *Schooling*) shows. She found that there was evidence of counter-school cultural practices within a group of West Indian girls who 'gave the appearance in class of not doing their school work or homework, and in many other ways displayed an insouciance for other aspects of the good pupil role'. And yet at the same time these girls 'were all strongly committed to achievement through the job market'. This reflects some of the contradictions these girls were experiencing within their own culture. They demonstrated their attempts to control their own destinies through the independence they would attain through the qualifications they would acquire.

Another dimension of this general discussion concerning the superiority of men's education is made by Shaw when she draws attention to the trend that 'girls now achieve about the same 'O' level passes as boys.' But she does not celebrate this development so much as dismisses it on the grounds that 'O' level passes are becoming increasingly irrelevant to pupils' future careers. She advances no argument in support of this claim. This furthermore conflicts with her assertion that girls' education is not as good as boys for there must, presumably, be some comparability in their education if the final results are converging.

In addition, to dismiss so completely the role of qualifications is to take to an extreme the notion that there is little or no fit between educational qualifications and employment. In this regard it has been pointed out that qualifications do provide an access, but never a guarantee, to employment. The labour market is, as we well know, highly differentiated as the two articles in *Schooling* on the labour market remind us, and if young women did have the same qualifications as boys, they would not compete on an equal footing with young men. The relationship between educational qualifications and employment opportunities is highly complex, and goes beyond the question of schooling itself.

While it is obviously important to draw attention to the many faceted problems that women experience within the educational system, there are a number of pitfalls involved in the sweeping assertion about the superior nature of boys' and men's education. As feminists we may legitimately express our frustration at the educational system, but it is all too easy to blame everything on the better education the men receive. To focus almost exclusively on gender can result in neglecting the very important question of class formation, cultural and sub-cultural factors. We do not question the employment of traditional tests, nor the very notion of 'achievement'. And to argue for an education which would meet girls' interests might well prove even

more limiting. Do we, after all, want to perpetuate the élite form of education pursued by 'achieving male pupils'? Is this really the goal for which we feminists should be striving? Or should we rather question the present educational system in its entirety, and argue for a different system for both girls and boys, women and men? This does not mean that we should forget the plethora of problems generated by gender differences.

A second problem concerns the on-going discussion on the contribution that 'subjective' analysis makes to feminist theory and practice. Such 'subjective' studies do concentrate on the experience of individuals. In the introduction to *Schooling* Rosemary Deem poses the problem of the 'relationship between research theory and feminist practice'. She accepts a need for 'research to be theoretically informed', but at the same time argues for research to make women visible. The effect of making women 'visible' is to generate difficulties in terms of satisfying theoretical criteria, a tension which Deem recognises. In the course of achieving this visibility, the accounts tend to ignore structural, materialist elements and continue to analyse the situation within the framework of existing structural inequalities. Deem, argues, and I would agree with her, that there is a place for subjectivist research which

focuses on particular individuals and their experiences within the educational system, which looks at processes of interaction between girls and their teachers, which examines the progress of individual women, through the labour market . . . (p4 *Schooling*)

How far this kind of work can resolve the tension between making women visible while taking the structural elements into account still needs to be resolved. For example, problems relating to whether such an approach accepts that the individual constitutes the basic unit for analysis need to be clarified, particularly as structural factors assume a lesser role in the causal sequence of events if the individual is seen as responsible in the final analysis for her own actions.

The value of these subjective accounts is apparent, though, in a number of fascinating accounts of different educational experiences. They graphically remind us of the effect that gender has in the course of growing up and making one's way in the adult world. Phillipa Brewster (*School Days, School Days, Learning*) draws on her own recollections and those of others. She singles out parental influences on girls in school and claims that there is a distinct shift from their concern while their daughters are at junior school in comparison with the period when their daughters are older. At the earlier age, she says, parents want their daughters to receive a 'good education'. But later they worry about their daughters' futures and their security, which the parents see as being inextricably linked to husbands to be and totally unrelated to their daughters' own efforts.

From the other side, teachers' experiences are discussed from various angles. Lou Buchan's personal testament suggests one of the reasons for the perpetuation of women teachers at the lower rungs of the hierarchical structure. In 'It's a good job for a girl, (but an awful career for a woman!)' (*Learning*) she provides a detailed description of her struggles within and final withdrawal from the teaching profession. She begins by describing the enormous efforts she made to become both 'super' teacher and a 'super' woman. She catalogues her downhill career from her over zealous dedication to her final resignation following an offer of a junior job which totally ignored her specialist knowledge and years of experience gained at personal expense. Together with her husband and children she had moved towns in the course of her husband furthering his career, and this was the only teaching post she was offered.

Then there is the confrontation of sexism in everyday practice in the classroom. Dale Spender (*Disappearing Tricks, Learning*) gives her formula for making females visible within the classroom. This she does through a revised use of language, and

illustrates her thesis with details of projects she devised and successfully used in a mixed classroom. An examination of Classroom Interaction, (*Learning*) describes how she turned the conventional views her pupils held about women's position upside down.

These examples do illustrate the difficulties already referred to. All these descriptions raise the level of our consciousness, and succeed in making women visible, but tend to ignore the broader structural elements. Brewster, for example, talks in terms of parents but makes no attempt to differentiate between parents on grounds either of class position, or, indeed, on grounds of gender. Implicit in the description by Buchan are the effects of family organisation and the work situation. Her career was clearly affected by two factors. The first is the prevailing tendency for a husband's work to determine where families will live, and the second is the tendency to overlook the training and experience women have acquired when they re-enter the labour market. Both these factors are tied in with the ideology relating to family wages, and the notion that the man is the main supporter of the family and, as such, earns a family wage. It would be unlikely for this reason for a man with similar qualifications to those Buchan had to be offered such a job, except in circumstances of high unemployment.

In each of these examples there is, perhaps, an implicit suggestion that raising the level of consciousness can effect changes within the educational system, and hence alter the conditions of women's education. Brewster says so, and she is not alone in expressing this view. On the question of confronting sexism in the classroom, raising pupils' levels of consciousness may well bring about an immediate reaction within the classroom situation. However, there are other spheres of influence in pupils' lives, notably their families and peer-groups, influences which contain certain power relationships. Consider Marion Scott's contribution (*Teach her a Lesson: Sexist Curriculum in Patriarchal Learning, Learning*). Scott describes the response of the press to a situation where a Devon mother wanted her son to do more English rather than take a 'soft craft', which had to be either cooking or needlework (p10). Both local and national newspapers revealed what Scott calls a basic conservatism, decrying the positive consequences that 'soft options' could have for a boy's development – it would, they thought, turn him into a 'cissie'.

This illustrates quite clearly that the dominant ideology about what constitutes the 'correct' form of education does hold a powerful position and protests relating to attempts to undermine such a position are given some prominence. Changes within classroom practice can, at best, be only partial because they are not concerned with the structural power relations surrounding the educational system. This is not to deny the importance of effort made by individual teachers to confront sexism and bring about changes wherever possible; but it is to emphasize the need to view these changes within a broader context.

It is in the article by Mandy Llewellyn (*Studying Girls at School: The Implications of and Confusion, Schooling*) that the problems of the relationship of subjective data to theory is made explicit. In the course of discussing her findings derived from a participant observation study conducted in two single-sex schools, Llewellyn says her primary interest was to make gender visible, a necessary prerequisite, according to Deem, of feminist research. Llewellyn recognised the difficulty, she, as an ethnographer, faced in making sense of complex relationships between peer groups, teachers, and school-based activities. This constituted an immense problem for her particularly, for she was hampered 'because I was unconsciously trying to understand what was going on around me in relation to existing concepts and frameworks' (p44). What Llewellyn is saying is that our observations make sense only according to the theories we adopt, consciously or unconsciously. Our theoretical perspective is an integral part of the

way we make sense of the world; we employ a set of ideas which may well reflect part of the dominant 'concepts and frameworks' current in our society. Here the dominant concepts and frameworks are constructed in such a way as to marginalize women or render them invisible. Her struggle to make sense of the data was hindered by her own framework which was rooted in this particular paradigm.

But recognising the problem does not necessarily lead to its resolution. Subjectivist research brings to the surface a wide range of issues relating to women's education and many insights into various facets of school life. Those unfamiliar with what actually happens in schools will learn from the kind of research contained in these books, and those familiar with them will be reminded of the struggles still to be waged. However, we need to go beyond this point. Making sense of data can only be satisfactorily accomplished within a theoretical framework, which in turn requires detailed and careful formulation. Without an adequate theoretical framework within which to locate these discussions, nothing more than a description and a labelling of these events can be achieved.

Apart from making women visible, subjectivist research, according to Rosemary Deem, is of importance as it 'alerts us to the all-pervasive nature of patriarchy and patriarchal relations because it is able to show how these two phenomena work'. (p4 *Learning*) Deem takes as her starting point 'McDonough and Harrison's definition of patriarchy as "first the control of women's fertility and sexuality in monogamous marriage, and, second, the economic subordination of women through the sexual division of labour and property"' (p4, op. cit).

Now there is no doubt of the importance of the concept of patriarchy in terms of providing a base to account for the domination of men over women. Unfortunately there is a tendency to apply this concept right across the board to a variety of situations in which women can be seen as being disadvantaged. And so it has become something of a convention to talk in terms of 'patriarchal learning' and 'patriarchal ideology' and 'patriarchal education'. There is the danger of this concept becoming a catch-all which obviates the need for further explanation and assumes that which still needs to be explained.

This problem is apparent in the Spender and Sarah book. Patricia de Wolfe (*Women's Studies: The Contradiction for Students, Learning*) regards women's studies as providing a radical challenge to what she terms 'patriarchal learning'. She juxtaposes patriarchal learning with 'feminist philosophy' which she says is compatible with existing methods of teaching and learning. She says that the women's movement has 'always stressed the importance of shared experience and cooperative learning in a situation in which there are no leaders and no experts' (p50). 'Feminist philosophy' cannot, therefore adapt to existing forms of study and the assessment of work according to certain criteria within formal institutions. She concludes that although it is necessary to include feminist studies in such environments, there is the danger that 'feminist philosophy will be undermined' and that women's studies may 'run a risk of becoming another quirky subsection of sociology.'

Unfortunately de Wolfe does not detail what she means by patriarchal learning, nor does she explain how 'shared experience' 'cooperative learning', and 'the absence of leaders and experts' will result in the production of knowledge about women's condition nor how the system will operate. Surely feminist philosophy embraces more than just shared experiences and cooperative learning, and is in any event, derived from existing theories, which according to her definition, could come under the heading of 'patriarchal learning'.

Deem recognizes the danger in subjective research and says that it alone 'does not help us to analyse the exact mechanism whereby patriarchy is reproduced and maintained'. It is in her book that Madeleine MacDonald does attempt to do just this

(Sociocultural Reproduction and Women's Education). One of her main concerns is to examine the theories of the reproduction of social relations of production as represented by the work of Althusser and of Bowles and Gintis. MacDonald is critical of both positions: Althusser for failing to consider 'patriarchal ideology and the way in which it is transmitted in school', and Bowles and Gintis for not analysing in detail the division of labour in terms of sexual divisions and most particularly the 'patriarchal power structures within the very nature of capitalist formation'. In the course of her detailed criticism of Bowles and Gintis she talks of the 'hierarchy of male over female within the social relations of school and of the work processes', and 'sexual power relations [which are] integral features of capitalist work structures.' She also argues for the recognition of the 'structure of male-female dominance relations as integral and not subsidiary organising principles of work processes.' (p15 op. cit.) To this extent she accords patriarchy and patriarchal relations a place in the course of the analysis of women's situation within education. But she does not ignore, what I have earlier termed, the structural dimensions, such as class and family organisation. She makes a strong plea for this '... if we are to understand the ways in which women are prepared to take their assigned place within capitalism in the family and in the labour force, we need to investigate the processes of gender construction in both the family and education'. Thus she goes beyond the theory of patriarchy. She argues that theories of cultural and social reproduction, despite their limitations, still raise interesting questions ...' (p24, op. cit).

In the course of her article MacDonald does provide a guideline for doing what Deem would regard as an important part of subjective research which could 'help us to see and feel how patriarchy is perpetuated'. This would overcome the criticisms which can be levelled against de Wolfe and others whose use of the term patriarchy appears to be an adjectival one, one which is employed in a pejorative form to label those elements in our society of which we do not approve. So, for example, de Wolfe can speak of those practices in academia with which she is in disagreement as 'patriarchal' without providing any explanation of why the writing of essays is to be scorned, or how feminist practice can be employed within specific learning situations.

On the basis of all the above arguments these two books do raise a number of problems which require resolution. It has been suggested that we do not progress much further if we attribute the differences between the genders to an overall general superiority of education that men are reputed to enjoy. Nor are 'subjective' studies without their difficulties. Deem's book (*Learning*) with fewer articles, presented the data in a more detailed, formal manner. She successfully brought together a wide range of work which is highly relevant to furthering our knowledge on women's condition in education. The Spender and Sarah book (*Schooling*) with its larger number of often short contributions does provide a more vivid picture on life within the school system. It is hoped that the criticisms that have been raised will stimulate readers to examine the books themselves and to join in a debate in issues which after all, affect an extremely important part of our lives – the educational scene.

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Notes

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Cradle of the middle class. The family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865, Mary P. Ryan. CUP 1981 £19.50.

Cradle of the middle class provides a fascinating account of the social construction of the middle class family in Oneida County, an area of New York state, between 1790-1865. Mary Ryan started working on Victorian ideologies of domesticity some years ago, initially looking at the literature written about the family but becoming increasingly preoccupied with questioning the relation between the development of domesticity and the social and economic changes which were taking place in American society. In other words, what was the relation between femininity and capitalism in early nineteenth century America? As she put it in 1975 in a lecture published in Zillah Eisenstein's collection *Capitalist Patriarchy and the case for Socialist Feminism*, the major problem as she saw it was to unpack the 'and' between femininity and capitalism – something which she thought could be done in the context of specific empirical studies. In the book she has now published she makes a convincing case for the importance of detailed historical studies in deconstructing the relation between ideals of womanhood and the mode of production. She does not pretend to offer any general theoretical rule but her work is underpinned by theoretical questions central to feminists and stands as one of the best examples we have of the actual workings of what she calls the 'dialectic of class and family history'.

Ryan has drawn on every possible kind of source in her effort to describe and analyse the changes which occurred in Oneida county and Utica, its main town and commercial centre, between 1780-1865. In 1790 Oneida was part of the frontier and Utica only a village. By 1865 the region had gone through two transformations. It had developed from an agrarian economy into a thriving centre of commercial capitalism. By the mid-century forms of industrial capitalist organization were becoming more important – factories replacing the small workshops of the commercial era, family businesses increasingly overshadowed by larger scale concerns and a growing industrial proletariat. Alongside these changes in economic organization there were corresponding social and cultural transformations. In some ways 'the family' looked surprisingly similar in 1790 to 1865. The mean size of household changed little in the period and household structure did not alter greatly on the surface; indeed the vast majority of Oneidans lived in nuclear households throughout this entire period of rapid social and economic change. Looked at more carefully, however, there were very important changes. Any additional member of the household in the early nineteenth century farm was likely to be kin; by the 1850s and 60s, in urban industrial districts, he or she was likely to be an unrelated boarder. The household was no longer