

'Engendering critical pedagogy: Sex groupings and subject teaching'

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The retreat in England to a particular pedagogy believed to be fostered in single-sex organisations reflects a long history where educational policy and practice has made explicit the belief that sex groups are different in both how they learn and what they should learn. Historically rooted ideas about gender experience something of a renaissance when societies confront perceived disruptions articulated as globalisation, deindustrialisation and information explosion in a bid to stabilize what appears to be shifting social ground. In education currently, there is no longer a clear gender demarcation between public and private spheres, although whilst women have increasingly been required to, and have chosen to, enter the public domain, the same cannot be said about men and the domestic sphere. Therefore in advocating single-sex organisation of teaching and learning educational rhetoric and policy maintains a difficult tension between a belief in innate gender differences and a belief in equality, though all too readily the former can dominate the latter.

The paper is concerned with how gender is recognised, understood, represented and reconciled in teachers' and students' interactions in educational settings where subject knowledge learning is the primary goal. A common assumption is that there is equality in what is made available to learn and, if there is not, then single-sex organisation achieves this. In the paper we challenge the retreat to single-sex teaching on several grounds. Central to the paper is the recognition that curriculum subjects, and the cultural tools and resources associated with them, have gender values attached to them that reflect their social historical legacy and who historically has been associated with them. These historical roots continue to influence resources and practices that are made available to students and provide them with clues about legitimate ways of acting and talking, and about what kind of texts can be produced in subject classrooms. These value systems affect how individual girls and boys feel positioned, distancing them or connecting them to the practices of the subject, and extending to them an identity of participation or non-participation.

The paper presents empirical work from single sex classes introduced in coeducational comprehensive schools to target boys' apparent underachievement in comparison to girls. Within the schools gender was identified as a problem and pedagogy as the means to address perceived inequity in subject achievements. We use extracts from interviews and classroom interaction to demonstrate how teachers and students understood gender in relation to subjects such as Science, English, Drama and Design and Technology. In demonstrating difference between pedagogic practices in boys' and separately in girls' classes we make explicit the way gender interacts with subject knowledge to set up different classroom settings and different opportunities for learning. We show how a range of students managed the opportunities that were made available to them in classroom settings and in doing so demonstrate the flow of gender mediations in social practice in which social identities undergo movement in moment to moment interactions. In making the interaction between gender and knowledge explicit we invite teachers to engage with the questions about the purpose of education and propose conceptual tools to help students cross into non traditional gender territories within subject lessons.