

Feminist Conference Paper:

Hi, my name is Ana Borges and before I start to present my research around Feminism and education in Australia I would like to acknowledge the work of Jane Kenward and Willis, Martin Mills and Wayne Martino among others that inspired and influenced this research and many others in recent years.

Since 1975, the International Women's Year, Australia has been promoting investigations of gender equity in schools and turning its findings into policies. In 2002 a new document from Howard's government, *Boys: Getting it Right!* Addresses boys as the new disadvantaged group in need of specific actions to improve schooling achievement, an argument used to implement an anti-feminist policy, strongly influenced by a movement for making schools more masculine. These ideas were present in the majority of Anglophone countries at that time. The backlash "coincides" with the moment that USA leads these same countries to an open war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

However, in some Australian states, as Queensland, the state documents and policies proudly refuse the view presented by *Boys: Getting it Right!* And this is why I decided to study how gender issues are perceived and presented in the websites of Queensland schools.

From the 33 websites of the 33 co-educational schools from the same area in Queensland, 11 websites did not refer to gender at anytime but in their uniform policies.

Between the 22 schools that make reference to gender further than uniform policies, 9 of them refer to gender in their behaviour management policies when referring to sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexism, sexual abuse and sexist language as inappropriate behaviour.

Two schools refer to gender only in their sexual education/ healthy projects. When referring to sports 3 schools offer the same sports for both but to practice separately and another one offer a very different list for different sexes and one sport to be practiced together. Other schools just refer to gender to say that both are treated equally and share the same rights in that school but what it really means is never very clear.

Three schools offer programs focusing only on boys' needs, two schools on both sexes and one school only focusing on girls. It is a program that teaches girls how to combine essential oils to make their own skincare products.

If the majority does not present a specific program in gender this same majority can not avoid dealing with gender issues in some way. The references to gender are usually based on stereotyped views of gender roles, non-creative and not challenging the *status quo* of gender. The little input in the opposite direction is done regarding boys' interests. They are based on choirs for boys; boys in cheerleading squads; literacy programs and programs to guarantee "Success for Boys".

Besides the identification of sexual harassment as inappropriate behaviour, nothing from the gender equity agenda seems to be constant in these schools programs. Only one school offers childcare to the students' kids and none of the websites mention changes in timetables to increase girls' possibilities of choice; strategies to girls' achievement in mathematics and science, the development of non sexist educational material; the adjustment of salary with more possibilities of promotions for female teachers etc. Even though many of these changes are, in theory, supported by the Queensland government, the fact is that they are not happening inside the schools or at least not being advertised by them.

Are there some possible reasons for that, such as a resistance to accept the feminist ideas, lack of training to deal with gender issues and the outcomes of projects focusing on gender and the large influence that the national policies and funding have on Queensland schools. Unfortunately the current Rudd's government did not present yet a document in opposition to *Boys: Getting it Right!*

Something interesting to note is that at the same time that the current gender policy in Australia does not see masculinity itself as a barrier to gender equity and boys' achievement Australia is known worldwide, especially in the fields of education and psychology, as the country that more researches develops in masculinity and its possibilities of change. In another research that I conducted recently the subject *Masculinity* was found as the second more studied subject in Educational research in gender, being behind only Girls and science in recent years.

There was not a great amount of research in gender and education since 2002 (39) and only 5 of them under a feminist framework but it was still possible to reach the conclusion that the gender research in Australia in its majority agrees with a totally different gender agenda than that implemented by its national government. The most part of the researches indicated gaps on the educational systems where girls are in disadvantage and improvements are necessary so they can reach their full potential.

As it becomes obvious no state policy or academic research has the power to change social realities not just because in this specific case it goes against a national orientation but because educational services and government are some of the institutions created to keep privileges and not destroy them and in this category they are full of contradictions and limits that reduce its capacity to act promoting meaningful social change.

The real responsible for social change is the group of social movements, especially the feminist movement in this situation, that organized can push governments and educational agencies for changes. Surely the feminist movement and others have contradictions but it does not have to mean a reduced capacity for action but many times this is part of the dialectic process of building a stronger movement. The experience shows that without a real social movement behind, policies get stuck on paper and funds disappear in political rhetoric. The experience also shows that Education besides maybe only Health is a strategic field to the development of major social changes. If there is a feminist society to be built, the classroom is a territory to conquer.

Brazilian experience with CMS. Social Movements Coordination with World March of Women beside other movements for social change increasing the government capacity to answer to problems and pushing for real social changes towards full democracy.

There are 3 schools (iii, xx, xxx) that have the same selection of sports for girls and boys to practice separately and one (xvi) listing the sports that are offered to boys (basketball, rugby league and soccer) and a different list of sports to girls (handball, netball and volleyball), nevertheless they play one of the sports mixed (Touch).

The traditional female practice of cheerleading is advertised in two schools for both sexes.

Other programs which are presented and divided in boys and girls are choirs. Three of the schools (xii; xiv; xxxiii) had advertisements of the same Australian girls' choir in their websites. One of these schools offers four options of choirs in the school (xxxiii) one of them being a boys' choir. This is one of the 3 schools in this area that present in the website a program totally focusing boys' education. The second school (xii) has a boys' club and a priority in Literacy & Numeracy to implement *Success for Boys* strategies, the third school (xviii) has a Year 10 Boys Day In which consists of a trade expo just for boys. Strategies addressing boys' education are considered in a feminist framework as a way to change boys and improve girls' situation in the school.

Another two schools (xxv, xxviii) offer gender based programs to boys and girls. One of them (xxv) has writing texts on years 3/5/7 and the results are considered to include gender, ethnicity and socio economic background to create a strategy to raise literacy. Even knowing that it is a program for both genders it is known that raising boys' literacy is part of the recent governmental policy (House of Representatives, 2002) and that this is usually where girls have their highest scores (Poole, 1986). At least the project stays under the scope 'Which boys, Which girls' when talking about boys educational needs (Kenway and Willis, 1997; Mills, Martino and Lingard, 2007). The last project (xxviii) is developed focusing on assisting parents in achieving great educational outcomes. It means a large group of services including child care, transport, referral to other services, workshops, flexible timetables and counselling to keep young parents at school.

Only one school advertises a program for girls. It is a program

This data supports the idea that there is still much to be done in gender and education (Kenway and Willis, 1997; Hansen, 2008; Mills, Martino and Lingard, 2007) in the sense that just openly debating gender in the classroom and in the possible ways with the whole society the schools will be able to offer

more than the reproduction of a national policy, but instead a real gender equity in Queensland and in the whole Australia.

A common problem found in co-ed schools, that goes against a gender equity agenda, is the practice of ignoring girls' educational needs to spend more time solving boys doubts, based on the stereotype that girls learn independently and are quiet (Kenway and Willis, 1997; Charlton, Mills, Martino and Becket, 2007). Some schools even have expectations that girls will accept an active role on taking care of the boys (Charlton, Mills, Martino and Becket, 2007)). These perceptions have based practices of single sex classes and schools (Kenway and Willis, 1997; Hansen, 2008).

In addition masculinity itself can be seen as a barrier to gender equity and the boys' achievement (Martino, 2000; Charlton, Mills, Martino and Becket, 2007). The masculinity that seems to usually lead in the school hierarchy is based on verbal abuse, bullying, not study and muck around (Martino, 2000). For the national government the solution to boys' low achievement at school is hiring more male teachers to be good role models (House of Representatives, 2002), unfortunately the discussion of gender roles in the society bases and the meanings of masculinity are not presented and addressed in this document.

The 39 researches considered as data were divided into analysis categories such as themes, year and methodology. For the purpose of this research at this stage, the data from these 3 categories were not combined in analysis.

The methodology table presents 10 quantitative researches, 16 qualitative researches and 13 combining methods. From this group, only 5 researches were feminist, being 4 qualitative case studies and one bibliographic review what reflects the tradition of feminist research.

The other 4 studies in girls' issues are case studies towards girls suffering prejudice when entering non traditional spaces or being discriminated against in a situation to favour boys' educational interests.

Physical education has 3 studies in its area. 2 of them are case studies of teachers (one man and one woman) and their battle fighting gender stereotypes in physical education practices.

Single sex schooling is the subject in 4 researches.