



## TRANSCRIPT

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A Learning Society

### Commentary

**Gender and Education – Looking Back and Looking Forward**

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*International Women's Day in 2008 falls on Saturday 8 March. Our commentary today has a focus on some new understandings of gender and education. Associate Professor Judith Gill, from the University of South Australia looks back and looks forward.*

### Associate Professor Judith Gill

In the 1970s, I worked as a High School teacher. My specialist areas were French and Maths. I had mostly girls in my senior French class and mostly boys in the senior maths class. At the time, I hadn't thought much about it – it was just the way things were. Boys did maths and girls did languages!

After reading some of the new wave women's writing – Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and many others – I began to think that, rather than being born with different abilities, there might be something in schooling treatments that produced the gender differences that we regularly saw in the senior years. I looked to educational research to find some answers.

When I asked the Professor of Education at Adelaide University, he doubted that my question was a serious topic for study. He suggested that I should read some more Plato.

Without going into great detail – although I did read Plato and other classics – I laboured through a research masters degree and then a PhD, both of which focused on investigations of gender as constructed by schooling experience. For both programs, I was the first student to take gender as a central problem for my thesis work – whereas nowadays gender is a common theme in research on social issues. So much so that to omit gender as a dimension is considered a serious oversight. How times have changed in twenty years!

What I discovered from my studies was that a good deal of standard schooling experience actively teaches young learners about gender – thus girls learn to be girls and boys to be boys. Regardless of whether genetics plays a role here – what I want to argue is that the social context constrains young people to act in stereotypical ways which can restrict them from fulfilling their potential.

By the social context I mean the people, places and things they interact with in the normal course of daily life – all of these are inflected with gender. The ways in which people talk, the words they use, the way we dress, the names we call one another, every interaction carries gender messages. Gender distinction forms part of our earliest learning.

One way of demonstrating this is to look at the welcome baby cards in the stores. There you will see colour coded cards – blue for a boy, pink for a girl – but also notice that the baby boy is shown awake, larger than life with action toys in bright colours whereas the girl baby is often drawn asleep, a smaller figure than the boy with lots of sweet soft toys and flowers surrounding her. And then read the verse in the cards ...

Working with teacher education students, one exercise I routinely set is for them to go into a toy store and tell the sales person you need a present for an eight year old birthday. Immediately the question arises ... Boy or girl? And depending on your answer you will be shown an entirely different array of toys.

Why this matters is that toys provide crucial early learning experiences through which some learn elements of applied physics through play with balls and wheels whereas others learn about nurturing and caring through play with dolls. And so children are socialised to become differently ready for school subjects years later. One theme of my work has been to look at learning contexts to see the degree to which they are influenced by gender. This led to the question of comparing single sex schooling to coeducation for optimal learning. Not long ago in Australia and elsewhere single sex schools were associated with better results; nowadays this conclusion appears unwarranted.

Rather than trying to erase gender distinction, my approach has been to try to avoid young people's learning to be limited to the gendered pathways that once sent girls into needlework lessons while boys learnt carpentry. Boys into maths and girls into languages – as it was when I started teaching. By now, my research has led into areas beyond schooling, such as *investigating the ways in which gender impacts on people's self understanding, world vision and life choices*. I have no problem with people making gender typical choices – so long as they are not being unnecessarily limited by them.

We have made significant advances. We now know that particular abilities are not determined by gender. But the vision of equal numbers of men and women across the range of employment opportunities and seniority is still quite a way off.

**Tony Ryan**

*To mark International Women's Day on Saturday 8 March, our Learning Works commentary today was written and presented by Associate Professor Judith Gill, from the School of Education at the University of South Australia.*