

THE GENDER IMBALANCE IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION

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When formal education is being discussed the word 'balance' is frequently used: the phrase 'breadth and balance' trips easily off the tongue and no doubt many people would claim that we have achieved it. But Scottish education is not balanced; it's lop-sided. The reason for that is that it is designed, planned and managed almost entirely by men. With a few exceptions women's contribution is confined to the classroom. All our universities and colleges, most of our secondary schools, about half of our primary schools, the inspectorate, the directorate, the Scottish Examination Board, and the Scottish Office Education Department have men in most of the senior positions. Because of the hierarchical nature of the system - itself an effect of the male way of working - it is the people in the decision-making positions who form the bodies which give advice at various levels. So, inevitably, women are under-represented on such bodies and seldom chair them. All of this means that there is an important dimension lacking which has serious consequences for the sort of education young people receive.

The situation is not new, but it seems surprising that there has not been more challenge to the status quo. Neither the feminism of the sixties nor the more low-key but persistent movements of the next two decades appear to have

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focused on the issue as one of crucial importance not only to women but to Scottish society as a whole. It could be, of course, that any attempts to highlight it have simply been ignored. Matters of this kind are notoriously difficult to advertise: a male-dominated press dismisses them as of no interest or import.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

There are several reasons why the prevailing circumstances need to be challenged and changed, even leaving aside the not inconsiderable question of women's career prospects within the profession. Our culture and our experience exert a strong influence on our perceptions and judgements. Objectivity is an elusive quality. The effects of this are often drawn to our attention by Scotland's minority ethnic groups, for example, who point out with justifiable anger that much of what we have taught in schools in the past has painted a distorted picture of their countries of origin and their culture. More locally, the history of Scotland itself has often either been ignored or misrepresented because the prevailing culture of the people in power has been imitation English.

A gradual awakening to the consequences of this is now taking place. Scottish people are shuffling to their feet and rubbing their eyes after years of national somnolence. We are beginning to see parallels between our situation and that of other small countries whose interests have been overlooked or submerged in those of a stronger neighbour.

But Scottish culture is not uniform. The traditions, values, life-style and linguistic heritage of the west highlander, say, are very different from those of the lowlander or of the urban Scot. Our social class, religion, and, specifically for the purpose of this article, our gender affect our values and our judgements. Because of the concentration of educational decision-making in the hands of middle-class, white men a fairly narrow set of experiences has been brought to bear in working out the agenda for Scottish education. In arguing for the need to take account of the female perspective I would not wish to exclude other groups; we need to hear the voices of black Scots as well, and it would be good to believe that many of the men in powerful positions at present have not entirely forgotten their working-class roots. Nevertheless, women make up just over half the population and girls fill at least half the places in our schools, colleges and universities .

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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Women and men experience life very differently and there is a distinctive female culture although no doubt there are common elements running through each. That this has not been acknowledged in the educational policy-making process suggests either that there has been an easy but quite wrong assumption that men's life experience is much the same as women's or, more likely and more damagingly, that there is a general belief that men's experience is somehow more valid and male culture more worthwhile.

The first glaring example of this that comes to mind is the prestige and importance that is put on the world of paid work compared to the low status accorded to matters such as child care or the maintenance of family and community relationships. Nods of approval and expressions of appreciation of the value of the latter are worthless if they are ignored when it comes to decisions about teaching time, resources and visible recognition. And this applies to governments no less than to educational policy-makers.

Personal and social development has been a feature of the Scottish secondary school curriculum for at least fifteen years under one name or another, but it is still only of marginal significance in most schools when it comes to deciding priorities of time or resources. In the recent re-writing of the curriculum for pupils aged 5 to 14, for instance, the Personal and Social Development guidelines were issued last, after all the others had come out, a bland paper, all too likely to be ignored while schools get on with the real stuff - English, maths and the like. If the policy-makers had been really committed to the need to nurture personal and social development, these guidelines would have come out first, establishing a framework for all the others. But an interest in personal and social development is not part of traditional male culture.

Creativity has likewise failed to flourish in Scottish education, not because men are potentially less creative than women, but because there is less of a place for it in the male world. Creativity is first and foremost an expression of feeling, and in this respect men are constrained by cultural taboos. Women can say they are feeling happy, sad, sorry, glad. They can decorate their rooms with flowers or their persons with colour and ornament. Men's culture puts them into emotional strait-jackets and grey suits. Or could it be that men compartmentalise their lives more than women do, believing that art or emotion have no place in the working world?

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There are also differences between the sexes in the area of less tangible qualities and inclinations. Whether these are innate or culturally defined it would be hard to say. Words associated with male culture might be competitiveness, forcefulness, aggression, ambition. (Men often pretend to these even if they are not part of their nature.) Female culture would include consensus-seeking, negotiation, conciliation, sympathy. Women who penetrate male power structures often feel obliged to abandon these inclinations, however, and assume the mantle of the dominant culture.

So far as education is concerned, the point is that only one set of values has been brought to bear when working out the agenda. The major decisions which affect the nature and content of the curriculum, the ethos of schools and colleges, assessment methods and procedures and, more generally, how educational decisions are reached and implemented, have been taken - and are still being taken - by men. This has far-reaching consequences for Scottish society.

The first and most obvious injustice is to girls and women. At an impressionable stage in their lives, girls are subject to an influential process devised by people who have no first hand knowledge of their needs, experience or aspirations. It would be hard to imagine the reverse situation being tolerated; that is, the nature of boys' education being determined by women.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES POLICIES

The Educational Institute of Scotland, for example, has begun to recognise that there is a problem, although such recognition is not yet reflected in the gender balance of its own staff. The Institute has run some workshops for women both centrally and at a local level, designed to increase women's confidence and to encourage them to take an active part in union activities. Whether the union processes and procedures themselves have been examined, however, is another question, and it is often these 'ways of working' that women find most alienating. There have also been discussions at regional level, and that, coupled with pressure from women's groups, has resulted in some 'Women into Management' courses being run in Strathclyde and Lothian. (Not enough and heavily over-subscribed but it's a start.)

Most regional authorities have developed equal opportunities policies which require establishments to consider their practices with a view to eradicating gender inequality. This is obviously variously interpreted according to the level of awareness that has been reached. Some people are still at the treat-

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them-all-the-same stage. Others are at least trying to widen career opportunities for both girls and boys. A few, further along the road, are challenging the pervasive and morale-sapping sexism that is endemic in all our institutions. These developments have close parallels in the struggle for equality in which black people are engaged. It would be a mistake to think, however, that equal opportunities policies are simply about giving girls the chances that boys have always had. While it is undoubtedly true that girls suffer more and more overtly than boys do in the present system, the fact is that boys don't do so well either.

Because of the way in which power has been concentrated within a relatively small group of people, most of whom are men and most of whom are known to one another, the culture and experience of these people themselves has blended and taken on an establishment aura. This may be fine for those who can adapt to it - and clearly enough do for it to be constantly regenerated - but it is not liberating. Many boys and men feel uncomfortable in a climate where it's ok to play rugby but not to dance, where you are marked down for not being ambitious, or lacking in purpose if you would like to delay making an important decision. Men who have acclimatised to this sort of culture are often ill at ease with women as professional colleagues and unfamiliar with the female culture which supports them. They sometimes quite literally don't know how to treat them. They know that the odd mixture of gallantry and flirtatiousness that they used to use is somehow not acceptable but they don't know what else to do.

Such men are fearful of betraying the tender side of their nature in case they are seen as weak (and therefore to be taken advantage of), compete with one another on all sorts of levels, even feeling driven to cap each other's stories, would be embarrassed if you gave them flowers, and don't know how to say, "I'm sorry, I was wrong." They usually give much more time to their work than to their families and think there is nothing wrong with that or don't know how to stop doing it because other men are snapping at their heels. They assume an easy authority and are dismissive of weakness in any shape or form in themselves or others.

All of this is not to say that these people are not doing as good a job as they can. In fact many of them are probably grossly overworked and living quite unhealthy lives. (Although one should not be too ready to assume that over-long hours are necessarily productive or even essential.) It's not part of male culture, either, to say that the job is far too demanding and that you need a break. Men are victims of the system almost as much as women are, although they do at least enjoy some financial compensation.

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Our education system needs to be open to people who can contribute from a different perspective. These men themselves would benefit immeasurably if they had women among them who said, 'I'm going home now. My children like me to be there at tea time.' Their humanity would not be damaged if occasionally a mother suckled her baby at a committee meeting. They might actually benefit from listening to talk about the needs of an ailing parent rather than Saturday's football game.

But, more importantly, women's contribution is needed for the education system itself. We need to challenge all sorts of things because we would do them differently and our way is at least as good as what is happening at present.

For example, we could take steps to change the perception that the care of young children is exclusively the realm of women. Men should be actively encouraged to consider working in pre-five education for part of their career. Child care needs to be much more of a priority, and it is not going to be seen that way until women insist on it from a position of power.

The whole area of personal and social development needs attention. At present schools are just playing at it. Many of the acute social problems which distress us all could be alleviated if we focused on helping children develop a sense of self-worth. Too many people grow up thinking themselves worthless and trying to prove the opposite by violence and aggression. We are ill-prepared for adult life and independence, ill-prepared for marriage or parenthood, ill-prepared to contribute usefully to community and public life.

The atmosphere of schools has undoubtedly improved but it is usually still far from perfect. Many children and parents feel uncomfortable and lacking in confidence within the school building, particularly in the secondary sector. Questions need to be asked about why this is so and what should be done about it. The relative status of subjects in school needs to be examined and thought given to why it is that certain subjects are seen to be more worthwhile than others. Creativity should be fostered and valued much more than it is at present. Decision-making processes can be challenged and changed. Women need to contribute their concern for people and their willingness to say what they feel, their own brand of humour, their doubts and anxieties, and above all their experience of the female world.

Children need role models which both reflect reality and offer a better vision of what life could be like. When men take off their grey suits and take their turn in the nursery class, when women come in to inspect the technology

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department, when the principal of a university can be comfortably pregnant or menopausal or the school female janitor can direct the male cleaners, when discussing sexuality is seen as being as important as learning Maths, and children with disabilities are accommodated in schools as a matter of course, when a committee of eight men and two women is unheard of and no one would dream of using sexist language, when children's safety and happiness is seen as being as important as passing examinations - then we will have the makings not only of a better education system, but also of a better Scottish society.

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