Women's 'Life-Work': Teachers in South Australia, 1836-1906

Kay Whitehead

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's work as teachers in various contexts from the beginning of white settlement in 1836. It also analyses the structure of the teaching family, drawing out ways in which women's teaching contributed to the economic and social status of the family, and to their own identity.

From the 1850s women colonised church and state school systems, their options mediated not only by class but also by religion, ethnicity and geographic location. The middle class teaching family was co-opted as a social and economic unit to accommodate sex-segregated schooling, and men's interests were protected by the mid-nineteenth century state. However, women found niches as licensed teachers in single-sex schools and in small country schools. Catholic schools also utilised the teaching family, but Lutheran schools excluded women as teachers.

Under the 1875 Act the state individuated wages, institutionalised married men as sole breadwinners and fostered the sexual division of labour in teaching families. Married women were marginalised as the state school system expanded and teaching became an occupation for single women. From 1867 the Catholic church introduced women religious as teachers, thereby making its schools the province of single women too. By the end of the nineteenth century the ladies' academy was the only teaching context still colonised by the traditional teaching family.

Women's agency in negotiating their teaching careers is revealed by juxtaposing biographical sketches with the narrative of structural change. The sketches document women's lives as teachers, demonstrating ways in which they negotiated the changing social and family circumstances that accompanied the expansion of school systems. I argue that when teaching became waged labour it was exposed publicly as women's work. Tensions between married men and single women escalated as both participated in the construction of teaching as a profession. Women teachers contested male dominance in the workplace and by their increasing participation in social and political life. Many women also opted to delay or reject marriage and to make teaching their life-work. I conclude that, by the early twentieth century, their public and private challenges constituted a threat to the gender order.
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