

Sex Inequalities in Education for Work: The Case of Business Education

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This paper examines the way the labor market shapes course choice and patterns of sex segregation in schools. It is based on interviews with a group of students who did not go on to post-secondary education. Interviews were conducted while they were in school and after they had graduated. Business courses are the only school courses that are seen as training students for jobs. The paper argues that girls choose business courses for economic reasons, even though the courses are largely seen as boring. The economic benefits the students see are real, and strategies for integrating and improving the courses must take this into account.

Nous examinons dans cet article la façon dont le marché du travail détermine les cours choisis par les élèves et les modes de ségrégation selon le sexe dans les écoles. Pour les fins de notre recherche, nous avons réalisé des entrevues avec un groupe d'élèves qui ont quitté l'école à la fin du secondaire. Nous les avons rencontrés pendant qu'ils étaient à l'école et après qu'ils l'ont eu quittée. Le cours commercial est le seul cours donné à l'école qui est considéré comme ouvrant la voie à des emplois. Nous prétendons que les jeunes filles choisissent le cours commercial pour des raisons d'ordre économique, bien que la plupart d'entre elles le jugent ennuyeux. Les avantages économiques que voient les élèves sont réels, et les stratégies d'intégration et d'amélioration des cours doivent en tenir compte.

Business courses in high schools have been ignored in discussions of vocational education and sexism in schools. This is surprising, as they are a prime example of both phenomena. Commercial courses enrol a large percentage of the total number of students who are getting some form of direct work preparation in the public schools, and this paper will argue that they are the most directly related to jobs of any of the courses high school students take. Critics have argued that vocational education serves primarily to "cool out" students, to lower their aspirations, and to separate them off from students with higher social class backgrounds and higher academic averages. They maintain it does not teach skills that are valuable in the labor market or related to jobs students can actually get. This conclusion needs to be modified for girls in commercial courses, and the practice of excluding these courses from the discussion, or lumping them together with other forms of vocational education, obscures the real short-term payoffs they provide.

Commercial courses also separate male and female students, teach them different things, reinforce stereotypes, and channel girls into low-paying, white collar, quintessentially "female" jobs. They constitute, in other

words, one of the major ways schools teach young women about traditional female roles. However, they are often overlooked in analyses of the ways schools teach sex stereotypes (Synge, 1977; Fischer & Cheyne, 1977; Frazier & Sadker, 1973), and unlike other forms of sexism in schools they are not simply legislated by teachers and administrators but are chosen by girls to further their own chances in the labor market. This makes changes much more complicated, as they risk disadvantaging the very people they are trying to serve.

This study explores how commercial courses are seen and how they affect students in Vancouver high schools. The paper will begin with an analysis of course selection, move to job plans and actual experiences in the labor market, and then examine the relationship between course choices and experience in the world of work. It will conclude with a discussion of ways to improve and integrate education for work in the high school.

THE DATA

These data are part of a larger study of males and females who were in Grade 12 in 1976-77 in three Vancouver high schools. These students were planning to enter the labor market directly after they graduated.¹ The three schools that volunteered to participate in the study were in different areas of the city. However, none was in a solidly upper-middle class area, and the occupations of the students' parents are what is usually considered working class. The sample was drawn by asking students who were planning to get a job the next year to sign up for interviews in May. The selection of interviewees was thus more or less voluntary, although the guidance counsellors helped to select representative students, more in some schools than in others.

Interviews were taped and transcribed with 83 students: 47 female and 36 male. All except six of the original sample were interviewed almost a year later, between February and April 1978. Three students could not be reached and three declined to be interviewed again. The interviews were wide-ranging. The first interview included questions on the high school, on course selection, on future plans and on the relationship between school and work. The second interview covered looking for a job, the characteristics of the job (or jobs) found, and a retrospective view of the high school. A structured set of questions was used for each interview, but questions were modified and added as interviews progressed in order to explore new interpretations that emerged from the data.

Despite the lack of a random sample owing to the constraints imposed by the school board, and the lack of strict comparability across interviews due to the exploratory nature of the research, this study is valuable in gaining new insights into how students view the process of course selection and job preparation. Much of what will be outlined here needs to be

tested more systematically, but these preliminary findings are important to direct (or redirect) further investigation, and to allow discussions of policy for developing vocational education and opening job options for girls to be grounded in the reality of how the courses and the labor market are actually perceived by students.

COURSE CHOICES

The patterns of course choice and the reasons for course choices were quite different for males and females. The figures in Table 1 show the distribution of course choices for this sample.² Although they are not strictly representative of all students leaving school in Grade 12, the general pattern is well known to high school teachers. The most salient sex difference is that most girls are taking commercial courses, and most boys are taking industrial courses. Although some girls in the sample have taken some industrial courses in earlier grades, by Grade 12, none are. The commercial courses are not quite so segregated. A few boys take the courses, but they take only a few of the offerings, ones that are designed more for life skills or running a small business than for working for an employer in a clerical capacity. A few students take academic courses that will allow them access to the university. The rest of the students take largely what they call "fill-ins" — cooking, child care, physical education, art, music, career explorations, and so on. These "fill-ins" are often largely segregated by sex.

It is not that males and females are simply getting different kinds of vocational training within the high school. Girls are receiving training for a particular job; boys are not getting much vocational training at all. A closer look at the course descriptions, the reasons that students give for choosing the courses, and their relationship to job seeking behavior shows that the commercial courses are related to jobs in a way that the industrial courses are not, and that the students are aware of the differences.

The course descriptions partially reveal this. The business courses the girls take include typing, office practice, office orientation, business machines, and secretarial practice. The course descriptions relate them directly to job preparation: "as many types of written language projects as are relevant to office work will be included"; "should be capable of handling books in a small business firm"; "qualifies a student for a high standard secretarial position." The business courses include actual work experiences in offices or within the school, accounting, answering the telephone, typing, and doing other forms of work in teacher-arranged programs. What the girls learn is thus explicitly tied to job skills and to the needs of the work world.

The commercial courses chosen by boys are ones that emphasize general life skills rather than specific job training. The boys tend to be concentrated in general business ("investing your money, conditions of employ-

ment, home ownership and mortgages, etc.”), accounting, marketing, and distributive education (“to develop in the student personality and skills which will enable him to become an intelligent consumer and achieve success in the field of marketing”), and career exploration/personal finance (“to overcome the tendency of students to drift into careers with the result that they find their jobs largely unfulfilling . . . and to enable students to make the best possible use of their income through sound money management”).

In contrast, the industrial courses include construction, drafting, electronics, mechanics, metals, and technology. The course descriptions suggest that these courses are not linked to jobs in the same way office courses are. The descriptions emphasize preparation for post-secondary vocational training courses (“recommended for students going on in engineering or architecture”; “designed to fulfill the requirements for admission to vocational school”), avocational skills (“the skills necessary to repair and maintain his own vehicle”; “constructing a stereo”) and sometimes intellectual skills (“to illustrate the fundamental principles of science”).

The different meaning of course selection for males and females was also supported by student statements on why they selected courses. The girls overwhelmingly chose commercial courses because they provided job preparation. They often mentioned other reasons as well — they drifted into it, they didn’t like other courses, they got good marks in commercial courses — but an underlying assumption was that commercial courses provided a salable job skill. Girls who did not choose commercial courses either regretted not having a salable skill, clearly didn’t want a secretarial job, or had some real commitment to general knowledge rather than job training. These quotations illustrate the ways girls described selecting or not selecting commercial courses.

(Commercial courses?) Because I wanted to be someone’s secretary. You know, there’s a big demand for secretaries.

(Commercial?) I wanted to be a secretary. There’s a big demand for secretaries. It’s the best thing for a girl.

(Commercial?) After Grade 9 the counsellor looks at your grades — she says you don’t have to take science any more if you don’t want to or can’t handle it. So I went into commercial. It’s the only other option.

(Commercial?) I can’t remember — my friends were taking it.

(Commercial courses?) Boring. The same thing all over again. But they do prepare you to be a secretary.

(Why did you take commercial courses?) To fall back on commerce. My mother forced me to. She’s a janitoress and she said I could do better than her. She sees all these women working in an office and she says you’re going to do better than that.

(Why did you select commercial courses?) Just because if I couldn’t be what I wanted to be, then I’d have those to fall back on . . . it’s a bore (would you like an office job?). If I needed to I would, but I wouldn’t if I could avoid it (laughter).

(Why didn't you take commercial courses?) I can do it after school, even if I have to pay for it but at least now I can sit down and talk to somebody without being a dumbo. . . . I just figured I might as well get an education, and then learn to work.

The males' choices of industrial courses were considerably less job oriented. When job preparation was the motive, the boy later realized he had made a mistake or just embarked on the first step in a much longer process.

(Industrial courses?) I like drafting — for a career as an architect.

(Industrial courses?) I was thinking of being a machinist but then they told me it was all filled up and there was no chance to get in for the next three or four years.

(Industrial courses?) My job won't have anything to do with school. I just took easy stuff.

(Industrial courses?) I took courses just to graduate. There is no job preparation. You need special training later. I took easy courses so I could pass.

(Industrial courses?) The industrial electives are more interesting.

(Industrial courses?) I'm inclined that way. I enjoy it. I like working on cars.

(Industrial courses?) Commercial is too boring. And I like auto — just for myself.

It seems clear that many girls view high school as a time to get specific job training whereas boys do not. This occurs for two reasons. All the girls planned to stop working when they had children, and even though many assumed they would return to work later, their views of this later period were very hazy. What they planned for was largely the next 5 to 10 years. They are therefore more concerned than the boys to get their training over with quickly and to settle in a job for a few years. They are less likely to feel that they have years to explore the labor market and decide what they want to do.

Secondly, the girls' views are shaped by the alternatives as they present themselves in the school. They see that there is a possibility of getting job preparation in the high school, and most boys do not. This forces the girls and their friends, parents, and guidance counsellors to consider business courses seriously. Other options are at an initial disadvantage as a result. In order to be chosen, they have to be not just equal to business courses in their intrinsic rewards, but superior enough to counterbalance the presumed advantage of easier access to jobs.

ASPIRATIONS FOR JOBS

The jobs the girls wanted to get were related to whether they had selected business courses in high school (see Table 1), as one would expect from the reasons they chose their courses. Of the girls who had taken commercial courses, 80% wanted office jobs. Girls in other courses were more

TABLE 1
Job Aspiration by Course by Sex

<i>Course</i>	<i>Female</i>					<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>Office</i>	<i>Sales</i>	<i>Waitress</i>	<i>Misc.</i>			
Academic	4	—	—	2	—	—	6
General	3	1	2	5	2	2	13
Commercial	22	1	2	2	1	1	28
TOTAL	29	2	4	9	3	3	47

<i>Course</i>	<i>Male</i>					<i>Don't Know</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>Sales</i>	<i>Distribution</i>	<i>Factory</i>	<i>Skilled Trade</i>	<i>Misc.</i>		
Academic	1	1	1	1	1	—	5
General	—	—	—	—	2	1	3
Commercial	2	1	—	—	3	—	6
Industrial Ed.	3	4	5	6	2	1	21
TOTAL	6	6	6	7	8	2	35

diverse in their plans. Among the boys, course choice showed no equally strong relationship to job choice, although there was a tendency for boys in business courses to want a job in sales. This is further evidence that the vocational emphasis of business courses for girls is more marked than it is for other courses.

The three options most girls considered for the year after they left school were office jobs, sales jobs, and waitressing jobs. Sixty percent of the girls named some sort of office job as their first choice including such activities as typing, clerical work, answering the switchboard, being a receptionist, sorting and delivering mail, clerking in a bank, and generally doing office errands. Office work was thought to be superior in terms of pay, hours, security, working conditions, and prestige attached to a white collar job, even by girls who did not choose it. It becomes a reference point for the discussion of other alternatives: "I can't stand sitting at a desk all day, so I'll have to get a waitressing job." However, intrinsic interest in office work was not high: "I hate anything to do with secretarial work. Just sitting there. It's so boring." "I'm more for outdoors and sports and kids." "It's always inside and just sitting down at a desk and doing nothing." "I hate to type. Filing and business machines aren't that bad." Only one girl said anything positive: "I'm fascinated with pushing buttons. I love to type."

The girls who took their objections to office work seriously tended to look for other kinds of work, most frequently in sales or waitressing. A few others aspired to medical jobs such as dental assistant or "anything in a hospital," and jobs such as fashion designer, model, interpreter, nanny, hairdresser. A couple of the students said they would look for "anything I can get," but it was unusual not to be able to talk about jobs with some sense of one's interest and ability and priorities. When girls talked about the options they were considering, they thought largely in terms of office-sales-waitressing. They planned to look for a variety of jobs within one of these categories before they tried another one. The girls with more unusual choices saw these as fallback options.

The boys' aspirations were more diverse and less predictable from their course choices. The largest single category of work chosen (20%) was in the broad area of retail sales. While the girls interested in sales jobs were looking for direct contact with customers in large department stores and in small clothing stores, bakeries or gift stores, the boys were looking in hardware stores, sporting goods stores, lumber stores, and trailer rental businesses. Those hoping for white collar work expected to move into management positions quickly, particularly as several were going into family businesses. Many of the jobs they expected would involve some work in a warehouse, with machines or trucks or delivery, or would involve some physical strength. These jobs were closely related to jobs in "distribution" — primarily shipping and receiving in warehouses — which another 20% of the boys chose.

The next most popular job for boys was some form of factory work (15%), including saw mills, furniture factories, pop bottling plants, and truck assembly factories. Several others wanted jobs in some skilled trade (pipe fitting, roofing, body shop, construction trades). Other job choices included many that were quite specific — baggage driver at CP Air, programming at a particular radio station, hockey player, forest fire fighting, driving a fork lift in a particular warehouse, repairing vending machines at a relative's business, and so on.

The boys talked less easily about the kinds of jobs they wanted. They considered a wider range of possibilities, but they had a harder time coming up with practical alternatives. Instead of talking about "factory work" in the same way a girl would talk about an "office job," the boys mentioned a particular furniture factory or meat packing plant they knew about, and then would jump to some quite different line or work as a second choice. Their choices were shaped more by particular leads or contacts than by a clear sense of the alternatives.

A striking thing about the data is how narrow the options are, and how salient office work is. The advantage of this for girls is the relative ease many of them have in making up their minds about jobs and in making connections in the right places to look for jobs. But the narrow options also restrict their range of choices and the use of their potential skills and

interests. The girls consider that if they do not like office work, they are in trouble. The boys, on the other hand, seem to flounder about trying to find something that is both realistic and interesting, and their understanding of the period after high school is that they will have to explore a variety of choices.

JOB ATTAINMENT

The jobs students actually got are fairly similar to what they were planning.³ They continue to be related to course choices for girls. Somewhat fewer girls actually got an office job and somewhat more girls got sales and waitressing jobs than had originally desired them. However, office jobs continued as the most frequent job category. Miscellaneous jobs decreased, as girls were forced into the fallback options they had anticipated — sales and waitressing. The boys' actual jobs also looked more or less the same as the jobs to which they aspired, except for those who wished to enter the skilled trades. Most boys either entered retail sales or distribution jobs or factory jobs.

The girls who got office jobs were overwhelmingly from business courses. As Table 2 shows, 80% of the girls in commercial courses got office jobs, and 80% of those in office jobs had taken commercial courses.

The girls' high school assumption that office jobs are the best jobs for girls was borne out by an examination of the actual pay, working condi-

TABLE 2
Job by Course by Sex

<i>Course</i>	<i>Female</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Office</i>	<i>Sales</i>	<i>Waitress</i>	<i>Distribution</i>	<i>Misc.</i>	
Academic	2	3	—	—	1	6
General	2	4	6	—	1	13
Commercial	20	1	1	2	1	25
TOTAL	24	8	7	2	3	44

<i>Course</i>	<i>Male</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Office</i>	<i>Sales</i>	<i>Distribution</i>	<i>Factory</i>	<i>Skilled Trade</i>	
Academic	—	2	—	3	—	5
General	—	—	—	—	—	3
Commercial	—	3	1	—	—	6
Industrial Ed.	1	3	4	5	—	18
TOTAL	1	8	5	8	—	32

tions, and stability of office jobs. Three quarters of the girls with office jobs had positive views of their work. They liked the people, felt important, and found the work interesting. Only two were wholly negative: "Boring, I hate it." "They treat me like a slave." In contrast, only half of the waitresses were satisfied with their jobs: "It's o.k., they treat you pretty good." "I like the people, they keep me here." The other half were dissatisfied: "It's no great shakes." "I ended up crying on the cash register the first week." The girls in sales were somewhat happier. Half were quite positive: "I like the job." "It's pretty good." A quarter were ambivalent: "I like the pay but not the job." Another quarter were definitely negative: "I don't like it."

Girls in office jobs also got paid more on the average than girls in other jobs. Their average wage was \$6.60 an hour compared to just under \$4 for both sales and waitress jobs. Their jobs were more often full time and were for larger firms with internal labor markets and more job security. Eighty percent worked for a large organization such as the government, the university, and banks. Only one had been laid off. Half of the girls in sales jobs were also in large firms such as department stores where there was a fair amount of security and internal mobility. Only a quarter of the girls in waitressing jobs were in large firms with any security. More of the girls in sales and waitressing were only able to work part time, and more had taken longer to find their jobs, and had been laid off since they began.

Overall, the boys were somewhat less satisfied with their jobs than the girls. They had higher pay on the average, but much less stability and much more dissatisfaction. In the high-paid factory jobs, there was a great deal of dissatisfaction. Five out of seven had nothing positive to say about their work, besides the high wages: "Boring." "Very hard work." "I hate the people I work with." "No thinking is required." In sales and distribution half were positive, at least on balance. This also held for the miscellaneous category.

In factory work, the average wage was \$7.50 an hour, and all the jobs were unionized. In sales, the male wage was just under \$5 an hour. In the miscellaneous other jobs the wage was \$4 an hour — mostly minimum wage jobs, comparable to the girls'.

The stability of the male jobs was markedly less than the females. Over 50% of the males who had done factory work had been laid off within the year. This was somewhat better in sales and distribution jobs where only two out of 12 were laid off, although half had only part-time work. Half of the boys who were in the miscellaneous category had also moved around within the year. The number of months of unemployment before landing a job was higher among males, the probability of being laid off was higher, and the probability of shifting jobs voluntarily or quitting was higher.

This brief summary of students' experiences on the labor market shows the unique status of girls with stable office jobs. Although the quality of their jobs and their long-term prospects should not be exaggerated, in comparison to their schoolmates they felt they were doing well. Most of the other students were entering a period of job instability in the secondary labor market and dependence on luck and personal contacts to find themselves work.

This period of frequent job changes, frequent unemployment, lack of clear direction, and low level jobs is described as a "floundering period" by Davidson (1937), who sees in it opportunities for trying out different things, learning about the labor market, and growing up. Osterman (1979) calls it a "moratorium" when the preference of employers for older workers coincides with the preference of youth for a low commitment to work roles. Others are not so sanguine about the phenomenon, and assume high youth unemployment rates cause hardship and stress and that entry into the labor market can be eased by increased knowledge and services for youth that would not only ease the inequalities produced by dependence on personal contacts but also allow youth to exercise their own preferences to a greater extent.

As reported above, girls in office jobs were less likely to "flounder." Much of the literature in this area is based solely on males (Osterman, 1979; Bullock, 1973; Grasso, 1975; Freedman, 1969; Ornstein, 1976) and has missed this sex and occupational difference. The benefits for employers, and the reasons why they treat young females differently from young males, is a problem that needs to be researched further. The short-run benefits for females are that they get more satisfying jobs and as a result feel more independent, useful, and grown up. However, their early entry into office jobs may lock them into what is ultimately a poorly paid and low status occupation, and prevent them from exploring more rewarding jobs that are only open to older workers. In the adult labor force, as a whole, male workers average much higher pay, status, and security.

RELATIONSHIP OF COURSES TO JOBS

The girls who got office jobs were largely from commercial courses. As shown above, office jobs were "better" jobs — more satisfying, stable and relatively well paid. We therefore have a situation where girls who have taken business courses have more success in the labor market than students who have not taken these courses. The next question is how much of this increased success is due to the courses.

Although teachers and students might quickly assume from seeing course selection repeatedly coinciding with better opportunities for jobs that course selection is an important cause of better opportunities in the labor market, another possibility is that the courses simply separate out

students who want office jobs and do not affect them any differently from other courses. This position would hold that if similar students had taken science or industrial arts or foods, they would still have the same experiences when they went to look for an office job. This is based on the assumption that business courses include a particular clientele headed for a particular type of employer. It is the characteristics of the clientele (female, well behaved, middle achievement levels) and of the jobs (white collar, low wage, primarily in large firms, and non-unionized) that are important in explaining what happens to them — not their training. This is one of the major claims of critics of vocational education — that vocational education cannot affect labor market chances, as labor market experience is fixed by the jobs available, and characteristics of employees that are independent of their training when they enter jobs. The implications of this are that decisions about course offerings in the school should be made not on the grounds of relieving youth employment or unemployment problems, or preparing them for work, but on other grounds.

No statistical test of the independent effect of courses on jobs can be attempted with these data. The size and representativeness of the sample and the small number of girls who are not taking business courses make it impossible. A study of employers also needs to be done. However, examination of the students' views of what has happened to them is suggestive of what processes are operating in linking courses and jobs.

Courses may have an independent effect on labor market behavior in several ways. They may shape the interests of students taking them. They may provide socialization skills that are necessary for employment. They may provide job placement services that allow students access to certain employers. Each of these possibilities can be explored in the interview data from this sample and will be contrasted to industrial courses.

The commercial courses did not excite the girls and convince them that they must have an office job. Some of the preceding comments give a sense of the general boredom, or at least lack of intensity generated by school business courses.

The only time that the courses themselves seem to have much effect on the girls' interest was when they were actually working at a job outside the school. Most of the comments about this work experience were positive, largely because the girls were kept busy in a novel situation. They felt "grownup," and responsible because what they did actually mattered to someone.⁴ This is an added attraction of business courses, and increases the interest and commitment of the girls to getting an office job. None of the girls that I talked to found that their work experience was bad. Compared to school, at least, it inspired them to actually be a secretary: "I like to really go into a real office and try it out." "It was more than just sitting around for a week. I was working. We didn't get paid for it. It was just experience, but it was worth it though."

The students in industrial courses were somewhat more enthusiastic about their courses. They liked working on cars, learning to construct buildings, and working with big machines in a way that girls did not like typing or learning about letter format. Although the boys also often found their courses boring, a way to pass time, and not a focus of pride, achievement, or hard work, there were more boys who enjoyed their courses than girls and they certainly preferred their courses to academic ones: "I don't mind my classes. They're not too hard. I see my friends." "My courses are o.k." "I've had it with school. I just need the courses to graduate. It's the only thing I could do. I don't like academics."

So enjoyment and enthusiasm do not seem to be the major link between course choice and job choice for students in business courses. Courses are as likely to dampen interest as to excite it. Other courses may perform the function of raising interests that may be pursued in jobs.

The skills and credentials that office courses provide seem to the students to be an important link to jobs. The girls clearly believed that they were learning relevant job skills, and took the courses largely to get these skills. Once in the job market, they were more ambivalent about how useful the commercial courses were, but those with a commerce background still tended to see their courses as useful, and girls without commercial courses often wished they had the skills taught in them: "I wish I'd have taken shorthand, I would have had a job." "I wish I'd taken typing more. I'm no whiz. Forty words a minute. I'll never make it as a secretary. You have to start in Grade 9, and I didn't like the teacher." "I don't like typing but it's the easiest way to get a job. It's boring and tedious sitting there. But if you can get a job you might as well take it." "Every office has a different way of setting up a letter, but basic typing speed is a help."

These comments suggest what much of the literature on vocational education has pointed out. The skills that are taught in pre-job entry vocational courses are often only indirectly related to skills actually needed on the job. The diversity of the kinds of "office" jobs these girls get makes this inevitable. They are switchboard operators, receptionists, "gophers," clerks, typists, and often combine all of these with some other skills such as developing microfilm or taking shorthand. Courses like business machines, office practice, office orientation, and bookkeeping cannot cover the variety of things a girl may actually do in her job, and it is not clear that the skills taught are generic or difficult enough to need related and general training.

However, the fact that the courses do not teach necessary skills for entry level jobs does not mean that they are irrelevant to getting the job. The courses do give girls an idea of what they might meet in an office. They allow the girls to get an image of themselves as office workers. They screen out girls who cannot stand doing office work, and give the teacher an idea of who is likely to work well in an office. If the girls then graduate

from these courses with good marks and good recommendations from the teacher, it is reasonable for an employer to assume that they will be good office workers; the actual skill training can be done on the job. To the extent that office courses simply provide this kind of general orientation and socialization, academic courses may serve as well as commercial courses. Graduating from them also indicates an ability to do what you are told, to use English, and to sit at a desk. The advantage of commercial training is marginal, and may be offset by the greater prestige of academic training.⁵

This issue can only be resolved by a study of employer hiring practices. However, in the area of typing and secretarial skills, the commercial courses can provide real skill advantages. Typing quickly and taking shorthand are taught in school, and tend not to be available to students who do not take the specialized secretarial courses. They are also skills that cannot be picked up in a matter of days on the job. It is these skills that are crucial to differentiating girls who have taken commercial courses from girls who have not. The students who have not taken commercial courses recognized that they would have to pick up these skills before they could apply for most office jobs. The girls who are taking the courses assumed that they would be tested on their skills in job interviews in many cases, and the most prestigious, high paying, and secure office jobs with large employers did require teacher recommendations and a formal interview process where secretarial skills were tested. The teaching of typing and shorthand skills thus sets the commercial program apart from other vocational programs in the high school.

This proposition can also be examined by looking at some cases that do not fit the usual patterns. The girls who got office jobs but did not take business courses all had jobs that did not require typing. This is unusual, as all except three of the other office jobs required at least some typing. One was a distribution clerk who carried mail and work around a large office building. Two were clerks in a bank and one was a clerk at a student placement office at the university. Two of the four students had some rudimentary typing skills which they found useful. These few cases show that office jobs are not available only to girls with typing skills, although these skills are helpful and put the girl on a different job ladder.

Of the five students who wanted office jobs and were not able to get them, three had not taken secretarial courses and thought this was a large part of their problem. However, the other two students show that secretarial training does not guarantee an office job.

For boys, the skills they learn in their industrial courses are not closely tied to the labor market. They do not learn any identifiable skill that cannot be learned quickly on the job by almost anyone. They learn about some machines, safety standards, reading blueprints, and the general principles behind some mechanical processes. But these are not enough to make them skilled in any particular job when they graduate. The boys

therefore have no easily identifiable slot into which to fit because of their high school training. Although their success in industrial courses should provide teachers and therefore employers with some general ability to assess their performance on related kinds of tasks, this does not have the same impact as the transmission of specific, useful skills taught to girls in commercial courses.

The job placement contacts that girls make through their courses also tie them more closely to the labor market, especially in office work, than students who have not taken these courses. This happens through the commercial teachers and through work experience weeks in the schools. Employers refer jobs to the school and to particular teachers in the school who in turn recommend students. Several girls chose and got their jobs because of placements they had in their work experience week, and several had leads for jobs through their teachers. Teachers also act as references who can talk about job related skills. This process is much less efficient for boys. There is much less work experience for males offered in the schools, since the industrial courses are not set up for occupational training in the same way that the commercial courses are. Their quasi-academic orientation means that a real effort would have to be made to make the work experience relate to the course, and job experience placements would be much harder to come by. Thus this important source of job contacts and placement is not available to boys.

Industrial teachers do act as job references and job referral agencies for their students, although again this is not as pronounced as it is for the commerce teachers. It seems to depend more on the personal contacts of the industrial education teacher than on employers naturally coming to the school as an important source of new workers. Industrial teachers, however, did pin up job notices and help some students find employment leads. They were relied upon more than the guidance counsellors, whom few students knew well, and who, students believed, knew less about jobs than about further schooling.

In sum, typing and secretarial skills do at the moment give female high school graduates an advantage in the labor market. Work experience and job placements associated with the courses also have some impact on job prospects. These advantages provide a real reason for girls to choose the courses over others, although some of the course work they do bears little relation to the specific jobs they actually get.

This may be a short-lived advantage, as typing skills can be picked up elsewhere, and innovations in clerical work are reducing the necessity for these skills. Shorthand is used much less than it used to be. Word processing machines that produce standard paragraphs, and new methods of reproduction and transmission, are progressively eliminating jobs and skills that were required. Taking business courses may become less useful as this process continues.

What becomes more important under these conditions is the stratification of clerical work, the issue of who gets the best jobs, and whether training has anything to do with it. High school business graduates are in competition with students from community colleges, private schools, and universities. Further research is needed to explore how this affects high school courses and the ways students are recruited to them, as well as how it affects the future economic payoffs of secretarial training in high school.

Even if business courses do improve labor market prospects, the generalizability of this effect must not be assumed for other occupations and courses. It will depend upon the organization of work in a particular area, and upon the structure of education for work programs. Blanket claims that instituting vocational programs will improve students' chances on the labor market are just as misleading as claims that they never can.

IMPLICATIONS

This paper has attempted to call attention to the important and neglected role of the commercial courses in high schools and to the dilemmas posed by preparing girls for work in a sex-segregated labor market. Commercial courses are a form of sexist discrimination in the schools; they serve to channel girls into non-academic, repetitive, and boring courses that do not challenge or enlighten them, and do reinforce all the stereotyping about feminine roles; they prepare girls for what is viewed as "legitimate" girls' work. But choosing these courses is quite rational as the commercial courses yield returns to the girls who take them. The skills taught — essentially typing and shorthand — are directly applicable in the job market, and have an immediate value to employers.

The existence of commercial courses is important for female students in shaping their views of jobs. Unless they strongly resist and have very negative feelings about office work, they drift into commercial courses as the best route to a secure, relatively prestigious, and well-paid job. Taking the courses avoids the problem of undertaking further schooling at one's own expense. These courses shape the way girls think about their school options, even if they don't select them. Other choices are often seen as the negation of commercial courses. The industrial arts courses do not have a similar effect on boys.

This study also suggests that commercial courses are one of a series of factors that affect the way youth labor markets work for girls. Much of the research on youth employment has been based on males alone and has emphasized the instability and marginal labor force attachment of youth. Ironically, it may be that females are more stably attached to the labor market just after leaving school, both because of the opportunities available — training courses and employers willing to hire young female workers — and their own expectations that their working lives will be relatively short.

The fact of commercial courses in the high school is important not just for the students but also for employers. The schools are providing skill training at public expense that is directed purely at employment. At a time when clerical and secretarial work has expanded rapidly, the commercial option in the high school has provided a larger supply of workers than would be available if secretarial training were less easily accessible. In a society where higher wages are often justified by higher levels of education or skill training, the courses may have decreased the ability of workers to bargain. Although none of these factors is a critical determinant of wages, they may well contribute to keeping wages down.

What can be done to decrease sexual segregation in these course in the high school and to improve everyone's education for work? The answers to this go far beyond the limits of this paper, but this study suggests some observations. There appear to be at least three policy options. The first would be to integrate the existing commercial courses, so that both males and females take the courses that are preparing office workers. The second would be to get rid of all job training in the form of commercial courses from the high schools, to put them in community colleges or private schools, and to replace them with either academic courses or more avocational ones in the hope that these would be easier to integrate and more worthwhile for students. The third option would be to introduce into the high school other programs that also do direct skill training in preparation for jobs.

The option of integrating commercial courses is a good one, but is not likely to be successful unless males want to take jobs as secretaries, or employers seek them for such positions, as the courses are so clearly designed for job preparation. Males are unlikely to do this unless the wages attached to secretarial work are increased, or unless male youth unemployment gets so bad that they go beyond their stereotypes and also come to see secretarial jobs as relatively prestigious ones. However, integration of all courses seems valuable on its own terms, as a way of breaking down stereotyping. The problems in doing this are indicated by a boy in the following comment: "Commercial courses are for girls. I'm not into that stuff. It's not healthy. And it's bad for your reputation." The second problem is that the courses themselves do not seem to be an exciting intellectual experience for anyone — why just add on the boys?

The option of getting all job training courses out of the high school so that more academic courses can be included on the students' timetables is neither practical nor especially useful. Business courses are firmly entrenched in the high school, are desired by employers, and serve a practical economic function for the student. It would take major political efforts to eliminate them and would cause hardship for students and increase educational inflation. Moreover, the argument that all vocational courses ought to be eliminated because they stream students out of academic courses and therefore out of competition for more high-paying

jobs (Grubb & Lazerson, 1975) is naive about the relationship between schooling and the labor market. Streaming occurs because of the nature of the jobs available outside of school; streaming within schools is not predicated on the existence of vocational courses. If job preparation courses are eliminated, the students who would have taken them will either be forced out of school altogether or into academic courses or into other avocational or general interest courses that are mounted according to the teachers' interests or departments of education's mandate.

The effects of this hypothetical change cannot be evaluated here in any detail. The sexual segregation of courses might well be reduced, as many of the "fill-in" and academic courses are now more integrated than business courses. However, the argument for this change is usually made on the grounds that it would increase students general knowledge, intellectual ability, and involvement with school. This change would lead many students to drop out of school altogether. Business courses did strike most of the students in this study as some of the most boring and repetitive courses available, and this lack of interesting content comes from the teacher's attempt to reproduce in the classroom what is often a boring and mindless office routine. But these students see any high school courses as simply marking time, jumping hoops, and getting by. Certainly the existing academic courses do not excite or stimulate them. General courses which might capitalize on general interest founder because of the school structure within which they operate. The business courses are redeemed by their relationship to work, and especially by the work experience built into them. Any hope of giving courses new life for a substantial number of students depends upon integrating this clear vocational and therefore real focus and experience with academic skills in language, math, social analysis, science, etc. This is admittedly a delicate balance — to please employers and teach what are often routine work procedures, and to introduce skepticism, analysis, and basic skills. It depends upon dedicated teachers and a school system committed to intellectual goals. However, it is a more useful direction for reform and pressure than eliminating work as a focus for curriculum altogether.

This leaves a final option of trying to implement vocational programs for more students. At the moment real job training in high school is available only for girls who do not mind sitting and typing. Efforts to broaden this by introducing, for example, preapprentice courses into the high school are being considered in several provinces.

This option might decrease the sexual segregation of courses. It would at least mean that students who wanted to get their job preparation done in the school could have the option of not doing commercial preparation. Girls will continue to select job preparation at a time when labor markets are tight and when they are scared about getting a job. If alternative job preparation options are offered within the school, girls could be urged to break out of traditional stereotypes, without feeling they are giving up

access to decent jobs. However, the sex composition of these courses will undoubtedly continue to reflect the sex segregation of the labor market. Very few girls now take industrial courses at the senior level in high school, and without direct attacks on market segregation they may be unwilling to risk taking non-traditional courses.

Whether the advantages business courses provide for girls in the labor market can be generalized to other students preparing for other occupations is also problematic. I have argued that the effect of these courses depends upon the existence of specific skills, especially typing and shorthand, that are useful in a wide variety of jobs that are not learned easily on the job, and that can be taught within the high school. The existence of these conditions in office jobs is increasingly threatened by the use of new technology. A careful study of work in other occupations would have to be undertaken before one could argue with any assurance that they exist in any other area. The existing literature on vocational education has focussed on these, mostly male, occupations, and the findings are that economic payoffs are uncommon. However, in most Canadian high schools, commercial courses are the only ones that seriously attempt direct job preparation for students. They are thus the test case at the moment.

NOTES

- ¹ Vancouver School Board statistics show that in 1976, 50% of the high school graduates were at some form of further education, and half of these were in university. Forty-three percent were employed and 5% were looking for work. Five percent of the graduates could not be traced (Vancouver School Board, 1977).
- ² The distinctions among programs are not made officially by the school, and students are sometimes hard to classify as when they are taking drafting, general business, geography, English, and physical fitness. Students were considered to be in commerce or industrial education if they were taking at least two courses in these areas. The students' own descriptions of their programs usually made clear whether they considered themselves to be primarily business, academic, general, or industrial students.
- ³ The data on jobs found covers any job held during the 10 to 12 months after the student left school. This includes almost all the sample since few students held no job at all.
- ⁴ These findings are consistent with a Vancouver School Board study that showed that work experience was a positive experience for most of the students who took it (Middleton, 1975). This study also confirms that it is primarily girls in business courses who have work experience connected with the school.
- ⁵ Research tends to show that vocational graduates have no advantages over graduates from academic programs (Reubens, 1974), but, as noted above, commercial courses have not been separated out and carefully studied.

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