‘It’s a Woman’: Molly Brennan and Gender, Social Justice and Leadership in the Victorian Education Department, 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract: Molly Brennan was a trail-blazing headmistress/principal of Victorian government high schools in the 1960s and 1970s. She was president of the Victorian Head Mistresses Association. In 1970, she made history as the first woman principal of a large Victorian co-educational government high school. Then, controversially, she applied to be Melbourne High School’s principal in 1974. Brennan was an early second-wave feminist. The following account of her activism analyses her political approach to social justice with regard to equity for women teachers and improving girls’ educational opportunities. She saw herself as a leader, and others recognised her as such during her career and today. It was not until she applied for promotion out of the girls’ high schools and into the traditional power bases of male teachers as heads of co-educational high schools and Melbourne High School that her teaching and leadership abilities were questioned.

Keywords: Molly Brennan, leadership, gender, equity, government schooling, women teachers, social justice, education, girls’ high schools, single-sex schools, co-educational schools, domestic science, headmistresses, principals Victorian Head Mistresses (Women Principals) Association

Introduction

While recalling her pioneering leadership roles, secondary teacher Molly Brennan reflected: ‘I did what I thought was right in giving good example to other women’. As a leader in the Victorian community, she was more political about equity than most women of her era, calling herself a ‘political animal’. This account of Brennan’s career reveals her leadership in the Victorian Head Mistresses Association (VHMA) in the 1960s, when she fought to retain the girls’ high schools. It then turns to 1969 and 1970, when Brennan applied to be Brighton High School’s principal and eventually became the first woman principal of a large co-educational government high school. Finally, this chapter recounts a controversial episode when Brennan applied to be Melbourne High School’s principal in 1974. Her story shows that ‘there is no simple linear progress towards gender equity’. Indeed,
leadership in education for women continues to be a ‘fraught path’. This examination of Brennan’s career takes as its guiding theme Jill Blackmore’s recent framing of leadership in education as a question: ‘Which men and which women get to be leaders and why?’

When Brennan taught between 1933 and 1977, the Victorian Education Department was a gendered learning and working environment. Although women made up a critical mass of the teaching service, they faced discrimination for decades. Equal pay was not phased in until 1967; women could not be heads of most secondary schools until 1969; and it was 1956 before married women were allowed to retain permanent positions. There were also few women inspectors but hundreds of men inspectors. Promotion was based upon an inspector’s assessment and the teacher’s hierarchical position on the separate men’s or women’s roll. There was no woman director of education until 1988. Titles defined gendered roles: schools were headed by hundreds of headmasters and a few headmistresses. Most government schools were co-educational and, until 1969, the most senior positions for women were as infant mistresses in primary schools and senior mistresses in secondary schools. Senior men were called senior masters and, until 1969, this role was the stepping stone to becoming a headmaster. For the senior mistress, there was no ‘next step’ in a co-educational school until the common roll was introduced in 1969, combining both the men’s and women’s hierarchical rolls. The roll, which denoted seniority, was used to decide on appointments. Senior mistresses were created to attend to what were perceived as the special needs of girls and they were expected to ‘set the tone for the whole school’.

Ron Tandberg, ‘It’s a Woman’, cartoon in Ms Muffet, Melbourne: VTU, VSTA, TTAV, Joint Sexism Committee Project, no.15 (June 1982), 1.
During her career, Brennan worked in co-educational and girls’ secondary schools, the latter enabling women to be heads of large schools, something not possible in other schools before 1969. Between 1961 and 1977, she was head of three secondary schools, Preston Girls, and Brighton and Castlemaine High Schools. From 1965 to 1967, and again from 1973 to 1976, she was president of the Victorian Head Mistresses Association, a gendered organisation for women who headed government secondary schools. The VHMA began in 1937 and changed its name to the Victorian Women Principals’ Association (VWPA) in 1969, when both male and female heads of schools were rebadged ‘principals’. Brennan was a member of the VTU’s Equal Pay Committee, the Victorian government’s influential Status of Women Committee, the Lyceum Club, the International Soroptimists, the Australian Federation of University Women, the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs (BPWs) and other community organisations. She was also elected a Fellow of the Australian College of Education.

According to historian Kay Whitehead, Brennan, as a spinster, was ‘typical’ of women teachers in this era. She began teaching when ‘the educational state was constructing teaching as work for married men and single women’. Brennan, like her aunts and her two sisters, made the choice to remain single. Her aunt, lawyer Anna Brennan, was purported to have ‘little domestic inclination’, and Mollie also disliked domestic responsibilities, particularly cooking. She was quite decided against marriage and declared ‘it was never for me at all’. When some women teachers married after being single for many years, she asked why they were prepared to ‘give up their independence’.

At the high point of Brennan’s career, government schooling had a reformist agenda. During the 1960s and 1970s, she recalled, ‘everyone was revolting against authorities’. Historian Stuart Macintyre saw this time as ‘the baby-boomers’ rejection of their parents way of life’. Concomitantly, this era saw changes in schooling and an unprecedented community interest in educational issues. It was referred to by educational administrators of the era as the ‘crisis’ in education. The baby-boomers ‘forced a crash programme to build and staff secondary schools’. Amongst the changes were the numbers of students staying longer in secondary schooling and, as a result, in the 1960s the numbers of Victorian government high schools grew from 150 to 242. This created shortages in qualified teachers and a lack of classrooms.

This period was also recognised as the ‘second wave’ of feminism and women teachers won equal pay and new career opportunities. Brennan reflected: ‘In those years … the issue of male–female equality in and out of the workplace
was a hot topic’. Changed expectations about women’s role in society were reflected in changes to girls’ education and this in turn created further changes for teachers, particularly women. In the late 1960s, the girls’ domestic science secondary schools were converted to generalist high schools and most of them changed from single-sex to co-educational schools. This had implications for girls and their teachers. Immediately, there were fewer women principals of Victorian government schools. Men gained the headships of the newly created co-educational schools and, for the first time, because of the common roll, men became principals in the remaining girls’ schools. Brennan’s story shows how equity changes paradoxically brought disadvantages to the earlier women principals.

**Molly Brennan’s Early Years**

Brennan was born in 1914 at Sedgwick, near Bendigo, into a large, well-known and close Catholic family. Her parents were Mary Anne (née Conway) and Richard Brennan. Richard was the Strathfieldsaye Shire Council’s secretary. Her notable uncles in law and politics were Frank (1873–1950) and Thomas Brennan (1866–1944). An equally notable aunt was Anna Brennan (1879–1962), a community activist in social justice and a pioneering woman lawyer. ‘Aunt Anna’, known for her ‘decisive mind and delightful wit’, teased Molly about being ‘our teacher’ in the family. It will be seen in this chapter how Brennan followed these family leaders into community activism for social justice.

Brennan’s family encouraged scholarship for both the girls and the boys, so she followed the older family members into the University of Melbourne, intending to become a lawyer like her uncles and aunt. However, in the context of the Great Depression, she expected that it would be difficult to gain employment as an articled clerk and decided instead on secondary teaching as there was a teacher shortage. In her first years of teaching in the country, she was young and lonely, living in ‘appalling conditions’ with only her dog and horse for regular company. An ambitious woman, she spent the next 30 years working in rural schools all over the state, seeking ‘promotion wherever [she] could get it’. Brennan found that ‘the promotion system prevailing at the time encouraged teachers to move and so a stay of two or three years became normal’. Between 1933 and 1961, she taught in eleven different Victorian schools. Brennan was single, without family responsibilities, and this, combined with her independent and pragmatic nature, enabled her to move to any available promotion vacancies. Secondary schools in rural and isolated areas found it difficult to find ‘permanent’ women teachers. These
conditions helped single women teachers to ascend the promotion ladder quickly; even though married women taught, they were unable to be promoted. Like many teachers, she continued to study while working until she was fully qualified with a degree and Diploma of Education by 1949. While teaching in rural areas, she displayed early community leadership as the founding president of Colac’s (1955) and then Seymour’s (1958) BPWs. From 1958 to 1960, Brennan was also the convener of the Soroptimist Federation’s Status of Women Committee.

**Victorian Head Mistresses Association/Victorian Women Principals Association**

Brennan’s first promotion to a headmistress position was at Preston Girls High School in 1961, although, since it was a girls’ high school, this did not challenge the male-oriented status quo. Preston Girls was a large northern suburban high school with almost 800 students. Brennan headed the school for almost a decade before equal pay (1967) and the common roll (1969) were implemented. Preston Girls, unusually for the earlier government girls’ secondary schools, provided domestic, professional (academic) and commercial curricula from its establishment in 1928. Initially it was developed as the ‘sister’ school for Northcote High School, which opened as a boys’ high school the same year. Cheryl Judd, a former student when Brennan was the headmistress, and now the principal, has noted:

> This broad curriculum in today’s context would be in accordance with the government’s objective of having a range of education and training pathways available to our students to address their different abilities, aspirations and interests but retain them in education and training.

As headmistress, Brennan lived on-site in the school’s flat. Most girls’ secondary schools had a ‘training’ flat for which the domestic science students were responsible, taking care of its maintenance, the laundry and preparing meals. As this domestic work was done for her, and like her aunt who had her unmarried sister providing the domestic support, Brennan could concentrate on her career and her community activism. At Preston Girls, she was appreciated by staff and students who recalled her leadership. In the school’s history, Brennan was described as:

> an equal opportunity pioneer who fought against “only a girls’ school” attitudes undermining the advantages of single-sex education. Her legacy included Form 6—Year 12—from 1964, the Science Block first
stage, and the Parents and Teachers Association from 1967. There was a one-off 12 hour round trip to Broken Hill in 1962, while European migrant numbers began a steady rise—and so did smokers’ numbers and the girls’ hemlines!\(^{34}\)

Cheryl Judd, meanwhile, envisaged her own leadership potential from an early age after being inspired by Brennan’s example and encouragement.\(^{35}\)

When Brennan became a headmistress in 1961, she immediately qualified as a VHMA member. The association’s membership consisted of the headmistresses of the nineteen government girls’ secondary schools and high schools. Ardent about the VHMA’s role for sixteen years, she held leadership positions for most of this period until the organisation ceased in 1977. By 1961, three girls’ secondary schools had joined MacRobertson Girls’ as high schools. They were Canterbury, Mentone and Preston. This was because they offered matriculation (university entrance) subjects. The remaining girls’ secondary schools offered the intermediate (form four) and the leaving certificate (form five).

Male heads of high schools belonged to the Victorian High Schools Head Masters Association (VHSHMA), which began in 1948, the same year as the Victorian Secondary Masters’ Professional Association (VSMPA). Although it initially had the slogan, ‘Every Secondary Man a Member’, the VSMPA began taking women members after a few years, later becoming the influential Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA).\(^{36}\) The VHSHMA and the VHMA liaised from 1948 and then formally joined together in 1962 as the cumbrously named Victorian High Schools Head Masters and Head Mistresses Association (VHSHMHMA), holding joint meetings as well as separate ones within their gendered organisations. In 1961, 19 (or 15 per cent) of the 130 heads of high schools and secondary schools were women. They were all heads of girls’ schools.\(^{37}\) During the existence of the VHSHMHMA up to its demise in 1985, the only woman principal who ever reached senior office was Nina Carr, Brennan’s close friend, who served as junior vice president from 1970–1971.\(^{38}\)

Brennan joined the VHMA in 1961 in its 23\(^{rd}\) year. As a consequence of her leadership, it became more political in its activities.\(^{39}\) The headmistresses decided to join the Victorian Teachers’ Union (VTU) Women’s Division.\(^{40}\) In the same era, girls’ perceived educational needs evolved and the girls’ schools began to change. Brennan emphatically argued that: ‘We knew our students’ [needs] best’.\(^{41}\) A letter from the VHMA’s secretary, to a Mrs E.C. Somers, who was investigating what sort of government school her local community
should establish, provided insights into how the headmistresses saw the girls’ schools’ role in Victoria’s community. It explained that employers were increasingly demanding higher standards so girls were staying on to the leaving certificate. There was a broad appeal for such schools: ‘In girls’ schools those responsible for planning courses should include a good solid core of academic or professional subjects as well as practical subjects if girls are to gain a certificate worthy of the name Intermediate or Leaving certificate.’ The VHMA argued: ‘We feel that our girls’ secondary schools should not become places from which the gifted girls are excluded and some of our schools already include the high school course’.

The letter clearly defined VHMA’s ‘ownership’ and the independence of these schools. The response continued with ‘we like our girls’ schools for a number of reasons’, claiming ‘many girls are better off in an all girls’ school, the less gifted pupil has more opportunities of doing work which interests her and many parents like girls to be in a school without boys at the adolescent age’. In many ways, these schools were a parallel division on the margins of the department and it appeared that senior men tended to leave girls’ education to headmistresses. Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School’s historian Pauline Parker agreed, finding that when the school was co-educational (1905–1927), the principal, Joseph Hocking, though he was ‘head of the hierarchy’, left matters concerning girls to Miss Margery Robertson, the headmistress. A singular advantage for girls’ education, this enabled headmistresses to develop innovative educational programs that catered for the individual needs of their students. These single-sex schools provided leadership opportunities for girls and significant leadership roles for women, unavailable to them in co-educational schools.

The status of girls’ schools in the community changed as their title changed to ‘high schools’, an advance that demonstrated they were evolving. It was not the idea of the department’s senior male staff to create these girls’ high schools from domestic arts schools. Rather, the initiative came from a VHMA resolution in 1957. Consistent with its concerns for the quality of girls’ education, in 1961 the association tackled the lack of promotion opportunities for women teachers compared to those for men. Letters initiated by Brennan were sent to the VTU, the VSTA and James Mills, the chief inspector of secondary schools, about the inequitable promotion opportunities for women. There were fewer senior positions for women teachers at girls’ high schools and secondary co-educational schools compared to the number of senior positions in boys’ high schools and co-educational schools available to men. Having fewer senior staff placed extra pressure on girls’ schools.
Brennan’s vigorous contributions led to her election as the VHMA’s vice president in 1964, even though she was a relatively new member. Matters acted upon that year included equal pay and the need to keep the VHMA’s own identity within the VHSHMHMA, especially when it dealt with girls’ schools.\textsuperscript{52} The VHMA also nominated the primary teacher and VTU vice president (women) Hilma Cranley for the VTU’s presidency. Cranley won, making her just the second woman president in the union’s long history.

The next year saw Brennan elected to the presidency of the VHMA and she took up her leadership position with gusto. The minutes of meetings indicate that her point of view dominated from the time she joined in 1961. She was a forceful and articulate speaker, and consistently took a more political approach than others. Some complained, however, that Brennan and Carr were unnecessarily political about equity issues at other teachers’ meetings.\textsuperscript{53} In 1965, the VSTA launched its ‘professionalisation’ campaigns, focusing on tribunal reform, curriculum reform, control of entry to the profession, inspection, improved conditions and teachers’ rights.\textsuperscript{54} The resulting industrial action affected secondary schools. At Preston, VSTA members of staff were ‘in tears as they were going on strike but didn’t want to let me down’.\textsuperscript{55} Later, she closed Brighton High School because so many staff went ‘on strike’, there were not enough left to supervise the students. This was a controversial action as principals were not supposed to independently close schools but Brennan stood her ground when the department tried to stop her.\textsuperscript{56}

As president for a second term in 1966, Brennan listed the past year’s successes at the annual general meeting.\textsuperscript{57} She included the Commonwealth public service’s acceptance of the department’s Girls’ Leaving Certificate as an entrance pre-requisite both for employment and for nursing and some trainee teaching courses. The department approved more girls’ secondary schools becoming high schools (Ballarat, Bendigo, Dandenong, Flemington, Footscray, Malvern, Matthew Flinders, Pascoe Vale, Shepparton and Williamstown) and the introduction of the innovative intake testing.\textsuperscript{58} These achievements, Brennan asserted, meant that the VHMA was recognised by the department as a policy-making body. In contrast to past years when it was ignored, the VHMA was included on a diversity of departmental committees including ‘Transition’, the committee established to investigate the transition of students from primary to secondary schools. Its advice was also sought in planning the annual ‘Education Week’. Brennan continued on the executive of the VHSHMHMA and was a member of the department’s library week
committee, the VTU’s equal pay committee and the State Schools’ Relief Committee. The VHMA also organised the annual girls’ swimming and athletics carnivals, as well as other girls’ events.

In her presidential address, Brennan emphasised the historical importance of the VHMA’s strategic and unique role in policy development, and the need to preserve their girls’ schools’ independence:

Bodies, outside the girls’ secondary schools, imposed nothing on our courses or certificates. We hear frequent complaints about outside pressure on school courses. We are quite free from this. Then too I do not think that any of us would wish to see complete uniformity in our education system. Our girls’ secondary schools are one of the few examples of variety. Finally I believe that our schools, quite apart from the courses have something very valuable to offer our girls. I, therefore, before leaving the presidential chair appeal to all head mistresses to give very careful thought to the importance of our association and to the importance of allowing nothing to weaken it.\(^{59}\)

Her forceful speech reflected educational researcher John Collard’s recent findings about headmistresses of non-government girls’ secondary schools. Brennan and the VHMA behaved in what he termed ‘the matriarch tradition’, whereby they ‘brooked little interference with their regimes’.\(^{60}\)

However, not long after these confident claims, Brennan and the other women heads found themselves battling to keep control of their schools. Early in 1967, they were anxious about the future of girls’ schools though they had received no formal information about possible changes. Brennan had finished her term as president but continued to be an audacious leader, heading a new VHMA committee appointed to formulate policy pertaining to the status of the girls’ schools.\(^{61}\) The responses to the questionnaire she sent to each headmistress revealed an overwhelming conviction that ‘the continued existence of girls’ schools appears to be threatened and action is felt to be necessary’.\(^{62}\) The committee immediately despatched a deputation to Ron Reid, chief inspector of secondary schools, to air the headmistresses’ grievances, which included the future of girls’ schools and the lack of promotion opportunities, but they left the meeting no happier or wiser.\(^{63}\) The VHMA’s members, in defending their territory, were more active in 1967 than ever before. The headmistresses had been managing, in effect, a marginalised ‘department of girls’ schools’, and now they considered that the department was not keeping them up-to-date with information directly affecting them.
The VHMA continued their campaign to retain girls’ high schools in the government school sector, but the ultimate decision makers within the department seemed not to recognise their unique educational role. In the 1960s, boys and girls in co-educational high schools did not have the same educational opportunities. The schools had segregated grounds, and other attitudinal and practical gender differences were clearly evident. Senior masters and senior mistresses administered differently to the students’ perceived gendered needs. Different subjects were considered appropriate (or inappropriate) for boys or girls, beyond assigning girls to domestic arts and boys to woodwork. Careers advice and subject choice were also gendered. Ada May, a maths teacher at Mildura High School, a large co-educational high school in the 1960s, recalled: ‘Then it was accepted that boys were better at maths and science’. The department organised special maths camps for boys only. Schools in this era, particularly co-educational schools, practised a ‘hidden’ curriculum and ‘sex-role stereotyping’ that discriminated between girls and boys in terms of their learning opportunities.

The VHMA drew attention to the learning needs of girls that were not dealt with in co-educational schools in the 1960s. Their arguments were vindicated a decade later in the landmark findings of the Australian Schools Commission’s report, Girls, School and Society, and the Victorian government’s Equal Opportunity in Schools Committee Report to the Premier. The VHMA had ceased in 1977 and most of its more strident members, particularly Molly Brennan and Nina Carr, had retired from teaching by then. But, in the late 1970s and 1980s, many other teachers drew attention to the ‘single-sex or co-educational schools’ issue with regard to girls’ learning needs. The department employed a co-ordinator for the elimination of sexism in schools whose role included the development of policies and programs to eliminate discriminatory practices considered detrimental to the learning opportunities of girls and boys.

From 1961 to 1967, Brennan represented the VHMA on the VTU’s Women’s Branch’s Equal Pay Committee. Equal pay was finally won by women teachers, almost 70 years after it was first demanded in 1901 by Vida Goldstein, Clara Weekes and others. However, the headmistresses continued to be concerned about possible changes to their schools. At the annual general meeting in 1968, the president, Bea Boardman, headmistress of Dandenong Girls High School, observed that, ‘despite the obvious worthiness of girls’ schools, opposition is apparent’. Brennan’s committee had requested the department’s Curriculum and Research Branch (C&R) to ‘investigate the benefits of single-sex schools for girls’. The headmistresses expected the
branch to find in favour of the need for girls’ schools; a need they knew was felt in the Victorian educational and parent community. Instead, however, Brennan and the other headmistresses were incensed by the resulting report, which supported co-education for all secondary students.72 The VHMA sent a letter to the department that carefully summarised their concerns. These included C&R’s failure to investigate girls’ education in England, where ‘the single-sex school is the norm and co-educational education was the innovation’, and its similar failure to investigate co-educational schools in the independent sector, where single-sex schools are more common. They also asked if the situation in NSW had been studied, where there were more girls’ schools than in Victoria.73 The letter questioned the ‘false assertion’ in the C&R report that commercial careers are the main goal of girls’ schools.

As the girls’ schools evolved, they offered a greater range of subjects including matriculation level. However, a greater diversity of subject choices depended upon sufficient qualified teachers and the supply of teachers was problematic in the 1960s and 1970s. Cheryl Judd, a Preston Girls student in the 1960s, was encouraged by Brennan to study science subjects and went on to study science at university but had to change schools for matriculation as there were insufficient maths teachers at Preston.74 Brennan and others wrote to the Apprenticeship Commission about greater opportunities for girls in apprenticeships other than ladies’ hairdressing.75 In the 1960s, young women attended girls’ secondary schools to study biology and the other prerequisites required for nursing, including, in particular, invalid cookery, a compulsory subject for nurses in that era. Interviewed many years later, Brennan considered that C&R’s report was not scholarly but, rather, an uncritical reflection of prevailing attitudes.76

Senior men in the department’s head office patronised the women heads. Gwen Evans, headmistress of Shepparton Girls High School, challenged the men’s condescending behaviour, which appeared to be reflected by C&R, in a letter addressed to Boardman, the VHMA’s president. Evans claimed that Jack Ford, a secondary inspector, later to become director of the secondary division, told one of her teaching staff that she worked at a ‘second rate’ institution.77 Brennan believed that Ford’s solipsistic opinions about girls’ schools helped the department to move towards closing them: he was ‘hell bent on getting rid of them and we wanted to save them’. Evans maintained that clearly ‘the local community did not see the school as second rate because the school was only established in 1960 with 202 girls and by 1968 there were 550 pupils’. It was obviously meeting a local need. She added ‘employers ring me every year and say, ‘we’ve had your girls and we’d like another one’. She continued: ‘In the recent state nursing examinations a
former student came third of 400 candidates’, and ‘many of our girls are teaching’. Elida Brereton, who much later became the admired principal of Camberwell High School, first taught at Shepparton Girls when Evans was head and agreed that the school had an excellent reputation.

Nevertheless, by the end of 1969, Shepparton Girls High School was closed and there were only a few other girls’ high schools left: Fitzroy, Footscray, Mac.Robertson, Matthew Flinders, Canterbury, Mentone, Preston and Pascoe Vale. The VHMA meetings held in 1969 were tinged with bitterness and sadness for the loss of their schools. The substantial number of girls’ schools had constituted the headmistresses’ power base too. The atmosphere reflected in the minutes of that year was in stark contrast to the optimistic views expressed at an earlier meeting held in 1952: ‘The girls’ schools have come to stay’. The minutes continued: ‘They have won a delayed and once grudged place in every district where they have been set up. But the central administration has not been able to cope with them’.

The secondary division saw other changes in 1969. Following from the phasing in of equal pay, the gendered secondary rolls were changed to one common roll. Men and women teachers were numerically woven into one hierarchical roll and all promotion positions were open to women (and men) for the first time. In the same year, the director of secondary education, Ron Reid, attended a VWPA meeting where it was pointed out to him that retaining differently coloured information sheets for men and women teachers—white for men, pink for women—was out-of-date. He was also informed that the VWPA believed that closing girls’ schools was not an educational decision, despite the advice provided by the C&R report. Brennan believed that, in the end, the department had made a financial decision, and she recalled that the headmistresses thought so at the time. The director agreed. Most of the girls’ high schools thereafter became co-educational, saving government costs by providing desperately needed classrooms and qualified teachers.
A Woman ‘Out of Place’

From 1969, all school principal positions in co-educational and single-sex schools were theoretically open to applications from either sex. However, it was men that immediately benefited, not women, as attitudes about male entitlement remained. In that year, Brennan and Carr sent letters of complaint about the continuing inequitable treatment of women teachers to the Committee of Classifiers and the Teachers’ Tribunal. Through their letters, they expressed concern that eligible women who had applied for principal positions in co-educational schools were not appointed, but men had become heads of Preston Girls and Richmond Girls’ High Schools for the first time. The classifiers responded that ‘careful consideration was given to all applications from women teachers’, while the tribunal did not bother to reply. Brennan, typically articulate and feisty, argued in response to the classifiers that ‘the members of the Association (VWPA) are fully aware that careful consideration would be given to all applications for vacancies whether from men or from women, but that members expected justice as well as care.’

It was in the context of this overtly patriarchal culture that Brennan applied to be head of Brighton High School, one of Victoria’s largest government co-educational high schools. On her first application, despite her qualifications,
seniority and experience heading a large high school for nine years, she was not appointed. She immediately appealed against the younger male initially appointed. He was junior to her on the new common roll and had only eight years’ experience in a co-educational high school. He argued that Brennan did not have the experience required to head co-educational schools. However, Brennan tartly responded that women were not allowed to be principals of co-educational schools until 1969 so how could she have this experience? Inspectors had given her lavish praise during the nine years she was principal of Preston Girls but, as Brennan ruefully reflected, they ‘would never have done so if they thought I would be in competition with men ten years later’.  

Brennan’s seniority and nine years’ experience eventually won the appeal for her and she made history when she was appointed at Brighton, becoming Victoria’s first woman principal of a large co-educational government high school. June Mayson became the school’s first deputy principal in 1969 and chose to stay there until her retirement twelve years later. Mayson had occupied a gendered role as a senior mistress in co-educational secondary schools for decades. For five years, the two women constituted a unique leadership team as the first of their sex to head a large co-educational government high school.

At Brighton, Brennan received praise from her staff, and her experienced senior master considered that she was the best principal with whom he had ever worked. Today Brighton’s Brennan Library commemorates her leadership at the school. Brennan and Mayson were perceived to ‘float’ through the centre of the assembly hall surrounded by hundreds of students. Felicity Childs, a Brighton High School student from 1970 to 1976, remembered that Brennan and Mayson had different leadership styles. Mayson was friendly with a brisk walk, beautifully dressed, and her downstairs office door was always open. In contrast, Brennan’s office was upstairs with the door shut and a secretary outside. She was described as looking ‘grim’. These recollections reflected the different roles assumed by the ‘principal’ and the ‘deputy’ as outlined in the 1970s by educational theorist and secondary school inspector Max Badcock. He saw the principal as someone who ‘will make loneliness an effective tool of command; but if he is necessarily socially distant, this is precisely why his deputy must not be’, as ‘friendship was the deputy’s job’. Badcock assumed that both the principal and the deputy were male and he particularly called the deputy, the ‘link-man’. Perhaps Brennan believed that behaving in what could be seen as a ‘male’ manner was the appropriate style for her. A teacher at Brighton High School during this period recalled how important Brennan’s position as one of the few women principals was to female teachers.
Ambitious and political, Brennan had, however, set her sights higher than Brighton. In 1974, when Melbourne High School’s principal position was advertised, she applied. This was the government system’s ‘flagship’ boys’ school. She openly admitted: ‘That position was what I was really waiting for, to put my experience to the test’. She was ‘number one’ on the common roll and therefore the most senior applicant. ‘She could not resist the temptation to push further barriers.’ As ‘number one’, she expected to be appointed to any position she wanted. She was recognised as one of the best principals in Victoria. But, although the department had always used seniority when selecting staff, Brennan was not appointed. When she appealed, she was advised that, ‘because of the nature of the duties, a male is preferred’. Brennan recalled that Alistair Clarke, chairman of classifiers, told her that ‘the Classifiers did not question my qualifications, my competence, my eligibility, my seniority, or my claim to wider experience’. When questioned, Clarke agreed that the position had not been tagged as ‘male preferred’. Brennan argued that, as males were appointed as principals of Preston Girls and Richmond Girls’ High Schools over qualified female applicants, it was inconsistent to prefer a male for a boys’ high school ‘because of the nature of the duties’. The tribunal must have shared the prejudices of the classifiers and was prepared, in the words of Brennan, to ‘support inconsistency and discrimination based on sex, for my appeal was not upheld’. The appointee, Lou Barberis, was a Melbourne High ‘old boy’ and was considered to have ‘a longer and a more varied and successful experience as principal of a co-educational school than did Miss Brennan’. However, he had five years less experience as a principal and was over a hundred places below her on the promotion roll. The tribunal’s decision was thus inconsistent with its recent ruling on Brennan’s eligibility for Brighton, which had prioritised her ‘seniority’ over her lack of experience in a co-educational school. Arbitrarily, this time her seniority was discounted.

The Victorian ombudsman did not find in her favour either. In her response to him, Brennan asserted: ‘Discrimination can seldom be proved. I knew that the best I could hope for was that your investigation would make discrimination and injustice a little less likely in the future’. With regard to the argument that Barberis had had ‘longer and more varied experience as a principal of a co-educational school’, she retorted angrily: ‘Did anyone remember that my experience was not “longer and more varied” because, AS A WOMAN, I was debarred until January 1st, 1970’, women’s leadership experience having been restricted by the department to girls’ schools.
Alan Gregory, another Melbourne High ‘old boy’ and the school’s historian, explained how Barberis’s appointment was managed. Jack Baker, who was on the tribunal that had decided against Brennan in 1974, was another former Melbourne High student and staff member, as well as a former VTU president. Baker had ‘great affection for the school and his attitude to teachers at the school was rather misogynistic’. According to Gregory, ‘Baker used all his political cunning; ways were found to defeat the appeal, and the nomination of Barberis stood’. It must have seemed like anarchy for these ‘old boys’ to contemplate a woman at the helm of what Gregory called ‘a famous boys school’.

However, the following year, Brennan was appointed to an influential state government advisory committee, the Committee on the Status of Women, established by the Victorian government in recognition of International Women’s Year and the attention drawn to women’s needs in this period. Premier Rupert Hamer invited Brennan to join the committee while she was principal of Brighton High School. She was the only teacher; the other ten committee members were well-known Victorians, from government, the private sector, academia and the community. Chaired by Eva Eden, principal of Janet Clarke Hall, University of Melbourne, it had five men and six women members. The committee was established to advise the Victorian Government ‘generally on all matters related to the status of women’.

The committee’s report was released in 1976, by which time Brennan had moved from Brighton to Castlemaine High School. Among its recommendations for raising the status of women (and girls) in the Victorian community, the committee called for further career counselling in schools as well as refresher courses for teachers to help them deal with the effects of society’s changing attitudes on appropriate roles for men and women. The committee also called for an examination of Victorian schools’ practices with a view to uncovering the extent to which the hidden curriculum was still operating. The report recommended that girls be encouraged to consider apprenticeships, study a wider range of subjects and aspire to a greater range of occupations, including ones with promotion opportunities for undertaking leadership roles. As a result of the committee’s findings, the premier established a second government body, the Committee on Equal Opportunity in Schools, to report on equity with regard to students’ learning and teachers’ work. Brennan was instrumental in the development of the resulting equal opportunity legislation and, although the other committee members expressed some reservations, she convinced them to be involved. Consequently, Victoria became one of the first Australian states to implement equal
opportunity legislation. By the end of 1977, however, Brennan had retired from teaching.

Conclusion

This study has provided a snapshot of Molly Brennan’s leadership in the Victorian community in the 1960s and 1970s. In doing so, it has also provided us with ‘past visions of women’s educational leadership that have been lost, erased or distorted’. Brennan’s gendered experiences and contributions to social justice are significant because, in education today, we ‘see a rearticulation of old problems such as social justice emerging in new forms and changing contexts for the next generation of women leaders’.

Her story particularly shows the determination and strength of the headmistresses who led the government girls’ schools, which for many decades operated as ‘marginalised communities’ in the education sector. These women were not at all cloistered; they were enlightened, spirited, well qualified and highly professional.

Brennan and the VHMA challenged co-educational schooling for girls and they are vindicated in the 21st century. Of the original nineteen girls’ secondary schools in the government system, eight have survived and six of them have waiting lists. Five of them are members of the Alliance of Girls Schools Australia (AGSA). In 2011, the AGSA’s vision is to: ‘Increase public awareness that single-sex schools provide the optimal learning environment for girls’, an aim that could have been written by Molly Brennan, Nina Carr and others back in the 1960s.

Learning styles and curriculum choices, however, continue to be gendered. Women are still missing from top leadership roles in education and are reluctant to take up principal positions. Among the barriers that help explain why these lacunae continue are women’s life-cycle patterns and family responsibilities, which make it problematic for them to seek promotion at certain times in their careers because of the long hours expected in leadership roles. We saw that Brennan pursued her complex leadership career by being single and independent, resourceful and assiduous. She also had domestic support. This enabled her to fit into the traditional hierarchical patriarchal leadership model of her era. Although today’s women are still generally expected to fit into a ‘male career model’, more democratic leadership models suggested by researchers such as Jill Blackmore, Whitney H. Sherman, Danna M. Beaty and John Collard are now entering the discourse of educational management.
Brennan’s story is that of a leading community activist for social justice particularly in Victorian government schools. Unlike other women discussed in this collection, she did consider herself a leader, and headmistresses, teachers, students and others recognised her authority. She applied to be Melbourne High School’s principal to show that a woman could do it. Gwen Bowles, a former Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School principal and VWPA member, recently stated, ‘we knew why she did it’ in reference to Brennan’s quest to be Melbourne High’s principal. Not surprisingly, however, Brennan was happiest at Preston Girls. Molly Brennan saw educational leadership as gendered. In reflecting decades later upon her attempt to gain the top position in Victorian government schools, her attitude remained truculent: ‘I am still angry about how I was treated by the Department. I wanted Melbourne High, because I was a woman, and they prevented it, because I was a woman’.

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3 Deborah Towns, interview with Molly Brennan, Bendigo, 29 April 2006 (hereafter Molly Brennan interview).
6 Blackmore, 73.
11 Grimaux, 5.
12 Molly Brennan interview.
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13 Grimaux, 5.
14 Stuart Macintyre, A Concise History of Australia (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 228.
16 Macintyre, 228.
18 Grimaux, 5.
19 Molly Brennan interview.
20 In 1994, Strathfieldsaye Shire Council was amalgamated into the Greater Bendigo Council. Brennan’s sister, Margaret, was, like their father, Strathfieldsaye Shire’s Municipal Clerk from 1944 to 1977. She was awarded an Order of the British Empire for her community service.
22 For ‘our teacher’, see Molly Brennan interview.
23 Molly Brennan interview.
24 Grimaux, 5.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Molly Brennan, Teaching Record no. 30257, Teacher Records, 1863–1959, Victorian Education Department, VPRS 13719/P1, Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV).
28 Molly Brennan interview.
30 Ibid.
31 In 2011, Northcote High School continues as a co-educational high school.
32 Cheryl Judd, speech made at the 75th celebrations of Preston Girls Secondary College in 2003. Author’s own copy.
33 Ibid.
35 Deborah Towns, interview with Cheryl Judd, 19 November 2010.
37 By 1983, of the 295 secondary school principals, the proportion of women had decreased to 10 per cent.
38 Molly Brennan interview.
39 Ibid.
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41 Molly Brennan interview.
42 Letter from VHMA to Mrs E.C. Somers, 27 June 1961, Outward Mail, MS184/10202, SLV.
43 Ibid.
44 These schools were Camberwell (renamed Canterbury in 1961), Preston and Mentone, joining Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School.
45 Letter from VHMA to Mrs E.C. Somers.
47 Molly Brennan interview.
48 MGM/VHMA, 10 September 1957, Book 3, 1955–60, MS186/10202, SLV.
50 Ibid.
51 Letter from VHMA to VSTA, 21 July 1961, Outward Mail, MS 184/10202, SLV.
52 MGM/VHMA, 21 February 1964, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
54 Bassett, 65.
55 Molly Brennan interview.
56 Ibid.
57 MGM/VHMA, 24 February 1966, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
58 Intake testing was the headmistresses’ innovation, whereby a test was given to grade 6 students to ascertain their scholastic abilities. This would help the girls’ schools to plan the appropriate educational program when students commenced their first year of secondary study.
59 MGM/VHMA, 24 February 1966, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
61 MGM/VHMA, 24 February 1966, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
62 MGM/VHMA, 20 May 1967, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
63 Ibid.
64 Letter from Ada May, a maths teacher, to Deborah Towns, 23 July 2008.
67 MGM/VHMA, 18 March 1967, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.
Deborah Towns was appointed to this position in 1977.

For a history of the equal pay campaign see Deborah Towns, “Our Own Sphere”: Women Teachers and the Victorian Education Department 1880s–1980s (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2010).

Minutes of the annual general meeting, VHMA, 8 March 1968, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.

Minutes of the annual general meeting, VHMA, 8 March 1968, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV; Curriculum and Research Branch (C&R), an Education Department branch, established in 1947.


Letter, 7 May 1968, MS185/10202, SLV.

Deborah Towns, interview with Cheryl Judd, October 2010.

Molly Brennan interview.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Deborah Towns, interview with Elida Brereton, Melbourne, 15 October 2010. Brereton also starred in the television program, Summer Heights High, as the principal of the co-educational government school.

In 2008, these six schools were joined by Melbourne Girls’ Secondary College. Previously it was Richmond Girls’, then Richmond Secondary College and co-educational, and currently it is a very popular single-sex girls’ school with a waiting list.

Observation gleaned from the minutes of 1969 meetings, Minutes Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.

MGM/VHMA, 21 February 1952, Minutes Book 2, MS186/10202, SLV.

MGM/VHMA, 26 October 1969, Minutes Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.

Molly Brennan interview.

The term ‘out of place’ was used by Marjorie Theobald in the phrase ‘the processes by which the masculine fear of women out of place’, in her analysis of Julia Flynn’s leadership aspirations. See Marjorie Theobald, ‘Women, Leadership and Gender Politics in the Interwar Years’, History of Education 29, no. 1 (2000): 65.

Letter, 26 June 1969, VWPA, In and Out, 1965–76, MS184/10202, SLV.

Letter from the classifiers, 10 September 1969, VWPA, In and Out, 1965–76, MS184/10202, SLV.

MGM/23 September 1969, VWPA, Book 4, MS186/10202, SLV.

Molly Brennan interview.

Deborah Towns, interview with Justin Shortell, Melbourne, 20 July 2007. Justin is the son of John Shortell, who was the senior master at Brighton High School when Brennan was the principal.
Deborah Towns, interview with Felicity Childs, Glenhuntly, 31 August 2008. The word ‘float’ was also used by Joan Kirner to describe Fay Moore, a formidable headmistress at the Ballarat Girls Technical School, where Kirner first taught in the early 1960s. Deborah Towns, interview with Joan Kirner, 18 January 2007.

Felicity Childs interview.


Deborah Towns, interview with anonymous teacher, Brighton Secondary College, 2 September 2010.

Ibid.

Grimaux, 5.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Victorian Ombudsman’s Report, Melbourne, ‘Miss M Brennan–C/1873’, 1974, 2 (original report is the property of Molly Brennan, Bendigo) (hereafter ‘Ombudsman’s Report, Miss M. Brennan’). The report is in the PROV but is a closed file—see Ombudsman Victoria, Complaint Files (General Jurisdiction), 1974–2002, VPRS, 11347, PROV.

Molly Brennan interview.

Ombudsman’s Report, Miss M. Brennan.

Molly Brennan interview.

Ombudsman’s Report, Miss M. Brennan.

Letter from Molly Brennan to the ombudsman, upon receipt of his report, 30 November 1974. Copy of the letter is the property of Molly Brennan, Bendigo.

Ibid. ‘AS A WOMAN’ was typed in capitals in her letter.


Ibid.


Ibid., 16–17.

Molly Brennan interview.


Collard, 79.

The author telephoned the government girls’ secondary schools to gain this information. Mac.Robertson Girls’ is a selective entry high school and has more applicants than places available.


118 Educationist Barbara Watterston, quoted in Tarica.


120 Deborah Towns, interview with Gwen Bowles, Brighton, 21 November 2010.

121 Molly Brennan interview.

122 Ibid.