

SUBMISSION TO
THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
INQUIRY INTO

**THE
EDUCATION
OF BOYS**

NEW SOUTH WALES
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY
INTO BOYS EDUCATION**

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The NSW Department of Education and Training welcomes this parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys. It is appropriate and timely for the Commonwealth to take a leadership role in this issue of national significance. The focus of the inquiry on the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys signifies the complexity of the issues facing schools and other educational institutions with regard to gender.

The national debate about boys educational achievement needs to move on from notions of competing interests between boys and girls to a more sophisticated conceptual framework for addressing the complexities facing education systems around Australia.

This submission highlights the ways in which boys' education and gender cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from the general processes of schooling and other social circumstances.

The broader policy debate

The gap between boys' and girls' educational outcomes has been a key aspect of national educational debate in Australia for some thirty years. There has also been considerable popular and scholarly debate, which has had a significant influence on national education policy.

In the mid 1980s the Commonwealth began to take a leading role in establishing national education policy direction in this area, first by developing national policy directions for girls in education and then later, for boys in the context of a broader notion of gender equity.

In recent years there has been a loss of national momentum to address the ongoing and changing nature of gender issues for girls and boys in educational achievement. It is in this context that a national policy response must now be developed.

Achievement of boys and girls in NSW

The broad national and international trends of under-achievement of boys in literacy in the early and middle years of schooling over the last decade are evident in New South Wales. The similar pattern of educational achievement of boys across national and international boundaries, and in educational systems that are different in fundamental ways, suggests that there is more behind the apparent under-achievement of many boys than can be explained by what happens in schools alone.

The NSW data reveals a complex range of factors associated with educational achievement. The achievement patterns for boys and girls in the early and middle years are also reflected in the post-compulsory years. As with outcomes in the early and middle years, these factors vary on the basis of girls' and boys' Aboriginality, socio-economic status and other socio-cultural variables.

The only way to understand the impact of gender on educational achievement is through its interaction with other socio-cultural factors such as Aboriginality, socio-economic status, ethnicity and language background, and geographic location. Among the most significant factors affecting the educational outcomes of boys and girls are the social and economic resources available to them through their homes, communities and schools.

The significance of the differential in achievement between boys and girls at school, can only be understood by considering how educational achievement patterns impact on boys and girls as they move into further education, training and the labour market.

Despite the significant improvements in educational achievement among girls and young women generally, and the persisting lower performance of boys and young men in literacy and English, the post school outcomes of young men and women are far less predictable on the basis of past schooling achievement. Not all young men and women have enjoyed the successes of the group as a whole.

Causes and causal relationships

Neither Australian nor international research has been able to conclusively establish causes for the much-studied trend or why educational achievements have diverged around the developed world since the early 1990s. Identifying the causes behind the differing participation and performance of boys and girls remains an issue that needs attention across education systems. The influence of gender in schools and classrooms is not always easily recognised or addressed and causes not easily ascribed.

Nonetheless, schooling is a key socialising agency with the potential to shape both individual and broad social outcomes. As such, schooling processes need to address the extent to which they sustain gender bias through the ways in

which particular forms of masculinity are recognised, promoted and practised in the life of the school.

The NSW approach to gender equity

The public education system of New South Wales has promoted improved practice at system, school and individual teacher levels with a robust gender equity policy framework which has resulted in substantial improvements for both boys and girls.

There are, however, major obstacles remaining to achieving gender equity. What is emerging is that addressing gender issues in education takes commitment over time.

Effective support to achieve change

It is not possible or appropriate to prescribe processes to achieve improvements in boys' schooling in some circumstances. The inter-relationship of gender issues in schools and gender as a broader social issue means that effectiveness in school based programs to improve boys' educational outcomes cannot be marginal, additional or independent of mainstream processes.

Effective change in an area such as gender education must focus on influencing mainstream and everyday practice in schools and classrooms. This poses considerable challenges for governments and educational systems to foster and support the type of change that can and should be achieved in boys' education.

As an issue of national significance, the Commonwealth has an obligation to assist systems and schools to improve the already substantial efforts to achieve improvement in gender equity. Accordingly, the NSW Department of Education and Training believes that it is both appropriate and timely for the Commonwealth to re-assess the national policy context for understanding gender as an issue of national significance.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the House of Representatives Standing Committee recommend to the Parliament that:

- the Commonwealth take a leadership role and work with States and Territories to build a sophisticated understanding of the current impact of gender on educational achievement as we move into the 21st century;
- as part of this leadership role the Commonwealth work collaboratively with states and territories to reach a national consensus on the definition and scope of the issue so that all levels of government, educators and educational systems are working in a constructive way to improve the educational achievement and post-school outcomes of all students; and

- any future Commonwealth funding commitments be made in the context of agreed national processes for reporting and accountability (eg through MCEETYA).

1 Introduction

A Parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys is timely, as the issue is one of national significance. A national leadership role by the Commonwealth on boys' education issues is appropriate. The focus of the inquiry on the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys signifies the complexity of the issues facing schools and other educational institutions with regard to gender.

The national debate about boys' educational achievement needs to be put into context and needs to move on from notions of competing interests between boys and girls to a more sophisticated conceptual framework for addressing the complexities facing education systems around Australia.

The widening gap between the academic performance of boys and girls, particularly in literacy in the early years of schooling, is a trend that has been extensively documented throughout the OECD¹. The pattern of educational outcomes for boys and girls in NSW reflects these national and international trends.

Despite significant improvements in educational achievement among girls and young women generally and the persisting lower performance of boys and young men particularly in English literacy, the post school outcomes of young men and women are far less predictable on the basis of past schooling achievement. Not all young men and women have enjoyed the successes of the group as a whole.

The data, most of the literature and the experience of the NSW Department of Education and Training indicate that the differential in achievement between some groups of boys and girls cannot be explained solely by what happens in schools alone or by factors that are intrinsic to each individual's sex.

There is a complex and dynamic interplay between factors external to schooling, and the curriculum and organisation of schooling itself. Factors such as socio-economic status, curriculum and social and personal relations all impact in different ways on gender and on schooling outcomes.

The achievement of boys and girls at school needs to be understood in terms of gender, which is a broader concept than sex:

...gender can be defined as the social arrangements made to deal with sex differences. A complex range of historical and social factors that influence the ways in which girls and women, boys and men experience and express their femininity and masculinity. Current beliefs about feminine and masculine behaviours shape differences in educational and social outcomes for girls and boys.²

Connell argues that with gender 'we are dealing with a complex and powerfully effective domain of social practice...that gender is more than just one

¹ Powner, 1996, Elgqvist-Saltzman, et al. 1998, Arnot, et al. 1999

² New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996, *Girls and Boys at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001*, Sydney, p. 2

structure...it includes power relations, production relations, emotional relations and symbolism'. He suggests that 'gender is embedded in the institutional arrangements through which a school system functions - the gender regime'³. The NSW Department of Education and Training recognises that the educational outcomes of boys and the influence of gender generally are significant issues for schooling in Australia.

It is the objective of all educators to ensure that students' educational outcomes are not unfairly influenced by factors of gender – gender equity.

Effective approaches to gender equity in education can only be addressed by strategies that include mainstream schooling processes, at classroom, whole-school and whole system levels. Targeted initiatives designed to support greater equity can be effective only when equity is understood to be inextricably linked to the structures and procedures which apply in various ways to the system as a whole.

Because these issues cross other boundaries and apply to all types of schooling, whether government or non-government, the Commonwealth needs to work with states and territories to build a sophisticated understanding of the impact of gender on educational achievement.

It is time for the Commonwealth to take a leadership role in order to rescue the debate from one of competing interests. This will help achieve a common understanding of the scope and complexity of the issue in the current social environment so that governments, educational systems, educators and academics are working in a constructive way to improve the educational achievement of all students both in school and beyond, in their post school lives.

2 The broader policy debate

The gap between boys' and girls' educational achievement is also not an issue, which is peculiar to Australia. Similar trends are reported in other OECD countries, including the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and New Zealand⁴. The similarity of this pattern across national and international boundaries, and in educational systems that are different in fundamental ways, suggests that there is more behind the apparent under-achievement of many boys than can be explained by what happens in schools alone.

The difference in educational outcomes of boys and girls has been a key aspect of national educational debate across Australia for some thirty years. It has also featured in both popular and scholarly debate from a range of perspectives. There is a need, therefore, to understand the educational outcomes of boys and the potential for a policy response within the context of the development of this debate. It is an issue, which by its very nature is prone

³ Connell, R.W. 2000, *The Men and the Boys*, Allen Unwin, Sydney p. 18, p. 153

⁴ Powner, 1996, Elqvist-Saltzman, et al. 1998, Arnot. et al. 1999

to political and ideological distortion, and therefore, is an issue which requires sustained national coordination and momentum so that in educational terms it can be addressed constructively.

In the mid 1980s the Commonwealth began to take a leading role in establishing national education policy direction in this area. During the 1980s, the concerns were largely about overcoming obstacles to opportunities for girls and women. These concerns led to policy responses such as *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools*⁵ and within New South Wales, the *Girls' Education Strategy* (1989).

In 1991 a review of the *National Policy* established that it still remained relevant:

*While awareness of the educational needs of girls, for instance, had increased, curriculum reform, and equitable allocation and sharing of resources had been less successfully achieved. The review noted that the experiences of many educators working within equity areas of a "continued sex discrimination which actively operates to exclude women and girls."*⁶

The *National Policy for the Education of Girls 1993-1997*⁷ was released in 1993 and established eight priority areas that are arguably as relevant to the education of boys as they remain to the education of girls:

- examining the construction of gender
- eliminating sex-based harassment
- improving the educational outcomes of girls (students) who benefit least from schooling
- addressing the needs of girls (students) at risk
- reforming the curriculum
- improving teaching practice
- broadening work education
- changing school organisation and management practice.

By the mid 1990s, however, public interest and concern had been directed at the trend for girls to outperform boys in end of school examinations. A study by McCann (1995)⁸ suggested that girls had shown dramatic improvement in relation to boys since 1991 in both traditional and non-traditional subject areas.

Concerns for the education of boys, however, are not new. Willis (1977)⁹, Foster (1984)¹⁰ and Walker (1988)¹¹ are early voices in discussions of 'what

⁵ Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987, *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools*, Canberra

⁶ Women's Employment Education and Training Advisory Group, 1996, *Talking about Gender: Terminology Used in the Education of Girls Policy Area and Implication for Policy Priorities and Programs*, Department of Employment, Education, Training & Youth Affairs, Canberra, p. 3

⁷ Australian Education Council, 1993, *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997*, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton

⁸ McCann, R. 1995, *A Longitudinal Study of Sex Differences at the Higher School Certificate and School Certificate – Trends over the last decade*, Board of Studies New South Wales, Sydney,

⁹ Willis, P. 1977, *Learning to Labour*, Saxon Houses/Gower, London

about the boys?’ These authors suggested that the alienation of some boys from school arose from social class issues or youth culture. Today the differences in achievement between the sexes are popularly attributed by some to girls beating boys.

These concerns, as well as research such as that by Teese et al (1995)¹², Connell (1989),¹³ Cox (1995)¹⁴, brought increasing awareness that strategies previously implemented to bring about broad gender reforms had achieved only limited success for some girls. Girls still faced barriers and discrimination in the curriculum at school. Dominant forms of masculinity continued to sustain untenable levels of sex-based harassment and violence against girls and boys. Real improvements for either sex needed the understanding and cooperation of the other.

It was in the context of this developing awareness that the concept of ‘gender equity’ arose. In 1994 the Ministerial Council for Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) renamed its working group on the education of girls *The National Gender Equity Taskforce* to address the significant emerging issues for boys. In this way, national efforts would be focused on promoting gender reforms that would benefit all boys and girls.

Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools was released in 1996. It provides a framework for promoting gender equity in schools and recognises the ongoing needs of girls in education. It also acknowledges the educational needs of boys in a society that is experiencing reductions in employment opportunities in the primary labour market that had previously favoured males:

*Girls and boys do not use secondary school to the same extent or in the same ways. The fulltime labour market for young people favours boys. Girls are required to make more intensive use of school because their non-school work and training options are more limited.*¹⁵

The research outlined in *Gender and School Education* (1996)¹⁶ makes it clear that more work is still needed to bring all girls success at school and to improve opportunities for girls and women in the workplace. It also demonstrates that achieving such improvements requires the understanding and participation of boys and men.

¹⁰ Foster, V. 1984, *Changing Voices: Females, school and work*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney and 1994, *What about the boys! Implications of the theory/policy/practice nexus for the education of girls and boys*, *Education Links*, no. 48

¹¹ Walker, J. C. 1988, *Lotus and Legends*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney

¹² Teese, R. et al. 1995, *Who Wins at School? Males and Females in Secondary Education*, AGPS, Canberra

¹³ Connell, R. 1989, *Cool Guys, Swats and Wimps: The Interplay of Masculinity and Education*, *Oxford Education Review*, No. 15 (No. 3) pp.291-303

¹⁴ Cox, E. 1995, *Girls and boys and the costs of gendered behaviour*, Proceedings of the Promoting Gender Equity Conference 1995 reproduced in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, MCEETYA Gender Equity Taskforce, ACT Department of Education, Canberra

¹⁵ Teese, R. et al. 1997 “Who Wins at School: which boys, which girls?”, in *Will boys be boys? Boys education in the context of gender reform*, Kenway, J. (ed.) ACSA, Deakin, p. 8

¹⁶ Collins, C. et al. 1996, *Gender and School Education*, AGPS, Canberra

In recent years there seems to have been a loss of national momentum to address the changing nature of gender issues for girls and boys in educational achievement. A more productive national partnership is needed to assist education systems with the task of refining our understanding of the changing dynamic of gender relations and its impact on education; as well as with the development and implementation of initiatives to address these issues at both system and national levels.

The debate is certainly alive amongst teachers and academics. Teachers are engaging in the latest research on the role of gender in education. At a recent national conference it was suggested that not all boys are doing badly and not all girls are doing really well. An article in a teachers' union journal, argued that the most significant question posed at the conference was "Which Boys, Under What Circumstances and Compared to Whom?" The authors suggested that it is only by addressing these questions that this important educational debate will proceed and 'expose the various agendas of those propagating the current boys education crisis'. They argued that conferences such as these are essential if the gap between theory and classroom practice is to be addressed coherently.¹⁷

National leadership is needed to reinvigorate a national commitment to gender equity in schooling. It is time to re-assess the national policy environment to establish, describe and support gender as an issue of national significance in education and training as we head into the 21st Century.

3 Achievement of boys and girls in NSW

The broad national and international trends of under-achievement of boys in literacy in the early and middle years of schooling over the last decade are evident in New South Wales. While gender is an important and persistent factor in educational achievement it is not as large as other factors when analysed independently.

The only way to understand the impact of gender on educational achievement is through its interaction with other socio-cultural factors such as Aboriginality, socio-economic status, ethnicity and language background and geographic location. Indeed, it can be argued that among the most significant factors affecting the educational outcomes of boys and girls are the social and economic resources available to them through their homes, communities and schools.

¹⁷ Martin, P. & Rosicky, R. 2000, reporting on the *Cracking the Code* Conference hosted by the South Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training in "Gender, Literacy and Disadvantage" in *Education*, NSW Teachers Federation, 16 October, p. 6

3.1 Literacy and numeracy achievement in the early and middle years of schooling

The differences in literacy achievement between boys and girls have been well documented¹⁸. Girls have generally outperformed boys in literacy tests. Many boys have experienced difficulty in reading, writing and language.

A closer examination of the NSW data reveals a complex range of factors associated with educational achievement. When each factor influencing educational achievement is considered the data appear to indicate that there are more significant gaps between the performance of all students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and low socio-economic backgrounds than between boys and girls as a whole.

For the purposes of this submission a range of literacy data has been analysed by gender and by isolating the key variables of Aboriginality, socio-economic status, geographic location and non-English speaking background with a view to considering their relative influence.¹⁹ The results show that:

- lower literacy achievement among boys as a whole is persisting, although the percentage of students in the lowest achievement level has been decreasing for both boys and girls;
- Aboriginality has the greatest effect on achievement when considered on its own, far above that for all students, and within this group, the performance of boys is lower than that for girls indicating that they are more at-risk of lower educational achievement than all other students;
- low socio-economic status²⁰ is also a significant factor in literacy achievement, where the differences between low socio-economic status students and all other students, are of a slightly greater magnitude than the differences between all boys and all girls;
- gender has less of an effect on literacy achievement than Aboriginality or socio-economic status, but more of an effect than geographic location; and
- living in a rural or remote location²¹ has a smaller effect on literacy achievement of all the factors considered. There is a slightly greater difference in performance of boys and girls in rural and remote areas than the gender pattern for all students.

This analysis is not intended to indicate a definitive hierarchy of importance of variables influencing educational achievement or that these factors can be constructively considered in isolation from each other in most circumstances.

The listing of these factors and their apparent relationship with educational achievement is only intended to provide a general overview of the range of issues which can operate through schooling to affect student opportunities and the general apparent relative influence of gender.

¹⁸ Cf. Authors such as Powner, 1996, Elgqvist-Saltzman et al. 1998, Arnot, et al. 1999

¹⁹ See Appendix 1, Tables 1.1-1.40).

²⁰ Low socio-economic status is defined using the NSW *Disadvantaged Schools Program* index.

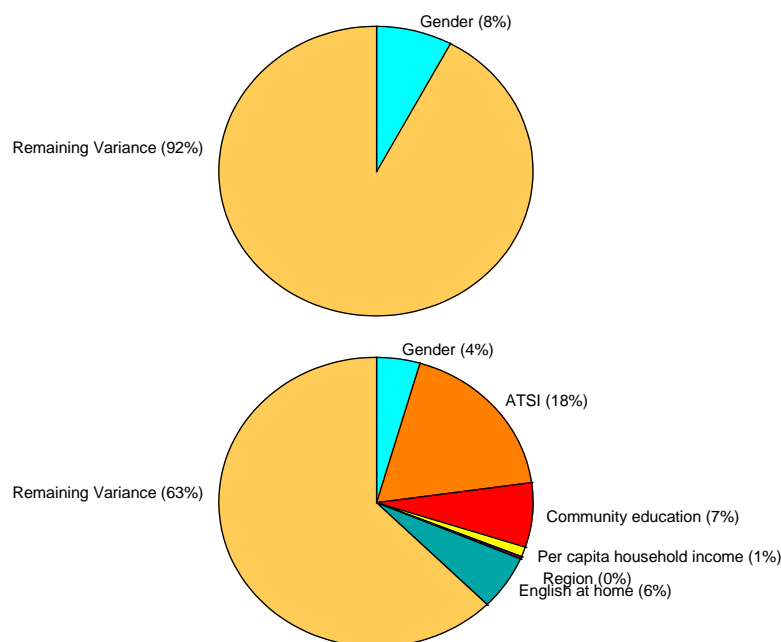
²¹ Rurality and Remoteness is defined by using the Country Areas Program index.

The complexity of the relationship between gender and educational achievement begins to emerge when considering the degree to which these various socio-cultural factors intersect with gender.

The data analysed above provide descriptive information about performance gaps but they are limited in determining possible interactions among the variables. What must also be considered is the variation in performance and how much of that variation (as measured by *variance*²²) might be attributed to gender as opposed to other considerations.

The upper pie chart in Figure 1 below shows the amount of variance in Year 7 *English Language and Literacy Test* for 1999, which can be accounted for by gender when it is considered by itself. The lower pie chart in Figure 1 shows the apparent variation associated with gender when other factors are also taken into account in the analysis.

Figure 1 - Year 7 *English Language and Literacy Assessment* for 1999



The analysis demonstrates that when other factors are taken into account, the amount of the variance associated with gender is reduced. In the example above, the variance is reduced by half. This illustrates the extent to which gender outcomes can be disguised as part of the apparent effects of other factors and the way in which the effects of other factors may be expressed through gender.

The extent of the influence of each factor in this analysis is not the key feature, as the introduction of additional factors could change the picture substantially.

²² Variance is a measure used to characterise the dispersion of results amongst a given population.

These relationships are also evident in the earlier years of schooling in *Basic Skills Test* data for Years 3 and 5 and in the *School Certificate* in Year 10²³.

3.2 Achievement in the post-compulsory years of schooling and post-school destinations

The achievement patterns for boys and girls shown in the early and middle years of schooling are also reflected in the post-compulsory years. Generally, girls have a marginal advantage over boys. This varies substantially across subject areas and at different course levels. As with outcomes in the early and middle years, these factors vary again on the basis of girls' and boys' Aboriginality, socio-economic status (SES) and other socio-cultural variables.

Females have higher participation rates in post compulsory schooling at all SES levels with males substantially less likely to complete 12 years of schooling. This is reflected in 1999 *NSW Higher School Certificate* (HSC) awards with 53.2 percent going to females even though males outnumber females in the age cohort.²⁴

At the HSC mathematics achievement is essentially gender neutral. This has been tested across quintile bands of achievement. There is no difference for example in the likelihood of males or females scoring in the bottom 20 percent. Comparison on a SES dimension produced similar outcomes. Average Science results at the HSC are skewed slightly in favour of females and this is also apparent in the top 20 or 40 percent of achievement. Males are substantially more likely to be in the bottom 20 percent of achievement.

As reported by McGaw²⁵, English is the major subject area where average female and male outcomes at the HSC diverge. Males are twice as likely as females to be in the bottom quartile of English achievement in the HSC and almost half as likely to be in the top quartile. In other learning areas, SES seems to be a more significant factor than gender in explaining differences in outcomes. Within the English learning area, gender appears to be more significant than SES.

What is not clear from the analysis is whether gender is manifesting itself in differing ways through the various stages of schooling or how these effects change over time. A comprehensive longitudinal analysis of trends would be necessary to shed further light on this complex issue.

²³ See Appendix 2 where data from the 1999 *School Certificate* for government school students have been analysed according to gender and a similar range of socio-cultural variables as for the early and middle years data. Tables 2.1 – 2.6 show the percentage of females and males by achievement level and by Aboriginality, non-English speaking background, socio-economic status and geographic location.

²⁴ The *NSW Higher School Certificate* data presented in this section is from NSW Board of Studies and NSW Department of Education and Training.

²⁵ McGaw, B. 1996, *Their Future: Options for Reform of the Higher School Certificate*, DTEC, Sydney, and 1997, *Shaping Their Future: Recommendations for Reform of the Higher School Certificate*, DTEC, Sydney

Notwithstanding this, in order to begin to understand the significance of the differential in achievement between boys and girls at school, it is important to understand how educational achievement patterns manifest themselves for boys and girls as they move into further education, training and the labour market. An overview of the participation of young men and women over the last 5-6 years in apprenticeships and traineeships, in TAFE and university and across occupational areas is presented in Appendix 3.

Generally, there has been a continuing improvement in participation of young women across the range and level of post-school destinations, particularly in the traditionally male areas of vocational education and training and in the traditionally male dominated high prestige university courses such as law and medicine.

Experience in terms of labour market outcomes has been uneven. Pay equity is still a major issue for young women as they move into the labour-force, compared to their male counterparts. The trends in pay equity for women have also been documented elsewhere by authoritative scholars as an important contextual consideration in the overall debate about the relative achievement of boys and girls and men and women as they move from school to the workforce²⁶.

Comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analyses such as from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum looking at the developments in education and training and labour market outcomes nationally over the 1990's for 15-24 year olds has highlighted another dimension to the issue²⁷. Despite the gains for particular groups of girls (and boys) over the period, there still remains a significant group of young people marginalised from valued and recognised pathways to education, training and employment. Within this, some females are substantially disadvantaged.

The research shows that school-leaving age has an influence on marginalisation from the workforce and that females are 20 percent more likely to be in marginal activity²⁸ than boys are if leaving school early²⁹.

Among the 20-24 year old age group the research shows that the labour market dynamic of the 1990s has had highly uneven consequences for different parts of the population³⁰. Young women are markedly disadvantaged

²⁶ Connell, R. W. 2000, *The Men and The Boys*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney

²⁷ Refer here to Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1998, *Australia's Youth: reality and risk: a National Perspective on the Developments that have affected 15-19 year olds during the 1990's*, DSF, Sydney and 1999, *Australia's Young Adults: The Deepening Divide*, DSF, Sydney.

²⁸ Marginal activity is defined in the study as those young people who are neither in education, training (studying a recognised qualification) or in full-time work (ibid. p 106).

²⁹ Ibid. pg. 110, See Table 5.

³⁰ In New South Wales 18.1% of young adults are unemployed or employed part-time (10.3%) and not in education, 9.4% are not in the labour force and not in education. That is, 27.5% of young adults in New South Wales face continuing disadvantage in the labour market. There are marked differences between males and females with a significantly higher proportion of young women who are not in the labour force. This difference is consistent with the national data.

compared with young men and appear to have less scope to assert themselves in terms of realising sustainable economic independence³¹.

Despite the significant improvements in educational achievement among girls and young women generally and the persisting lower performance of boys and young men in literacy and English, the post school outcomes of young men and women are far less predictable on the basis of schooling achievement. Not all young men and women have enjoyed the successes of the group as a whole.

This illustrates the multi-dimensional complexity of the impact of gender on educational achievement and post-school destinations. It also reinforces the contention in this submission that the impact of gender on educational achievement must be considered in the broader context of other socio-cultural variables which operate in potent ways both inside and outside educational institutions.

4 Causes and causal relationships

Neither Australian nor international research has been able to conclusively establish causes for the divergence of educational achievements around the developed world since the early 1990s. This void has allowed numerous unsupported notions, theories and hypothesis to gain currency.

Nationally, media and public attention has continued to narrowly focus on gaps in the average performance of girls as a group and boys as a group. The release of the results of national literacy benchmarks³² and end of secondary schooling examinations such as the *NSW Higher School Certificate*, for example, guarantees an annual rejuvenation of the “girls versus boys” debate.

While gaps between the performances of boys and girls are a concern, NSW data also demonstrate gaps between the performance of all students and Indigenous students and between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds. Those gaps are also a concern and require action in schools and by education authorities.

Identifying the causes behind the differing participation and performance of boys and girls still remains an issue that needs attention across education systems.

Writers such as West, Browne & Fletcher, Buckingham, Biddulph and Millman have suggested a number of causes for the difficulties faced by some boys at school and in life. These include biological factors such as hormone

³¹ Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 1999, *Australia's Young Adults: The Deepening Divide*, DSF, Sydney

³² Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, “Year 3 Reading National Benchmark Results Table 1 – Appendix 4”, *1999 Annual National Report*, Melbourne

(testosterone) levels, cognitive maturation and brain-side dominance³³ and social causes such as higher divorce rates, single parent families³⁴ and the need for boys to find role models.

Connell suggests that an examination of the evidence for biological causes demonstrates that the claims are not credible. Cross-cultural studies of masculinities (eg Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994) he claims reveal a diversity that is impossible to reconcile with a biologically fixed master pattern.³⁵

West, Browne and Fletcher, Bly and Millman, have also suggested other social causes for the difficulties faced by some boys in life and at school. Confusion among males about their place in the contemporary world the need to find acceptable, they argue, are affecting their educational performance.³⁶

Influential writers such as American, Hoff-Sommers³⁷ have suggested that feminism has influenced teaching and learning in schools to such an extent that it has severely disadvantaged boys. Similarly in Australia, some commentators have argued that the school system is failing to pay due attention to boys' developmental capacities³⁸. This has led to calls for males to be recruited to teaching and for 'male' pedagogies to be developed.

American writer, Nicholas Lemann³⁹ has observed that these notions are often expressions of a populist ideological mission. He comments on two warring camps in the boys debate in America, (whom he terms the "Red Team" and the "Blue Team" according to their positions on feminism):

The Red Team sees boys as being oppressed by traditional notions of masculinity, and yearning to break free. The Blue Team thinks those traditional notions are just fine but need to be shored up because of the damage done by a generation of feminist attack...there is an odd unity of purpose...both of them want to use boys as experimental subjects in a broader effort to remake gender relations [they] share an ironclad, deeply worried view of boys, and a desire to send adults with the proper views into boy-space to coax them along in the project of becoming their true selves. One imagines that behind each of them a great army of the onward-marching adult faithful prepared to enter this latest engagement in the gender wars.

³³ Biddulph, S. 1995, introduction to *Boys in Schools*, Browne, R. & Fletcher, R. (Ed's) Finch, Sydney

³⁴ Buckingham, J. 1999, *The Puzzle of Boys' Educational Decline: A Review of the Evidence*, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney

³⁵ Connell, R. W. 1997, *Arms and the Man: Using the research on masculinity to understand violence and promote peace in the contemporary world*, Paper for UNESCO Meeting on Male Roles and Masculinities, Oslo, UNESCO, p. 2

³⁶ Browne, R. & Fletcher, R. (Ed's) 1995, *Boys in Schools: Addressing the Real Issues – Behaviour, Values and Relationships*, Finch Publishing, Sydney; Millman, D. 1995, *Peaceful Warriors*, Newman, Chicago; West, P. 1995, *Giving Boys a Ray of Hope: Masculinity and Education*, Discussion Paper for the Gender Equity Taskforce, Sydney.

³⁷ Hoff-Sommers, C. 2000, *The War Against Boys: How misguided feminism is harming our young men*, Simon and Schuster, New York

³⁸ Arndt, B. 2000 "Attention Boys", *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 28, p35.

³⁹ Lemann, N. 2000 "The Battle over Boys – Will Feminists or their Foes win the Teenage Soul?" in *The New Yorker*, 10 July 10, p. 79, p. 83

The premise underlying many commentaries is that there has been an ‘over-correction’ of school approaches in favour of girls and to the detriment of boys education. It may be the case that some aspects of schooling appear, on face value or on anecdotal evidence, to be more in tune with the interests and perspectives of girls than of boys.

However, there is no stable pattern of boys’ and girls’ behaviours that align with more or less successful schooling. There is also no clear evidence that there are any particular approaches and emphases in school and classroom practice that are of more or less benefit to either girls or boys. In different circumstances both girls and boys respond to a range of pedagogical approaches with no apparent pattern of distinction between them on the basis of gender.

Moreover, there is no reason to believe that responding to existing patterns of male and female behaviours and re-enforcing them will in the long term be in the interests of boys’ educational outcomes. It is just as easy to make the case that boys’ educational outcomes are due to the unsuitability of some traditional male behaviour to the contemporary demands of work and learning.

4.1 Gender bias in schools can disrupt learning

Whilst these populist notions espoused by a number of academics and social commentators need to be treated with caution, it is clear, that gender bias in schools is a real issue. In *Gender in School Education* (1996)⁴⁰, Collins et al provide compelling evidence that gender is a strong influence on the behaviours, participation and performance of boys and girls at school. The research indicates that boys’ under-achievement is part of a broader pattern of behaviours. These include:

- evidence of male students teasing both girls and boys wishing to take non-traditional subjects;
- a significant over-representation of boys in special classes for emotional and behavioural disturbance;
- high levels of sex-based harassment and bullying between and within both sexes, but perpetuated overwhelmingly by boys against girls and other boys (particularly if the harassment is physical);
- scape-goating and harassment of those boys not seen as sufficiently ‘masculine’ by groups of ‘dominant’ boys who are committed to maintaining differences between the sexes in all aspects of behaviour;
- over-representation of boys among those who disrupt classes and ridicule students who work hard or contribute to lessons.

Some boys and girls face constant or intermittent harassment, bullying, homophobia and violence that disrupts their learning and can lead to absenteeism, truancy and depression.

⁴⁰ Collins, C. et al. 1996, *Gender and School Education*, AGPS, Canberra, p. xiv

An argument can be made that some expressions of masculinity in schools are continuing to lead boys to reject the intellectual offerings of school and disrupt the learning of others. These behaviours are associated more readily with some groups of males than with students generally. The dynamic created by behaviours such as those noted by Collins et al has been used to help explain the relative marginalisation of some groups of boys from schooling success.

Neither these aspects of male behaviour, nor the negative effects they can have on schooling outcomes, can be ascribed to the schooling process independently. Further, many aspects of masculinity can be argued to improve the learning experiences of males at school and can just as easily be associated with the traditional dominance of some boys in other aspects of school learning. Similarly, these aspects of student behaviour and school and classroom dynamics are not exclusively associated with males⁴¹.

To the extent that these aspects of masculinity in schools help explain the experiences of boys at school, it is necessary to understand the extent and ways in which schools can contain or exacerbate their negative aspects.

The influence of gender in schools and classrooms is not always easily recognised or addressed and causes are not easily ascribed. Nonetheless, schooling is a key socialising agency with the potential to shape both individual and broad social outcomes. In this sense it is necessarily implicated in the social processes which relate to and create gender roles and schooling opportunities.

As such, schooling processes need to address the extent to which they sustain gender bias through the ways in which particular forms of masculinity are recognised, promoted and practiced in the life of the school. These may relate to discipline practices, curriculum offerings, classroom dynamics, sports, peer relations and teacher-student relations.

5 The NSW Department of Education and Training approach to gender equity

Gender and School Education (1996) stated that *attention to gender issues by systems, schools and individual teachers does make a difference to the gender experiences of students in schools*⁴². The public education system of New South Wales has promoted improved practice at each of these levels.

At system level, specific initiatives such as the development and implementation of *Boys and Girls at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001* and *Gender Inclusive Language Statement*⁴³ in the context of broader

⁴¹ Connell, R. W. 2000, *The Men and the Boys*, Allen Unwin, Sydney p. 16

⁴² Collins, C. et al. 1996, *Gender and School Education*, AGPS, Canberra, p. 14

⁴³ *Gender Inclusive language in school communities* (1996), Sydney: DET

anti-discrimination strategies such as the *Anti-racism Policy*⁴⁴ have delivered significant successes for both boys and girls.

At the school level, implementation of the Department's *Boys and Girls at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001* has stimulated many changes in teaching and learning approaches and programs. Many schools have increased their curriculum offerings to provide a broader range of experiences for boys and girls as well as increased opportunities for leadership and community service by students.

Schools have continued efforts to ensure safer school environments and to promote greater critical awareness among staff and students of the impact of gender on their attitudes, decisions and behaviours. The experiences of schools at the forefront of dealing with gender issues reveal that major obstacles remain to achieving gender equity. Despite the successes, reform has still not reached all levels of educational administration, all staff and community members at schools, and all the boys and girls enrolled in the primary and secondary schools of the public system.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has also maintained learning support programs to support these policy initiatives. For example, the Department has expended over \$200 million on the State Literacy Strategy. Although learning support programs provide support to all students who need it, the majority of students receiving such support are male.

There is still much to do to assist boys to overcome obstacles preventing them from matching the participation and success of girls at school, and to assist girls to overcome obstacles preventing them from matching the success of boys beyond school.

Major obstacles to achieving gender equity include:

- the limited understanding of many teachers and staff in schools that their ideas about gender influence their decisions and behaviours as well as their expectations of and interactions with boys and girls;
- limited system and school-based support for sustained effort over a number of years to bringing about gender equity, including leadership at the national level;
- the over-reliance on narrow-focused initiatives to address gender issues that at best have limited short-term impacts; and
- unrealistic expectations that individuals act as ongoing catalysts for change.

What is emerging from primary and secondary schools beginning to have success in promoting change is that, like the State Literacy Strategy, addressing gender issues in education takes commitment over time.

⁴⁴ New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 1992, *Anti-racism policy statement*, Sydney

These schools have moved on from short-term initiatives and the reliance on individuals. They have come to understand that to be successful, initiatives focusing on the particular learning needs of boys or girls must be incorporated within a broader, whole-school agenda that addresses barriers to change within the organisation and operation of the school and its community. Such agenda embed awareness-raising and commitment-gaining initiatives within a framework of sustained activity to expose the impact of gender on boys and girls, as well as on the teaching and learning activities of teachers.

Successful whole-school programs build on awareness to develop understanding. They tackle outdated or limited aspects of school organisation such as: award and discipline systems, timetabling to provide adequate time for quality teaching, broader curriculum options, encouraging all students to participate in leadership and community service activities, support for boys and girls who take up opportunities to cross traditional gender boundaries, and ways of promoting support for reforms from parents.

These schools strongly assert that assisting boys and girls to change their beliefs and attitudes about the impact of gender on their decision making and behaviours also demands that staff and caregivers undergo a similar educative and reflective process. In this way, boys and girls receive a consistent message from staff at school and from their homes.

Approaching the achievement of gender equity in this holistic way, by the whole school community, can bring observable changes to the operation of schools – to what happens in staffrooms, classrooms, the playground, the sporting field and to what happens between students and staff, as well as between students and their male and female peers.

In such a safe and supportive learning environment boys and girls can learn to develop and sustain quality relations with other males and females. They can develop a range of skills other than intimidation and violence to deal with conflict and frustration and they can acquire personal and interpersonal skills that better equip them with the resilience to deal with the personal challenges they may experience at school and in their adult lives.

6 Effective support to achieve change

It is not possible or appropriate to prescribe processes to achieve improvements in boys' schooling in all or most circumstances. The nature of the issue is such that it can only attempt to be addressed effectively through the particular and the every day in the experiences of students, teachers and parents. The inter-relationship of gender issues in schools and gender as a broader social issue means that effectiveness in school based programs to improve boys' educational outcomes cannot be marginal, additional or independent of mainstream processes. Like all equity issues that are largely based on social or relational circumstances, effective change in schools will entail cultural change across school provision generally.

To the extent that aspects of schooling are open to change, the focus point for such change must be schools, as well as the relationship between schools and students' homes. As aspects of masculine culture can imbue every aspect of schooling and learning, through defining and shaping relations between individuals, so these issues will be effectively addressed through the myriad of relationships and circumstances through which learning is achieved and in which gender plays a part.

This raises the question of how governments and educational systems can foster and support the type of change that can and should be achieved in boys' education. The experience of the NSW Department of Education and Training, acquired through the direct provision of educational services and equity initiatives, as described above, is that effective change in an area such as gender education must focus on influencing mainstream and every day practice in schools and classrooms.

The most common approach to governmental initiatives to support change in school education takes the form of supplementary initiatives or program funding. Program activities of this sort are crucial to any school and learning improvement process.

Equity education programs such as gender programs help garner and disseminate effective practice. They also support individuals with a particular professional interest in an area to maximise their knowledge and to ensure that their expertise is applied to the benefit of schools generally. Program approaches help stimulate and force a greater rate of change when a broader tendency to change is already under way.

To be effective, initiatives and programs need to work through local (school and district based) individuals who can apply ideas and use support materials in ways which are meaningful at the local level. Program approaches can be limited in their effectiveness or even counter-productive when they run counter to mainstream processes in school education such as curriculum, classroom based training and development for teachers and perceptions of executive staff or senior officers.

In some circumstances, programs and activities that do not explicitly address issues of gender achieve substantial outcomes in that area. The Commonwealth's Full Service Schools Program is noted by the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs as a case in point ⁴⁵.

As an issue of national significance, the Commonwealth has a right, and perhaps an obligation, to assist systems and schools to improve the already substantial efforts to achieve improvement in gender equity. As a corollary, the Commonwealth also has a right to implement accountability processes for any funds it commits.

⁴⁵ Department of Education, Training and Youth Employment, 2000, *The Education of Boys: Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations*, DETYA, Canberra, p. 35

Accordingly, the NSW Department of Education and Training believes that it is both appropriate and timely for the Commonwealth to re-assess the national policy context for understanding gender as an issue of national significance as we move into the new millennium.

The Commonwealth should provide leadership in achieving a national commitment on the basis of a widening recognition of the complexity of the issue, to help move the debate away from a simplistic notion of competing interests between boys and girls to a more sophisticated understanding, definition and scoping of the issue so that all levels of government, educators and systems are working in a constructive way to improve the achievement of all students.

This submission seeks to highlight the ways in which boys' education and gender cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from the general processes of schooling and other social circumstances. It would therefore be inappropriate to develop generalised models of practice or guidelines for participation in national or whole system approaches to boys' education. These are more likely to be counter-productive and a distraction from the 'every-day' main game of gender relations.

It would also be inappropriate to seek accountability for boys' educational achievement in any way, which assumes that such achievement can be identified and isolated from all other factors. Existing Ministerial Council processes allow for reporting on the relative achievement of boys and girls. This is done within the context of broader reporting against literacy benchmarks. Data on boys' educational achievement at an aggregated system level is best understood in that context.

The NSW Department of Education and Training believes that the application of national approaches should be able to be integrated into current state and territory local and systemic initiatives, any additional resourcing should be made available in this context and not at the expense of, existing Commonwealth initiatives for either boys or girls.

7 Recommendations

It is recommended that the House of Representatives Standing Committee recommend to the Parliament that:

- the Commonwealth take a leadership role and work with States and Territories to build a sophisticated understanding of the current impact of gender on educational achievement as we move into the 21st century;
- as part of this leadership role the Commonwealth work collaboratively with states and territories to reach a national consensus on the definition and scope of the issue so that all levels of government, educators and

educational systems are working in a constructive way to improve the educational achievement and post-school outcomes of all students; and

- any future Commonwealth funding commitments be made in the context of agreed national processes for reporting and accountability (eg through MCEETYA).

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