

# 1

## Introduction

### Why the education of boys?

- 1.1 The fact that boys are generally not achieving as well as girls across the curriculum from early literacy to senior secondary is a growing concern to many parents and teachers. The impacts of under-achievement on the boys themselves and on the broader society are such that the issues must be addressed.
- 1.2 At the first public hearing of this inquiry the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs presented the following powerful evidence of the differentials in the educational achievements of boys and girls:
  - nationally, girls' results in Year 3 and Year 5 Literacy Benchmark tests are up to five percentage points higher than boys';
  - the Year 12 retention rate for girls is between 11 and 12 percentage points higher than it is for boys;
  - girls' average levels of achievement in a majority of subjects assessed at senior secondary level are higher and the gap in the total has been widening, for example the difference between the aggregate NSW Tertiary Entrance Score for girls and boys widened from 0.6 to 19 percentage points between 1981 and 1996; and
  - over 56 per cent of students in higher education are women.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3 The difficulty experienced by some students, particularly boys, in early literacy requires attention as it can impact adversely on the rest of their schooling. Further, the apparent decline in boys' relative performance at secondary level requires investigation and explanation, especially as the

---

<sup>1</sup> see *Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 1-17, and *Submission Nos. 117 and 117.2*.

gap in achievement between boys and girls appears to have widened significantly in the last 10 to 20 years.

- 1.4 Another concern is the growing trend for boys to disengage from learning, misbehave or truant. Explanations variously offered include the absence of fathers, the lack of male teachers, inappropriate curricula and teaching strategies, the feminisation of curricula and assessment systems, the declining status of men and the prevalence of negative, violent or hyper-masculine stereotypes in the media.
- 1.5 The costs of under-achievement are substantial. The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling has estimated that the lifetime cost to the country of each early school leaver is \$74,000. Half of this amount is a direct monetary cost borne by the individual and government and the remaining half is a social cost borne by the individual, government and the community.<sup>2</sup>
- 1.6 While public discussion has raised awareness and concern it has frequently done little to analyse, and inform the public about, the complexities underlying the issues. The quality of the educational program is central but there is undeniable evidence that gender is a factor in education. It interacts in complex ways with other social factors such as race, ethnicity, locality and aspects of socio-economic status to influence the educational success of children, be they boys or girls.
- 1.7 Aspects of the public discussion have at times pitched boys' education in competition with girls' education suggesting that there has been enough focus on girls and now it is the boys' turn. This is simplistic and misleading and detracts from an analysis of the real issues. It is the role of schools to help all children achieve their potential. Efforts to raise the achievement of boys can be made without threatening the gains made by girls in recent years.
- 1.8 The Committee has concluded that the focus of the current approach embodied in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* is too narrow and recommends that it be recast to provide for separate, but complementary, education strategies for boys and girls. The way forward for both boys and girls is to identify their joint and separate educational needs and to implement a policy framework and positive strategies to address those needs, focussing on positive student/teacher relationships, teacher training, relevant high quality educational programs and effective teaching.

---

2 National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, *The Cost to Australia of Early School-Leaving*, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, October 1999, p. 1.

## The terms of reference

- 1.9 In the terms of reference for the inquiry into the education of boys the Committee was specifically asked to inquire and report on:
- the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling; and
  - the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.
- 1.10 While the early to middle years of schooling are covered comprehensively, as required by the terms of reference, this report also looks beyond these years at school. Much of the public debate and concern about the education of boys takes place around published measures of educational attainment at Year 12, such as the New South Wales Higher School Certificate or the Victorian Certificate of Education. Other measures of social and economic success beyond school, such as rates of imprisonment, unemployment, labour force and tertiary education participation rates and income, have also featured prominently in the debate and been raised in evidence to the inquiry. This is understandable as the social, cultural and educational factors affecting boys in the early and middle years of schooling influence their outcomes beyond those years.

## The structure of the report

- 1.11 First of all it is necessary to review carefully a range of school and post-school outcomes to establish whether the evidence on boys' and girls' educational attainments supports claims about boys' under-achievement. A number of key indicators are considered in Chapter 2. The evidence does not support the notion that the educational needs of boys and girls are in competition such that measures must be taken to prevent either sex enjoying an educational advantage. However, it does clearly point to areas of concern with boys' education. The needs of boys and girls can and must be addressed simultaneously and education must focus on achieving the best possible outcomes for all students.
- 1.12 Education does not occur in isolation from the wider community and what happens in schools must be looked at in the context of the social and

economic changes that have taken place over recent decades. A range of labour market, social and education policy changes have impacted on the educational experience of boys and girls but appear to have more adversely affected boys. These changes are relevant in considering whether policies and practices in Australian schools are appropriate for both boys and girls. These issues are examined in Chapter 3 and are also presented as important background to the remainder of the report.

- 1.13 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment interact with each other, and other factors, to create the learning environment in each school. The Committee believes that teachers and school leaders are pivotal in shaping positive learning environments out of that interaction of factors but that, above all, it is good teaching that motivates and engages all students. Being aware of learning differences and adapting practices to meet the common and different needs of girls and boys is essential to helping all students reach their potential. This issue is considered in Chapter 4 together with some examples of effective practice.
- 1.14 The Committee is convinced by the substantial body of evidence indicating that literacy and numeracy, and success in early literacy in particular, are crucial to success at school and in later life and learning. Boys are generally not performing as well as girls at literacy tasks and this has important implications for the rest of their schooling. Some of the reasons for this gender performance differential are considered in Chapter 5 along with potential interventions. Again, the evidence does not support the notion that boys' needs and girls' needs are in competition. The Committee has recommended interventions aimed at lifting the achievement of all students and simultaneously reducing the gap between boys and girls and between high and low achievers.
- 1.15 Chapter 6 considers a range of other issues of public concern that were put to the inquiry. These issues include peer and teacher/student relationships, teacher education, school structures, behaviour management, men in teaching and the importance of male role models. The Committee believes many of these factors are of central importance to students, teachers and parents but their significance has been understated by education departments, some academics and education unions as they have sought to protect the current gender equity policy framework. The Committee also believes it is time to consider whether a gap between rhetoric and practice in education is partially responsible for the alienation of some boys and whether teachers are adequately supported to create conditions where good teacher/student relationships flourish.

---

## The aims of the report

- 1.16 The degree of public concern about boys' education issues, and the welfare of all boys and girls, demands a dispassionate examination of the facts. This report attempts to do that from the perspective that Australia should provide the best education possible for all children irrespective of their sex or social background. The Committee hopes that the report will lead to a better public understanding of the issues, a commitment to further research where that is needed and a positive response by Australian governments to its recommendations.
- 1.17 The Committee has made several important recommendations in this report that require the Commonwealth to make a financial contribution. However, the Committee is concerned that extra Commonwealth grants for education should not be offset by the reallocation of State and Territory resources elsewhere. Therefore, the Committee expects that the Commonwealth will ensure that the outcomes are monitored and that appropriate conditions are attached to Commonwealth funding to ensure that the States and Territories do not undermine, but actively support, the Commonwealth's commitment.