

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS - SUBMISSION BY THE PUBLIC POLICY ASSESSMENT SOCIETY INC.

The poor performance of boys is a matter of great concern, particularly in view of the fact that the deliberate policies of successive Commonwealth, State and Territorial governments have, in the Society's submission, been in large measure responsible.

The gross gender inequity which is endemic in Australian secondary education requires urgent attention. The first step must be for the federal consultative structures to recognise the major role they have played in helping to promote gender inequity over the past decade. Although during this period secondary educational outcomes for girls have generally been far superior to those for boys, federal education structures have throughout this period, perversely, insisted on treating girls in secondary schools as disadvantaged. Under the influence of radical feminist activists who have gained great influence within the secondary education sector, policy was developed in accordance with a special *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools*, and State and Territory education departments were encouraged by the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97* to adopt a frankly inequitable approach.

Although secondary education outcomes for boys are in a parlous state and continuing to deteriorate, official policy documents promulgated nationally still call for further emphasis on the interests of girls ahead of those of boys. I refer for example to the policy document *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, published in 1997 by the former Gender Equity Taskforce of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. Note that the first page of the Introduction carries the statement: "It is important that the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97* is read as a companion document to this Framework."

It is not immediately obvious why the interests of girls continue to receive emphasis over those of boys in secondary education, when for many years data have consistently demonstrated that boys are the disadvantaged group. A clue to the answer was given in a newspaper article last year (*The Weekend Australian*, 9-10 January 1999, page 5), headed "Girls win honours, boys wear dunce cap":

But senior academic at the University of Technology, Sydney's humanities and social science faculty, Eva Cox, said there was little cause for concern because high scores in Year 12 exams did not correlate with success in later life.

"I am not unduly worried about the results of the HSC (NSW Higher Schools Certificate) because they are not good predictors of whether we do well in the jobs market", she said.

This shows how feminist theory views education: as an area in which the existing advantage of girls can be progressively enhanced, in the hope that girls may thereby be compensated for a perceived disadvantage in some other sphere of life. The same attitude was exhibited by the then chairwoman of the National Advisory Committee

for the Education of Girls, Ms C Vardon, in 1994. Asked about the fact that the education of girls received special attention although it was the boys who were disadvantaged, Ms Vardon was reported (*The Weekend Australian*, 19-20 February 1994) as saying:

I don't want the issue of education of girls diluted in any way by a return to "Oh my God, we feel terribly guilty about paying all this attention to girls. We'd better do something for boys". That's what women have always done. We've been looking after boys and men all our lives and that's why men dominate in the end.

Clearly, Ms Vardon's attitude was: Women have always had it rough, so we're going to give more and more to girls in the education sphere, even though by all measurements of equity they sailed past boys years ago.

For presentational reasons, the National Advisory Committee for the Education of Girls was at some stage changed to the Gender Equity Taskforce, but everything else about it seems to have remained the same. Ms Vardon was still chairwoman of the Taskforce when she wrote the *Foreword* to the policy document cited above (*Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*). We understand that the Gender Equity Taskforce was disbanded in 1998 because it could not be induced to give genuine consideration to disadvantage on the part of boys. But its *Framework* document has never been formally repudiated by governments, and is likely to be regarded still in many secondary schools as the current statement of policy on gender equity. Attached is some more detailed criticism of the document, contributed to the Society by one of our members.

In summary, then, a factor which has played an important role in impairing the education of boys – from the social, cultural, and academic viewpoints – has been the extremely damaging effect on boys of discriminatory national policy relating to gender issues in secondary education. We believe the major active harm has been done in the school years 7 to 10, when adolescent boys are developing their self image and trying to identify their place in society. As the material we have presented shows, the task of formulating relevant policy was allowed to fall into the hands of feminist activists, with disastrous results. A vigorous remedial program is now required, commencing with the frank and explicit repudiation of previous policy.

Criticism of the policy document *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*

PART A – Framework for action on gender equity in schooling

Introduction

In the first paragraph, it is stated that the Gender Equity Taskforce "is responsible for providing advice which will enable improved education outcomes for girls and boys in Australian schools". This aim is not bad, but is not particularly appropriate for an equity taskforce, which might be expected to focus on how to improve outcomes in the group with the poorer outcomes (boys). However, the feminist orientation of the taskforce is revealed later in the introduction, where secondary education outcomes are confused with outcomes of post-school activities, the objective presumably being that girls should continue to be viewed as the disadvantaged sex in secondary schools, even after a long history of superior education outcomes. The passage

Despite the fact that girls now stay longer at school than boys, they are not deriving the same post-school benefits from schooling. There are also significant differences between the rewards of schooling experienced by different groups of girls and different groups of boys.

shows the enthusiasm of radical feminists to use secondary education as a means to compensate for the disadvantage which they expect females will experience later in life. This is not equitable education; it is use of the secondary education system as a handicap system for post-school life.

Principles for action

The 10 "principles for action" listed are generally unexceptionable. I suspect senior policymakers checked only these "principles" and didn't read the rest of the policy document.

Strategic directions

In the section entitled "Violence and school culture", the primary outcome objective is given as "Gendered violence and sex-based harassment will be eliminated from schools." This indicates a hopelessly biased approach. Violence and harassment are particular problems for boys, affecting girls to a far lesser extent. The authors sought to make them "girls' problems", so as to maintain the perception that girls are victims who require special measures. Their strategy is simple: confine discussion to "gendered violence", which (although it is a relatively minor subset of violence) affects girls more than boys.

PART B – Perspectives on gender equity in schooling

Curriculum, teaching and learning

Both girls and boys should be aware that, in Australia, women and girls are still disadvantaged in terms of economics, employment, and political decision making and are less safe in their homes, and that men and boys are more likely to die through accident, suicide, murder, to be jailed and to lead emotionally isolated and restricted lives.

Again, this quotation at the beginning of the chapter implies that school is to be used to give a boost to the sex which some perceive as experiencing disadvantage later in life. But the quoted assertion (which is from an obscure paper not available to me) appears to be false, anyway. On what basis is it claimed that girls are disadvantaged in economics and employment? Studies of youth unemployment suggest that the reverse is in fact the case.

Papers presented at the Promoting Gender Equity conference, February 1995

"Boys and girls and the costs of gendered behaviour"

This paper appears to be little more than an exposition of feminist educational dogma. Its publication in a government policy document – particularly in a document which purports to deal with gender equity – was a grave error.

On the first page, the author, Ms Eva Cox, rejects objective data, with the remark:

I am really concerned that we don't get into what I've often defined as 'your statistics against my statistics behind a cathedral at 6.00am'.

She goes on to write

... it strikes me this whole debate is getting into what I call the 'competing victim syndrome'. This is basically about trying to claim that 'I'm worse off than you are, because there are limited resources and if I can prove I'm worse off than you are and *look at my scars*, look at my pain, look at my misery - I can have more of the existing resources than you can'.

This attitude is reminiscent of that exhibited by the then chairwoman of the National Advisory Committee for the Education of Girls, Ms C Vardon, in 1994. Asked about the fact that the education of girls received special attention although it was the boys who were disadvantaged, Ms Vardon was reported (*The Weekend Australian*, 19-20 February 1994) as saying:

I don't want the issue of education of girls diluted in any way by a return to "Oh my God, we feel terribly guilty about paying all this attention to girls. We'd better do something for boys". That's what women have always done. We've been looking after boys and men all our lives and that's why men dominate in the end.

Rejection of the principle that resources should be allocated on the basis of need has become prevalent among radical feminists in recent years, since data became available showing that in important areas such as education and health, males have the greater need. On the next page of her paper, Ms Cox writes

Competing victims is a really dangerous game. I acknowledge women's groups have been doing it and I can do it with the best of you!

Later in her paper, Ms Cox launches a diatribe against men and masculinity - an argumentative tactic which feminists used to call "blaming the victim". (The phrase is used in a later paper in the document,

entitled "Cultural bridges or walkovers? Improving the outcomes for girls who benefit least: A special focus on girls experiencing cultural conflict".) She writes:

Maybe it is time we actually started taking a look at certain attributes of Anglo-Saxon, Western European masculinity (because we must remember that this is the only form that we are really competing with).

Inclusion of this sort of thing in a gender equity policy document - aggressive anti-male rhetoric, in which the writer identifies ("we") with females in general - is disgraceful.

Ms Cox then proceeds to confuse women's employment in senior education administration with the achievement opportunity in access to education:

I wish that some of the power that was attributed to the radical feminists (who are apparently running the system) actually existed, because I tell you what, we wouldn't be in nearly the mess we are in today if we were in control.

In summary, Ms Cox's paper

- denigrates the genuine problems to which boys are particularly subject;
- tries to diminish the credibility of factual material which radical feminists find inconvenient; and
- takes the opportunity to focus on girls as requiring attention.

The whole paper attempts to justify continuing to treat the advantaged group (girls) as if they were the disadvantaged group.

"The costs of masculinity: Placing men's pain in the context of male power"

Written by a doctoral student in sociology, this paper was of little relevance to gender equity in schools. The paper was presumably chosen for inclusion because the author apparently accepted radical feminist ideology. Typical was the following paragraph:

For men who balk at the idea that they are in a position of power, I would ask them to consider this. While individual men may not possess much power, by the mere fact of their gender, the possibility of power exists. It is a fundamental entrance requirement of the elite levels in our culture. Each man, if he decides to play the game by its rules, has at least some chance of making it to the top—he may be barred on the grounds of class or race, but he is not barred by his gender. For every woman, her gender alone makes it considerably more difficult to even get through the door.

"Gender issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls: Exploring issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys"

This paper was a confused jumble. For example, after writing that indigenous girls had requested some separation of the sexes in the class environment, the author noted that this would seem to be supported by Recommendation 31 of the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* which states, in part:

That agencies and organisations providing secondary education for male Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander secondary students: ... adopt school organisational practices (such as separating male and female students for particular subjects or at particular times) which give appropriate respect to the status of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in their communities.

Of course, Recommendation 31 was intended for the benefit of indigenous boys, not indigenous girls! Later, the author writes:

In some groups, it was suggested that there is a growing tendency for white girls to date indigenous boys. Added to the effects of racist and sexist name-calling, this trend appears to be increasing the low self-esteem of some indigenous girls.

A curious remark! No mention of the non-indigenous boys, who they dated, and whether their self-esteem was satisfactory.

"Cultural bridges or walkovers? Improving the outcomes for girls who benefit least: A special focus on girls experiencing cultural conflict"

What about boys experiencing cultural conflict? The last section of the paper is headed "The 'too-hard basket' in the Plan: the education of boys from non-English speaking backgrounds"!

"Assumption, expectation and discrimination: Gender issues for girls with disabilities"

Again, boys seem to have become invisible. And this despite the fact that more boys than girls have disabilities.

"Gendered learning practices: Exploring the costs of hegemonic masculinity for girls and boys in schools"

The author appears to be another man who has accepted radical feminist ideology. He refers to the "advantages and benefits that are accrued to men within the hegemonic institutional structures of the state". His general argument seems to agree with the Vardon-Cox position, which calls for girls to be given a better school education than boys, in the hope that this will help to compensate the girls for hypothetical disadvantages which may be experienced later in life.