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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Reference: Education of boys

TUESDAY, 20 MARCH 2001

ELIZABETH NORTH, SA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Tuesday, 20 March 2001

Members: Mrs Elson *(Chair)*, Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Emerson, Ms Gambaro, Ms Gillard, Mrs May, Mr Ronaldson, Mr Sawford and Mr Wilkie

Members in attendance: Mrs Elson, Ms Gillard, Mr Sawford and Mr Wilkie

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into 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.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 10.42 a.m.

HUDDY, Ms Dinah, Junior Primary Teacher, Broadmeadows Primary School

LINDSTROM, Ms Helen, School Counsellor, Broadmeadows Primary School

McKEOUGH, Ms Sue, Principal, Broadmeadows Primary School

PARIS, Ms Sonia, Junior Primary Teacher, Broadmeadows Primary School

CHAIR—I would like to thank Ms McKeough for her hospitality and agreeing to host the committee's visit to Broadmeadows Primary School today. I would like to also thank everybody else for their hospitality and the morning's presentation at the Broadmeadows Primary School and those who are about to give evidence.

While we are your guests we will try to keep this as informal as possible but I am obliged to remind you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and they warrant the same respect as proceedings in the House. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but if at any stage you wish to give evidence in private, would you please ask and the committee will consider your request.

I would like to invite Sue to make some introductory remarks about the school and the issues you think important to the inquiry before we proceed with questions and answers. We have had a great tour through here this morning and you have shown us some fantastic plans and programs you have in place. We hope that you repeat a lot of them during our discussion and, on the record, give a little history of the school.

Ms McKeough—Thank you. Broadmeadows School is a child-parent centre to year 7 school. We are a school in Elizabeth North. We are involved in and connected to the Peachey Road cluster of schools. The Peachey Road cluster of schools is considered to be one of the most disadvantaged clusters of schools in South Australia. That is largely due to the high percentage of school card, which is assistance for parents on a low income or no income.

We have a high proportion of kids with disabilities and a high rate of transience with kids coming in and out of the school. Certainly within the district and within Playford council, statistics say that kids in our community have a high crime rate, violence at home, a high level of incarceration when they are older and lower access to higher education. However, in saying that we are a disadvantaged school, we are very advantaged in many ways. We are advantaged in that our families want life to be different for their children.

We have very strong relationships with our students. Staff here are merit selected. We are one of the few schools that have control over how we pick our staff. That has been crucial in our ability to have what I would say are exceptional teachers, who want to be here and therefore are high learners as well. They are enthusiastic and committed to professional development, and are involved in projects and innovation, trying out new strategies to see what makes a difference for our kids. We have a strong commitment to collaborative teaching and learning, which would have been evident touring through the classes, with teachers being in pairs and classes being in joint units.

We have, over time, earned a reputation for exploring factors which affect the quality of education for girls and boys. But with boys we have come up with similar sorts of things that were in the report produced by DETE in relation to things like the notion of masculinity, homophobia, the mental health issues associated with some of our students and families, the increase in behavioural issues we have with boys and underachievement in literacy. We have pursued many projects and have been involved in much professional development to look at projects and programs to address this. Again, as I said, many of those were described in the submission that DETE put forward.

CHAIR—Thank you. Would anyone else like to make a contribution to your statement? We will go straight into questions and then we can ask you a few things. I probably know the answer to this but I would like to see it on record: I was very interested in your program of employing your own teachers, which is a little bit unusual in the South Australian system, isn't it?

Ms McKeough—Yes.

CHAIR—Could you tell us a little bit more about that and why you think it is beneficial to be able to do that within a school?

Ms McKeough—Certainly the complexity of teaching in a school such as Broadmeadows is high. There was a situation about eight years ago across Peachey Road schools where, because of the nature of transfer and teachers not having a choice over where they went, we ended up in a situation where many teachers came here not wanting to come and teach in areas such as this, ending up stressed and often on leave. That caused great instability for the children and personal cost to those teachers.

At that point it was decided that a strategy which might address these hard-to-staff schools—now called Peachey Road schools—would be to make them 'open' positions. The advantages are that now contract teachers as well as permanent teachers can apply for a position of one to three or five years. I think the term has extended now. So each year, all Peachey Road schools go through a process where we declare our permanent vacancies through a school choice process. We advertise across the state. We have applications coming in from across the state. We run panels at each school and create a list of recommendations. We also have positions that are not permanent and we can employ contract teachers through a similar process. Contract positions are usually for 12 months or less in duration.

With that process we only had people applying who were prepared to come here and wanted to be here. Those people who were successful were the people who showed their commitment to, I suppose in the first instance, the methodologies we were looking for. In all of our applications we had behaviour management, literacy and social justice as being the criteria by which people needed to apply, so for people to apply they needed to be comfortable learners in that area.

In that process we have, across the Peachey Road schools, an incredibly highly skilled staff across all schools. That is certainly one of the things that has been really evident. In some cases, that has meant a younger staff than probably the average age of teachers in South Australia, but

some of that is because it is open to nonpermanent staff. It has resulted in a high level of teacher expertise.

CHAIR—It is good to see it is successful. What would be the average stay of a teacher since that program was introduced? Has it lengthened the stay of teachers?

Ms McKeough—Yes. Last year we had teachers employed whose contracts came up after six years and some left, some moved. Many of our teachers actually win school choice positions in other schools down the track because we have a reputation for our staff being highly skilled. They are sought after by other schools because their level of ability is high. Because we have only been doing this for seven or eight years, no teacher has been here for a really long time, but I would imagine that the average stay would be between three and eight years, I suspect. I do not have any data to verify that, but that would be my guess.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Ms GILLARD—It has been put to us during the course of this inquiry because we are focusing on boys' education, that particularly in primary schools, as the teaching service has been feminised, boys lack adequate male role models. In terms of your teacher selection, how many teachers that you have here now are male? What view do you take about the balance of male and female teachers when you are recruiting?

Ms McKeough—Currently on our teaching staff out of nine teachers we have one male staff member. It is always healthy to take those considerations into account but, as the principal—and I would speak on behalf of all the principals across Peachey Road—the biggest criteria is having a skilled teacher. The most skilled teacher, or the one that has the attributes that best fit the school at that point in time and best can support the priorities of that school at that time, would win. However, I think it is always useful to have some representation from both sexes. Even in Peachey Road the predominance of applications quite outstandingly would be from women. Historically we are finding in many merit-selection processes that often happens with teachers and schools are dominated by women.

Ms GILLARD—We have also, during the course of the inquiry, heard about behaviour management problems particularly with boys and various strategies for dealing with them. For the record, could you talk about those issues in this school and perhaps give us a perspective on whether you think behaviour management issues are getting worse over time, particularly for boys. One of the things we have to explain is the slippage in boys' educational attainment over time. We are trying to look for factors that have changed over the period.

Ms McKeough—Certainly we could comfortably say that 90 per cent of our time is directed to behaviour management issues concerns boys versus girls. That is a great concern to us and a growing concern to us, particularly as these children get older. As boys approach adolescence there is another range of issues attached to behaviour management. It is an area that we continually review and revise and discuss and implement. It is still an area that we need to continue to review and revise and try new things. It is enormously labour intensive. Helen, as counsellor, would verify, that the proportion of time that goes into behaviour management issues is enormous and keeps both of us going full-time sometimes.

We believe that some of these issues around behaviour management, in part, are a result of kids' disengagement from the curriculum and therefore the strong focus we have on the early years is something we believe in time will change this around. It is interesting to look at our years 3 and 4 now, who seem to be, hopefully, in a better situation. The test will be, as they become adolescent, to what degree their engagement in the early years has led to their better participation as they have become older.

Ms GILLARD—Do you think there has been a change over time in behaviour management issues?

Ms McKeough—This is my second year. I am sure there have been changes. I do not know if I could articulate them. The other staff might be able to talk about that more comprehensively than I. There certainly seem to be periods of things going well and then times when things get quite difficult. I do not know what other staff would say.

Ms Lindstrom—One of the things that I have noticed, Julia, with the children we saw last on our tour around the school, was that—many of the boys in that class were able to really quite explicitly state the sorts of things that made a difference to their relationships and to the ways that they would behave with other boys and with girls—it was quite striking. Those children have come through a system where, from reception onwards, in our earliest classes and even in the CPC, they have been exposed to learning about relationships and values and ways of looking at girls and boys that are not in narrow constraints. I suppose it would be fair to say that we do not have hard data yet. In this state we have just started putting our behaviour management data into a computer system. That will be really useful to give us more concrete ways of measuring this, but anecdotally you can certainly see a difference in those children, in their understanding about girls and boys and so on.

Ms GILLARD—Thank you.

Mr SAWFORD—Sonia and Dinah, why did you come here? How long have you been here? Do you live around the area? Is the school involved in the community?

Ms Huddy—This is my second year here. I have been teaching for 14 years. I have been teaching in totally different circumstances, out in the southern area of Adelaide, Norwood and out that way and places like that. The opportunity came along where I was able to apply for Peachey Road and I felt that it would be a challenge to myself, being in those other areas for so long. I felt that I needed to extend my own challenges and my own ideals so I applied and won the position here. It has been different. I am learning so much more. I have learned more at this school than I have learned in my whole teaching career, just changing my own way of teaching and thinking.

Ms Paris—I have been teaching for about seven or eight years. I have only ever worked out here in Peachey Road. This is my third year. I won permanency. I also had a time when I worked overseas as well. I come to work and it takes me 35 minutes every day, but I chose to come out here and, as a result, I fortunately have permanency. I enjoy the challenges but I also enjoy collaborative teaching. For some people it is not a preferred choice and there is always speculation around as to whether collaboration is the way to go, but from a personal view, I

think it is a very positive thing. You are able to develop the relationships that we focus on a lot here: we focus on values and draw that into our program.

We are also focusing on that questioning you saw me doing with my students. They are at a young age and that is the first step we go to. Last year I had children that were a little older—years 2, 3 and 4. That was the next step. This is where we are heading with them. We are just working around that questioning and getting them thinking and taking that responsibility for their learning.

Mr SAWFORD—Do any of the teachers on the staff here live in the nearby vicinity?

Ms Lindstrom—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—How many?

Ms Lindstrom—I live at Gawler. That is only 15 minutes away. Many of our teachers live close.

Ms Huddy—10 minutes away.

Ms Lindstrom—In the northern area there are many.

Mr SAWFORD—Sue, when we came in this morning and we were conducting the introductions you made mention that with all we do in education there are pluses and minuses, with which we all agree. In collaborative learning, there have to be some negatives. What are some of the negatives?

Ms McKeough—The biggest negative would be if the teacher was not willing or not wanting to engage in collaborative teaching. It is very hard to force people to change their methodology, particularly if they see no value in it. In the first instance that would be the biggest hurdle. I hope that staff here who have been not as convinced, have learned over time and have chosen to work together. For example, one unit last year had the teachers at either end. They may as well have been in separate classrooms and that was fine, but this year they have joined. It was a bit of a surprise, but they think it is marvellous and they just keep talking about it, they are so excited. It has renewed their energy and their belief in what they are doing.

However, there will be times, because we work collaboratively—and much of that is for teacher support—where we do have, I suppose, a level of difficulty. If you were in a single classroom by yourself it would add a degree of complexity in management of an issue. When there are two people working together there is flexibility to manage the issue, or the kid who 'loses it' at some point. There is that sort of usefulness.

We really want to have collaborative relationships between our staff and we really want to teach the children collaborative skills, but that does not mean people do not separate and do their own thing, their own bits and pieces of what they want to do. We would not want to say that is the only methodology that is useful, because I think it depends on the group, the time, the space, the activity or whatever. We leave people to chose those things.

Mr SAWFORD—One of the other observations you would make is that, even though you were talking about values this morning, this is a highly structured school. It is very organised.

Ms McKeough—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—A lot of work has gone into it and there is a lot of teacher effort in the sense of how the rooms are organised, the aids that are around. That does not just arrive.

Ms McKeough—Absolutely.

Mr SAWFORD—It takes a lot of hours.

Ms McKeough—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—So there is a balance there between that. One of the things that has been put to us, not so much by principals and teachers, from whom we have had a great deal of very useful information right around Australia, is that there seems to be an academia that these opposing arguments—not all competition is bad, for example—you push collaboration but you deny competition, the good aspects of competition. You accept qualitative research but you do not accept quantitative research. You accept the nurture arguments but you do not accept the nature arguments. In this school would you say there is a balanced view between all of those views, or do you go one way or the other?

Ms Lindstrom—As we said earlier when we were informally talking here, you use the quantitative data to add to your professional judgments. I mentioned, for example, the student behaviour management stuff, so you can see that most of the students are boys but then you can look at your database to see which boys and ask 'Are they mainly school card boys?' So you always use the two things in conjunction. Julia or Kay was asking about what sort of literacy approaches we use, and I think we would all say that we would use a variety of approaches because there is not any one approach that is going to do for all children.

Certainly what we know now is that if we simply use a whole word approach or if we use what we used in the past—what we call conferencing, where children were just supposed to come to school and be able to construct a story, even though those had not been the home literacies that they were used to—we were really setting them up for failure. We use really a blend of both, for good reasons. That is also why we do, as James noticed in one of our classes, that explicit teaching of relationships, too, because otherwise the children who have had a very different home background to the sort of background that we expect at school cannot catch up and we are really doing them a disservice.

Mr SAWFORD—I put this question back to the teachers. One of the great criticisms of collaborative learning is that it reduces everything in a unit to a uniform thing, a same thing and everyone behaves in the same way, when sometimes the challenges of the future are in fact the differences, the creativity, the spontaneity. How, as teachers, do you balance those sorts of competing demands? Do you deny competition at all in your classroom and only use collaborative styles?

Ms Huddy—No, not at all.

Mr SAWFORD—How do you use competition in a room?

Ms Paris—It is what Helen was saying, we have been doing a lot of work on learning styles so we compensate for that. There are times when we are three separate classrooms and, within those classrooms, we are even smaller if we have some SSO support or whatever. We are very conscious of that and we consciously program according to the different learning styles and the needs. There will be times when we are all together, which is generally in the afternoon. There are times when it is just our class and we provide those opportunities for all children to experience and develop, because our priority is to develop those relationships between girls and girls, boys and boys, and girls and boys. We feel that we are ensuring that we are providing those opportunities.

Mr SAWFORD—Dinah, a lot of people in teacher unions who are representing the teacher unions at these meetings, a lot of people who represent education departments and institutions—and probably 50 per cent of academia—have often put arguments that are not saying what you are saying. They tend to favour one learning style over another.

Ms Huddy—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—It is favouring nurture over nature, it is favouring qualitative research, basing information on, over quantitative.

Ms Huddy—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Everywhere we go in terms of talking to principals and teachers, they are saying the exact opposite, that they use all the varieties. Is that a fair comment to make in terms of the way all of you work at this school?

Ms Huddy—Definitely.

Ms McKeough—Very much so.

Mr SAWFORD—Sue, can I put you on the spot. Why is that? What is going on in our schools is so different to the propaganda that is coming out of education departments, teacher unions—and it is also true of the Independent Education Union when we spoke to them in Victoria who were putting forward the same propaganda and, to a lesser degree, Catholic Ed in Brisbane—yet teachers and principals are sending a completely different message. What is going on?

Ms McKeough—Do you mean about the use of both quantitative and qualitative data?

Mr SAWFORD—Yes.

Ms McKeough—My personal belief is that although we are qualified and trained in our jobs, we are practitioners as well, so we have both sides—we have the theory and the underlying principles that we base our practice on, but we have the reality of the day-to-day work—and that creates a different construction for us in which we need to balance both worlds. Most

teachers are incredibly practical in what they do. They have to always assimilate a theory into practice and then reflect on that theory into practice and it goes in a continuous loop. In fact, that is something as a staff we do as part of our professional development. We reflect on practice always and we question each other. We have actually set up a buddies where people have to engage in reflective questioning, open-ended questioning, in order for us to gain a deeper understanding of our work.

I do not think it is an either/or debate for us, because it is the practice and the theory. In relation to data, some of us who would prefer to keep just qualitative data and some of us would prefer to keep just quantitative data. However, we know that both can be effective for our questioning of our practice from either side. Sometimes we can have a belief around the qualitative data, but do the numbers add up, do they support that? That is our question: does this support what our belief or our theory and vice versa?

Teachers on the whole are very good at combining qualitative and quantitative data and they do not have a particular discipline that stops them being able to merge the two. We still have to have our bottom lines and we have to have something that we measure. I have talked about that before. Do we measure what we value, or value what we measure? We want to measure what we value and we have to keep ourselves honest in that. Sometimes we value what we measure and sometimes as a system we value what we measure, but we are very careful to keep a balance with measuring what we value as well.

Ms Lindstrom—Rod, in relation to what you term 'academia' I do think—

Mr SAWFORD—There are split arguments coming from academia, by the way, as in 50 per cent.

Ms Lindstrom—I am glad to hear you say that because I do not think you could lump all academics into one barrel.

Mr SAWFORD—No, only 50 per cent of them.

Ms Lindstrom—I would also like to say that if we did not have so-called academics who were doing the research and really investigating issues and so on, some of the things that we know about and do in schools would be the poorer for it, really. A lot of really good research has come out about girls and boys from all sorts of people for years now.

Mr SAWFORD—Not a great deal of quantitative research, a lot of qualitative research.

Ms Lindstrom—Possibly, and that might be—

Mr SAWFORD—In fact, one of the criticisms of gender equity programs around Australia has been that you can always trace them back to Dr Carol Gilligan's book *The Different Voice*.

Ms Lindstrom—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—That goes back to the 1980s and yet journalists chased Carol right around the world for the quantitative research that she said the book was based on. Of course there was none. What there was, which has now become public, did not suit her argument and so she did not use it. Taking that sort of line, which a lot of people have taken in academia—we have people come to us with studies of 30 people not even randomly selected, who have then drawn conclusions on that very minute study to influence the education system in this country. I think that is plain stupid. Yet there are people in academia who are doing that and they get plenty of publicity. They love publishing books. What I am saying is there needs to be a balance.

Ms Lindstrom—Yes, that is right.

Mr SAWFORD—And that is really what Sue and the teachers have been telling us.

Ms Lindstrom—That is what I feel, too.

Mr SAWFORD—No, only 50 per cent of academia.

Mr WILKIE—I was really impressed with the relationship training you are doing down there. There has been evidence given that one of the differences between boys and girls in learning styles is that girls can be given a subject, no matter really of the relationship with the teacher—although it is reasonably important—and they can get on and do the task and they will tend to learn, whereas, for the boys content is important, but the relationship they have with the teacher is critical. If they do not get on with the teacher they will not actually do anything. I am just interested in your comments on that. Has that been your experience?

Ms Huddy—I feel that developing good relationships with all students is vital for good learning and that is one of the things we aim to achieve in the beginning, in their early years. We are noticing in our teaching practices here that has made changes with the children, particularly the boys. In our reading program we have smaller groups. You might have seen that in our unit in Sonia and Rachel's class. We do smaller group work and that is to focus on the individual needs of all those children, particularly of boys, in literacies.

Ms Paris—We just feel that if we can develop those skills at a young age then they have those skills, they can take on with them. Throughout their lives they are going to need to develop those skills, those social skills, for their future learning. That is why we emphasise it so much.

Ms Lindstrom—I think also, Kim, for many of the families—not all, but many—in our area it would be true to say that they would have quite narrow views about the ways in which boys would behave and the ways in which girls would behave. There is quite a high level of homophobia in the area and amongst many of the boys at our school. It is really important, we know, for boys' mental health that they do get some understanding about how to build relationships and form relationships. I have a nice little anecdote about that. There was a little boy who was in Sonia's class last year, who has now moved up a class. He was very violent in the first term. He had many 'take homes' because of his violent actions towards other children and towards property. He used to really go on rampages in the classroom. What seems to have been significant for him is the relationship that he was able to form with Sonia and, not only that, but the explicit teaching she did of relationships and gender equity. That boy would have

been one of the boys you saw putting his hand up in that class to talk about relationships and forming relationships—a really big change with him—that illustrates the point.

Ms McKeough—He is the one who said, 'This year I'd like to do more about conflict revolutions.'

Ms Lindstrom—Quite, yes, when asked what he would like to learn in the Student Representative Council.

Mr SAWFORD—He has been well indoctrinated!

Mr WILKIE—There has also been evidence—and there are quite opposing views—that some people believe that children should remain home longer before they come to school and others believe that they should go to preprimary and probably kindergarten so they can build relationships and start to learn before they get to school. What has been your general experience?

Ms McKeough—My personal belief is that children who come to our child parent centre or who have gone to other kindergartens are advantaged when they come to school because they have been put in a new and different environment. It is very different to home, no matter how small a group. Sometimes it is the first time they have needed to share, or the first time they have needed to get on with other people. I think the skills they learn through being in these situations are incredibly important. We really like having our CPC on site and we believe that it is very much in the best interests of those children's early years in our school.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you administer the CPC?

Ms McKeough—I am the oversight manager but the CPC is funded a little bit differently.

Ms Lindstrom—Sue spoke earlier and informally about the little child who did not go to the kindy and then suddenly was thrust into school having never been at any formal learning venue at all and how difficult she is finding it—certainly less difficult than she did. As Sue was saying, that first day or first couple of days she was here—she is in Dinah's class—how difficult it was for her. What a difference it makes to our children when they have had that time in kindy and then the structured transition into classes.

Ms GILLARD—The child parent centre, is the intake into that any kid who wants to come or any family that wants to send their child?

Ms McKeough—Four year olds, yes.

Ms GILLARD—But you are not selecting for disadvantage, as such?

Ms Lindstrom—Only in the sense that Aboriginal children can start at age three.

Ms GILLARD—What percentage are school card holders in this school? You said it was a high percentage.

Ms Lindstrom—About 90 per cent.

Mr WILKIE—With amalgamated classes, I know you have years 1 and 2 and 3 and 4?

Ms Lindstrom—Yes, reception, years 1 and 2.

Mr WILKIE—Then year 5, 6 and 7. How effective do you find that, particularly the years 5, 6 and 7? I have seen years 6 and 7 before, but I have not seen years 5, 6 and 7. How do you find that?

Ms McKeough—This is the first year we have done it. We did it because we believed it was a better option than the alternative of having a year 6 and 7 class dominated by year 7s. We were wanting to make sure that the needs of the year 6s were not overtaken by the needs of the year 7s, particularly when they are a majority in that group. What we notice in year 7 is that assertiveness, and other issues associated with that become more prominent as the year goes by. We talked about the different mixes that we could have and decided that years 5, 6 and 7 was likely to be the best social mix. Again, by having collaborative classrooms, there are many activities where the year 7s are taken off and the other teacher takes the years 5 and 6, or alternatively it might be the year 5s. There are many groupings that go on within that classroom according to the activity or what is happening. It has flexibility and it gives us opportunities. There will be things that we do, particularly with our year 7s, that are separate. It did not seem to impede us and possibly provided a better learning environment in general. That is why we made that decision. So far I would say that is the case, but it is early days.

Mr SAWFORD—This inquiry has only been going for a couple of months. We go to Western Australia Wednesday night and Thursday. We will go to Tasmania and we will go to regional Australia. If the election is later on in the year, as we expect, probably this report will be tabled in this parliament and you will get a copy that will be sent to the school. Right at the very beginning of this inquiry the Commonwealth Department of Education reported to us that if you compared girls' and boys' attainments 20 years ago generally around Australia, but certainly looking at the more populous states of Victoria and New South Wales, the differentials in attainments between boys and girls was less than one per cent, which you would expect, since boys and girls are intrinsically equally intelligent.

Yet there is evidence now that those differentials can be up to 20 percentage points. We have been to schools that have been diagnostically tested four years ago—both in 1997—and found similar results. After programs, after four or five years, they have things back in balance again. Would you like to make some comments on whether you have done any diagnostic testing here and whether it has been tracked? If so, what were the differences between boys' and girls' attainments, if they were done? If they were not done, have you found, Sonia and Dinah, successful strategies that work better with boys, some that work better with girls, some that work better and it does not matter whether they are boys or girls? Have you had any experience in that way? First of all, with the diagnostic results, have you done anything in this particular way?

Ms McKeough—Not probably to the degree that the other schools you were citing may have. I certainly have not been part of that. This is only my second year. There is obviously statewide

data in relation to our education department's requirements of things that we report against. That includes things like the basic skills test.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you report on differences in attainment on the issue of gender?

Ms McKeough—We do.

Mr SAWFORD—Does the South Australian system do that?

Ms McKeough—Yes, I think so.

Mr SAWFORD—You think so?

Ms McKeough—Yes. We can see some big differences in literacy attainment as defined by a basic skills test between boys and girls and that would be as we would predict, I think. Some of the things I talked about earlier were in relation to our early intervention programs and the oral skills our children come in with and the reading skills our children enter school with and our huge focus on that. We are interested to see what difference that makes, because many of our boys are the people who are identified under our early intervention for speech, and for reading. For whatever those reasons are, we would expect a gap between performance of some degree. We can see that in some testing. However, our prediction would be that we will see that gap lessen.

Mr SAWFORD—Why do you think the gap over the last 20 years got there in the first place?

Ms Lindstrom—Whose data is that?

Mr SAWFORD—This is Commonwealth data. This comes from every state education department in Australia.

Ms Lindstrom—Yes. I have heard that before.

Mr SAWFORD—You may not be comparing oranges with oranges or apples with apples but it is respected quantitative data of 20 years ago. Compared to now there are huge differences. Schools that have actually done diagnostic testing—certainly since the emphasis has been on literacy and numeracy over the last four or five years right across Australia and there has been funding available for it—have acknowledged those differentials exist and they have focused programs deliberately in order to bring it out. In fact one school we went to in Kay Elson's electorate had huge differentials four years ago. Their differentials were not one per cent but they were less than three per cent. That was after four years of concentrated programs, highly active learning, highly structured learning. We went to a school in Sydney where it was two-thirds/one-third; two-thirds were boys having a problem four years ago and now it has basically evened out. Those scores are reinforcing that Commonwealth data.

Ms McKeough—One of the things I would say is that the nature of schools 20 years ago would have reflected the nature of society 20 years ago. I imagine there is a level of complexity

and diversity existing across Australia now, 20 years later, that did not exist then. While that brings a great richness it brings issues as well.

Mr SAWFORD—Twenty years ago basically what people were saying was, 'Schools were pretty healthy in terms of attainments.' Something has happened in the last 20 years that has had a deleterious impact on boys—but it is not just boys.

Ms McKeough—And what I am suggesting is, it is not just schools. We need to look at it from a society point of view. We would need to look at that in context of what else has happened.

Mr SAWFORD—But schools have reversed that trend within four or five years and there has been some key dimensions of their programs—active learning, highly structured lessons; lessons basically are explained, the purposes are explained, the steps are explained, it is highly monitored, it has highly committed teachers like you have here. Highly committed teachers can make anything work. There seem to be some patterns coming through. When those characteristics are true of a school program, the differentials between boys and girls disappear.

Ms McKeough—We might find that to be true and I suspect we will, but what we find at the moment is that with our early intervention, as I have already stated, the amount of boys that qualify for that or are identified through that process is 90 per cent to 10 per cent. I assume that if we are successful long term with the strategies that we are resourcing at the moment and we continue to be able to resource them, then that would even itself out. That would be my prediction. Otherwise, we would have to say, 'What are we doing and why are we doing it?' because what we are doing would not be making a difference.

Mr SAWFORD—That is right.

Ms McKeough—Those kids we saw today, three years down the track if we have not levelled that up, then we need to go back to the drawing board and say, 'This isn't the way to go.' We are doing that all the time, refining and renewing, within the available resources we have.

CHAIR—When you do your year 1 assessments, you were saying before that a lot of the children come from disadvantaged homes and they do not have a language ability when they come to the school—

Ms McKeough—They do, but not one that is—

CHAIR—Not one that is in tune with learning. Is there a big difference between the boys and the girls then, in year 1? Are the boys behind in year 1 when you do that assessment?

Ms McKeough—I think the girls have a higher standard even though they come from the same family background.

Ms Paris—We have a high level of students who he been identified as special ed, having learning difficulties. There is a high number of those who are boys. When you take that into consideration as well, we are dealing with that as well as all the other issues.

Ms McKeough—But that is an interesting question. I do not know why we have a higher proportion of special ed boys.

CHAIR—It takes a long time then for them to catch up.

Ms Lindstrom—But that is congruent with the whole of Australia, I should imagine, because it is certainly congruent with the state because of the sorts of familial things that happen. What is known—and there is good research to back this up—is that often parents do not talk to their boys with the same degree of complexity that they talk to their girls and so on. Apparently Australian families do not touch their little boys in friendly ways, appropriate ways, as much as little girls are touched and so on. I do not think Carol Gilligan pointed that out.

Mr SAWFORD—Carol did not point that out!

CHAIR—I have heard that from other sources. We have unfortunately come to the end of our time, but I really appreciate the time you have given us today. We are very serious, when this report comes out, that there is going to be some positive recommendations, that if there is a problem that we are going to actually have some decent recommendations to help boys. As teachers, at the coalface, is there any one particular recommendation or issue that you can bring forward today that is going to help boys with their learning ability?

Ms Lindstrom—Before the others speak, one thing that I think would be very important is that there still needs to be a push from the top, or some leadership at the top to help teaching staff come to grips with what we call construction of gender or gender equity principles. Unless teachers really understand the ways in which we learn about our gender and then, similarly, ways in which to disrupt that, so that girls and boys do not live within these very narrow constraints, we are really facing an uphill battle. I really do think that is part of it because many boys at the moment in Australia are seeing themselves as nonreaders, nonwriters, not good at relationships. That starts at a very early age. That would be very good.

The education of girls' push was really useful in terms of a whole raft of things happening across Australian schools to a greater or lesser degree, but we need to go that step further now and say it is girls and boys and both groups are at risk if they do not know how to overstep the narrow constraints of their gender roles.

Ms Paris—I agree with that, as a teacher in the classroom actually working with students doing that. The level of resources is increasing, but there is insufficient funding there.

Ms Lindstrom—That would impact on teacher training.

Ms McKeough—Yes. We have talked about that. We often have younger staff who are out of university. I think the issues that are part of their teacher training would be interesting to discuss sometime as well.

CHAIR—Thank you very much again. We really appreciate the time you have given to us.

Ms McKeough—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Wilkie):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.34 a.m.