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Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Reference: Education of boys

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Thursday, 5 April 2001

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

Members in attendance: Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Cadman, Mrs Elson, Mr Emerson, Ms Gambaro, Mrs May, 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.

WITNESS

**FLETCHER, Mr Richard, Manager, Men and Boys Program, and Lecturer, Family Action
Centre, University of Newcastle 1043**

Committee met at 9.07 a.m.**FLETCHER, Mr Richard, Manager, Men and Boys Program, and Lecturer, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle**

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Richard Fletcher to our inquiry today. I declare open this public hearing and inquiry into the education of boys and thank you for your attendance. I am obliged to remind you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and 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 at any time that you wish to give evidence in private, please ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. I invite you now to make introductory remarks before we have some questions from the committee.

Mr Fletcher—Thank you. I have given you a submission. What I would like to speak about is why I think we need a new policy framework and why I think that, although there are lots of good things about the existing gender equity framework, it really is not going to be appropriate for developing things with boys. Whether policy developers wish to go for a separate boys policy or not, you cannot avoid the fact that some of the policy in there will have to be directed towards boys. You cannot call everything ‘gender’ and think that it is covering boys.

When I started teaching in Sydney schools in the seventies, we had the *Girls in schools* report. We felt clear as teachers that we were trying to raise girls’ expectations and lift their sights and so on. All the thinking that happened in that 20-year period from 1975 to 1995 was based—I think quite rightly—on saying, ‘How can we structure things for girls to lift their achievements?’ I have three daughters, two of them still in school, and I think there is still a long way to go for girls. However, as excellent as that thinking was, to just rub out where it says ‘girls education strategy’ and write in ‘gender education strategy’ and say, ‘This will do for boys, too,’ is a ridiculous idea.

I cannot see how you could argue that all the thinking and development which was so precisely targeted would automatically apply for boys. Now that we look at it 20 years down the track we can see that there were some features of that which did not work very well, either. One of them, for example, is the issue about valuing what work is done in the home—parenting and so on. There is a trap in the existing gender equity basis. If equity is the basis for doing things, really all that leaves you to measure in this case is labour market outcomes, so that you are looking at whether girls get the same jobs as boys for the same income.

That means that when you come to try and value what happens in the home outside of the paid work force, you are left with a trap, because—as is in the documents that I have cited here—for example, boys not performing in English is not considered to be the same as girls not performing in science. Why? Because girls not performing in science really matters. Why? The documents say, ‘Because that will affect their income.’ The fact that boys might be affected by having a narrow view of what life is about is not weighted in the same way; that is not considered such a big issue.

With the best of intentions, that document tried to pretend that it was value neutral. It said, ‘We’re after a fair go for everybody. That’s the only value. We don’t need to say what sorts of values we have about men, for example, in the community.’ That is a fundamental mistake.

When we work with schools everywhere around Australia one of the issues we raise with them is, 'What is it that you value about men in the community?' That is not saying, 'Don't we value women?' It is saying, 'What is it we value about men?' The idea from the eighties, through the antidiscrimination legislation, that it was not right to discriminate was fair enough and a good idea, but to carry it over to say, 'It doesn't matter whether you're male or female,' I think is a ridiculous notion.

You can imagine how it looks to a boy. There is a typical conversation that happens with boys in schools. For example, Rod is 10 years old and we say, 'Rod, there's the girls' dance group over there—15 girls. I'd like you to go over and join in.' Rod will say, 'No, thank you,' or words to that effect and then the teacher will say, with the best of intentions, 'Come on now. Don't be hung up about the fact that they're all girls. It's all human movement. We've all got rhythm, we can move. You can do that,' and they will imply Rod has a problem with what boys can do, that he is hung up about what boys can do.

That happens all the time and it is a con, because if I brought a 10-year-old in here, who had never met any of you in his life, and I asked him to go around the table and pick out the men and pick out the women, what would his success rate be? It would be 100 per cent. Why? Because you make it perfectly clear. The way you groom yourselves, the way you dress, talk and sit, you make it perfectly clear whether you are male or female. Boys see adults all around them who go to a lot of trouble every day to make it perfectly clear, at a glance, whether they are male or female, but the boys are told all the time that they are hung up about what boys can do.

The notion of recognising that there are males and females, valuing that there are males and females, and what is it we value about men in the community, is an important issue for schools which they have not really come to grips with. It ought to be reflected in the policy documents, I would say, instead of pretending that it is value neutral and that we are after generic citizens who are not males or females.

That has important implications in the obvious areas of literacy. It is not that women do not make excellent teachers for boys. Of course they do. We have put out a book recently called *I Can Hardly Wait Till Monday*, which is interviews with women teachers who are doing a great job. We are talking to them about what they do. Women make excellent teachers for boys. But what does the boy see around him in a school environment? Apart from the male principal, all the teachers, all the teacher aides who are concerned about reading, and when he goes home his mum, all of those women are the ones who say to him in a million ways, 'Reading and learning are important.' The men around him seem to have another agenda.

When we are talking about this issue of valuing males, it is important that we convey to boys that men value learning; not just later when you are in the work force or somewhere out there where it happens, but right now in that classroom in those early years. That is where we need to convince boys that men value learning. The best way to do that is to have men demonstrate that, obviously. You can imagine it is not quite as convincing for a female teacher to tell the boy that men value learning as it is for him to see men doing it. The implication of that is not to sack female teachers and re-employ men. That is a clumsy response to that area. What makes perfect sense, I think, is for schools to live up to the rhetoric of community involvement and be much more effective about involving males in everyday ways in the classroom.

I come from Newcastle and there is a high percentage still of shift workers, even though we have lost some major industries. When you say to schools, 'Can you get men in here?' they say, 'No, they'll be too busy at work.' In an environment where there is 80 per cent unemployment they say, 'No, we can't get men in here. They'll be too busy.' There is a perception that men cannot be involved in schools, and I would suggest that is a strong area of development. It does not have direct financial implications, in the sense of not doubling the work force of schools or sacking women teachers—which I do not support—to replace them with men in some way. Involving men in day-to-day ways is an area of minimal development in Australia. It is not a conspiracy theory—'Somebody's against me'—but it is because it has not been obvious how to do that.

We have just started a five-year project funded by van Leer in Holland. This is a large project in the Hunter Valley to engage fathers in schools and child care and antenatal activities. We are in the first few months of that and the results so far are very clear from having the same discussions with teachers. For example, the night before last I was at Kurri Kurri Preschool. They had arranged an evening for parents to talk about boys. They thought they would be lucky to get 30 and they had 90 turn up. I asked the audience, 'Where are your concerns?' We had, for example, a mother of a 14-month-old child who was worried that he would follow in the footsteps of her five-year-old who was diagnosed as having ADD, right through to mothers and fathers of 19-year-olds who were worried about something. We had the whole age range of concerns.

After that I was talking to one of the staff and I said, 'I'm interested in what you do for parents here,' and they told me about their programs for parents. I said, 'Well, what do you do for fathers? What do you do for them?'

To her credit, this staff member said, 'To be honest, I've never thought about fathers.' What we have learnt in the work we have been doing with schools is not that people are out to exclude fathers deliberately. It is just seen as either too difficult, and the ways to do it have seemed impossible, or the notion that fathers might be involved has not really come up. That is an obvious area of development that I would be keen to see reflected in the policy. I go back to the idea of reworking the policy into something which is more realistic about males and females and which does include values.

I will just show you one thing in conclusion that we have been doing with boys. I know this is recorded, but I do not know how you do this with words. If you ask boys in a big group, 'What is a success?' they will say, 'Win a million dollars.' If you say, 'How could you improve the school here?' they will say, 'Build a skateboard ramp in the library.' If you ask them in a big group that is the sort of response you get. What we do—obviously at the request of the school—is take boys off in a smaller group. It is very important that they cannot be seen or heard by others. We have a teacher, one of us, and we take them in a group of no more than 10. We put them on chairs, and we put these sorts of images out. We say, 'Pick up a photo of a man who is a success.' We put out photos of men who are a success and then we say, 'Pick one up and tell us why he is a success.'

There are about 40 photos here of men from, as you can see, a range of occupations. We have a recorder. What do they pick up? When they look at these photos—there are basketball players and things like that here—they pick up photos like this and say, 'He's a success.' You ask why

and they say, 'Because he has overcome something,' or 'He's obviously disabled in some way and he had to do something hard.' You can see by the reflection on the group whether it is something some of them are not sure about. You can see they are all going, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

What the boys pick up demonstrates, I think, what you can see in some of the South Australian research—which I think you have had a presentation on—that boys' values are the ones that we would really like them to have. We would like boys to want to be successful, to want to work hard. What we find is that when you take small groups of boys and ask them in a safe environment, that is exactly what they say. The teachers are often surprised. The teachers are not allowed to say anything and they find it very difficult because they are often astounded. 'That little ratbag, he doesn't say that.' Of course, he does not behave like that in the classroom. What we take from that is not that we are magical and we have transformed his personality but that this has given him an outlet.

We then ask them, 'How would you improve the school?' To the teachers' real surprise, boys' ideas about improving the school are often about learning. They want the learning environment to be better. They want consistency and fairness. They want the teachers to be fair. What the girls do is rarely a big point, even though everybody is afraid that if you ask boys what they want they will want to rule it over the girls or get all the resources, have all the computer time, or something. Our experience is that girls do not figure largely in boys' thinking when they are thinking about what would improve the school. Most of the things they are thinking about is what the teachers do.

We know from other research that what boys really want is a good relationship with teachers. These things are very constructive evidence for how we might proceed with boys. I have given you an example in the submission of a school where we had year 9 boys survey other year 9 boys. We took 15 of them and worked with them for a term and then asked them, 'What are the main questions?' We did not structure that. We did not say, 'You have to ask about this.' We ended up with a great smorgasbord of questions and they narrowed them down by discussion. If you look at that list the biggest group of questions is about learning. They were the main issues of the year 9 boys, some of whom were really struggling at school. They certainly were not angels, they were not the pick of the bunch, they were average boys. Their identification of needs is an important issue that has not been brought out much.

Schools survey a lot now on what are boys' subject choice preferences. That is good, but that means all the boy does is tick something or write a comment and the teacher processes it and the teacher owns all the knowledge. We are keen on the boys having a real say in what the school does, so the boys have some responsibility for learning. I will stop there.

CHAIR—That is great. Thanks very much for that. I am sure you have stimulated a lot of questions. You have seen an enormous range of programs while going around and visiting schools. Can you tell the inquiry some of the successful ones?

Mr Fletcher—I think they go in three groups. This is an important point for schools. Some programs are generic. They are not called boys programs, they are not only for boys, they are to improve things in the schools. Some schools, for example where they have made a real effort in literacy, have lifted the whole perception of literacy in the school, its usefulness and the teachers' enthusiasm for dealing with it. That is an excellent thing for boys. It is not called a

boys program and that is not why they did it. They did it because they were interested in lifting the game of the school. Those programs are a good way to affect schools. For example, if schools improve their offerings in a range of technology courses, that would be great for boys, but they need not do it for boys—they can do it for the general reasons of improving education, and similarly in the arts area.

The second group of courses or initiatives are ones that are boy focused, but we do not call them boy programs for a number of good reasons. For instance, you might want to address bullying, which really might be particular groups of boys that you are worried about, but you address bullying in the whole school and institute a whole school policy and do a lot of development work with teachers and students. The boys are the ones who benefit from that particularly, because they might have been involved in that. In fact, as you would be aware, our whole discipline system in schools is called a discipline system for the school, but it has really been done for the boys because boys make up the bulk of any disciplinary group. These programs in the middle group—that is, boy focused but not only for boys—are important.

Then there is the third group, which is boy specific programs. Those are what schools often think of first. When we get calls from schools they often say, ‘We are worried about the boys here. Do you have something we can do? Do you have a kit or a speaker or something?’ There is a whole range of those. The ones that we use as examples are ones like the rock and water program which we bring from the Netherlands. There is David’s course from South Australia on boys and relationships—that is another very good course.

There are a number of these developed on a local level. In Queensland there are a number of schools which have done excellent courses, including Maryborough High School and Trinity Bay High School. Trinity Bay, for example, has a peer reading course where the boys from year 9 go to the surrounding primary schools to be tutors for boys in the primary school. From the primary school’s perspective, of course, that is an excellent idea because the boys appreciate this role modelling, they appreciate the extra attention, and it validates what the teachers are trying to do. For the year 9 boys it is also excellent because they review their own learning practices by being a tutor. This is really helpful for them and it also increases their sense of responsibility and connection. It is a pay-off at both ends. That is one example which is duplicated in other places. Those three groups of programs are the ones I would point to.

Mr WILKIE—I have to leave to go to the Main Committee. Thank you for the presentation. It was very interesting. It is always good to see different research.

Mr SAWFORD—I was very pleased to read your submission, too. I think it has made a substantive addition to this inquiry. I was also pleased initially when you reject the deficit model which seems to be so prevalent. I have three questions: one about the deficit model, one about the Adelaide Declaration on the *National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century*, and the third about the gender equity framework. I have found it amazing that the orthodoxy coming from education departments, the Australian Education Union, even the Independent Schools Union and Catholic Ed, is full of deficit modelling, yet the schools we visited did not talk about that at all. They rejected deficit modelling, yet it was there in the orthodoxy in terms of the negative behaviours of boys. There was nothing written in the terms that you write. That is a problem.

In rereading the Adelaide Declaration, I have never seen such convoluted nonsense in my life. What I ask is not in a critical way but you make as a recommendation that we ought to recognise the *National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century*. I would have thought education is a trinity, in a sense that you ask the why, you ask the what, you ask the how and then you monitor it all to see whether there is a reconciliation between why, what and how.

Mr Fletcher—You don't find that?

Mr SAWFORD—No, I think that is what you should do, but when you look at the *National Goals for Schooling* it is all confused. There is none of that division. You have purposes, strategies and outcomes all confused together. When they go into the 'what' part, I think a year 5 kid could have drawn that up. I know this has been drawn up by the state ministers and there is always a problem when you have nine ministers together and they are up there with a blackboard trying to put all this down. I understand all that, but I would have thought that from the perspective of the teachers and the school that it is absolutely useless.

I have asked my third question of everyone who puts forward the argument about the gender equity framework: on what quantitative and empirical evidence has that been based? Every education department, everyone you ask, cannot answer the question. We know why they cannot answer the question: there is not any. I find it absolutely amazing that here we are in a country—and the United States, Canada and all the English-speaking countries have done it too—where we introduced a policy in 1997 called gender equity framework, notwithstanding the valid comments you made, that is based on purely qualitative evidence—and some of that is not too flash when you start to analyse and find out where it has come from—without any empirical data. We have done this, so that seems to suggest there has been another reason for the introduction of that policy. When you go out and talk to the schools themselves, they do not talk about that at all. They talk about what you said just a while ago. They do not talk in terms of boys and girls. We went to a school in Kay's electorate, we went to one in Sydney, we have been to one in Western Australia, and we have been in Adelaide. The schools are on about improving performance. They do not even split the gender stuff really. They are on about what you are saying. Can I get you to make some comments about deficit modelling and what you find around the country with respect to national goals for schooling and the gender equity framework, and why there is no quantitative evidence.

Mr Fletcher—About the deficit modelling, it is true there is a sort of assumption that that is how we plan things. The difficulty is not in looking at needs but in recognising what needs tell us. I think we ought to be looking at needs. We ought to be saying, 'What are boys' needs?' When we started this work in men's health in 1990, the same situation pertained there. Women's health needs were very clearly articulated and identified, and men were assumed to be doing fine. When it became clear that men were not doing fine in terms of mortality rates and so on, eventually there was a shift. There was the 1995 National Men's Health Conference in Melbourne. There have policy ups and downs about that but, around Australia, there has been increasing recognition that you cannot just assume that men are doing fine and that you only need to pay attention to indigenous groups, disabled groups, women and so on. You need to look at men's needs.

There is a parallel here in the education sector. We have had this assumption that you do not need to worry about boys because they are going to earn more money than the girls when they

leave school anyway, so they are obviously doing fine. That has been a narrow view of needs, that all you need to worry about is the money.

CHAIR—A division has been called in the House and that means we will have to leave here for a few minutes.

Proceedings suspended from 9.33 a.m. to 9.50 a.m.

CHAIR—The committee will now resume.

Mr SAWFORD—Firstly, we have covered the deficit modelling thing.

Mr Fletcher—The second one was about—

Mr SAWFORD—The *National Goals for Schooling*. What a convoluted statement that is. The third one was about the gender equity framework. How can you introduce a policy like that into Australia without any quantitative or empirical research to back it up?

Mr Fletcher—I have answered the first one. Regarding the second one, I am not as familiar as you about what policy documents should look like at that level. I am keen for us to rework the gender equity framework and I am looking for a consensus, I suppose. If the ministers for education have already agreed on that document, I am happy to start from there. I am not really being a critic of it, as you are, nor am I a champion of it; but if it exists and it sets out what we want for boys—we want them to be achieving in all of those areas—then we should get on with it. That is my response to that area.

In relation to the third, my main concern is the way labour market outcomes are the only things we talk about. You look at the boys in high school and the girls in high school and say, ‘When they leave here, the boys are going to get more apprenticeships in the metal industry. The boys are going to get higher paid jobs when they are 19, on average, so we should address that.’ True. We also know that for every girl that dies in high school, over 15, three boys will die. That is a horrific statistic for Australia.

Mr SAWFORD—Absolutely.

Mr Fletcher—We should say, ‘What about that?’ That is a reasonable outcome to look at as well, isn’t it? We should look at the fact that, of every 10 people in jail, nine of them will be men in their 20s. That is an outcome that is important. We want to look at outcomes—that is appropriate—and we want to base it on evidence, so I take your point there. But I think the way the discussion has happened has been very narrow in saying, ‘The only thing you should look at is how much money you make at 25,’ and that informs the education debate. That is too narrow. I would like to see that in the Collins report from DETYA.

I think DETYA has been constrained. The only things they have funded, as far as I can see, are reports and analyses which start from the assumption that the only important things to look at are how much money you are earning or whether you go to a particular course at university. There are other important indicators, and I know they are important for the community because when we go to parent meetings no parent says, ‘Well, I don’t care much about his health, I just want him to be able to use a computer.’ Parents do not say that. Of course they are concerned

about their kids' lives. They want them to live good lives. We have been far too narrow in the discussion.

Mr SAWFORD—I will just ask a follow-up question, then I will keep quiet. I also have the belief that we are dudding girls and we are deluding ourselves about the attainments of girls. My argument for that is, when we look at the research and the data that we base our policies on, no-one wants to use any quantitative research. I find that unbelievable. When you read the orthodoxy that is coming across, they all want to talk about disaggregated information but they never want to talk about aggregated information. They want to talk about the nurture argument but they never want to talk about the nature argument. They want to talk about the details of curriculum work but they never want to talk about the main point. They want to talk about continuous assessment but they do not want to talk about examination systems. The list goes on and on.

There are what I call girl friendly schools and boy friendly schools; girls are much better at description, boys are much better at analysis. There is a whole range of things. They are only generic statements; it is not true in all cases, of course. If you cut half of those things away, I would have thought analysis and synthesis in schools are important, not just synthesis in schools and forget the analysis. How can you write an essay in the chemistry exams we have now? You are almost writing essays for mathematics 1 and 2. It has become almost a bit of a joke. What is your comment about the attainment levels of girls in this country? Are we deluding ourselves about those attainments?

Mr Fletcher—We may well be. What your comment provokes in me, though, is the realisation that the standard way we have developed teaching as part of a verbal culture is to prioritise being able to explain what is happening in words. What we have underestimated is how important the physical is. That goes to the heart of teaching styles and learning styles. The idea of single-sex groups and so on is recognising, as you put it, that there are differences between males and females in the classroom. It might be great for all the kids—girls too—to have a lot of movement in the class, but it is certainly a good idea for the boys.

If you are trying to improve boys' learning, one of the things you can pay attention to is the fact that boys as a group will have preferences for learning styles. They are splitting up classes in primary schools—I think you have visited Western Australia, where they have done that very successfully—separating them in the morning and bringing them together in the afternoon to work together. In New South Wales just recently, in western Sydney, you would have noticed that there are going to be new all boy and all girl schools. The idea that that will solve it by itself does not make any sense—just putting the boys together. I have taught in all boy schools and I do not think we did a good job in the late eighties. But I think there is an opportunity then to notice that boys do things differently and to adjust your teaching style. Just grouping them together is not the answer, but what you can do then is pay attention to their learning style and change the teaching.

I think we are dudding the girls, if you like, by saying that the way we have done it is the only way and that that is the best way for everybody. There are some girls who do not do very well in that system either and, if we paid more attention to learning styles, we would improve things for the girls.

Mr CADMAN—You gave an example of a male principal and totally female staff. To what extent do you think a better gender balance amongst teachers would affect this? Do you think that would influence the outcome of boys' education?

Mr Fletcher—Yes, I do. As I said, I am not in favour of sacking female teachers.

Mr CADMAN—No, I am not suggesting that.

Mr Fletcher—Suppose you are employing a teacher. You have a vacancy and there are 10 applicants, some of them men and some of them women. On what basis would you employ the man? Suppose all of them seemed to be good teachers. Obviously it is not right to say, 'Well, he's got testicles, we'll have him.' That is not the basis of it. That is why I think schools really need to start asking such questions as, 'What do we value about men? What do we like? What is it we are trying to encourage our boys towards?' Then you can look at the range of teachers and say, 'This guy has some of the skill areas and some of the attitudes that we want to foster in our boys and demonstrate to our girls, so we'll have him.' Once you start thinking about employing male teachers, it raises the issue of: what do you want them for? I do not think schools have come to grips with that. They have not asked that question. We have used the deficit model. What don't we want? We do not want to produce bank robbers, murderers and rapists. But what do we want? I think that is the issue.

Mr CADMAN—The empirical information from schools in western Sydney seems to be that the father figure for many boys and girls is a very significant factor in relationships, and the odd male teacher find himself overwhelmed. But that is only empirical; there does not appear to be any hard evidence. Do you know of any evidence?

Mr Fletcher—That it affects the outcomes?

Mr CADMAN—Yes.

Mr Fletcher—No. I do know from our work recently that teachers are often under the impression that men are not in the picture. For example, we are talking to schools and saying, 'We want to start you on this project of engaging fathers. Do you think that's a good idea?' They say, 'Oh, sure, that's a good idea.' Then they say, 'But I don't think it's going to work very well here.' We say, 'Why not?' They say, 'Well, this is not an affluent area. A lot of families do not have fathers.' After quite a bit of respectful encouragement from us, some of the schools have drawn up a list of who has a man at home—dad or de facto or part-time father—and it has turned out, to the teachers' surprise, that the number of kids who have no dad or no male figure around is very small, but in the teachers' perception it is a huge thing.

This is partly the difficulty that teachers face. They are thinking, 'This is going to be an enormous problem,' until they start to pin it down and get some empirical evidence about who is there and then start inviting them in. Schools still send letters home that say, 'Dear parents'. You say, 'Are you talking to dads then?' and they say, 'Of course we are.' Everybody knows that when you get a letter from school that says 'Dear parents' it is for mum. Everybody knows that.

Just let me give a couple of examples of how you link that up. In Western Australia—somebody here was from Western Australia—in the wheat belt area they wanted to make dads part of the picture but they were off on tractors 200 kilometres away and to call them in for a meeting did not seem realistic. They started to use a loudspeaking phone in the deputy's office, with the boy—for good and bad; not just when he was in trouble, but when he also did something well. They called dad on the mobile. He is on a tractor. He stops the tractor and he takes part in the discussion through the loudspeaking phone, to make the link for the boy that, 'Dad is in the picture here. Dad thinks this discussion is important, too. It is not just mum who comes in.'

In England they have linked up boys in the literacy area with faxes and emails. The Ericsson company has sponsored some of this. Their employees email boys in the school and the boys then have to respond. This is an outside man taking an interest in you. They have to respond and, of course, they have to write, so that encourages that perception. I think making those sorts of links, both for the fathers and for other men in the community, to say that this is important is an example of the sorts of things we might do, as well as being clear about why we want male teachers.

Mr CADMAN—The evidence that I have seen, which has been measured, indicates that the failure in literacy and numeracy tends to be about five times greater—five boys to one girl. That appears to be fairly general, as far as I know, across the English speaking world. Do you know of any areas where it is in balance or where there might be a greater failure rate amongst girls than boys?

Mr Fletcher—No, I do not honestly, but I am not all that familiar with the international literature. Like you, I have seen the literature mainly from the UK. Recently we got some from the Netherlands and the US.

Mr CADMAN—Is five to one about right?

Mr Fletcher—No, I think that is too big. It is not that big. It depends on which area of literacy you are looking at. In the Netherlands, for example, they have a number of systems that you can swap between, like streams—trade, technical and university. What they measured there was how much the students moved up or down. The girls are moving up into the top stream and the boys are moving down. It was not just literacy; it was about their whole academic achievement. They are going in different directions. I am sorry, I am not familiar with the exact measure in each country.

Mr SAWFORD—In Australia it is up to 20 per cent, but it is largely in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. It is not so bad in South Australia, New South Wales and Western Australia.

Mr CADMAN—I was just thinking of some studies that were done by the Australian Council of Educational Research, probably about 15 years ago, which seemed to indicate that the greatest success in literacy and numeracy tended to be in Queensland for boys and girls. You are saying that is not the case.

Mr SAWFORD—We are just looking at DETYA information.

Mr CADMAN—Where did they get theirs from? I am talking about scientifically designed studies.

CHAIR—How long ago?

Mr CADMAN—It was 15 years ago. Have we got anything comparable, or just DETYA's ideas?

Mr SAWFORD—DETYA's data will tell you that 20 years ago the differentials in Australia were less than one percentage point between boys and girls. That is what you would expect because there is a natural spread of abilities among boys and girls. Now it is up to 20—

Mr CADMAN—No, I am talking literacy and numeracy.

Mr SAWFORD—Yes. I am talking about 20 years ago. If you look now it can be up to 20 percentage points. Something has gone horribly wrong in the last 20 years for that to occur.

Mr CADMAN—I did not realise that. That is handy information.

Mr SAWFORD—That was the first information that the Commonwealth department gave this committee.

Mr CADMAN—As most members do, I attend a lot of speech days and prize givings. I have noticed that generally across my electorate there appear to be twice as many girls in the school as boys because they seem to get twice as many prizes, whether it be in sporting or academic spheres. Can you draw any conclusions from that?

Mr Fletcher—I know that parents draw a lot of conclusions because we get a lot of calls from parents from different parts of Australia who notice that on prize night there are 20 kids on the stage to get a prize and 18 of them are girls. They do not wish those girls ill, of course—they are delighted that they are succeeding—but they are saying, 'What is that saying about the boys' attitudes in this school? What are we doing here?' I think that is an important point.

Mr SAWFORD—Is that the wrong question? That is what they are saying, but what they should be saying is, 'What are the teachers doing in this school for that to occur?'

Mr Fletcher—Yes, I think they are saying 'we' as the school.

Mr CADMAN—I raised it with a few principals and they just think it is a personal attack. Maybe I am a bit too blunt in the way I express it. From a societal point of view, I look at the follow-on from that failure pattern and look at the suicide rate and, knowing there is a link between that failure and suicide, or drug abuse, I say, 'There is a big downside here that probably the principal is not seeing.'

Mr Fletcher—The principals we speak to I suppose do see it because they are the schools we get involved in. We see a lot of people who are concerned, but they are often frustrated in how to do it. There was a school in the Hunter where they were tearing their hair out. The principal

told me that he and the deputy tried to figure out stuff about getting boys involved. They thought, 'What can we do that boys will like?' They decided to get a cadet corps for the first time, as the school had never had one. They contacted the Army and arranged all the bits and pieces. They had their first muster, I think they call it, and the deputy came in and said, 'Come out to the playground, you'd better have a look.' He went out to the playground—this was the first day for the cadet corps—and there were 16 girls and two boys. He had tears in his eyes. I said, 'What did you do?' He said, 'We put the boys at the front so it didn't look so bad.'

Teachers are often frustrated at how to engage boys. I do not think it is just that if teachers would work harder or something all this would go away. It is more fundamental than that, which is why I think we need national policies and a bit of direction and support for what is happening in schools. Teachers are trying to figure out things on their own, in a school setting, because the states have not really taken this up. The state governments' education departments have not really made much progress in this area. They have tended to stay with the gender equity framework.

Mr CADMAN—Is that because the administrators themselves are committed to the gender equity program that has existed? Maybe their job attaches to it, so the preservation of its existence is more important than change.

Mr Fletcher—And also because it has not been clear what to do. It is not like it is obvious. I wish it were. We put out kits and everything but all they do is help teachers figure out how they are going to do things. We do not have an answer for everybody, to say, 'Just buy this and you'll be right.' To be fair to them, it has not been clear which bit to start with.

Mr CADMAN—If you could design the whole program, what would you do? Just blow your brains for us and say, 'If I was going to get this fixed, this is what I would do.'

Mr Fletcher—From the Commonwealth level?

Mr CADMAN—Yes.

Mr Fletcher—I would say this is an area for leadership in the Commonwealth, for a start, rather than them saying they are in the background and that the states are the ones that should decide all this. There needs to be a rethinking of the policy to say what the good bits in the gender equity framework are, and let us keep them; then let us look at what a broader framework is and what values we would like to see in there about boys and men—as well as girls—and so on. What we see happening is a whole lot of schools really working hard to try to address the boys in front of them, and it seems to me they get little support.

They call us, and the university charges a pretty hefty fee so they are pretty desperate if they are going to get us there because they have to find the money. When we go there it is not like there are only two teachers and the others are all off somewhere else. They are very concerned with what they see happening and they are trying different things, but there is no backup. You heard from Ken Rowe, I think, in the Victorian example of the literacy program they developed there. They had a team come into the school and support the teachers. They had time off to talk about what they were doing, a lot of support. The teachers we are talking to, who are trying to do things, are doing it in their own time, or they squeeze it into something else. I would not like

to see some academic group—even us—being given the money and told, ‘Here, you solve it, and we’ll tell all the schools what to do.’

Mr CADMAN—You would not want a prescriptive approach?

Mr Fletcher—No, I do not think that is going to work, frankly. It would be more constructive to support what is happening at the school level and particularly to encourage schools to link with the community, getting them to do things like finding out who the parents are.

Mr CADMAN—Education is full of fads. You are going to find somebody who is going to seize on a bright idea and run it right through a state system and everybody will do it for 10 years and then they will say, ‘We didn’t bother to test that. It has fallen over.’ How do you stop that faddy and fashionable stuff happening? I reckon it is just crazy the way education has behaved—I’m sorry.

Mr Fletcher—I do not know how you stop fads. That is too big a question for me.

Mr CADMAN—But you would just let diversity rip?

Mr Fletcher—I would support diversity. That is where I think the policy is important. How do you support diversity now? A school does this for boys—

Mr SAWFORD—You do not have diversity at the moment. That is the problem.

Mr BARTLETT—The example you just gave about the attempt to introduce cadet corps illustrates that the problems are deeper seated than just what happens at the school. From your experience, how successful have focused school based programs been in overcoming those other societal problems that are militating against boys achieving—the media images, the peer group pressure and the lack of male role models? Have you had contact with enough successful programs to convince you that those broader problems can be overcome successfully at the school level?

Mr Fletcher—Yes. They are small examples. We have not seen anybody transform the whole community around them, but we have seen schools have a positive effect on the community by what they are doing with boys. So there are hopeful signs. We produce that *Boys in Schools Bulletin*, which has examples.

Mr BARTLETT—You said earlier that there has been an assumption in the whole focus in the past on raising achievements for girls. There has been the assumption that boys will take care of themselves, that they will be all right. Obviously those assumptions over the past few years have been seriously questioned—there is the existence of this committee—and you referred to parental concerns being expressed and so on. Teachers at the coalface are well aware of the problems. At the tertiary level in teacher training, how much of a focus are we seeing there in terms of pedagogy: evaluation techniques, development of approaches to classroom management and relationship building? What sort of focus is there in the teacher training area in really trying to come to grips with these issues?

Mr Fletcher—We have just started the first postgraduate course for teachers in educating boys.

Mr BARTLETT—But doesn't it need to be part of the undergraduate course?

Mr Fletcher—It does, that is true. And is it in Australia? Not as far as I can see.

Mr BARTLETT—How do we tackle that then? How do we raise the focus so that this becomes a mainstream issue in terms of teacher training?

Mr Fletcher—There are probably mechanisms available to the Commonwealth that I am not familiar with in terms of policy development, funding and so on. If you ask the teachers who are in their first two years of teaching what would have been handy, I reckon you would get a terrific mandate for saying, 'What would have been handy would have been to know what to do with that bottom group of boys.'

Mr BARTLETT—Is it your view that we ought to be tackling at that level approaches to pedagogy—evaluation, et cetera—that will focus on addressing the needs of boys and overcoming those circumstances?

Mr Fletcher—Yes, absolutely. I think it is very slow in that area.

CHAIR—Thank you. Time has unfortunately got away with us. I have had one member leave a question behind, so I had better do the right thing by her. Margaret May from Queensland asked if you could expand on the training program for male volunteers. How are they used as role models within the school?

Mr Fletcher—They are put through a 10-hour training program which is about child protection, confidentiality, and child development. These men are not remedial teachers. They go to the school for one hour a week, usually, and they arrange to meet a particular student. There is a coordinator who meets the family and the teachers. The schools nominate the students they think would be helped by this Home Link Program. The schools nominate whichever students they like. Between 70 and 90 per cent of them are boys, because that is what the schools see they can use help with. They are not always, but are often, boys who do not have a father at home. The volunteer is very consistent. It is important that they always turn up and that they are interested in that boy. That is their job. They do not have to teach him anything; all they have to do is be interested and be able to talk to him and listen.

This program is run out of Newcastle and the schools have to pay for this. There is a fee because these things are not funded. The results are exceptional. Behaviour improves, academic performance improves and the parents often report that their behaviour at home improves. There is less anger, less acting out. That is not because we accidentally employed therapists; it is because these men are volunteers. They are bricklayers, bank employees or whatever. They have had a career. They are not all from one group; they are from a range of groups. Some of them are retired. Some of them are just sick of what they are doing and want to do something for the community, and they engage with boys in that way.

CHAIR—I think there was a pilot program like that in Canada, where they went to retirement villages and got male role models from there, and the boys improved about 132 per cent!

Mr Fletcher—Older men are very important. We have been mainly talking about getting fathers involved. One of the things retired men have is the added bonus that, for them, being tough is irrelevant. When you talk to boys, and when you talk to male teachers and men who are in the work force, being tough is still an issue—not that we are all keen to be like Jean Claude van Damme or something. I do an exercise where I get the men teachers out the front, some male volunteers. I say, ‘I want you to just, without talking, line yourselves up—toughest at this end, least tough at the other end.’ Of course they are embarrassed and people laugh, but they do it. If I said, ‘I want you to line yourself up in terms of lung function,’ they would look at me and go, ‘I beg your pardon? You want what?’ When I say ‘tough’ they know exactly what I mean, and boys do too, and they can line themselves up.

If you say that to men who are way out of the work force, who are older men, you would think you had asked them about lung function. They say, ‘Tough? I beg your pardon? What?’ It does not mean anything to them. That is why they are really good to have around boys, because male teachers are still part of that picture, I think—not because they are not wonderful blokes, they are. That is why older men have a big role with boys.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Richard.

Mr SAWFORD—I have one last question about inconvenient data.

Mr Fletcher—What academics hate.

Mr SAWFORD—You mentioned, from academia, Ken Rowe and by inference you mentioned Faith Trent and Malcolm Slade. We have had Professor Peter Hill to give evidence. They put forward a view which I think to most members of the committee, whatever their politics, comes across as a very commonsense sort of approach. Then you get another group who push the orthodoxy. It seems to us that there is almost a 50 per cent slide—50 per cent of academia push the orthodoxy and 50 per cent question it, which is probably a healthy sign in some respects. But I am asking the question about the inconvenient data. For example, I always find that there is a lot of useless debate. For example, it is true that kids from single-parent households get into more trouble than two-parent households. That is a fact. Yet, when that is brought up, there is a great defence because it is seen as an attack on women, who are usually the single parent. I find that a useless debate because these kids still have fathers; the fathers are around somewhere. Do you understand what I am saying? We spend a lot of time, in terms of the data, defending something that is not worth defending or is seen as an attack on women. The child-care debate—

Mr Fletcher—It is also too big. We asked field workers to go and talk to the single women they worked with and ask them two questions: ‘Do you have a boy at school? Does he need a man around?’ If they said, ‘No, we don’t have a boy at school,’ that was it. If they said, ‘Yes, we’ve got a boy at school,’ then they were asked by female field workers, ‘Do you think he needs a man around for things?’ Sometimes they said, ‘No. We’ve had violent relationships. We’ve seen plenty of men. We don’t want to see any more.’ But that was not the main response.

The main response was, 'Yes.' They were then asked, 'What do you want him for?' They had a whole list of specific things. This was not about their love life; this was not about them needing a man. The focus was on the child, and that is the appropriate question: what does the child need? If you stick with that focus you can get out of that general debate about, 'Are you attacking single mums or are you trying to value fathers?'

Mr SAWFORD—I am glad you put that on the record.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We have to close now, but thank you for your time here. We really value your input and the time you have taken to come here and give evidence.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Bartlett**):

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 10.19 a.m.