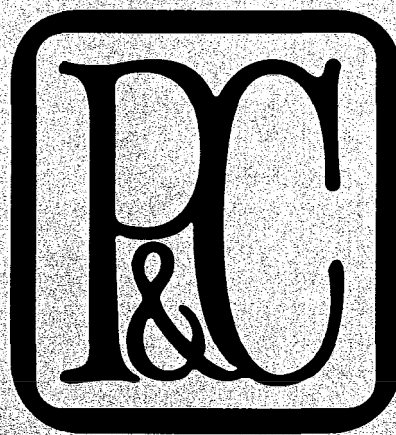


**Federation of Parents and Citizens'
Associations
of New South Wales**

SUBMISSION



**To the
The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and
Training**

**Regarding
Inquiry into the Education of Boys**

19 June 2002

Preamble

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that:

- ◇ All students have the capacity to learn;
- ◇ The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all which is free and secular;
- ◇ Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children.

P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students. P&C Federation's annual conference, attended by representatives of its 2100 affiliate associations, develops policy which is energetically promoted by P&C Federation's democratically elected Council.

Terms of Reference

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.

Federation Recommendations

General Recommendations

The P&C Federation Recommends;

1. That the Federal Government fund a national clearing house to provide an information service on local, inter-state and international initiatives to support the development of professional communities in schools.
2. That the recommendations of the DETYA report *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School*¹ is given consideration in any changes made to the *Framework for Action on Gender Equity in Schooling*.

Improving the Gender Equity Strategy

The P&C Federation Recommends;

- 3 That a greater dialogue occurs between those consultants responsible for gender equity and the school and its community, so that schools can implement relevant action plans to support a gender equity strategy and increase general awareness of gender as an educational and social issue
- 4 That pre-service training and professional development for teachers is mandatory so that all students have the benefit of highly skilled and qualified teachers in addressing gender equity.
- 5 That action research is used more extensively in schools to improve the transparency of gender equity in schools. Action research should also be used to convey information to consultation teams.

Engaging Students

The P&C Federation Recommends;

- 6 That the New South Wales and Federal Governments adopt a strategy for schooling that abandons the traditional primacy of structure and authority in favour of an approach which asserts the primacy of student diversity, student engagement and the joy of learning.

¹ Cherry Collins, Jane Kenway, Julie McCleod, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School*, Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, July 2000

- 7 That schools incorporate new learning pedagogies to engage all students. Specific attention should be given to those that are disadvantaged or have special needs.
- 8 That more emphasis is placed on programs that encourage mutual respect and negotiation between schools and students. Teachers should be encouraged to build better relationships with students, taking account of their individuality, backgrounds and needs.

Introduction

The Federation welcomes the opportunity to comment upon the education of boys across the country. Fundamentally, we are concerned by the momentum that the ‘what about the boys’ debate has generated amongst parents and in the media. Especially as the so called crisis in boys education is based on a simplistic assessment of the educational circumstances of girls as compared with boys. This debate is of national significance and what is needed is a recasting of the issues, to remind those advocates of boy’s education that children are a composite of many parts, their gender identity being only one aspect of this.

The Federation acknowledges the complexity of advantage and disadvantage amongst students that make policy responses to equity issues multifaceted. With respect to this, Federation believes that a ‘which girls, which boys’ is a more fair and equitable way of meeting the needs of all students. The New South Wales gender equity strategy is one that is held with high esteem in our organisation, and we continue to support approaching boy’s education through the lens of gender equity.

The disaffection amongst boys that is popularly referred to by teachers and the general community may be more an indication of the need for educators to adopt a more democratic model of schooling. Taking young people seriously, and adopting the curriculum to suit their needs may decrease the view that boys in fact are a “problem.” The Federation sees this inquiry as an opportunity to reflect upon current educational practices and modes of delivery to engage youth in their education. If boys are provided with opportunities to voice their opinions, they will be able to have a say in their education and provide valuable information and feedback for educators.

In line with the Vinson Inquiry, the Federation supports the development of a national clearing house to enable the development of professional communities and dialogue with regard to pedagogy issues. The bottom line is that the success of any strategy will often depend on the ability of teachers to reflect upon their own class room practices and professional dialogue is required to achieve this goal.

An Equitable Approach to Education

We do not see large scale generalisations about the social, cultural and educational circumstances of boys, as claimed in the mass media, as helpful to the pursuit of an equitable and just education system that services the needs of all students. Gender equity is an issue of significance to the Federation and our policy espouses the importance of an inclusive education for all boys and girls. The Federation is not convinced that a generation of boys is educationally disadvantaged. However we do argue that educational models of schooling need to be rethought to be more responsive and relevant to the needs of all students. We are an organisation that promotes the values of an equitable, pluralistic and democratic education for all students.

Statistics presented in the recent Federal Report *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in Schools and Their Initial Destinations after Leaving School* indicate that it is incorrect to adopt ‘a boys versus girls’ approach to gender equity. Students are a complex amalgam of attributes that include factors such as socio economic status, Aboriginality, sexual orientation, NESB and disability. The fact stands that ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ are not homogenous groups and the assumption that they are denies other aspects of their identities. The above mentioned report makes clear that it is insufficient to ignore the power differentials in assessing the educational performance of boys and girls at school. A comprehensive understanding of disadvantage and how this intersects with gender is required to develop cogent policy responses. For this reason, the Federation will continue to support a gender equity approach or more pertinently a ‘which boys which girls’ approach to resolving boys issues. This way public funding can be directed selectively to those students that really do require remediation.

‘What about the Boys?’

The Federation believes that the central issue in this debate is really about ensuring that schools are receptive to the needs of students. We do acknowledge that the middle years are a target period where attention needs to be honed, to ensure that all students maintain interest in school. The popular perception that boys are disadvantaged in schools, may be more an indication that schools are not responding with appropriate pedagogy to all of their students. It is at this point we are concerned that ‘a what about the boys’ mentality may result in policy shifts that favour a resurgence in an exclusive boys education policy. Federation views this as a problematic course of action, that does not successfully learn from the mistakes of gender reformers who focused exclusively on girls’ education.

We do not believe that student disengagement amongst boys is the consequence of a crisis in masculinities. Instead, we view disengagement to be an issue that can be resolved by making schooling relevant to meet the needs of all students, boys included. The recuperative masculinist politics that blames the education system and the so called feminization of the teaching profession as responsible for boys’ behavioural and educational problems simplifies a number of complex issues. This kind of masculinist politics, while masquerading as advocating for all boys, in fact marginalises a substantial number that may not be of the dominant model of masculinity that this view asserts. Those boys that do not meet the dominant model of masculinity are not met under this ‘what about the boys model’. The ideology that supports a move to boys education, actually suffers from its own internal contradiction as it evidently values certain types of dominant masculinity above others.

For this reason, Federation continues to support a gender equity policy that conceptualises gender, and masculinity, as constructed through the curriculum and other school practices as well as society at large. In this way, all sorts of students needs are met. Increasing suicide rates and disenchantment amongst young boys are issues to be taken seriously as part of the education systems responsibility to care for all students. Yet, the Federation views increased choices for men in terms of their masculinity as more helpful than programs that reinforce dominant and mainstream understandings of what it is to be a man. The former may in fact be more harmful to the needs of young boys.

Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School confirms this stating that a first order disadvantage for educational performance is:

‘being locked into traditional and narrow gender identity and peer group which constrains rather than enables educational choice and flexibility.’²

Further making the recommendation:

‘It was recommended that the DETYA work with states to develop programs that encourage boys and girls to move towards positive and flexible gender identities and peer cultures. Such movement would enrich their interpersonal relationships, enhance their adaptability to economic and social change and thus widen their educational and career choices.’³

The P&C Federation endorses the above recommendation.

² Ibid., 5

³ Ibid., 10

Making Education Relevant

As Faith Trent's research confirms a high percentage of boys feel that school is not a welcoming place. *Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention; The perception of Adolescent Males*⁴ discovers that boys view school as a place that is unsympathetic to their needs as they are viewed as "problems". The boys in the study were in years 9-11 and vocalized a need for more adult learning environments, idealizing TAFE and senior school environments. The reality of their perceptions is aside from the point; at issue is the fact that currently our education system is alienating some students. The boys in Faith Trent's study are disaffected by the middle years, viewing the goals of schooling as incomprehensible with their own needs and aspirations. This cultural rift can be alleviated if schools '*develop and foster environments in which adolescent males are not seen as a problem and are recognised as young adults who have views which need to inform the educative process.*'⁵

This kind of rationale can clearly be seen in the curriculum consultation process that occurred at the NSW Board of Studies between the years 2000-01. Students from both the government and non government sectors participated in the same workshops that teachers attended. The outcome of this was that teachers and the Board alike were impressed by the quality of feed back and the valuable information that informed the Board in its consultation.

This inquiry should take the measure of providing students with significant opportunities to voice their personal views on schooling. Schooling needs to listen to the views of all students to be more relevant and desirable for students to attend. Emphasis needs to be placed on the relationships between schools and the communities they are situated in to understand students learning needs. Schools should be places that develop their teaching practices from bottom up rather than top down, responding to the needs of the particular needs in communities. They should adapt and devise teaching practice to engage young adolescent students and teaching arrangements should assist students to negotiate transitions successfully.⁶ Effectively our education system needs to be more responsive and align the academic and the cultural in a more cohesive way. The Federation supports a more democratic model of schooling that takes young people seriously.

The P&C Federation Recommends;

That the New South Wales and Federal Governments adopt a strategy for schooling that abandons the traditional primacy of structure and authority in favour of an approach which asserts the primacy of student diversity, student engagement and the joy of learning.

That schools incorporate new learning pedagogies specifically to engage those students that are disadvantaged or have special needs.

That more emphasis is placed on programs that encourage mutual respect and negotiation between schools and students. Teachers should be encouraged to build better relationships with students, taking account of their individuality, backgrounds and needs.

⁴ Faith Trent and Malcom Sade, *Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention The perceptions of adolescent males*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, June 2001

⁵ Ibid., xi

⁶ *Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW First Report*, May 2002, NSW Teachers Federation and Federation of P&C Associations of NSW, 41

The New South Wales Gender Equity Framework and the scope for Broader Implementation and Increased Effectiveness

In NSW, the Gender Equity Framework is a positive and practical framework that successfully conceptualises the complex nature of gender identity and the associated issues it presents for school students. It treats gender as an educational issue that is in the best interests of girls and boys alike. However the weakness of this strategy is the fact that it has not been systematically implemented in all schools. This problem is not unique to the gender equity strategy alone. It can be argued that this is a system wide problem with a number of government endorsed strategies. The question of implementation raises the issue of how to manage school strategies and make them accountable. The outcomes of the Vinson *Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW*⁷ have been of use on this point. The Inquiry comments upon the problem of an increasing emphasis on curriculum and assessment to the detriment of class room interaction. The Vinson Inquiry responds to this sort of dilemma by setting up a national clearing house that works to provide an information service on local, inter-state and international initiatives, and practice and research databases. '*The inquiry sees the Clearing house functioning in support of the professional communities in the schools, revitalised by the recommended professional development initiatives.*'⁸

This sort of clearing house is essential to programs such as the gender equity strategy that rely on addressing the culture within a school. This is made a reality through professional communities collaborating and information sharing to improve their pedagogies and school practices.

Our recommendations to the NSW government on the gender equity strategy in a submission late last year to the gender equity unit were:

That a greater dialogue occurs between those consultants responsible for gender equity and the school and its community, so that schools can implement relevant action plans to support a gender equity strategy and increase general awareness of gender as an educational and social issue

That pre-service training and professional development for teachers is mandatory so that all students have the benefit of highly skilled and qualified teachers in addressing gender equity.

That action research is used more extensively in schools to improve the transparency of gender equity in schools. Action research should also be used to convey information to consultation teams.

These recommendations reflect the fact that the success of implementing change at the school level, relies on the professionalism and the professional dialogue of teachers in school communities. Increasing awareness of gender as a social and educational issue cannot be achieved without opportunities for reflection upon pedagogy and teaching practice. This will fundamentally assist the utilisation of equity strategies in schools.

The P&C Federation Recommends;

⁷ op.cit.

⁸ Ibid., 4

That the Federal Government fund a national clearing house to provide an information service on local, inter-state and international initiatives to support the development of professional and communities in schools.

Critical literacy outcomes: what are they and what do they mean?

If the distribution of opportunities and goods is skewed due to the impact of differences such as a student's gender or ethnicity for example, this is of concern. The current perceived literacy crisis amongst boys, may be an inaccurate assessment of the circumstances, when other factors are taken into consideration.

The outcomes of the PISA testing indicate that there are concerns for boys in literacy, with under representation at the highest levels of reading proficiency and over representation at the lowest levels. What is noted in this report is that the greatest challenge to Australian educators '*providing programs that are interesting and stimulating, to help students with poor attitudes to reading to begin to like reading and to want to engage in reading more than they currently do.*'⁹ This reflects our concern that teachers in schools need to develop pedagogy that is more relevant to their school community.

What was also pointed out in PISA was the fact that the relationship between socio-economic background and achievement in reading is higher in Australia than other countries. PISA results suggest that;

*'The continued provision of supplementary programs to improve the skills of students who are struggling, many of whom will have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, needs to be high on our educational agenda...'*¹⁰

If we look to the results in the *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after leaving school*;

*'Taken overall, these results confirm common experience and research findings: a failure to catch on to reading and writing is somewhat more common amongst boys than girls in the earliest few years of schooling. What are the plausible explanations for this phenomenon? The most popular hypothesis is that developmental delay affects a greater proportion of boys than girls. The average boy develops more slowly physically and neuro-physiologically than the average girl and this means that there are more boys at age five or six who are unable to cope with the neuro-physiological demands of literacy. For a while, in the middle primary years, most boys and girls move successfully through outcome levels in English and, in the Western Australian data, by year 7 the very large proportion of boys of whom this is true virtually equals the proportion of girls...'*¹¹

These results confirming literacy underperformance of boys may have less to do with biological differences and be more imbued with cultural preferences. Underperformance in English may be more associated with cultural preferences amongst boys to perform in those subjects that accrue more vocational and long term status. However poor literacy has long term impacts and may restrict later

⁹ PISA in Brief from Australia's Perspective, Australia Council for Educational Research, Victoria 2001, 16

¹⁰ Ibid., 15

¹¹ Collins, Kenway & McCleod, op cit, 46

labour market options. It is imperative that in handling boys education concerns that the education community ask themselves ‘which boys are failing and why?’

Data needs to be disaggregated to service those students who genuinely do require educational assistance and sit in the lowest percentiles in terms of their performance outcomes. The education of boys cannot be considered without reference to disadvantage.

Factors Influencing the Educational performance of Males and Females in School and Their Initial Destinations after Leaving School comments on the disadvantage and makes evident the complexity involved in addressing the factors that affect the education of boys:

First-order disadvantages

These affect students of both genders and can be summarised as follows:

- Being locked into a traditional and narrow gender identity and peer group which constrains rather than enables educational choice and flexibility;
- Coming from circumstances which are characterised by such material disadvantages as unemployment, low incomes and lack of access to resources and support;
- Coming from a grouping which is culturally marginalised and stigmatised;
- Suffering physical and mental under-nourishment and/or ill health or various forms of abuse, including substance abuse;
- Living a life-style which is characterised by high degrees of personal risk particularly of homelessness, even pregnancy and suicide;
- Attending a school which is characterised by any or all of the following: intolerance, harassment and violence; socio economic status, gender and cultural bias; an unwelcoming environment in which students and their families are not valued; and
- Lack of a stimulating and rewarding learning program; the absence of regular diagnostic feedback on progress and opportunities to take responsibility and exercise judgement; an environment which is poorly resourced and thus unable to support the full range of learning and welfare needs.

Second order disadvantages

These include:

- Early school departure with no or few adequate and sustainable opportunities for paid work or further education and training;
- Participation in a narrow range of school subjects which constrain students’ opportunities to develop their full human, social and cultural capital;
- Participation in a disconnected range of school subjects which do not have the potential to convert into sustainable opportunities for paid work or further education and training;
- Inferior performance, but particularly poor performance in the multiple literacies and numeracies which are required for full participation in post-school life;

- Inferior performance in those fields which readily convert into opportunities to access further work, education and training and to lead a full and balanced life; and
- Severely restricted opportunities in post-school working life. These include the opportunities to work, to pursue training and education, to pursue life with a sense of agency and optimism.¹²

In the long term the comparison of performance outcomes is one of many indicators of disadvantage. We see issues of marginalised boys and girls of equal concern. The implications of student's subject choices for their long term social, cultural and economic capital are evidently issues to be monitored. However the Federation sees the issue of servicing the most disadvantaged boys and girls as one that should be high on the educational agenda.

¹² Ibid., 5