INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

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Introduction

This submission is concerned at the present position of many boys in Australian schools, especially in relation to literacy performances as shown in such measures as the Victorian LAP tests and the national literacy test results. The document argues that Australian schools do not adequately address the developmental needs of boys. Also, present strategies for identifying problems through testing and taking action through remedial classes are at best ineffective and at worst damaging. Schools are not resourced to deal adequately with the problems many students face in their daily lives. Teachers are restricted in their practice through a narrow emphasis on literacy and numeracy that fails to acknowledge different cultural and social backgrounds or learning styles. The ideological climate does not allow for the confrontation of issues, such as poverty, that influence the life chances of so many young children (Gilley and Taylor, 1995).

- This submission will discuss gender differences in relation to educational outcomes and suggest early childhood programs and the early years of school should be targeted as areas where high quality, developmentally and culturally appropriate learning environments should be offered.

- Other factors influencing educational outcomes include economic, cultural, social and ethnic factors. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island boys are the most discriminated against through poverty, ethnicity, culture and also systemically within the education and legal structures of the states and territories.

- Emphasis on assessment became an ideological beacon in the 1990s and this trend appears to be increasing. State and national literacy benchmarks are reported as if this is a giant competition (The Age, 26.2.00; The West Australian, 7.6.00). Children diagnosed with difficulties are catered for through remedial programs (eg. Reading Recovery). The majority of children in these classes are boys. Another aspect of present practice is the growing number of boys being labelled as suffering emotional, behavioural or learning problems. Many of these are treated with prescribed drugs. The efficacy of these strategies has to be, at the least, critically researched.

- Strategies for addressing problems boys encounter in the educational system have to acknowledge the diverse nature of the problems. If well resourced, high quality educational institutions can provide programs where there is not a discernible difference between the literacy performance of boys and girls (Kleinfeld, 1998) then an argument can be made that many of our institutions lack appropriate and sufficient resources and do not provide high quality programs. Boys do not perform as well at reading and writing tasks in years 3 and 7 (Victorian LAP tests, 1997)have a lower retention rate in year twelve (The West Australian, 7.6.00) and make up the majority numbers in special reading programs like "Reading Recovery". Boys are more likely to be diagnosed with problems. Our present educational systems need to be scrutinised in relation to quality, resources and programs offered to boys.

Gender differences and educational outcomes

> In developing programs within the Gender Equity Strategy, the sometimes different needs of girls and boys must be recognised. In some areas different provisions will be needed to deal with the different challenges which gender-based disadvantage presents to each sex (NSW Government Advisory Committee, 1994).

The NSW Government Advisory Committee in its Report on Boys' Education (1994) highlighted the need for a Gender Equity Strategy that included programs for boys as well as for girls. The committee found that boys were disadvantaged through gender stereotyping and this disadvantage would continue unless attitudes and expectations within the system changed. Gender stereotyping was also recorded as creating additional problems for school children from certain groups. The groups identified were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, children with learning difficulties, those living in poverty, isolated rural children and those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Gender differences - the brain research

Research is again emphasising the importance of phonemic awareness for children when learning to read (Spear-Swerling, 2000; de Woolfson, 1999;D'Arcangelo, 1999). Recent brain research supports this stress on phonics (Eliot, 1999; D'Arcangelo, 1999) and suggests there are differences between girls and boys in relation to language learning and learning to read and write. Brain imaging patterns of children diagnosed as good and poor readers show differences in brain activation patterns when readers were asked to carry out phonologic analysis tasks (D'Arcangeol, 1999). When men and women were presented with phonologically based tasks there was found to be a difference in brain activation patterns between the two groups. The results however showed that both groups were equally quick and accurate in answering the problems posed showing the same result can be achieved through different routes (D'Arcangelo, 1999). Eliot (1999) discusses the brain and development and states that differences in early language learning have largely disappeared by age five. Differences have been found in the linguistic areas of the brain structure of men and women. The planum temporale in males is asymmetrical and women have proportionally larger Wernicke's and Broca's areas. For women dendrites are more densely packed and longer in Wernicke's area as well. These differences could potentially advantage women in verbal skills and men in visual-spatial skills.

A longitudinal study in America followed 400 five-year-old boys and girls through school in order to study differences between girls and boys ability to learn to read (D'Arcangelo, 1999). The children were tested in numeracy and literacy annually and the researchers found no difference between the girls and boys reading scores. A disquieting factor that did emerge was that boys were 4 times more likely to be identified as having reading problems than the girls. What the data revealed was that the teachers used behavioural criteria for selecting children for further evaluation. Boys' behaviours made them more noticeable and the quieter girls might not be reading but were not identified as having problems.

Whilst genetic influences on literacy achievement has been researched it is difficult to assess these separately from environmental influences. As Spear-Swerling (2000) states:

> Just as poor readers can have difficulties that stem from a variety of cognitive weaknesses (eg., poor phonemic awareness, poor word decoding, or poor

> general language comprehension), those cognitive weaknesses in turn can have a variety of ultimate causes, including lack of preschool literacy experiences, inadequate reading instruction, or hereditary factors (p. 11).

Underachievement by boys

The neurobiological perspective does not provide many answers about children's reading and writing abilities at a time when the gap between boys and girls achievements has become an established pattern in standardised assessment procedures. Educationalists and government policy makers are faced with the challenge that in terms of outcome boys are statistically disadvantaged in the Australian schooling system (eg., Mallabone, 2000; Media release, 2000; The West Australian, 2000; Arndt, 2000; Naidoo, 2000; Kowaluk, 1999; Brown, 1997; Victorian LAP test, 1997; NSW Government Advisory Committee, 1994).

This pattern is reflected in countries like England (de Woolfson, 1999) and America (D'Arcangelo, 1999; Kleinfeld, 1998). In a study that examined the performance of primary school boys in England girls outperformed boys at ages 7, 11 and 14 in literacy measurements. The gender gap started in the earliest years of schooling and widened in the secondary years (de Woolfson, 1999). Research from Newcastle University, reported on in the same paper (de Woolfson, 1999), supported the view that there is little difference in the ability of boys and girls. A number of hypotheses were put forward the first two being:

- Schools are failing to meet the needs of a significant proportion of pupils, ie, a large number of boys.
- Approaches to learning are more conducive to helping girls achieve. Dr. Ken Rowe, University of Melbourne, suggests that "GCSE examinations have increased the requirement for literacy skills and, more particularly, verbal reasoning skills - areas where many girls have an advantage".

Issues identified from this project included lower self esteem amongst primary boys. Boys generally had a more negative attitude to reading, the majority of identified special needs children in reading programs were boys and boys were perceived to be

less motivated, more disruptive and had shorter attention spans (de Woolfson, 1999). Such statements are repeated throughout reports and in newspaper articles that pertain to boys and schooling. Assumptions, and unsupported claims, need to be identified and researched if some of the controversies surrounding boys' education are to be usefully addressed. Assumptions about self esteem and the importance of self esteem is one example.

The English project highlighted self esteem as an issue for boys in the education system but did not include references or evidence. The Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (2000) linked self esteem to behaviour and communication difficulties that could in turn lead to quite drastic long term impacts. Given the significance of the claims, the need to link such statements to researched knowledge is essential Kleinfeld (1998) discusses the research on self esteem in the United States. Measurement problems create difficulties. The research shows no large, consistent gender differences in self esteem at adolescence (p. 33). Kleinfeld cites a number of studies and quotes from Harter:

> There is no evidence in our data for loss of voice amongst adolescent females as a group….The mean levels we obtain (average scores of around 3.0 on a four-point scale) reveal that levels of voice are relatively high among young female adolescents…We have also found no evidence for gender differences favoring males…(p. 33).

That our systems are often reactive and based on possible assumptions underlies another important point and that is the gaps that exist between research, practice, policy makers and the political process. Kleinfeld discusses this politicisation of some of the reporting of the research. Such politicisation would also appear to occur in Australia. Arndt's (2000) article in The Age, on this Senate inquiry, quoted a number of prominent researchers who had experienced very differing reactions to their respective research findings. Professor Cuttance, from Sydney University, was reported as stating a paper on girl's educational progress was not welcomed by the NSW Education Department as it drew attention to the under-performance of boys in NSW schools. Professor Kenway, from the University of South Australia, led a group that was commissioned by DETYA to examine factors influencing educational performance of girls and boys. As of June 17th, the date of the Arndt article, the report

was still to be released. Arndt wrote that the report indicated that gender differences in literacy levels are not as great as public perception would have them.

> The report's discussion of "which boys, which girls" suggests that factors such as socioeconomic and rural backgrounds may be more important than gender in determining educational outcomes (p. 4).

This emphasis on socioeconomic factors over gender was then criticised by Professor Hill from Melbourne University.

The waters are further muddied by an acceptance that such strategies as the Victorian early years' literacy scheme will benefit boys. Where is the evidence for this? The Victorian government's further narrowing of the curriculum base was not greeted enthusiastically by many educationalists (eg. Wilks, 2000) and the West Australian early years approach has been strongly criticised (Corrie, 1999). Of the West Australian experience Corrie has stated that there is an inextricable link between politics and educational reform and when reforms are introduced it is unlikely they will be in the interests of the young children they should serve. The new AIM (Achievement Improvement Monitor, The Age, 14.7.00) newspaper) being introduced into Victoria to replace the LAP (Learning Assessment Project) tests has been criticised by parents and academics like Professor Timms from England. One criticism Timms made was that there is no research evidence to support the idea that the homework strategy in the AIM, a strategy that has repercussions for family life, can even be considered potentially beneficial. (Radio National, 2000). Reading through the literature the following features would appear to be agreed to:

- Differences between girls and boys potential are small or negligible
- Females have an advantage in reading achievement and writing skills
- Males are over-represented in special education classes
- Differences are grounded in both biological and cultural differences
- Boys are more likely to be labelled as having problems
- Boys are more likely to be suspended from school
- Boys participation rates are lower
- Boys retention rates are lower (less completed years at school)

Gender differences in educational outcomes exist even if there is little difference in potential. The patterns of disadvantage revolve around social and emotional circumstances as well as test results. Social images of boys would appear to have a detrimental effect on attitudes towards them and expectations of their abilities. If the behaviour of boys leads to discriminatory practices within schools should the child change or the institution? Within this scenario there are members of groups that are traditionally disadvantaged in the institutions of our society. Many of these are boys and therefore suffer double disadvantages.

Factors influencing the educational outcomes of boys

Economic/Social

In Australia there is a growing trend in income inequality (Gilley and Taylor, 1995). This trend has now been present for some twenty years and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence sees potential dangers in this growing divide (Gilley and Taylor, 1995).

> Some children will be growing up in families where a high level of income and security prevail; for others, low and insecure incomes are a continuing feature of life. In the long term, this polarisation has the potential to produce markedly unequal life chances for children and to reduce social cohesion. Whether it does depends on whether we, as a community, are able to counteract inequality not only through the tax and social security systems, but through our health, education and community services (McClelland in Gilley and Taylor, 1995: iiv).

This longitudinal study being carried out by the Brotherhood of St Laurence did not specifically look at schooling in the early years but did cite studies that examined children and poverty and school performance. Ongoing poverty over a number of years was found to have an effect on reading skills (Smith and Carmichael, cited in Gilley and Taylor, 1995). Of special relevance in the study was the research carried out on children's development and behaviour (pp. 42-43). In all but one of eight developmental tasks children from low-income families scored lower than more affluent peers. The statistical difference was not significant in two instances. Mothers in low-income families were also more likely to rate their child's temperament as

more difficult than average (p.50). As behavioural criteria is used by teachers to identify children who need further evaluation of reading skills this perception of behaviour could have an impact on the school's perceptions of the child.

In a recent study by the Jesuit Social Services (Vinson, 1999) findings from research overseas and in Australia were discussed. Vinson reports that:

> A number of American studies indicate that the number of complete years of schooling is the most important predictor of good health (p. 15).

Vinson also cites Reynolds and Ross (1998) who state an individual's socioeconomic status depends on years at school, work and economic resources. Childhood poverty and retention rates at school are significant aspects of measuring success in the schooling system. Given this comments made by Connell and White in 1989 still have veracity:

> The mainstream education system's academic curriculum, its system of competitive assessment, and the way school and colleges stream, select and narrow their offerings, all work to produce social inequalities and disadvantage the children of the poor (p. 110).

Cultural factors

Australia is a country of diversity and many children entering the schooling system have English as an additional language. Language and culture are often interlinked in the research literature (Vygotsky, 1978; Halliday, 1975). The relationship between language and culture is related to the child's entering the world of adult culture as well as the different social meanings that exist in specific developmental contexts. Diversity and culture are therefore broad terms that encompass language, ethnicity, social class, economic group and gender as well as particular family and community cultural patterns.

In the past language and cultural diversity have been widely discussed as issues to consider in regards to inequality in education (eg. Bisseret, 1979; Holt, 1973). Bisseret (1979) wrote of recorded popular language forms and related language practice to power relations and concrete and symbolic domination by one social group over another. Holt (1973) conceded that education might successfully help an individual escape a working class or poverty stricken life but considered problems of

class inequity and poverty to be complex problems that needed to be addressed at a larger societal level.

Inequities within our systems exist with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children living in poverty, children from language backgrounds other than English and children with disabilities being most disadvantaged. Campagna-Wildash (1998) still puts girls on this list of disadvantaged but this is not supported by the majority of the studies or the assessment data available. That Campagna-Wildash at the time of making the statement about girls' disadvantage was working at a senior management level with the SA Department of Education, Training and Development and developing curriculum resources may be of concern. As well as language and culture and systemic inequalities in our social systems there is also the situation that within the cultural world of childhood boys and girls, at certain ages, tend to inhabit gender segregated worlds for much of the time.

There is research on gender differences in play behaviours (eg. Powlishta, 1998; Paley, 1987). Paley carried out lengthy observations of children she knew well and ended up being more tolerant towards the boys and more worried about some aspects of the girls play (1987). Powlishta states that gender segregation leads to acceptance of gender stereotypes and that teachers interactive styles often encourage compliance and dependence in girls and assertiveness in boys (1998). James, Jenks and Prout (1999) also consider this difference within schools and comment that structural constraints within schools reward girls for docile and nurturing behaviours whilst boys are validated for more boisterous behaviours. This difference in behaviours has led some to suggest that girls compliant behaviour is more highly valued and schools and classrooms have undergone a "feminisation" in terms of what is considered to be desirable behaviours and learning styles (Franklin, 2000).

Present strategies

Early childhood experiences

Victoria's reaction to the national literacy skills benchmark was to inject more money into early childhood (The Age, 26.2.00). This money will be used to attempt to boost

pre-school enrolments to help "in the fight against falling literacy and numeracy standards" (Naidoo, 2000). Whilst there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of the early years the situation is much more complex than an injection of funds into existing settings. One issue is that of quality. Research into quality indicators in early childhood programs has given examples of children from high quality educational settings showing higher scores on standard language tests (Melhuish, Mooney, Martin and Lloyd, 1990; Goelman and Pence, 1988) and standard measures of vocabulary comprehension (Schliecker, White and Jacobs, 1991).

Despite the quality research indicating less structured programs with higher levels of spontaneous play facilitate better academic outcomes at school (Jacobs, Selig and White, 1992) there is a growing trend to further separate early childhood programs by moving pre-schools into the schooling system. This has happened in Western Australia with potentially harmful effects (Corrie, 1999) and there is a national campaign by the Australian Education Union for pre-schools in other states to move into the schooling system (2000). The children who are disadvantaged in these settings are the boys who are not yet five. They are not such mature language users as the girls (Eliot, 1999) and there are gender differences in play and behaviour that suggest boys are more constrained in certain circumstances, like a classroom setting, at too young an age. Elliott (1999) has studied the number of non-parental care and education settings the pre-school child encounters over the week. With restricted pre-school services and the cost of child care these are many and varied. Harrison and Ungerer (2000) recently highlighted the need for differing settings to be researched.

Quality, type of setting, numbers of settings and access to services are all issues in the early years. Appropriate curriculum is also a question. As state governments around the country invest in curriculum documents there is an issue that these will not reflect present research knowledge about programs that best facilitate language and literacy growth and allow for individual, cultural, social, language, ethnic and gender difference. As well as these considerations early childhood is not the panacea that it is sometimes presented to be and good beginnings need to be followed by high quality schooling programs. While noting that pre-school can promote cognitive development in the short term Vinson (1999) sums up the research:

> Moreover, preschool experience appears to be a stronger force in the lives of low-income rather than advantaged children. The latter can often, as a result of preschool attendance, achieve at a level nearer that attained by their more advantaged counterparts, but most of the effects seem to diminish over time (p. 16).

Intervention

Intervention strategies have become a part of the present system of highly organised curriculum, testing, reporting and identification of children "at risk". In an age where children are more supervised and tested than ever before assessment and national standards and benchmarks have become normal practice. Victoria has just introduced the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) which will replace the old Learning Assessment Project (LAP) tests. There are five components of the AIM:

- Classroom assessment
- Homework guidelines
- Comprehensive reporting
- Learning improvement program
- Statewide testing (McKinnon, 2000).

The education minister has stated the AIM will lift standards across the state.

> Aim is a comprehensive program designed to boost student learning, improve teaching skills and better inform parents… Importantly, AIM will help identify students having difficulty at school and provide the expertise to put their education back on track (Delahunty cited in McKinnon, 2000;1).

Reading the descriptions of the components it is difficult to see how AIM is not just more of the same system. A system that in regards to boys has been found wanting. The identification of students at risk is a major aspect of the testing as stated by the minister and reiterated in another article in the Education Times (13.7.00). The children identified most at being at risk are boys. Intervention strategies like "Reading Recovery" are mainly used for boys. The research literature (D'Arcangelo, 1999; de Woolfson, 1999; Kleinfeld, 1998) suggests there may not be a difference in the potential performance of girls and boys. The underachievement of boys is a

concern. If boys are more alienated from the present system than girls an argument could be put forward that there needs to be a change in the system not more testing, assessing, reporting and identification of difficulties. Especially at a time when the curriculum has been correspondingly narrowed to have an even stronger literacy and numeracy focus. There are those arguing that special boys programs and more male teachers in the lower levels should become a priority Carvel, 1998; NSW Government Advisory Committee, 1994).

Literacy and numeracy testing is competitive and for many young children competition is emotionally, socially and culturally inappropriate. The language used to describe the processes, the importance placed on results and the media's approach make such an approach to schooling, especially in the early years, problematic. Victoria was greatly concerned to find that year three students lagged behind most states in reading skills (The Age, 26.2.00). NSW came "first". In WA where 87.9 percent of students reached the minimal standards for reading, compared with the national figure of 86.9 per cent, only 54.4 percent of indigenous students passed. The national figure for indigenous students was 66.1 per cent (The West Australian, 7.6.00). A significant number of boys have been labelled as suffering behavioural problems and this has resulted in an unprecedented number of young children being prescribed drugs like Ritalin (ref**at work). The number of children on drugs for conditions like ADD and the number of children identified as having behavioural disorders is disturbing. Are we encountering a new health problem or are present institutions of learning too restrictive to allow for varied development and other differences. As research literature links behaviour problems and low literacy this is a pressing issue.

Curriculum

What is curriculum? Who should make decisions about the content and processes of curriculum practices? Nutbrown (1994) discusses children as active learners and the importance of interactions with knowledgable educators. These educators have roles and responsibilities. They must plan the curriculum, their own role and according to the needs of the children. The educator organises time, space and materials to promote learning. Observations are needed in order to understand individual children, the

dynamics of the group and how they are interacting with the organised environment. Interaction to build relationships, scaffold learning, communicate with colleagues and discuss work is important. Other words Nutbrown uses are monitor, assess, record, communicate, act and reflect. The children and educators in such a system are active agents participating in the learning process. The present system in Australia seems more akin to the description given by Holt (1991) in Learning all the time. Nutbrown quotes a passage where Holt uses an assembly line as a metaphor for education:

> Down the conveyor belt comes rows of empty containers of sundry shapes and sizes. Beside the belts is an array of pouring and squirting devices, controlled by employees of the factory. As the containers go by, these workers squirt various amounts of different substances - reading, spelling, math, history, science - into the containers.
>
> Upstairs management decides when the containers should be put on the belt, how long they should be left on, what kinds of materials should be poured or squirted into them and at what times and what should be done about containers whose openings (like pop bottles) seem to be smaller than the others, or seem to have no opening at all.
>
> When I discuss this metaphor with teachers, many laugh and seem to find it absurd. But we need only to read the latest rash of school-improvement proposals to see how dominant this metaphor is. In effect, those official reports all say, we must have so many years of English, so many years of math, so many years of foreign language, so many years of science. In other words, we must squirt English into these containers for four years, math for two or three and so on. The assumption is that whatever is squirted at the container will go into the container and, once in, will stay in (Quoted in Nutbrown, 1991;142).

Strategies for success

From this brief and general discussion of present strategies there are a number of aspects of present practice that could be challenged. Three of these points are:

- However important early childhood experiences may be high quality educational experiences need to continue to be accessible

- Poor quality early childhood experiences can have a detrimental affect
- There is a need to research present practices and assumptions about:
  - Intervention practices
  - Boys behaviour

To develop this discussion and give an example of different ways of thinking and acting Wilks presents some research findings on assessment philosophy and method as practiced in Victorian schools and pre-schools.

Assessment - research findings

Anne Wilks

Collaborating with parents to support their children's learning through the assessment process.

Through collaboration with parents in the assessment process, children can be supported in their learning by both teachers and parents, each of whom may bring a different perspective on the child to the process.

1. Assessment of children

"Assessment of children" in this paper refers to 'studying the child for a purpose' - that purpose being to support and promote their learning.

2. Working in partnership with parents

A "partnership" with parents involves the sharing of knowledge, skills and expertise. In a partnership parents and educators bring something different but of equal value to the relationship (Pugh & DeAth,1984).

<u>Looking back</u>

Changes to the purposes of assessment often went hand in hand with changes to the philosophy of teaching at the time. In the 1960's and prior to this time, tests were norm-referenced enabling the teachers to rank individuals or group them in relation to a norm population (Perrone,1976). This information was then used to make judgements, make comparisons, for screening, labelling, grouping or streaming. These judgements usually resulted in a self fulfilling prophecy with low results occurring because of low teacher expectations, and the reverse, where high teacher expectations of the top stream children and good teaching usually resulted in high achievement (Good & Brophy,1991).
The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1991) in its position statement on assessment highlighted the limitations of a single mark being used to make decisions for children. They also questioned what a mark actually tells us about children's learning or development. Perrone (1976) also questioned whether norm referencing provided any useful information about individual children or the class as a whole. The intentions of these practices were usually honourable however, we can look back with hindsight at the inappropriateness of some of these assessment practices and motives (NAEYC, 1991).

Historically 'child study' was the assessment approach used in the early childhood field to understand children as individuals (Weber,1984). In Australia, observation or child study was the approach reported to be used with young children in kindergartens (Burton 1996). Initially, for many early childhood teachers in Australia the term 'assessment' referred to something quite different from child study. Assessment was associated with measuring performance against a standard while child study implied observing a child and looking for emerging abilities and interests (Halliwell, 1993). This was possibly because in Australia the term assessment was used only when referring to assessing or testing children who appeared to require additional support or who

had a special need. Beaty (1994) believed that a great deal of assessment of children at this time was based on what was wrong with the child.

In the 1970s the purpose of assessment started to be understood differently. Instead of assessment information being used to quantify knowledge and development, it started to be used to support teachers in facilitating the next step in the teaching and learning process.

Ballard (1991) suggested that assessment should be driven by an intention to change a child's behavior, not to classify or compare children's behavior with a normative model. He also suggested that assessment and teaching should proceed together. In this way assessment would provide a structure for looking closely at children's learning and identifying ways forward.

The changes in assessment were summed up at this time by Daly (1989:19) who stated:

> *The notion of assessment has finally changed from that of measurement of skills to the gathering of layers of information which, together, provide rich and rigorous data about children's development. This data will establish not only where children are 'at' but also will assist in their future learning.*

A significant change to assessment then came with the change towards gathering richer data on individuals using a broad range of assessment techniques and covering a range of contexts.

<u>Looking in</u>

Another view of assessment has started to be realised where assessment has been found to have the potential to support children in their learning by informing themselves and others about possible directions for learning and teaching.

Within the early childhood field many researchers talked of the benefits of assessment when it is linked with teaching and learning:-

- Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992 : 23) describe the important role that assessment has in informing learning and teaching :

  Assessment of children's development and learning is absolutely necessary if teachers are to provide curriculum and instruction that is both age appropriate and individually appropriate .

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1988) in their position statement on assessment have stressed the importance of ongoing assessment of children's learning and development as essential for appropriate curriculum planning and individual instruction.

- Katz (1989) also recognises the potential strength that assessment possesses in connecting children's understandings with what is taught. She believes that assessment is able to affect curriculum decisions about what is taught, how children learn, and when it is best learned.

- Gibbons (1991) has also shown the important relationship that assessment has with curriculum by suggesting that good assessment procedures are those which give teachers specific information to help in planning future learning experiences.

- Anning (1993) elaborates on this idea by highlighting the active role of teachers and children in the process. She suggests that an educationally sound assessment system is one which alerts both teachers and learners to what the learners can do, so that they can move on to what they might do next in their learning process. These new assessment processes just highlighted reflect the complex and integrated nature of assessment. The new assessment brought about a change in the type of information that was collected. Great importance was placed on assessment as a

means of *seeing what and how individual children learn* (Genishi, 1992 :28).

Puckett and Black (1994) describe the assessment process as having moved from the traditional model of teach - learn -assess, to become an authentic process where teaching, learning and assessment are ongoing and intertwined.

These processes represented a change in the role for the teacher. Rather than prompting for the desired responses, the teacher now became involved in scaffolding the child's learning around the child's own areas of interest.

The changed roles of adults and children in the assessment processes also reflected changes in the view of children as active constructors of their own learning and recognised the teachers as active facilitators in the process. Each individual was studied in order to provide the optimum educational environment (Seefeldt, 1990). These assessment practices fitted with a rationalists view of children as goal seeking, thinking individuals, who construct their own knowledge. Learning was viewed as internal and individual (Seefeldt, 1990). This change in assessment linked with the interest in the emergent curriculum, where the curriculum would develop from children's interests and thinking. The emergent curriculum complemented and extended upon the core curriculum.

The new role of the teacher in the assessment process required them to design an educative environment and collaborate with children by scaffolding their efforts to master new skills. Teachers were now required to identify the child's potential to learn, in order to plan learning activities which would further the child's development (Berk & Winsler, 1995). The new approach required teachers to observe children more closely than ever before to understand their thinking.

The ongoing challenge for teachers is to determine the best way of interacting in a facilitative manner within the child's zone of proximal development to help meet their learning needs. Vygotsky believed that adults carry much of the responsibility for making sure

children's learning is maximised by actively leading them along the pathway. Berk and Winsler (1995) also recognised the importance of guided participation, or scaffolding, as forms of collaboration that lead to internalised mental processes. Vygotsky, discussed an educationally sound assessment practice as one which alerts teachers, parents and children to what they might do next in the teaching and learning process. He highlighted the importance of working within the child's zone of proximal development or their 'buds' of development, rather than only examining their final 'fruits of development' (Berk & Winsler,1995).

Collaborating with parents as part of the assessment process

Teachers traditionally were responsible for assessing children and then responsible for reporting the outcomes of that assessment to parents and the children themselves. This form of reporting is now being challenged in the current literature on assessment. Teachers in early childhood field and in schools are being encouraged to use a more collaborative approach.

Collaborative assessment provides the opportunity for strong positive relations to be developed between teachers, children, parents and the community. The process of collaboration is valuable as well as having positive outcomes for all those involved. Puckett and Black (1994) describe collaborative assessment as the sharing of information and decision making between a range of parties. Collaboration in the assessment process can take place between the teacher and child; between teachers; between children; between the teacher and parents; and between teachers, parents, children, and the community.

Looking forward

How then can we construct this partnership around assessment ?

This seminar will explore how to 'look beyond' parental involvement towards a model of 'partnership' with parents, where teachers

share the decision making during the processes of teaching, learning and assessment.

The benefits of parental involvement in their children's education has been well established. The nature and type of this involvement varies considerably. For a long time in Australia, teachers have relied on "parent involvement" which often places parents in a 'helper' role rather than being involved in any real decision making for their children.

David (1993) says we have also moved away from the negative connotations of 'educating parents' and parents are recognised as bringing their own strengths to their children's learning.

> *Services are expected to provide support and to work in partnership with parents. However, the need for educators to offer articulate accounts of the curriculum and play methods in early childhood settings as part of their accountability is still a central issue*
> (David 1993:167).

Informing parents about the program is still seen as very important. Parents need to be well informed to be able to contribute in the process. The proverb 'knowledge is power' is true for parents in early childhood settings.

Several researchers have recognised the potential that assessment has for building a partnership and collaborating with parents :

- Pugh (1985) identifies collaboration as the highest level where parents are able to contribute to the assessment of their children's needs, and the planning of a suitable program or course of action for their child. We now have the opportunity to extend collaboration with parents to include the work of assessment.
- The Australian Council for State School Organisations and The Australian Parents' Council Inc. (1996:3) have recognised the potential of forming a partnership in the assessment process:

  > *Assessment and reporting are critical activities through which this partnership around learning can be constructed*

and maintained. They can be dynamic interactions when the arrangements and contexts allow all participants to learn about students performance in order to improve what students learn, think, make and do.

- Bloom (1995) suggests that assessment could be the catalyst for greater collaborative decision making and action from a much wider group of parents which could result in feelings of empowerment and commitment.

  Collaborative assessment can open up opportunities for parental involvement where parents can be seen as active collaborators in their own children's learning and development. Assessment is one area where parents can make a valuable contribution, they see and interact with their children in many situations, and have a great deal of knowledge about them.

  Sharing the responsibility

  Kearney (1992) believes that collaboration in the assessment process requires teachers to move toward a much broader understanding of sharing responsibility and ownership within the processes. Collaborative assessment provides the opportunity for strong positive relations to be developed between teachers, children, parents and the community.

  The benefits of a 'learning connection' between home, early childhood setting, and the school have been highlighted by Mc Gilp and Michael (1994) in this connection, all parties work together with a shared sense of responsibility and shared commitment to children and their education.

  Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt (1993) suggest that the partnership between home and school should seek to encourage a shared commitment to the success of the individual child and create an ethos of understanding and openness in home-school relations. They discuss the importance of extending the concept of parents becoming involved in teachers' work, towards

teachers expecting that their programs will complement and fit along side the child's home life.
Stonehouse (1988) also suggests that teachers collaborate with parents. By having the insights about the child that others can provide, teachers can work effectively and appreciate the child more fully.
Newman (1995) emphasises the importance of mutual understanding, respect and trust to be the basis of a solid collaborative connection between teachers and parents.

How to maximise the contribution that parents can make during the assessment processes

Parents have a unique experience of their child and this can be used to modify and enrich the insights of the teacher (Hegarty, 1993). In turn, professionals can help parents to look in more detail at what their child can do and share what they know about child development, and curriculum provision (Bruce, 1987).

The role taken by parents needs to be an active one to have these benefits otherwise parents may have their role delegated to that of receivers of information. Parents can be effective partners only if professionals take notice of what they say and how they express their needs, and treat their contribution as intrinsically important (Pugh, 1985).
Apple and Beane (1995) highlight the importance of parents having a substantive involvement in their child's education. They believe that parents are more likely to be involved if they can exercise real decision making that directly affects the future of their children's school and their lives.
For collaboration between teachers and parents to be worthwhile, there needs to be a clear understanding of the roles played by all parties throughout the assessment process, as well as an understanding of the process itself.

> *Parents' roles in school settings are rarely discussed, making their responsibilities unclear and making it likely that they will only be called upon when their child is having a problem.*
> (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996 :195).

When teachers take a collaborative perspective it turns parents into partners and it can reduce the work load of the teacher. A strength-focused approach to assessment provides opportunities for the collaborative assessment to also have positive outcomes for all (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996).

By using a strength focus approach the assessment will have the ability to enhance the parent- child relationship. When weaknesses are focused on, there is the potential for assessment to have a negative affect on the parent- child relationship.

Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, (1996:195) outline the benefits of collaborative assessment to teachers :

> *A school culture built on the idea of collaboration leaves teachers free to discuss parents' interests and responsibilities for participation and to incorporate them into the classroom without feeling threatened by their presence. This strategy allows parents to define their participation and involves them in determining the boundaries between home and school, rather than being told where they ought to be. Moving toward a system that encourages inclusion, participation and collaboration is the ultimate goal.*

Rosenthal & Young Sawyers conclude that there are several barriers to effective collaboration :

> *lack of teacher training in interpersonal skills, lack of family friendly school programs and difficulty in focusing on family and educational strengths act as barriers to effective collaborative systems.* (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996 :195).

Katz (1993) reinforces the appropriateness of the community's and parents' preferences being used to set the goals of education. However, she believes that it is the special expertise of professional educators that should be used when addressing the questions of when and how those goals can best be implemented.

If assessment information is shared with all parties, each person they will have the information needed to contribute their perspective on the future directions for teaching and learning. For collaborative assessment to work well there needs to be a shared understanding of the aims, purposes and benefits of the process as well as a shared commitment to the task. Partnerships with parents requires time and energy and it is important that parents are given the opportunity to be involved at whatever level they prefer (De'Ath, in Pugh, Aplin, De'Ath, & Moxon, 1987). Some parents may not have the confidence or the desire to be involved
and some teachers may not have the skills or commitment to carry out the process. The possibilities for collaborative assessment will therefore depend on the skills of the teacher as well as the confidence of the parents. Pugh (1985) recognises that new skills will be required for teachers to successfully undertake collaborative assessment. Teachers will need to take on the role of facilitators and enablers so parents will have sufficient information to make real contributions in the process. There is a real skill in making parents feel welcome and valued in the assessment process.

<u>Recognising the valuable contributions that others have to make in the process</u>

- Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised the importance of links being made between the home setting and other settings such as the school, early childhood centre and the community. He saw this collaboration as having a major influence on the child's development.

- Pugh and De'Ath (1984) and a'Beckett (1988) outlined the benefits of collaboration for parents and the community they found that the quality and quantity of the involvement experienced by a parent may have a lasting effect on the parents feeling of investment in and attachment to their child.
- Hegarty (1993) believes that although assessment can be one of the most difficult aspects of home-school relations, it is also one where close collaboration yields benefits.
- Willis (1980) encourages professionals to use input from significant others in children's lives and incorporate the learning that occurs outside the early childhood centre or school to build a more complete picture of the child.
- Halliwell (1993) also suggests attending to the whole child in the context of home and community to gain a rich source of data on which to base plans for future learning.
- Gestwicki (1992) outlines how input from the community as well as the parents can make a difference to the cultural and individual relevance of the programme and curriculum offered to young children.
- The positive benefits of home- school relations have been outlined by Fox, Hanline, Vail and Galant, (1994 :249) who state :

  > *Early childhood education recognises that positive home-school relations can improve child competence, encourage growth and development of parents, improve the quality of the childcare services, and increase the resources of the program. Developmentally appropriate programs identify, accept, and respect the values and diversity of families as well as children.*

- Bastiani (1993:104) also recognises the importance of the type of relationship that is developed. He states :

  > *When teachers, parents and pupils work together, in a spirit of practical partnership, then not only do pupils gain in obvious ways, but there are also benefits of*

achievement and relationship that are both lasting and transferable to other aspects of the children's learning and development.

The type of collaboration that takes place in the assessment process is dependent on the role that is made available and taken by teachers, parents, children and the community during the process.
Personal philosophies may vary in the belief about the extent of involvement of others in the assessment process. There may also be debate about and nature of this involvement.
The assessment that is undertaken in schools and early childhood centres and the type of involvement in the process by teachers, parents, children and the community is largely dependent on who controls the process and the degree to which that person or persons are willing to share the process with others (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Looking forward

The challenge then comes to view assessment positively as a way :

1. To integrate assessment as a natural part of the teaching and learning process.
2. To use assessment to build on strengths and promote learning.
3. To work collaboratively in partnership with children, parents and the community.

1. To integrate assessment as a natural part of the teaching and learning process

1.1 Assessment needs to take place while the children are playing/learning rather than being a separate exercise to 'measure' children's skills or achievements.
1.2. Careful observations of children will provide the relevant information from which to scaffold their learning.

1.3. If assessment is integrated with learning it will be directly related to the child and build on what the child is doing.
1.4. Integrated assessment will help the teacher see and understand each child's thinking and their unique learning style.
1.5. Observation of the child in the learning process will provide the teacher with ideas for planning and extension.
1.6. The child's interests, strengths and abilities, also any areas needing support will be highlighted.
1.7. Integrated assessment will provide a means for the teacher to reflect on their own teaching.

2. To use assessment to build on strengths and promote learning**.**
2.1. The teacher will be able to provide appropriate extensions, experiences and challenges for individuals.
2.2. Because of its positive focus, the assessment process will contribute to a sense of self worth.
2.3. Assessment can lead to the development of special strengths.
2.4. The teacher may uncover how the child learns and improve the match between how knowledge and skills are 'taught' and 'learnt'.
2.5. The teacher becomes an 'active interventionist' in facilitating learning.
2.6. Feedback can be provided in a positive and timely manner.
2.7. Reflection is valued in the assessment process so opportunities for reflection to take place will be provided.

3. To work collaboratively in partnership with children, parents and the community.
3.1. Discussions with children will help gain a greater understanding on their perspective of learning.
3.2. The teacher will gain a greater understanding of how children construct their knowledge.
3.3. The role of parents will be valued and they will be given a meaningful role.

3.4. Parents will be empowered with real decisions about their children.
3.5. The context of home and community will be valued as a rich source of information for enhancing learning.
3.6. Contextual and cultural influences will become an important component of learning.
3.7. Learning will be embedded in the 'real life' experiences of the child.
3.8. The richness and diversity of people, and natural resources from the community will be used to enrich the curriculum

Looking beyond

A portfolio approach to assessment 'looks beyond' the traditional methods of recording and reporting and is one positive way that assessment information can be shared between children, teachers and parents.

Portfolios *are purposeful collections of children's work that illustrate their efforts, progress, and achievements*. (Meisels, 1995:2). Portfolios and profiles are not something that the teachers put together at the end of the day, but rather are a working ongoing documentation of learning put together by teachers, children and parents. The use of portfolios, or profiles, can provide opportunities to link learning, teaching and assessment in the context of real situations which immediately informs teaching. Meisels (1995) also points out the benefit of documentation within portfolios being used to integrate instruction and assessment. Forster and Masters (1996) believe that effective collaboration lies at the heart of the working portfolio. Both the process and the products of learning are valued in the portfolio philosophy, as well as the active participation of the teacher, children and the parents.

Eaton and Shepherd (1998) believe that the thoughtful display and documentation of children's work is "the cornerstone of the sharing process of learning". They suggest incorporating a range of

documentation processes such as photographs, anecdotes, videotapes, audio tapes into portfolios.

Meisels (1995) agrees that portfolios can become a medium for sharing meaning between child, teacher, parents, peers and members of the community.

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Conclusion

In conclusion the paper returns to the circumstances that face boys as a generic group within Australian schools.

- Differences between girls and boys potential are small or negligible.

Schools are failing boys as a group. The research would suggest that though there may be cultural and bilogical differences between girls and boys these factors do not affect potential success at schooling tasks like reading and writing. The difference between the research and the test and assessment results therefore needs to be reseached.

- Females have an advantage in reading achievement and writing skills.

When assessments are examined from the US, England and Australia there are differences mainly in writing skills. The renewed emphasis on phonics and phonological tasks is one that should be revisited. There is a danger here that any reactive response to this research could further disadvantage Aboriginal children if schools are not sufficiently aware and skilled in differentiating between 'dialect difference' and real literacy learning difficulties (Hanlen, 1998). The pattern presented here also suggests more research is needed into early language development, the relationship between spoken language, reading and writing and the relationship between language and culture.

- Males are over-represented in special education classes.

The use of special education programs and their efficacy is not known. There is a need for consistent reviews across schools and states in order to establish patterns and ask questions like which children benefit from these programs? Are some programs more successful than others? Are there long term trends?

- Differences are grounded in both biological and cultural differences

That differences exist and educational outcomes show a differential suggests there is a case for examining present practice. Areas of practice that could be studied are early childhood experiences as they are consistently identified in the literature as being of significance, transition to school practices and the idea that more flexible delivery of programs might give young boys a greater freedom to mature and adjust.

- Boys are more likely to be labelled as having problems
- Boys are more likely to be suspended from school
- Boys participation rates are lower
- Boys retention rates are lower (less completed years at school)

The last four points show a disturbing pattern that indicates serious failure on the part of our schooling institutions. These issues are complex and involve social images of children, societal expectations and developmental needs of children from diverse backgrounds. Educational reform is part of the political process and the most disadvantaged in our schools, the poor and the Indigenous children, reflects the wider social divide that exists in Australia in the year 2000. Systems of competitive assessment, narrow curriculum and a punitive approach to children's behaviours support and entrench endemic disadvantage.

This paper has presented the case that there are many areas where practice would appear to have developed from assumption rather than research knowledge. Some areas of potential research have been suggested. The other area of research that could be positively pursued is the question of self-esteem. Research findings could not be found to support statements about self-esteem made in newspaper reports. There is a common sense belief in the significance of social/emotional well being. As cultural psychology becomes more sophisticated methods could be developed to establish a meaningful research base for practice.

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