

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT,
EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The fundamental basis of ACSSO's policies on equity is that all children have the capacity to learn, and that schools should provide safe and supportive learning environments for all children to learn, with the aim of achieving equity in outcomes across social groups. A fundamental premise of ACSSO's equity policy, stated in our Gender Equity Policy, is that the capacity to learn is not determined by gender.

ACSSO believes that boys are now outperformed by girls in most academic aspects of schooling, largely as a result of the identification of barriers placed in the way of the education of girls and the implementation of some successful strategies to break them down. This process has been facilitated by general changes in Australian society in relation to the status of women. ACSSO believes that any programs to improve educational outcomes for boys must be based on equity in gender relationships.

ACSSO believes that it is vital that schools aim to equip all young people for fruitful lives as individuals, employees, and citizens. High level literacy and communication skills will be required for success in all aspects of life, and it is vital that boys, as well as girls, develop them. ACSSO therefore does not believe that narrow vocational pathways are a satisfactory means of providing options for boys. Instead, ACSSO believes that all young people, irrespective of their gender, need to develop a broad range of skills, knowledges and understandings to prepare them for their future lives, including in vocational pathways. There is no justification for the argument that boys cannot deal with literature, or other aspects of the curriculum, any more than we would accept limits on what areas of the curriculum girls can handle.

ACSSO believes that the debate over what is biological and what is socially constructed is of little relevance to the tasks of schools. Whatever the outcomes of this area of research, schools have to accept students with the biological and social backgrounds that they bring to school, and help them develop in socially acceptable directions. We note that the effects of socio-demographic factors on the differences in outcomes show that social construction is important. We further argue that schools have a significant influence in the development of the social attitudes and values of students. ACSSO therefore rejects arguments which suggest that we should abandon policies of co-education, which we believe, have been to the great benefit of both boys and girls. This does not mean that experimentation with single sex classes may not be useful.

ACSSO believes that the specific learning needs of boys and girls require further research. ACSSO believes that both girls and boys, as groups, have a wide range of learning styles, with substantial overlap. The educational solution is therefore to ensure that schools cater for the learning needs of all students.

ACSSO is concerned at the abundant evidence that the personal development and social goals of the National Goals for Schooling are not being achieved for all students. Of particular relevance to this inquiry, there is a clear influence of low socio-economic status, rural and remote location and Indigenous origin on the gender differences in academic outcomes, and some major issues around the current ability of schools to prepare many boys (and girls) for adult life. A reasonable hypothesis is that as boys fall behind educationally, so boys from disadvantaged backgrounds are increasingly alienated, particularly if their likely future is unemployment. Some boys may also suffer from a disjuncture between the attitudes of their families towards gender issues and the social construction of masculinity, and those that are predominant in schools.

ACSSO does not believe that these problems are unique to boys. ACSSO therefore believes that a major focus of attention must be on dealing with the problems of all students, both boys and girls, by equipping all schools with a wide range of student support services, which are well-integrated into, and work with, the communities that they serve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General issues

1. ACSSO recommends the establishment of a Council of Australian Governments Taskforce, with significant representation from representative parent organisations, to make continuing recommendations to MCEETYA and COAG on integrated approaches to the general youth issues rising out of this inquiry.
2. ACSSO recommends the establishment of the Commonwealth-State joint working party of officials from the education, health and welfare areas to work in close liaison with the COAG Taskforce on implementation issues arising from any recommendations.
3. ACSSO recommends that educational and other authorities make greater use of school and parent networks for targeting information and programs on youth issues, and other educational, health and welfare issues, to young people, parents and the general community.

General school issues

4. ACSSO recommends that the Commonwealth Government, through MCEETYA, take national leadership in coordinating with State and Territory Governments a national program for the development of schools which provide integrated welfare support and career counselling for all students.
5. ACSSO recommends that specific Commonwealth funding be directed to schools in which students from the high risk categories of low socio-economic status, rural and remote location and Indigenous origin are concentrated, for the provision of additional school counsellors, community development and liaison officers, early literacy and numeracy development and remedial teachers.

6. ACSSO recommends the systematic introduction of school-based screening for hearing and vision defects, which may contribute to the socio-demographic differences in outcomes.

7. ACSSO recommends that funding be allocated to a national program of professional development for teachers and other school staff in the use of community conferencing, so that the technique can be used extensively within schools for dealing with bullying, sexual and racial harassment, and other forms of anti-social behaviour.

8. ACSSO recommends an immediate national review of suspension and expulsion policies in schools, and of the adequacy of provision of alternative educational settings for students removed from main-stream schooling.

9. ACSSO recommends that funding be allocated to a national program of professional development for teachers and other school staff involved in health education to enable them to more adequately address their responsibilities for education in areas of drugs, sexuality and relationships.

10. ACSSO recommends the development of a national plan for the recruitment of males into the teaching profession at all levels. This will require a serious response to the previous inquiry into the status of teachers, and serious attempts to make teaching a more attractive profession, both by addressing salary issues, and by addressing issues around the quality of work environment.

11. ACSSO recommends that MCEETYA commission further research into what works in the education of boys and girls, with an emphasis on assessing longer-term outcomes, and bearing in mind the significant effects of aspects of socio-economic disadvantage on outcomes for boys. This should include a thorough review of teaching practices and curriculum documents at all levels to ensure that there is appropriate coverage of the range of interests and learning styles used by school students.

12. ACSSO recommends that MCEETYA commission a review of streaming and selection practices in schools to determine whether they contribute to the gender and socio-demographic differences in outcomes which are observed.

13. ACSSO recommends that Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments work together to ensure that all Australian children are guaranteed a place in a fully funded preschool, that all young Australians complete secondary schooling with a broad general education, which covers both the academic and the vocational, and are guaranteed free post-secondary education.

Funding implications

14. ACSSO believes that implementation of these recommendations will require significant funding increases, and recommends that COAG and MCEETYA develop a national plan for increasing the percentage of Australia's GDP committed to government spending on schooling to, at least, the levels of 1975-1983.

Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) represents over 2 million parents with children in government schools all over Australia, through 11 peak bodies at State and Territory level, and through parent organisations and school councils in the approximately 7000 government schools around in Australia.

A fundamental theme of ACSSO's policies is equity, the pursuit of equity in educational outcomes across social groups. In relation to gender, the fundamental premise of ACSSO policy is that gender does not determine the capacity to learn. This is reflected in ACSSO's Gender Equity Policy, which follows:

E.5 GENDER EQUITY

PREMISE

1. The capacity to learn is not determined by gender.

POLICY

- E.5.1 Schools must provide every student with an equal opportunity to develop creative, academic and physical abilities.
- E.5.2 Girls and boys must be valued equally in all aspects of schooling.
- E.5.3 Providing for equality of outcomes in education for girls and boys may require different provision.
- E.5.4 Schools must educate both genders for satisfying, responsible and productive living, including work inside and outside the home, both paid and unpaid.
- E.5.5 Schools must provide a learning environment which is socially and physically comfortable for both genders.
- E.5.6 Schools must be organised and resourced to ensure that the capacities of girls and boys are fully and equally realised.
- E.5.7 All schools should be co-educational in student intake and courses offered. The allocation of staff duties should not be on a gender basis.
- E.5.8 Gender equity initiatives should be encouraged by promoting research into the different needs of girls and boys in the education system.

- E.5.9 A gender equity strategy must address needs at both primary and secondary levels to assist schools to develop strategies:
- (a) for teaching, learning and assessment suited to the different needs of girls and boys;
 - (b) to break down stereotypes;
 - (c) to address the separate areas of disadvantage particular to girls and boys.
- E.5.10 ACSSO supports the development of gender equity strategies in all aspects of schooling, from early childhood through to post-compulsory, among teachers and the wider community by:
- (a) recognising that neither boys nor girls form a homogenous group. Individuals and groups have specific needs within the context of gender equity strategies;
 - (b) promoting awareness of the changing roles of men and women in society in terms of their economic, civic and domestic responsibilities;
 - (c) taking into consideration parents', carers' and students' real life experiences and promoting school-based research on their needs and concerns;
 - (d) understanding gender beyond biological definitions and sex role socialisation and recognising the interweaving of gender with culture, age, class race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability;
 - (e) encouraging people to explore the continuum of behaviours which are labelled as 'masculine' or 'feminine' and gender in relation to social expectations, pressures, constraints, power and resistances;
 - (f) critically analysing gender construction in curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment and reporting, as well as the school's management;
 - (g) promoting equal and respectful relationships;
 - (h) acknowledging the extent to which gender is a social construct.
- E.5.11 ACSSO encourages parents and carers, teachers and others to have a commitment to both boys and girls in gender reform work.
- E.5.12 Curriculum material on the family, child development and social relations should be made available to all students at both primary and secondary level and also to parents.
- E.5.13 Education authorities should provide physical education programs, including sports, that develop a high level of physical fitness in all students. Barriers should be removed that prevent girls or boys from participating in individual or team sports traditionally accessible only to the opposite sex, the establishment of mixed sex teams should be encouraged.

There is no doubt that there is a problem in the education of boys, which has been given particular focus by developments over the past 20-30 years. In general boys achieve lower literacy outcomes than girls, and have done so for a long time, yet historically boys have dominated education. This problem has been addressed by very successful strategies for the promotion of educational outcomes for girls. However, for almost 20 years now, girls have had higher school retention rates than boys, and girls have increasingly come to dominate the lists of most academically successful students. Equally there are now more young women than men in higher educational institutions, although there are areas in which the traditional pattern of male dominance is still alive, largely associated with mathematics and physics, in areas such as engineering, and in many areas of technical and further education.

Recognising the importance of these developments, at its last Annual Conference (Brisbane, October 1999), ACSSO established a working group to address issues around the education of boys, and an Executive Sub-committee was established on these issues. This issue will be debated at the next ACSSO Conference in Darwin in October 2000. We therefore welcome the establishment of the inquiry into the education of boys, and the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

The changing patterns of academic outcomes for boys needs to be put into a more general social perspective in relation to the high suicide rates among young males, patterns of drug usage, crime rates, and unemployment rates and labour market projections. The direction of causal relationships is often difficult to establish, but the National Goals for Schooling cover personal and social justice outcomes, as well as academic, and the roles of schools in relation to these areas are important.

This pattern of academic and social outcomes in turn needs to be examined closely, for the intersections of gender with family background, particularly in relation to socio-economic status, ethnic background and place of residence are crucial. Putting it starkly, a boy from a high socio-economic status background has every chance of a good future, while a boy from a low socio-economic status background, particularly from a rural or remote area, and of Indigenous origin, is facing an uphill battle.

Finally it needs to be stressed that the solutions to improving outcomes for boys cannot be achieved in isolation from the needs of girls. There can be no progress by attempting to put back into place the artificial barriers which were placed in the way of girls. Nor can solutions be achieved by restoring a pattern of male superiority in relationships and families, on the grounds that this is the only way that "shattered male self-esteem" can be restored. Nor can we accept facile solutions based on the supposed biology of boys, which generally turn out to be attempts to justify behaviours which need to be minimised through effective classroom and welfare practices. These statements may appear to be self-evident to many, but the principles need to be clearly articulated in view of the tenor of comments made in some of the submissions and in the wider public debate.

Are educational outcomes for boys declining?

Educational differences between girls and boys are not new. There are scattered reports even in ancient literature of how much easier it is to educate girls - a surprising claim given that it was a couple of thousand years before this greater facility for education into higher formal educational outcomes.

The evidence for the recent relative decline in outcomes for boys is obvious to any parent or student who has sat through a school graduation ceremony or prize night. Except where gender equity is ensured by giving parallel recognition to girls and boys, the dominance of girls in educational outcomes is clear. There is anecdotal evidence that playground cultures now accept that educational achievement is the province of girls, confirming a belief of perhaps longer standing that the only boys who succeed in academic terms are “nerds”.

An important question for this inquiry is whether the performance of boys is in absolute decline, or whether the decline in performance is only relative to increasing outcomes for girls. The literature on this issue often fails to distinguish clearly between absolute measures, and relative measures such as the Tertiary Entrance Rank and the University Admission Index are ranks, and not scores. If girls are moving up these ranking scales, as they are, inevitably boys must be moving down, without any necessary decline in their absolute performance.

Most of the evidence shows that the decline is only relative. Most indices show that educational standards, including literacy standards, are now as high as they have ever been in Australia. Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that levels of adult literacy are as high as they have ever been. School retention and completion rates, and participation in post-secondary education are in historical terms high, despite a recent, slight but significant, down-turn. On most of these measures, boys have continued to move ahead, but this progress has been over-shadowed by the dramatic improvement in outcomes for girls. There have been claims that the ACER Longitudinal Study on Literacy Outcomes shows an absolute decline in outcomes over the past 20 years, but the changes are small, and have been described as insignificant by the leading researchers associated with the survey.

We can therefore reject the claims, unfortunately put forward in a number of submissions to the inquiry, that there is a feminist conspiracy in schools to dumb down boys. This suggestion simply ignores the reality that most teachers and educational administrators, not to mention policy makers and politicians, are parents, who almost inevitably care about the outcomes for both boys and girls.

However, in doing this, we should not dismiss the importance of the relative decline in educational outcomes for boys. The education system remains highly competitive, and there is a considerable amount of de facto or explicit streaming, particularly in English, Mathematics and Science. The relative decline in the performance of boys may lead to them being squeezed out of extension courses, even if they are able to handle the material. This carries through to the competition for places in higher education.

Research to discover if, and to what extent this is happening, is needed. But, it is clear that reduction in the competitive nature of many of the choices and selection process, guaranteeing, for example, extension classes to all who wish to take advantage of them, and establishing a guarantee of free education from pre-school to tertiary level for all, would take the competitive edge off many of these processes. Current government policies of promoting access to tertiary education by promoting full fee-paying places as an alternative to subsidised places are likely to discriminate in practice against boys, and need to be reviewed.

Suspensions and expulsions from schools

Boys form the vast majority of those affected by suspensions and expulsions from schools. While there are big differences from school to school and system to system, depending on local regulations and policies, rates of suspension and expulsions appear to be consistently high for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and of Indigenous origin.

ACSSO believes that suspensions and expulsions are in general not an appropriate response to problems with student behaviour. Schools need increased support for student welfare and counselling, to take the load off teachers, and to avoid disruption to student learning, both for the students concerned, and for their peers. In rare cases where removal of the student from the school setting is required, ACSSO believes that governments, through their departments of education, have a responsibility for providing alternative educational settings, with support provided to facilitate rapid re-integration into mainstream schools.

The intersection of gender with indices of socio-demographic disadvantage

The evidence on educational outcomes for boys (and girls) needs to be considered in relation to a number of indices of disadvantage. The Report on Government Services Provision 2000 documents the intersection of gender with socio-economic status (Table 2.7), 2.8) and rural and remote location (Tables 2.9 and 2.10). It is clear that outcomes are lower for boys from low socio-economic status families, for boys living in rural and remote areas.

This has two consequences. Firstly it means that particularly sub-groups of boys, such as boys from high socio-economic status backgrounds, outperform certain sub-groups of girls, such as girls from low socio-economic status families, suggesting that the gender factors are not as crucially determinant as some appear to argue.

Secondly, the evidence suggests that the gender differences increase as a result of the intersection with factors of disadvantage. Thus, the educational outcomes for boys and girls from high socio-economic status backgrounds are closer than for those from low socio-economic status families. This is also true for rural and remote versus urban location. Certainly family wealth and educational level appear to provide a significant level of protection. The complexity of the interactions is underlined by data presented in Table 2.7, which show that over the period 1994-1998, the gender gap in completion rates increased in low socio-economic status deciles and decreased in high deciles.

ACSSO believes that research commissioned by DETYA from Dr Julie McLeod and Professor Jane Kenway on the intersection of gender with indices of disadvantage should be released to inform this inquiry. ACSSO notes the comments of Dr McLeod that “We are not saying that gender doesn’t matter, but it works in different ways in different class settings. The impact of social class, and poverty or economic location on educational performance is something that absolutely needs to be investigated.”

The conclusion we draw from this analysis is that the issue of the education of boys cannot be addressed in isolation from addressing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes. We believe that preparedness for schooling, and health issues may be an important part of the linkage.

While there is little evidence that boys as a group are biologically less prepared for school, it is clear that the intersection of gender with culturally constructed attitudes to masculinity and schooling, which can differ between different social groups, can produce groups of boys who are less interested in and receptive to schooling. This could have serious consequences for boys from these groups, who would have a tendency to fall further behind with time. For example, results from the National School English Literacy Survey support the idea that the spread of literacy achievements widens significantly between Years 3 and 5. The challenge for schools is then to effectively incorporate these students (for they are not just boys) into the learning process as early as possible.

There is also evidence that health issues may be important. Untreated hearing problems are well-documented as an educational issue in the Indigenous community, and there is some evidence for quite early onset of gender-related hearing loss in rural communities. There are also obvious reasons for thinking that undiagnosed hearing, vision and other medical and learning problems are also likely to be more common in low socio-economic status groups, and in rural and remote areas. ACSSO therefore believes that expansion of early screening at school level for medical problems and learning difficulties could make a significant difference.

Other aspects of outcomes for boys

The outcomes students receive from schooling clearly affect broader outcomes outside of and after school. In turn they impact on students at school, and their attitudes to schooling.

Youth suicide rates

There is evidence for rising rates of deaths from youth suicides, with a clear predominance of male deaths, which show a clear association with the other indices of disadvantage; low socio-economic status, rural and remote location, and Indigenous origin.

The issues around youth suicide are complex, and account needs to be taken of attempted suicides, and depression to get an accurate picture of gender differences. Our purpose in this section is not to argue that girls do not have psychological problems, while boys are having it hard. This would be to grossly caricature the situation. But, there is no doubt that the increasing levels of youth suicide, particularly in young males, and particularly where there are over-lapping factors of disadvantage, points to a major social problem which needs to be urgently addressed.

Our point is to argue that schools provide a clear focus for the detection of these problems and the delivery of support services. Adequate provision within schools would provide support to all students, irrespective of gender, on the basis of need.

Patterns of drug use

For the purposes of this section, we will use a broad definition of drugs as covering not only illicit substances, but also cigarettes, alcohol and petrol and glue sniffing. In general, the prevalence and level of drug use by boys is higher than for girls. Drug use, particularly destructive drug use, such as petrol and glue sniffing, shows some association with other factors of disadvantage, although the analysis is complicated by issues of differential access to, and ability to pay for, particular forms of drugs. However two changes worthy of note are the increasing tendency of boys to use cannabis, and the increasing levels of smoking amongst teenage girls.

One issue of major concern is the link between consumption of alcohol and road accidents. More generally, there is a tendency for some major life-style and health messages to be ignored by an increasing proportion of young people, with an increasing incidence of life-threatening behaviours, and behaviours which have long-term health consequences. These are often related to indices of disadvantage.

While by no means exclusive to young males, some of these problems are particularly obvious amongst the groups of disadvantaged young males. We believe that the best approach, once again, is to develop strong health programs in schools for all students. ACSSO believes that a balanced approach to the specific issue of drug education is to be found in the National School Drug Education Strategy. ACSSO believes, however, that it, and other health programs needs to be much more adequately resourced, including provision for the professional development of teachers.

Juvenile crime

Juvenile crime rates seem to be increasing, at least some categories of crime. In most categories, juvenile male crime rates are much ahead of female crime rates, although female crime rates are increasing in percentage terms more rapidly than male crime rates. The figures are far from comprehensive, and more information is needed on areas such as teenage prostitution and white-collar crimes, before clear conclusions can be drawn. However, there are indications of a link between crime and drug use, and rates of

imprisonment suggest that the risk factors of low socio-economic status and Indigenous origin are important.

Techniques of community conferencing have been used very successfully in the criminal justice system to limit re-offending. We believe that techniques of this kind can be adapted for use in schools to deal with issues such as bullying, harassment and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Use of these techniques and the provision of educational alternatives to suspension and expulsion have the potential to favourably impact on juvenile crime.

Unemployment rates and labour market projections

Future employment prospects are a big issue for students, and for parents. It is hard for students to maintain a commitment to schooling, if their future prospects are of, at best, transient employment. Early school leavers, predominantly, but by no means exclusively boys, are particularly vulnerable.

Youth unemployment rates are, in fact, at record levels. Changing patterns of employment are due, in part, to the disappearance of unskilled or low skill jobs in manufacturing industry and in agriculture. This change in the labour market has had obvious impacts on young people with little education, and shows up in regional patterns of unemployment. Clearly youth from low socio-economic status family backgrounds, living in rural and remote areas of Australia, and of Indigenous origin have felt a major impact.

The association of long-term unemployment with early school leaving has been well documented. Growth in youth employment has come from the service industry areas, generally of a part-time nature, which is often used as a means of obtaining financial support for continuing education. This pattern of employment has tended to exclude early school leavers from even this market. It should be noted that in general the service industries emphasise people skills and communication.

Labour market projections suggest that, if anything, this pattern is likely to become more exaggerated with time, with an increasing demand for part-time employees in the service sector. Growth in full-time employment is largely likely to take place in areas which require high-level communication skills, often in high technology industries. A recent survey of employers of graduates identified the lack of these sorts of skills as the biggest problems they identified in recent graduates. This makes the gap in literacy outcomes for boys and girls of crucial importance, and emphasises the importance of raising outcomes for those students who are currently achieving the lowest. Schools cannot solve the problem of unemployment. If there are more people seeking jobs than there are job vacancies, then unemployment is the inevitable result. However, schools can play an important role, in providing support for students at risk of leaving school early, and by developing educational pathways, often with vocational options. These need to be carefully constructed to balance the teaching of immediately job-related skills, which many students see as relevant, with the development of more generic skills, employment-related, employment-generating, and more academic, which will prepare

students for life-long learning. Schools also need to be able to offer more career counselling and support during the school-to-work transition.

While strictly beyond the framework of schooling, measures also need to be taken to provide all young people with continuing access to learning opportunities after leaving school, within the broad framework of life-long learning.

General Social Factors

The impact of general changes in society, including, of course, schools, also needs to be considered.

Changes in family structure

The evidence of a change in family structure has been well documented. The percentage of families of the traditional male wage-earner/female home-maker model is on the decline, being replaced by increasing proportions of families in which both parents are working, and of single (generally female) parent families. This is associated with a considerable dichotomy in family income. Double-income families tend to be wealthier (albeit at the cost of parental time with children), while single parent families tend to have low incomes, and are often reliant on welfare payments. As this submission is being finalised, the McClure Report on welfare reform has been released. The implications of the changes proposed will need to be assessed in relation to single parent families, and indeed in relation to welfare recipients in low socio-economic status, rural and remote and Indigenous communities, and the potential impacts on educational outcomes for their children.

ACSSO does not believe that the evidence on the impacts of family structure on educational outcomes, other than through educational and economic factors, is conclusive. However, whatever these impacts are, ACSSO believes that providing support to students, where their family situations impact on their personal and academic development, is likely to be a more effective approach, than attempting to reverse patterns of long-term social change. Where courses in relationships or parenting are offered, both within schools and elsewhere, professional development for teachers and other course deliverers is of crucial importance.

Changes in patterns of gender relations

While always difficult to measure and quantify, it is clear that there have been major changes in the patterns of gender relations both within families, and in society as a whole, over the past 50-60 years. The increasing proportion of working women is but one aspect of a significant and progressive change. How far this process has gone should not be exaggerated, as studies on the distribution of house-work in families, comparisons of the male-female ratios in managerial positions, and average male and female earnings indicate, but this should not be used to deny the real changes that have taken place.

It is highly unlikely that these trends will be reversed. But we are also clearly in a period of transition. There are still ex-teachers who can remember the times when women, on marriage, had to leave the teaching service, and the very different values and career aspirations of the great grandparents, grandparents and parents of present school children

are still active influences on their development. While quantitative data is always difficult to obtain in these areas, it seems clear that more traditional roles and values are more alive in low socio-economic status families, amongst the less well-educated, and in rural and remote parts of Australia. This creates a disconnection between the attitudes some young people are receiving from their families, and the reality of the school, and then the world in which they have to live. This contrast is no doubt unsettling for many, and many will need help managing the changes and conflicts in their lives.

Once again, the solution is to provide school-based support for students in this situation.

Gender Balance in the Teaching Service

ACSSO policy on recruitment of teachers emphasises the need for the teaching profession to be representative of the general community. This issue has been extensively canvassed in relation to Indigenous education.

In the context of the education of boys, considerable attention has been devoted to the large numbers of women in the teaching profession, and in particular the lack of male teachers at primary school levels. This imbalance is a matter of concern, although it needs to be stressed that this is in no way because of a belief that women are not good teachers. Rather it is based on the importance of schools for socialisation, and the construction of gender. Students need to be exposed to a range of positive role models, and male teachers (or teachers of ethnic or Indigenous origin, or from low socio-economic status backgrounds), are currently under-represented. This is likely to be most important for students from these backgrounds, or for students where there is a conflict between the attitudes to gender issues in their families, and those represented in schools. But, the issue is important for all students.

ACSSO believes that this issue cannot simply be addressed by advertising campaigns. There is a more general issue around the recruitment of teachers, and the possibility of a recruitment crisis, and the issue of gender balance needs to be addressed within the context of teacher salaries and working conditions, and a general approach to teacher recruitment.

And What About the Biology of Boys (and Girls)?

Much has been written about the behavioural differences between boys and girls, with a great deal of discussion about what is biologically determined, and what are socially constructed gender differences. While this debate is fascinating, it has to be said that it is of little relevance to the tasks of schools. Schools have to take students as they come to school, to understand and value what they bring to school, and to work with them to promote their general academic, personal and social development, in directions deemed to be acceptable by society. There is no implication that a biologically determined behaviour is more or less malleable than one which is socially constructed. Rather the challenge is to channel both in socially acceptable directions.

It is, for example, known that boys, and particularly teenage boys have higher testosterone levels than girls, but it is not clear what this means in behavioural terms. This

cannot be taken as a license for bullying, fighting and sexual harassment, or for acceptance of male failure.

ACSSO believes that further research is needed into the learning needs of boys, noting that the biological determinist views outlined above are often associated with two quite divergent approaches to the education of boys; an excessive tolerance for so-called male behaviours, or the belief that boys should be subjected to rigid discipline, formal teaching methods and rote-learning. In relation to the latter possibility, ACSSO stresses that this approach failed to achieve high levels of school retention and literacy outcomes when it dominated schooling.

When considering gender relations, we need to stress that a common-sense approach is necessary. We need to distinguish between normal rough and tumble behaviour, and bullying, fighting and violence. Further, the transition from childhood patterns of relations to those of mature adults is bound to be fraught with complications, misunderstandings and misinterpretations. In both cases, boys (and girls) have to learn the boundaries between what is acceptable, and what is unacceptable.

ACSSO believes that while there may be average gender differences of uncertain origin, the range of behaviours exhibited by both genders is large, with considerable, and maybe complete overlap. ACSSO therefore believes that schools need to be able to cater for a wide range of learning styles, which will encompass all students, and they need to be adequately resourced to do this.

Conclusion

ACSSO believes that the solution to the educational problems of boys lies in the provision of schools which cater for a wide range of learning styles, and offer extensive student welfare and other support services. Particular note needs to be taken of the intersection of gender issues with socio-demographic disadvantage. We do not believe that there is a “one-size-fits-all” solution for the education of boys, any more than there is a similar solution for girls, but that provision for all students should be the aim.