

Inquiry Into the Education Of Boys

A submission for the

House of Representatives Standing Committee

From the

Fremantle Education Centre

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The social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling; and

the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

This submission will look at the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys. The research context and initiatives articulated in the recommendations will however, focus on strategies to inform and enhance educating boys approaches for school communities.

(i) Organisational Background and Experience

The Fremantle Education Centre (FEC) is a non-profit organisation established in 1974 and is one of 21 centres nationwide under the auspices of the Australian Council for Education Centres, now know as Learning Network Australia Ltd. Emphasising and promoting Commonwealth education priorities provides the impetus for many of our activities involving whole school communities. The Fremantle Education Centre has extensive state and national networks to support current products and services, and the initiatives outlined in this submission.

The FEC has been actively involved for several years in extensive research, sourcing expertise and raising awareness with regards to inclusive education and specifically the delivery of boys' education initiatives. School communities pay a small up-front fee as opposed to a cost per participant enabling schools to work together in order to raise awareness, and harness support to create whole school approaches and implement classroom and parenting strategies. In this priority area alone participant numbers have exceeded 8000 over the last financial year via information seminars, tailored workshops, conferences and the *Motivating Boys* program. As a result of these professional development and community activities the FEC is researching and developing a number of new projects and a variety of successful strategies highlighting:

- Single-sex Classes in a Coeducational Context - when to use and factors impacting on success
- Relationships - gender construction, social skills and values

- Learning That Lasts - pedagogical strategies which successfully engage boys in learning focusing on literacy, learning technologies, multiple intelligences and learning styles

Experience in addressing Boys in Education Issues

As a Fremantle Education Centre priority area, the education of boys builds on work commenced in June 1998 which continues to improve and promote the issues of boys education in both primary and secondary, government and non-government schools in rural and metropolitan Western Australia. Intensive and ongoing evaluation of our activities reflects the impact of our services on client groups providing a solid case for continued support.

The objectives and outcomes of FEC education of boys activities have been to:

- continue to raise the awareness of the range and depth of challenges and critical issues educators and parents face in educating boys in today's ever changing environment
- improve the learning outcomes of boys and their overall educational participation by the development and implementation of strategies suitable to their identified needs
- gain a better understanding of the differences in male biology which makes boys different to teach and to lead
- develop and implement innovative classroom strategies and whole-school approaches including appropriate screening, and assessment and reporting strategies
- identify and promote good classroom practice for boys and by extension, girls' education
- address the crucial role parents play in helping schools improve the learning environment for boys and authentic learning
- identify innovative approaches for interaction and collaboration between schools and the parent community which will lead to an improvement in student performance, particularly boys' performance in literacy and numeracy across the curriculum programs
- develop and promote forum and network opportunities on a range of research and practical initiatives being undertaken in Western Australian schools and beyond
- provide training, professional development programs, seminars and research programs for teachers and support staff to enhance and improve boys education (see attachment one)

Educators, parents, community members and community agencies are acutely aware of the issues pertaining to the education of boys and are continually seeking strategies to incorporate into whole school and classroom planning. The Fremantle Education Centre is continually searching for current research, successful practice and new and innovative methodology to incorporate into our inclusive education priorities.

Ongoing Evaluation

The FEC utilises quantitative and qualitative methods of evaluation including surveys, follow-up phone calls, expressions of interest, interviews, field observations, formal and informal discussions, participants testimonials and comments from independent organisations. The evaluation data collected provides an on-going diagnostic framework enabling us to continually report on the impact on student learning outcomes, the content, delivery, and general satisfaction our activities and the client's perceptions of the service we design and provide.

(ii) The Research Context

This research originated from continuing concerns expressed by many teachers, and parents, in being able to successfully address the different and similar needs of both girls and boys. Specifically, attention is drawn to the high proportion of boys in remedial classes and the ineffectiveness of Managing Student Behaviour (MSB) policies. A major concern for girls as learners has been the behaviour of boys (Cuttance 1995).

As girls' education strategies began to generate success, schools in Australia and throughout the western world began to ask for help with managing, motivating and engaging boys in the learning process and their participation in school life in general. Men's and boys' well being has become a broad community concern (Connell, 1994; Cox, 1994; Brown and Fletcher, 1995; Foster, 1999). Many parents are equally concerned about their boys' education, general behaviour and motivation.

In contributing to the preparation and promotion of the 1995 *Promoting Gender Equity Conference* held in Canberra, Langridge (1995) commented that fundamentally the overarching issue relevant to all priorities is how we evaluate efforts to reform the curriculum in terms of class and gender, and success at school.

Rather than arguments about who is more oppressed or disadvantaged, efforts to meet the common and different needs of both boys and girls need to be creatively marshalled" Langridge (1995:182).

The changing roles of women and the changing world of work have also impacted on young males with a steady reduction in the number of labour intensive jobs coupled with uncertainty about what the male role of today entails. The continued fracturing of the family unit and low engagement of fathers and male guardians in their sons' (and daughters') schooling has further exacerbated the problems boys face. The changing view of violence as a conflict resolution option has seen many males adapt to different social, economic and family expectations. Shores (1999) explains that other males however have not, and he calls for educators to take up the challenge for work to be done in the area of male self esteem.

"Boys' self-esteem is the key to ending a lot of racism and sexism, which are significant social problems today" (Biddulph 1997:143). Defining self-esteem as internalised self-image and feelings of self-worth, the Western Australian Health Survey conducted in 1997 commented on the critical role of self-esteem as a correlate or cause of many adolescent educational, health and behaviour problems.

Over the last 15 years there has seen a steady decline in boys' attitudes to schooling, particularly in the middle years from 10 to 15. Research (Alloway 1995; Brown and Fletcher 1995; Connell 1994) indicates that part of the problem lies in boys' literacy achievement and the consequent inability to glean information from books and printed material, which increases progressively from year 3 to year 10 and beyond. Poor progress in literacy and disruptive behaviours in the classroom have been major features in the discussion of boys' education.

Many males therefore, are *at risk* in terms of their academic achievement, behaviour, aspirations for the future and low rates of participation in the social, caring and citizenship aspects of school life. Beyond school they pose a risk to themselves and others as indicated by the statistics on male suicide, car accidents and juvenile crime. Suicide is now the number one cause of death of young males between the ages of 15 and 24, followed closely by car crashes, which often take other lives as well. Home invasions, burglary and the use of illicit substances are also an indicator of *at risk* behaviour, predominantly perpetrated by young males.

Schools, explains Brown and Fletcher (1995), are required to manage large numbers of students and their problematic behaviours including bullying, harassment and put-downs, attention seeking, failure to complete work, and disruptive behaviour. The way in which schools deal with this behaviour, which in the majority of instances means controlling the boys, sets the tone for the school. "It is apparent that boys often form groups based on ridicule and competition. For many, fitting into the peer group is more important than learning. This is easier to see at high school but is no less present in primary school (Brown and Fletcher 1995:4). Exploring the critical issue of gender sensitivity in primary schools as well as secondary schools is clearly relevant.

The document *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997), which underpins the *Motivating Boys Program* is useful in this regard. Such programs need to be brought to the attention of teachers and school leaders if the outcomes desired for both genders are to be realised. The literature indicates that not all teachers are able to accept or support change and experience difficulty examining their teaching practices in terms of gender equity (Milligan and Thomson 1992).

In highlighting the issues for boys that seek to improve their academic and behavioural outcomes, we are also focusing on making situations better for girls. Throughout Australia it is critical to both inform and raise awareness across all education sectors to focus our attention on meeting the common and different need of our boys and girls, by exploring gender construction, examining potentially limiting expectations and negative behaviours, celebrating differences and being sensitive to the developmental needs of each gender.

(iii) Initiatives Informing Recommendations

Overview of FEC Initiatives

Much has also been written about gender equity and reform though it still remains a hotly contested area of education due to the lack of agreement about what constitutes equity in practice. Gender education is also interwoven with variables including ethnicity and social class, which impact significantly on teaching practices and pedagogy and the selection of appropriate whole school approaches and classroom strategies. The broad initiatives underpinning the recommendation in this submission focus on:

- (i) The role of gender construction in the teaching and learning process
- (ii) The efficacy of single-sex strategies in a coeducational context
- (iii) Pedagogical strategies which successfully engage boys in the learning process and enhance cognitive, social and emotional outcomes
- (iv) Relationships - between all stakeholders particularly boys and their teachers
- (v) The value of student perspectives in informing these initiatives

Research Background

A review of the research from OFSTED (Suknandan, Lee and Kelleher 2000) suggests there are no simple explanations for the gender gap in performance. In any one given environment a number of factors are likely to influence student outcomes including: pupil grouping, assessment techniques, the curriculum, teaching styles, teacher expectations, role models, and the way teachers reward and discipline can all affect the size and nature of gender differences in performance (Suknandan, Lee and Kelleher 2000). We need to unravel ways in which gender may affect, and interact with, social and academic learning.

What are the preventative strategies we can implement during primary schooling to address the issues of poor performance, disruptive and violent behaviour and critical health issues, that seem to manifest themselves in our lower secondary youth, which will improve the learning environment and outcomes for all students? The focus on primary school as well as secondary students in addressing these issues, is supported by Logan and Sachs (1988) who argue that primary schooling is a fundamentally important stage of learning, determining the foundations for, and dispositions towards learning, in later life.

(a) Gender Construction

Creating a gender sensitive environment, where tightly modelled perspectives of what constitutes appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour open up and no longer restrict potential, can only develop through the support of whole school policies and genuine support from within. The ways in which male students, male teachers and principals use/abuse power, and the ways in which the 'gender regime' (Connell 1994) is enacted in the staffroom as well as the classroom, have implications for how teachers can reflect on and improve their practices. This may be threatening for some.

Boys' literacy, social and health problems appear to be more a result of hegemonic masculinity which is fixed and constricting. Research indicates that illiteracy, violence and suicide in males is not a genetic predisposition to being male. Rather it is the messages of power and privilege that support and sustain this inappropriate masculinity allowing no room for the fluidity within and between the genders. 'Gender construction' offers a way into understanding how different groups of boys and different groups of girls negotiate, resist, and challenge gender appropriate behaviours, with the potential to develop more gender sensitive as well as racially and culturally sensitive, teaching practices (Allard 1995).

How do we as teachers consider implications of gender construction and sensitivity both personally and professionally and take account of gender in our own teaching and disciplinary practices? Allard (1995:161-173) puts forward the following points for consideration:

- Which teaching practices, which assessment procedures work well for which groups of boys/girls?
- Masculinity is constructed as the antithesis of femininity (Connell 1987). Are boys' negative comments to girls used to differentiate themselves from being non-feminine? In a single sex environment not all boys are equally socially powerful.

- Which teaching practices work to enable boys to explore the ways in which this either/or dichotomy informs their relationships with girls? In what contexts, and for what purposes should single sex settings be used? How will understandings and skills developed by boys in single sex settings be 'transferable' to coeducational groups?
- Which range of teaching practices that have worked to enhance girls' education are of value/relevance to education of boys? Many strategies which enhanced girls' experiences in science in the McClintock Collective for example, also increased boys' participation, enjoyment and understandings as well.
- How are issues of different discipline practices, difference often based on gender understandings, to be explored by male teachers, female teachers, with boys, with girls?

Just as we are proud of how we equip our young people with the skills to adapt and survive in a changing work and social environment, we also need to equip them to survive and thrive in the critical area of their own gendered development (Bonner, 1998).

(b) Single-sex Strategies

The efficacy of single-sex and coeducational schooling, and more recently single-sex classes within a coeducational context, continues to provide fertile ground for research and practice. Coeducational schools in Australia are accepting the challenge by experimenting with a variety of whole school approaches.

The intention for primary schools in particular is to provide students during their introduction to formal and primary schooling with greater options and resiliency to support their passage into adolescence and broaden the horizons of what it means to be male, female or quite simply a contributing member of society. Teacher education and introspection on exploring personal thoughts and beliefs (Shores 1999) therefore, is essential in order not to restrict potential and to proactively bring about change. In providing avenues to utilise single sex structures many teachers are currently undertaking this exploration.

A number of studies have shown that teachers thought the establishment of single-sex classes in coeducational schools was positive (Kruse 1992; DEET 1993b). Research into single-sex schooling (Milligan & Thomson 1992) indicates the major advantage offered is the quality of the learning experience for girls, rather than the enhancement of academic learning (Marsh 1989; DEET 1992a; DEET 1992b). Boys in single-sex classes were less distracted and more willing to contribute during lessons and to take risks answering questions (Sukhnandan, Lee and Kelleher 2000).

Geoff Hannan takes the strategy of grouping students to a deeper level as outlined in Lillico (2000). Hannan talks of *proximal groupings*, which appear to have some similarity to collaborative teaching strategies, however being much more explicit in the way they are utilised and why. Very briefly this involves group work occurring equally throughout a term consisting of:

1. Friendship pairings and groupings
2. Single-sex groups non-friendship pairings and groupings
3. Mixed-sex pairings and groupings

Schools have to recognise that it is not always easy for girls and boys to discuss gender issues (Dunn 1995). Many schools are now saying these issues can be explored more fully within the security and confidentiality provided by the single-sex classroom where each sex is less inclined to limit their participation based on fear of ridicule or rejection from the opposite sex. Simply establishing single sex classes however will not necessarily produce the desired results.

A number of Western Australian primary schools have responded to this challenge by trialing single sex classes within the context of the coeducational primary school. Obtaining the perspectives of students, teachers and parents in this process would add richness and depth to our understandings of the advantages and disadvantages of single sex and coeducational classes, and to assist in informing the appropriate selection of each approach.

(c) Pedagogical Strategies - A Focus on Gender

The final section to this paper is a reflection on teaching practices and pedagogy that can support learning styles and behaviours which, broadly speaking, appear to be gender specific though interwoven with other variables including class and ethnicity (Alloway 1997; Nichols 1995).

Goleman (1995) also talks about the emotional differences between boys and girls as they are taught very different lessons about handling and expressing their emotions. Whereas girls' early language development facilitates the ability to articulate their feelings, "...boys, for whom the verbalisation of affects is de-emphasised, may become largely unconscious of their emotional states, both in themselves and in others (Goleman 1995:131). Stoessiger (1997:4) clarifies this in greater biological depth, "Boys practice trying not to pay attention to emotional responses, they avoid any use of emotional language so instead of developing brain connections between the limbic system, where emotions are processed, and the neo-cortex, where conscious thinking occurs, the brain cells die and are lost...By the age of five, boys are already learning to shut down".

Emotional intelligence is the master aptitude. By bringing our out-of-control emotions back into line we can facilitate all kinds of intelligence underscoring the role of emotional intelligence as a meta-ability, determining how well or how poorly people are able to use their other mental capacities Goleman (1995).

These 'other mental capacities' are articulated in Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligence which has certainly become highly recognised and utilised in schools throughout the 1990s.

The message is clear that emotional intelligence, sensitivity to learning styles and the opening up of pedagogy to reflect multiple intelligences will broaden, strengthen and support the learning of all children irrespective of gender. In reference to the education of boys and a gender sensitive pedagogy, it is a matter of less pointing at their shortages, and more 'putting them in their strength' so that they can fulfil themselves and meet their responsibilities.

(d) Student Perceptions

Good quality management processes demand the recognition of clients' inputs (Dempster 1995). Education is not immune from this view, although it has not been a common practice to solicit student opinion, especially at the primary school level. This is now

becoming an expectation by those who audit educational institutions (Dempster 1995). Student views of school life provide a different perspective on school effectiveness than can be obtained from achievement measures. Ainley (1995) suggests that if student views were incorporated as part of a constellation of indicators a more comprehensive conception of schooling may be captured, making it possible to understand better how what's happening in the classroom shapes student outcomes.

Schools play a significant role in shaping our young men and women as it is in the playground and classroom where large numbers of children interact, divide themselves in groups, and are treated differently in these distinct groups. Student views informed the results of the *Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher* (1997) published on the Learning Exchange website, found that girls were doing better than boys in key educational areas. According to the survey, girls seem to have an advantage in terms of stronger future plans, higher teacher expectations and in everyday experiences and interactions in the classroom. Teachers nationwide also view girls as higher achievers and more likely to succeed than boys.

Interestingly one of the most salient points to come out of the survey was that students believed that boys and girls faced different roadblocks in striving to reach their goals. The obstacles cited most often by boys was *too much competition*, and by girls, *fewer opportunities* in society.

(iv) Recommendations

The Fremantle Education Centre and Learning Network Australia have extensive experience and depth of expertise to undertake the following recommendations.

1. There is very little research to draw any conclusions regarding single sex classes in coeducational settings. It is recommended that funds be made available to develop guiding principles, to promote and inculcate effective and appropriate strategies informed by the perspectives of educator, parents and students. As a result it is anticipated that the recommendations generated will provide prerequisite conditions and fundamental approaches to facilitate and inform practice in the appropriate selection of single-sex classes determining:

- In what contexts, and for what purposes should single sex settings be used?
- How understandings and skills developed by boys and girls in single sex settings be 'transferable' to coeducational groups?

2. Improving teaching practices to ensure gender sensitivity becomes an inherent pedagogical given is an intensely complex process requiring:

- a whole school community approach; an appropriate selection of assessment procedures,
- an acknowledgment and ability to cater for the diversity of learning styles, and
- a cooperative, collegial and safe *working* and *learning* environment where relationships are paramount.

It is recommended that funds be made available to determine which teaching and learning practices, which assessment procedures work well for which groups of boys/girls? Funding allocations should focus on the practitioner level where an action research process would help to inform theory and practice.

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