

Submission to the

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and

Workplace Relations

Inquiry into Boys' Education

September 2000

PREAMBLE

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

This commitment is based on the belief that:

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

Parents, as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students. P&C Federation's annual conference, attended by representatives of its 2100 affiliate associations, develops policy which is energetically promoted by P&C Federation's democratically elected Council.

INTRODUCTION

P&C Federation was pleased to see the Committee seek to address the social, cultural and educational issues affecting the education of boys. Education is a multi-dimensional enterprise and the success of individual students – boys and girls -- is dependent on the interplay of a wide range of intersecting and overlapping factors. The most important of these factors are the circumstances of individual students' lives.

While it is not possible to account for the life experiences of every school student and pinpoint those that steer a young person to success or failure in each of their lives, it is possible to make broad generalisations about the types of experiences that different types of children and young people have in common. Because this is so, individuals are often clustered into "groups" on the basis of their common experiences for the purposes of assisting or studying them. This creates a sort of human taxonomy - a term that is usually applied to the biological classification of plants and animals on the basis of the physical attributes common to the genus, order, family, species, race and sex of individuals.

The human taxonomy is not, however, based on physical attributes because it is widely accepted and demonstrably true that social, cultural and economic factors have a more profound effect on the quality of experiences enjoyed by individuals than do their physical characteristics. This is true regardless of whether some physical attribute, such as skin colour, is the basis upon which others in the community deal with an individual in social and economic terms, or the basis upon which the individual views him or her self.

SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

We believe the same is true of the experiences of boys at school, and those of girls too. It is regrettable and something of an indictment of over a century of educational reform that the most influential factors in determining the educational success of children is not whether they are boys or girls but remains what their parents do for a living, the level of education they achieved, how much they earn and where they live. These data collectively, if somewhat coldly, comprise the socio-economic status of individuals. Differential outcomes on the basis of socio-economic status alone and in combination with other factors such as Aboriginality or the non-English speaking background of individuals are well documented and generally undisputed. These outcomes are socially and economically derived.

The relative educational outcomes of boys and girls are significantly affected by the socio-economic circumstances of their lives. It is perplexing that, while the Commonwealth Government claims its programs for schools are intended to raise educational outcomes, it does not specifically target these socio-economic factors in any of its specific purpose programs for schools.

In these circumstances, it is necessary to intersect these social and economic factors by sex in order to obtain a more than superficial understanding of any significance contained in reports about differential school results achieved by boys and girls. The Commonwealth recently commissioned a report by C Collins, J Kenway and J McLeod entitled *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in*

School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School which canvasses these issues.

The report clearly shows that educational outcomes comprise more than mere examination results. They also comprise the quality of life achieved by participation in schooling. The two concepts are only loosely related and the report shows they are related in different ways for girls and boys from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Not only do these circumstances determine the quality and amount of resources available to children but socio-economic and cultural factors also influence the ways they form relationships with others and the way they interact with the institutions that comprise the society. The relationships of both boys and girls with schools are no different and are constructed by the attitudes and expectations students, parents and teachers bring to school. As such they are rooted in the culturally endorsed practices that govern interaction within and between sexes in the wider community.

Many of these culturally endorsed practices are present in the school setting but not all of them are helpful in pursuing the objective of raising learning outcomes across the board for all students. There can be no doubt that schooling is a "gendered" activity. Schools have a long history of promoting sex-related practices attitudes and expectations found in the wider community for both boys and girls and have long reinforced them by inventing their own sex-based practices. A glance of the secondary school curriculum of any of the states from the 1940s and 50s confirms this fact. Other less formal practices persist in the school setting.

DIFFERENTIAL OUTCOMES

Several gender issues have been documented and addressed in the last 20 years but most involved in education agree that much remains to be done for girls as well as for boys. It could be that, in different ways, the gender relations propagated in schools serve neither girls nor boys well.

Tackling individual issues is really not the point. P&C Federation believes schools should encourage critical reflection about attitudes towards and expectations of boys and girls on the part of staff and students and should constantly be mindful of how those attitudes and expectations are manifested in the day-to-day life of the school. This activity, otherwise known as gender education, is vital to the development of educational environments that meet the needs of both boys and girls.

There are many types of masculinity boys can and do express. Only some of these are valued in the wider community and, subsequently via the attitudes and practices of parents, other students and staff, in the school setting. Some forms are vigorously opposed. Most concede that these conceptions of masculinity influence the attitudes of boys to schoolwork, reading and the like as well as their responses to institutions like schools. They also prescribe relationships boys form with each other as well as with girls. Girls are equally influenced by countervailing factors in relation to different expressions of femininity.

Clearly, it is not helpful to talk of performance differences on the basis of sex difference when so many social and economic factors are at play. We recognise that the data that refers to the superior educational performance of girls across a range

of disciplines is statistically significant, but we also recognise that this difference is a manifestation of the ways boys and girls conceptualise themselves in the wake of expectations that are based on dominant constructions of their masculinity and femininity. It is these constructions that schools need to constantly examine. Schools need to actively explore gender stereotypes and create supportive environments where alternatives to these dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, which channel and limit the aspirations of boys and girls, can be celebrated.

Evidence from the report referred to above and also from other sources like the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (eg. *The Cost to Australia of Early School Leaving* October 1999) indicates that boys who find school unrewarding are more likely to find employment upon leaving school before completion than are girls in similar circumstances. This is not to say that examination results count for nothing, only that they form part of a picture about how men and women from different backgrounds position themselves for their future lives.

Similarly, it does not discount the fact that most early school leavers of both sexes are disadvantaged in the longer term when compared with those who complete school. It merely indicates one area of difference in which the relationship between school success and life success is contradictory. A reliable understanding of boys' school performance requires examination of all relevant factors and needs especially to take account of responses to schooling boys believe will serve them best.

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS?

We note that some, such as the Federal Education Minister, Dr D Kemp, have speculated about the possible benefits of educating boys in single sex schools. We also note that in previous times, similar utterances have been made about potential benefits for girls in single sex schools. P&C Federation does not support the concept of single sex schools. There is no evidence that single sex schools are any more capable of or likely to explore and encourage alternatives to dominant conceptualisations of masculinity and femininity, which we believe is vital to broadening options for boys and girls, than are other schools.

In addition, any claims that single sex schools produce superior educational outcomes for boys are suspect because they fail to account for the socio-economic factors that influence the achievement of students attending these schools.

P&C FEDERATION POLICY

P&C Federation's policy on gender education is the result of intense debate about education for boys and girls over an extended period. Many hundreds of parents have contributed to it over a period of several years. We commend the policy to the Committee in the hope that it assists its deliberations on this important matter.

PREMISE 5

Gender does not determine the capacity to learn. Girls and boys should be valued equally in all aspects of schooling. Providing a high quality education for both boys and girls is a mainstream professional responsibility for all educators. Schooling should reflect the entitlement of all men and women, in their own right, to personal respect, to

economic security and to participation in and influence over decisions which will affect their lives.

F: GENDER EQUITY STRATEGY

POLICY

5.41 Federation 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) promoting awareness that girls and boys have equal rights in all aspects of schooling;

(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 lived 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, Aboriginality, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability;

(e) acknowledging gender as a social construction where people are actively engaged in constructing their own femininity and masculinity;

(f) encouraging people to explore a range of masculinities and femininities, that is, gender in relation to social expectations, pressures, constraints, power, and resistances;

(g) critically analysing gender construction in curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, and assessment and reporting as well as the school's management structures;

(h) promoting equal and respectful relationships between boys and boys, girls and girls, boys and girls, and between men and men, women and women, men and women, as well as adults and children.

Federation encourages parents and carers, teachers and others to have a commitment to both boys and girls in gender reform work;

Federation supports the promotion of gender reforms which contribute to improvements in girls and boys opportunities not only in education, but in life.

5.42 Providing for equality of outcomes in education for girls and boys may require differential provision, at least for a time.

5.43 The Department of Education and Training should recognise the need for gender equity initiatives for both boys and girls in the education system, and by developing a Boys' Education Strategy and extending the present Girls' Education Strategy to identify these needs at both primary and secondary levels and assist schools to develop appropriate strategies:

- (a) for teaching and learning suited to the different needs of boys and girls;*
- (b) to break down stereotypes in male, as well as female roles;*
- (c) to address the separate areas of disadvantage particular to boys and to girls.*

5.44 Strategies to improve the quality of education for girls should be based on an understanding that girls are not a homogeneous group. Priority should be given to meeting the specific needs of those groups most requiring support to benefit from schooling; such as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, girls from LBOTE (Language Backgrounds Other Than English), those who live in remote areas, and girls who may be at risk of not completing their secondary education.

5.45 Schools should educate girls and boys for satisfying, responsible and productive living, including work inside and outside the home.

Further, P&C Federation Annual Conference called on the NSW Government to establish the following positions:

Federation urges the Minister for Education and Training to provide additional funding for the allocation of the following positions:

- (a) co-educational high schools with more than 500 students, a head teacher (female students) supported by a supervisor (male students) or a head teacher (male students) supported by a supervisor (female students), the specific allocation to be at the discretion of the principal;*
- (b) co-educational high schools with more than 500 boys and more than 500 girls, a head teacher (female students), and a head teacher (male students);*
- (c) single-sex high schools with more than 500 students a head teacher (male students) or (female students), as appropriate;*
- (d) co-educational high schools, or secondary departments of central schools, with fewer than 500 students a supervisor (male students) and a supervisor (female students); and*
- (e) single-sex high schools with fewer than 500 students a supervisor (male students) or (female students), as appropriate.*