

## **NSW FEDERATION OF SCHOOL COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS SUBMISSION INTO THE INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

The N.S.W. Federation of School Community Organisations (FOSCO) is a peak state school parent organisation with a primary interest in the early years of schooling. Affiliates are infant and primary school parent clubs throughout N.S.W. FOSCO's policy is decided each year at Annual Conference to which each club is entitled to send delegates. An Executive is responsible for implementing policy and carrying out administrative and representative functions of the organisation.

We welcome the opportunity to make a written submission to the Inquiry into the Education of Boys. The factors which affect the education of our children are of prime importance to us so we have a vital interest in this inquiry. We will focus our comments on factors affecting the early years of schooling as these are the specific concern of FOSCO and it is our belief that they are the most important years in the development of our children into young adults.

We are concerned that some sectors of the community see the need to address issues affecting boys because of relative improvements in some outcomes for girls. We would not expect this inquiry to result in resources being withdrawn from programs for girls but that it may result in improved strategies in gender equity education involving the whole school community and in identifying successful strategies and programs to improve literacy outcomes for boys in particular.

We believe that all children should have access to and be able to participate in high quality free education within the government system and the opportunity to learn and progress to the maximum extent of his/her ability. Capacity to learn is not determined by gender, just as it is not determined by location, socio-economic status or cultural grouping although outcomes may be influenced by these factors. We are pleased that the inquiry is to look at the social and cultural factors which affect boys education as this leads to a recognition that all boys are not the same and that ways of being boys and men vary according to class, ethnicity and locality. Schooling must educate our children, boys and girls, for citizenship – that is active, productive, responsible and satisfying living. For this they need to be educated for equity in gendered relationships beginning in the early years. Issues of education of boys cannot be separated from education of girls.

Our comments are based on FOSCO Policy affirmed by delegates at our last Annual Conference in September 1999 and on our experiences in working with parents and teachers in schools. Policy states:

### **F Social Justice in Schooling**

*While schools by themselves cannot bring about social justice, schooling should attempt to counter, rather than reinforce, social inequalities.*

*Affirmative action may be necessary in order to work towards more equitable outcomes for groups currently disadvantaged in education.*

### **F5 Gender Equity: Premise**

*Schooling is one factor in the forming of gender identity and in shaping the relationships between the sexes. Equality of outcomes from schooling for boys and girls is therefore important in assisting future good relationships and equality in society.*

## F5 Gender Equity : Policy

- 1. All children should be encouraged to develop their confidence and potential to their full extent, irrespective of their sex.*
- 2. Recognising that the construction of gender starts at a very early age Federation believes that all infants and primary teachers should include in their programs strategies to break down gender stereotypes and address areas of disadvantage particular to boys and girls.*
- 3. Curriculum and teaching practices, from the first years of school, should raise awareness amongst girls and boys of how their inter-relationships affect access to resources and knowledge and help shape their gender identities. They should learn to support each other towards achieving equality of outcomes.*
- 4. Students should only be grouped on the basis of sex for educational, not administrative purposes.*
- 5. Co-educational schools will contribute to long –term equality of the sexes in society.*

In seeking equity in outcomes for all, that is boys and girls, we would seek to redress circumstances where learning outcomes show real differences based on gender, or ethnic origin, isolation, sexuality or socio-economic status. It is significant that this inquiry is seeking to report on social and cultural needs as well as educational, because of the complex and apparent significance of all these factors. It also means that a range of affirmative policies and strategies will be needed.

In looking at literacy, it does appear that there are differences in outcomes, beginning in the early years of schooling, between boys and girls generally. However, there are also significant differences in literacy outcomes between students from high and low socio-economic status backgrounds and between Indigenous and non-indigenous students. There is not a significant difference in outcomes between boys and girls of high socio-economic status, whereas boys from low socio-economic groups have significantly poorer outcomes than girls from the same backgrounds.

Differences in outcomes in literacy can also vary according to location and to stages of schooling. They are more complex than being based only on gender and therefore successful strategies to improve literacy outcomes will be varied, look at social and cultural factors, will involve the community and will also address needs of groups of girls.

### Strategies to address social and cultural factors – Gender equity in relationships.

FOSCO considers that in addressing the educational needs of boys and in the knowledge that all boys are not the same, an understanding of the social and cultural factors which shape the different identities of boys and girls, and men and women, is essential. Teachers, in partnership with parents, need to work to understand the construction of gender and in gender relationships and to assist young people in their understandings.

Since the Commonwealth Schools Commission's National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools there has been considerable examination and research on these issues in schooling. These have frequently focussed on the rights of women to equality. Despite

much change in recent decades, women generally have not achieved equity in paid employment, in political decision making, nor in personal relationships. It does have to be acknowledged that there have been a number of specific programs to address curriculum areas where girls outcomes were generally below those of boys and that these used an understanding of gender issues in their development. It may be that specific literacy programs for boys based on gender understandings need to be developed.

The reality is that if girls' educational outcomes have improved significantly in relation to boys' as a result of affirmative action in schools, this has not been translated into economic equality for women. Average weekly wages for women are still significantly below that of men, and whilst they did rise in the 70s and 80s, they declined during the 90s in relation to men's. Radio reports of research this week reported that girls not completing school had much higher unemployment rates than boys who left before completion. Research is needed to investigate the reasons for this. Girls need to complete school to gain employment and this may be why they have higher retention rates; if school completion is not an economic necessity for some groups of boys, why should they stay? Perhaps these realities indicate that the outcomes from education that we are measuring, such as the quantifiable, testable items in literacy, are not necessarily those which prepare students for their future role in society. On the other hand, perhaps gender equity programs which have been implemented have not achieved greater equity for girls because they have concentrated on what is wrong with girls (bad at maths & computer science) and on changing girls' choices (not choosing childcare, but high paying careers) and not sufficiently on structural changes in society encompassing gendered relationships.

Specific gendered patterns of behaviour are noted in the early years of schooling in numerous studies (such as in "Shaping up Nicely: the formation of schoolgirls and schoolboys in the first month of school" Report to the Gender Equity and Curriculum Reform Project, DEET, 1994) and show that both boys and girls are coming to school with patterns of behaviour and attitudes which have a major impact on their school experience and how they learn. All studies on teacher interaction with students indicate that boys demand significantly more "teacher time" than do girls. We need to look at why this is so, how it restricts outcomes for girls and affects relationships between boys and girls. The disproportionate amount of counsellor time that boys command, is no doubt not deliberate, but a function of necessity but it has not led to improved outcomes. These factors suggest that 'more of the same' strategies will not lead to improved outcomes but that a major research program needs to be undertaken to develop effective programs.

All research into gender relations in the early years indicates to us that it is essential to involve the community as a whole and certainly all parents of school aged children in any programs which seek to address inequities in educational outcomes that arise from gendered behaviour and attitudes. Whilst parents of girls, and many teachers, have been concerned about the detrimental effect of gendered roles and behaviours of girls in schools ( eg not being assertive with computers, not interested in maths) and working to change girls' attitudes, there has been little genuine effort to challenge the behaviour of boys. There has all too often been the response that "boys will be boys" compared to that which encourages girls to seek equal opportunity and to take a more positive, assertive role.

There clearly has to be a research effort to examine strategies which enable both boys and girls to experience schooling and learn to their full ability without being "hindered" by

gendered stereotypes. This will require resources directed to developing understandings in teachers, parents and the wider community as well as for students.

### Literacy Strategies

FOSCO acknowledges that governments have directed considerable resources specifically to improve literacy outcomes in recent years. A large proportion of all targeted programs funds have been for literacy. Boys have predominantly been the recipients of most 'remedial' programs over many years although they have not been labelled "boys' programs". If literacy outcomes for boys have not improved then the issue of the ineffectiveness of these programs and resources needs to be investigated. If they are based on understandings of gender they may be more successful. In New South Wales 'Reading Recovery' has been successful in improving literacy outcomes but it is a very expensive program for universal application and does not have any real gender underpinnings. The underlying principles of Reading Recovery, with gendered understandings may be brought together to improve literacy for boys. Research on why girls are generally successful in literacy learning may also be helpful in relation to boys' literacy.

It may be that groups of boys do not see the need for high level 'school' literacy skills. It is said that high level literacy and communication skills are needed for today's information rich society, but boys' apparent lack of literacy skills has not hindered them in Information Technology industries nor apparently in most professions. Does this tell us that certain groups of boys do see 'school literacy' (that which we test) as irrelevant to real life?

In attempting to encourage boys' literacy and reading through their specific 'interests', should we have them reading computer manuals and stories based on conquest and violence and the like? These strategies may only serve to reinforce gendered 'male' attitudes which see reading as a 'feminine' pursuit.

Have boys interests in computers and computer games contributed to lower literacy outcomes for them? Communication through technology means no real engagement, even less than in physical activities which have traditionally been seen as appropriate play for boys rather than girls. The work undertaken by Nola Alloway (Foundation Stones: The Construction of Gender in Early Childhood, Curriculum Corporation, Melb, 1994) and Pam Gilbert (Divided by a Common Language, Curriculum Corporation, Melb 1994) needs to be further researched to understand its application to literacy learning in the early years.

FOSCO would recommend that there be a major research program, involving all stakeholders, which looks at education in gender relationships and in literacy programs based on an understanding of gender issues.

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