



QUEENSLAND INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION

*Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Workplace Relations*

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

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1.0 Preamble

The Queensland Independent Education (QIEU) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into the education of boys. As the state registered Union representing approximately 11 000 employees in the non-government education sector QIEU has a role in participating in the current debate on the education of boys. As our members deal daily with the issues arising out of educating boys our union endeavors to provide advice and support by way of policy formulation in regard to curriculum content, discipline and restraint of students, equity issues and harassment, bullying and violence matters.

Through QIEU's Equity Committee a Policy for Gender Justice in Schools was formulated in February 2000. This policy forms the core of our submission to the inquiry.

2.0 A Policy for Gender Justice in Schools

2.1 Introduction

The Independent Education Union policy for gender justice in schools rejects the populist "What about the Boys?" refrain, which argues that boys as a gender group are homogeneous and the new disadvantaged in the schooling system. Alternatively it supports the notion of "Gender Justice" as a goal for schools to assist both boys and girls in examining alternative constructions of gender, which in turn will assist in alleviating the problems experienced by some boys in schools.

The widely held perception that all girls are out performing all boys as a consequence of gender equity policies aimed at girls and the pro-feminist agenda generally, has fuelled the argument for the pendulum to swing back in favour of boys. The proliferation of media reports on the under-achievement of boys in testing results has added to this perception.

However, the generalisations found in the popular press ignore the vital questions; "Which boys?" "Which girls?" Factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and disability profoundly affect the performance of both boys and girls and should be taken into account in any measure of performance.

School based policies and procedures and the role of staff play a major role in the influencing both boys and girls in the construction of gender and in regard to equity policies. Young people are actively involved in reshaping themselves, their behaviour, language and attitudes through interaction with adults, with peers and with media in a variety of contexts including significantly the school. The whole school experience will play a major role in what it means for them to be a boy or a girl.

While school performance can be measured and influences such as social class can be factored into the results, it is undisputed that some boys dominate the statistics in issues such as:

- High incident of punishment in school
- Dangerous and destructive behaviour
- Abuse and assault of females and other males
- Homophobia
- Drug Abuse
- Suicide
- Road deaths

- Dominance of teachers' time
- Dominance of linguistic and physical space in the classroom and playground
- Dominance in the use of sports facilities and resources
- Dominance in the use of computers and technology
- School suspension and expulsion

These examples reflect the worst aspects of hegemonic or dominant masculinity and provide the reason that schools need to take action in order to provide alternatives to the currently held narrow view of what it is to be masculine and the restrictions associated with that view in terms of educational opportunities, life chances and quality of life.

As well as creating many problems for some boys, dominant masculinities powerfully impacts on the school experiences of girls and perpetuates imbalances of cultural and economic power between the sexes resulting in the abuse of women, girls and some male and boys.

Schools and teachers in particular need to provide both boys and girls with a sense of being male or female to which they can aspire. Teachers have a key role to assist young people to examine alternative constructions of masculinity and femininities and to affirm a range of identities as worthwhile and valuable. All teachers have a responsibility in making schools supportive learning environments for all students and especially those practising marginalised masculinities and femininities.

2.2 The Role of the School

Schools should ensure that all school-based policies and procedures encompass the principles of gender equity and in doing this promote alternative forms of gender construction.

A gender justice strategy would:

- Contain policies on bullying and harassment, which would be developed with a view to their relationship to racism, sexuality, and disability and to a perceived physical ideal of masculinity and femininity.
- Address the problems that dominant masculinities cause for men and boys and women and girls
- Be part of the mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and school culture.
- Promote and reward a wide variety of ways of being male and female.
- Encourage both boys and girls to critically examine their own behaviour and take responsibility for changing it if necessary.
- Involve administration and all staff in examining ways in which they model gender equity principles in their relationships.
- Identify ways in which the schools structures and practices help to produce and perpetrate narrow forms of gender construction.
- Provide access to role models that demonstrate alternative masculinities and femininities.

2.3 The Role of the Teacher

Teachers have a vital role in showing both boys and girls how widening their understanding of what it means to be male or female can lead to more diverse experiences and positive relationships with others. Teachers need to examine with students the effects of dominant masculinity and femininity and how these constrain as much as advantage them.

A combination of the following strategies should be used:

- Encouragement of activities which are cooperative rather than competitive.
- Exploration of relationships with others in terms of;
 - self concept
 - self esteem
 - self confidence
- The emphasis should be on feeling good about themselves, why anxiety may lead them to conform to more rigid models and how this rigidity can be ultimately harmful.

- Training in conflict resolution.
- Recognition of the symptoms of abuse, harassment and bullying eg.
 - Depression
 - Low self esteem
 - Withdrawn behaviour
 - Inability to make friends
 - School absences
 - Non-assertive defensive behaviour
 - Reluctance to challenge the statements or authority of others
 - Eating disorders
- A valorization of academic subjects and other involvements traditionally labeled “feminine” and devalued.

Teachers must also reflect on their disciplinary methods and consider whether they are modelling the behaviour about which they are critical eg. domination and harassment. For this reason sarcasm, shouting, physical punishment and bullying need to be unacceptable.

2.4 Staffing of Schools

The populist press points to boys’ poor performance being among other things, the result of the lack of male role models in the teaching profession. However, research has found that the sex of the role model is less important than the modelled behaviour. A diversity of skilled staff including those in authority positions in schools is the key to legitimising a range of gender identities.

The association of learning and intellectuality with the feminine may be overcome by more male teachers working in schools. Also, men do have a responsibility to work with boys around both the positive and negative effects of hegemonic practices of masculinities.

Schools should provide living exemplars of and demonstrably value males and females who enact non hegemonic forms of masculinity or femininity.

2.5 Violence, Sex-based Harassment and Bullying

The social construction of gender needs to be a matter discussed in schools specifically in the relation to some of the isolating and stifling aspects of hegemonic practices for both boys and girls and their relationships. Schools need to adopt a gender equity policy, which focuses on discipline, bullying, harassment and curriculum choice and content, and be integrated with issues of racism, sexuality and disability. An understanding of the social construction of gender needs to be integrated throughout the curriculum and the schools structure and practices. Skills in relation to resolving conflict, resisting sex-based harassment and bullying need to be developed in schools through a whole-school approach.

2.6 Conclusion

While the evidence may be compelling in terms of the school performance of some boys, the more legitimate concern is for the behavioural aspects of boys as a result of hegemonic masculinities, that for some boys has become a goal. The challenge for schools and particularly teachers is to resist the call “What about the boys?” and take up the gauntlet for gender justice in schools. The result hopefully will be that schooling is a positive experience for both boys and girls and for all boys and all girls.

Resources

- QTU Policy on Education of Boys
- “Contextualising and Utilising the ‘What about the Boys?’ Backlash for Gender Equity Goals” Bob Linguard – University of Queensland