

INSIGHT GENDER EQUITY

Boys' education may be currently in the headlines, but all students face gender-equity issues. In the first of a two-part series, Diny Slamet looks at how both boys and girls need a balanced education.



The gender balan

The newspapers are full of stories about the poor performance of boys. With the release of the Federal Government's *Boys: Getting it Right* report—widely criticised by teacher unions and academics alike—the debate has become tinged with an anti-feminist flavour in which boys and girls have become competing victims. The message is clear: we've done too much for the girls and ignored the boys; it's time we refocused on what boys need.

It's claimed that boys need such things as a boy-friendly curriculum that is more structured with lots of hands-on activities; they also need the opportunity to move around or leave classrooms for 'testosterone surge sessions'; they need single-sex classes in co-ed schools; and even classrooms painted certain soothing colours.

Society or gender?

But many academics say these kinds of solutions emanate more from the

realm of anecdotal experience, "common-sense" and intuition, rather than from any empirical research.

Indeed, according to Richard Teese, Professor of Post-Compulsory Education and Training at the University of Melbourne, the research evidence simply does not support the argument that boys are suffering across-the-board disadvantage in today's schools. Clearly, certain groups of boys have problems, though not across the curriculum. He says his research shows many examples of boys doing very well in various subjects, including English. In the Victorian Year 12 General Achievement Test, boys score better on average than girls in the maths/science test.

It is, Professor Teese says, the interaction between class and gender that is vital in getting a clearer understanding of how students perform. Professor Teese says that his book *Undemocratic Schooling* demonstrates that girls—and boys—from working-class backgrounds have made significant progress in

maths and science since the mid-1970s in Victoria. However, there are very large gaps between them and upper middle-class students, and also in the nature of the maths options taken by boys and girls.

His research shows that the greater the socio-economic advantage, the smaller the performance gap between boys and girls in maths, science and English. The gender gap widens for students with more socio-economic problems. As Professor Teese and his colleagues wrote in their report, *Who Wins at School*: "In general, the differences between girls and boys become sharper the more socially disadvantaged their parents are and the more gender itself operates as a category of cultural manipulation. Thus the real question is not whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged, but which girls and which boys."

The issue of boys "over-enrolling" in subjects such as maths and physics



may also be feeding the perception of male underachievement. Research by Deakin University's Dr Cherry Collins, Professor Jane Kenway and Dr Julie McLeod shows that girls will choose subjects they like and are good at, but which tend not to have strong vocational links. In contrast, boys tend to have their post-school employment in mind when they choose a narrow range of traditional subjects such as maths or hands-on technology subjects, even if they are not particularly good at them.

The researchers conclude that the average girl is performing slightly better than the average boy because, in subjects highly rated by boys, there is likely to be a longer 'tail' of boys bringing down the average performance. The broader spread of subjects that girls choose suggests they are less inclined to gamble on higher-status subjects such as maths and science if they are likely to do poorly in them.

Impact of social training

Professor Teese is clearly growing impatient with the direction the debate has headed, saying that the almost open attempt to blame boys' problems on feminists was "quite unconvincing and getting very boring". As he told *Australian Educator*: "Ultimately the inquiry should have worked back to the social origins of disadvantage, but it did not. The attempt to generalise the problem actually puts off dealing with the serious problems facing both boys and girls."

He is not alone in his criticism. Dr Wayne Martino, a senior lecturer at Murdoch University's School of Education, is scathing of the inquiry, saying that it had overstated boys' disadvantage and failed to acknowledge the complex interplay of factors that affect boys and schooling.

In particular, the inquiry's refusal to acknowledge the impact and effects of

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the social construction of gender was its greatest failure, according to Dr Martino. "We agree that there are problems for boys but the kinds of simplistic, tips-for-teachers approaches aren't really getting at the complexities and the actual impact that social training has on boys," he says.

The Tasmanian Education Department's website on gender gives a good overview of gender-construction theory. The theory asserts that ways of being masculine and feminine are "dynamically constructed through experience and socially interactive practice. Because of this, ways of being masculine and feminine can change from place to place, generation to generation and context to context.

"...Since this theory recognises that gendered ways of behaving are socially constructed, it opens the possibility to examine or deconstruct specific responses and behaviours... It allows for choice and change in which individuals are active."

Dr Martino says the inquiry's report did not address the issue of gender construction, despite increasing evidence around the world that it impacts significantly on curriculum, pedagogical practices and relations with and between students in schools.

Anecdotes rule

Unfortunately, says Dr Martino, gender construction is ignored when programs are being developed to address the educational and social needs of boys in schools. They rely on a kind of folk wisdom that boys are the way they are because of brain-sex or hormonal differences, he says. These "problematic assumptions" see boys as biologically

determined to behave, think, act and learn in certain ways—in other words, they assume all boys are the same.

"When we spoke to teachers, they referred to gut feelings and reactions, often to popular psychology. Programs like single-sex classes were implemented but the research does not support that they enhance the educational outcomes of boys and girls. Sometimes what I think tends to happen is a self-fulfilling prophecy. There's a belief that all boys are like that and then those beliefs get translated into what's seen as a truth for all boys," he says.

Tim Delaney, a project officer with the Victorian Education Department's Gender Strategy Team agrees, saying that, while some programs do recognise the diversity of boys and girls, many are based on "a lot of anecdotal stuff".

"The approach to having a boys-only program, or class, or whatever, is that if it's not managed carefully, then you reinforce the dominant versions of masculinity which can actually contradict what you're doing. Boys often understand that to be a male is anti-learning, or that learning is a feminine thing and they don't want to be involved in that. So, unless you can somehow come up with something that can bring that learning message with you, then the whole range of boys programs can be antithetical to what you're trying to do," he says.

Prisoners of gender

Michelle Rosicky, the Women's Coordinator with the New South Wales Teachers' Federation says the whole issue of gender equity is not to pit boys against girls in the competition for resources but to broaden an

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ATAGLANCE

■ Research shows that boys' educational disadvantage is linked to socio-economic hardship

■ Blaming girls' success for boys' problems is avoiding the complexity of the matter

■ Anecdote and pop psychology often replace facts in the discussion of gender issues

■ Boys and girls both benefit from thoughtful ideas about femininities and masculinities

understanding among boys and girls that there are many different ways to be masculine and feminine.

“During the 70s and 80s, we asked girls to take on boys’ subjects and asked girls to make the changes. I believe it was a reasonable understanding at that time, now it’s just as valid to ask boys to make the changes the other way, to make them work outside their comfort zone in the same way the girls were challenged. We’re trying to develop ways that lift the outcomes for both boys and girls and to help them confront the stereotypes that may reduce their life and learning options,” she says.

Rosicky says the issue not only covers class, but culture and race as well. “We want to make sure that the funding that is available gets targeted at the students that are most at risk. What schools can achieve with regard to this gender equity material is not just directed at the poor kids, the migrant kids, the Aboriginal kids, the kids in the bush. It’s just as potent for kids in affluent or middle-class areas. All students are prisoners of their gender construction.

“You target educational programs at the kids who have a need no matter where. In a boys’ school where bastardisation may be rampant, you would be developing programs that support those boys, to stop them from taking part in the practice and also understanding the ramifications and implications of it,” says Rosicky.

“Or schools may realise that girls are shying away from technology and boys are taking up the time on the computers, so the school would put in place a program to reduce this imbalance,” she says. “Or you might have boys at risk hiding in the library, so you develop a program around that. It’s all about schools developing programs relevant to the students in each location.”

BACK IN BALANCE



At the beginning of 1998, Ku-ring-gai Creative Arts High School in Sydney began implementing a Gender Equity Strategy that would raise teacher and student awareness of gender-equity issues, and examine and begin addressing the problems faced by the school community.

After extensive professional development in which teachers explored their own attitudes to gender issues, students were surveyed to find out their concerns. The survey posed such questions as “What are the best/worst things about being a girl in this school,” “What are the best/worst things about being a boy,” and “Do you think it is better to be a boy or a girl at this school”.

Among the priorities that emerged from the responses was the need for an anti-harassment policy and the somewhat more prosaic need to make the toilets more appealing. A long-term objective was to ensure all teaching was gender-inclusive.

The school’s anti-harassment policy, which clearly defines every behaviour that constitutes harassment or bullying, recognises that students and teachers are entitled to a safe and harassment-free workplace and are responsible for intervening, reporting and recording incidents.

The school’s reputation as a safe school has seen enrolment numbers grow. Where previously boys outnumbered girls by almost three to one, classes are now gender balanced.

“What the Federal Government inquiry concluded was that all boys were in need and we need to do something about it. What we’re saying is, ‘No, that’s not the way forward.’ We don’t want girls to fall behind and we don’t want boys that are in need of assistance being ignored,” says Rosicky.

Bullying and homophobia

Many of the “solutions” promulgated to deal with boys’ issues have also been harmful to young teens who are beginning to identify themselves as being gay, says Alison Xamon, the Women’s Officer with the State School Teachers’ Union of Western Australia. “By focusing on the idea of boys being a homogenous group and focusing on masculinist qualities, these solutions have been highly detrimental to young teens who don’t fit into that ‘boy-sy’ mould, not just if they’re gay, but if they’re sensitive or creative. The whole debate is having a detrimental impact on these kids.”

In a research project conducted for the Department of Education, Science and Training by Professor Bob Lingard and Dr Wayne Martino, a survey of 18 case-study schools found that bullying and homophobia were huge problems. The authors wrote: “Homophobia was often used to control those boys who were identified as not conforming to dominant and stereotyped ways of being male, including, in some schools, those boys with pro-academic attitudes.

“The usage of homophobic put-downs did not appear to be necessarily linked to issues of sexuality, but rather about gender non-conformity. Homophobia is often about the ‘policing’ of what is perceived to be acceptable or suitable male behaviour. In this way, such policing affects all boys and not just those who might identify as non-heterosexual.”

Schools need to be effective in dealing with the complexities of gender issues—which plainly have their effect on so many life choices that boys and girls make. According to Dr Martino, a “whole shift in culture” is needed in the area of professional development to help teachers understand and extend their knowledge base about the social construction of gender.

He speaks of the need to create “professional learning communities” of teachers within schools to enhance pedagogical practices that will produce more equitable student outcomes. As outlined in the Lingard report, these practices include “a high degree of intellectual quality, high levels of connectedness in terms of curriculum content and its application to the students’ lives outside of school, supportive classroom environments where students feel

valued and are encouraged to take risks in their learning, along with a strong recognition and celebration of difference”.

With their already insurmountable workloads, teachers must be wondering how they can possibly manage to deal with yet another complex issue such as gender equity. So it is perhaps appropriate to add this last word from Dr Barry McGaw, the OECD’s Director of Education, who told *Australian Educator*: “Changing the attitudes of boys about the many meanings of masculinity sounds, on the face of it, like an extraordinarily difficult thing to do because these are deeply held views. But if you look back only 15 years, we were having this kind of discussion about how to get girls to change their aspirations.

“And all across education systems, people put in place programs for the

education of girls. They thought carefully about what would be involved in shaping girls’ aspirations, thought about role models, thought about presenting opportunities in ways girls hadn’t seen them before. We ought to be careful we don’t undo those gains as we try to achieve similar gains for boys. The success with girls ought to encourage us to think we can make a difference for boys.” ■

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In the next issue of Australian Educator, we look at gender equity from the teacher’s perspective.

W The AEU policy ‘Gender Equity—Education of Boys’ is at: www.aefederal.org.au/Policy/GenderEquity2003.pdf
The AEU’s submission to the House of Representatives standing committee on employment, education and workplace relations inquiry into the education of boys is at: www.aefederal.org.au/Debates/index2.html#EOB

GETTING EVEN ON ANGER

Moonee Ponds West Primary School, in Melbourne’s western suburbs, is trialling a preventive anger-management program for years prep to six that is also being tested in four schools in the region, and a further 10 schools in the LaTrobe Valley.

After surveying children about how boys and girls express anger, teachers Jenni Smith and Wendy White are developing classroom materials that allow children to expose, examine and challenge the stereotypes of what it is to be a boy or a girl and to understand that anger is a natural emotion that can be expressed safely and in an acceptable way.

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“Anger management is critical in the gender debate, as gender can impact both on how a child experiences and expresses their anger,” says White. “Anger impacts on friendships and can impact on the willingness of children to engage in relationships and to communicate their needs effectively.”

“In this program we’re not just looking at anger management in relation to boys’ aggression, but we’re also very keen on looking at girls and repressed anger

and the potential for depression in later years. It’s telling kids it’s really important we express our anger in a safe way,” she says.

“We use gender-construction theory to challenge and consequently broaden kids’ options in the way they define what it is to be male and female,” says Smith. “By doing so it encourages them to be aware of other choices available to them. If we can teach them from a young age to say, ‘I don’t actually have to be like that’, ‘I can be really intelligent and be good at sports and like the arts’, or,

‘I don’t have to be really good at sport to be successful and still be a boy’. This extends to anger expression. Boys and girls need to know that assertive expression is not only acceptable, but important for their emotional and social development.”

“It is also important for teachers to broaden their knowledge of gender and how they manage their anger,” says White. “By doing so, teachers reflect on their practices and beliefs, ultimately permeating the curriculum.”