



## AEU Federal report on Boys' Education 2003/2004:

Federal Government  
Boys' Lighthouse Schooling Project Stage One report  
"Meeting the Challenge".



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The answer is – quality teaching and resources produces quality learning outcomes.

## **Background Report**

Over recent years, the intensity of both argument and action over the education of boys has escalated. The gender equity policies of education departments and governments alike have, to date, focussed on strategies to cater for the optimal learning environments of both girls and boys. The MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework 1997 has provided a solid base from which to address gendered disadvantage in schools, as well as acknowledging factors such as ethnicity, aboriginality, socio-economic status and sexuality, that contribute to learning outcomes for students. Such structural frameworks have been a feminist and union demand for almost 2 decades.

The AEU believes that boys' and girls' education initiatives must be regarded as parallel priorities and take place within a "whole school approach" to gender equity, i.e. There is no educational or social justification for introduction of a separate and exclusive boys' education policy. More strong girls do not mean more weak boys.

However, more recently this debate has moved away from treating gender equity holistically and has seen the Federal Government propose and enact reactionary measures which are based on false notions of masculinity, role models and assessment of educational success.

In 2002 the media hype and backlash against the perceived gender equity focus on girls, prompted an over analysis of the statistics that said SOME boys aren't doing as well as SOME girls. The hysterical reaction to these figures by governments and bureaucracy was to assume ALL boys were "failing" or "falling behind" and immediate action taken to redress this imbalance. Interesting that the response for boys took months, while a response for girls took decades!

The Parliamentary report, "Boys Getting it Right" that followed the 2002 inquiry into the Education of Boys, (below) proposed many initiatives, including:

- a full review of the MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework and tender notice
- the Boys Lighthouse Schools Program,

and

- and supporting those departments and employers who are formulating Male Teacher Strategies, (such as that by the Catholic Education Office last year).

The AEU has and is engaged in extensive research and campaigning around the assumptions of masculinity and the capabilities of female teachers, which underpin such changes in gender equity policy. The issue is complex and requires well informed responses, rather than the reactionary and largely anecdotal "solutions" the Government has devised. The AEU has initiated and published two articles in The Educator, (The gender balance) and (The gender agenda), and part three part of the series, to be published in the Summer Edition tackles the issue of responses to the "Feminised" workforce and the false assumptions that boys need men as opposed to women as role models in schools.

### **Sex Discrimination & Male Teacher Scholarships**

It was largely this assumption that lead to the Sydney Catholic Education Office's request in 2002 for an exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act, as part of their male teacher strategy. And that more recently has prompted the Federal Government (in March 2004) to introduce legislation to amend the Sex Discrimination Act to ALLOW for discrimination by employers wanting to offer teacher education scholarships to men only.

It was the perceived crisis that the male teacher shortage has on providing quality education for boys in schools, which saw the Catholic Education Office's misguided challenge to the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) **rightly** dismissed by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. On 30 August 2002, the Catholic Education Office's application for exemption attempted to allow them to offer scholarships for male high school students to undertake study to become primary school teachers.

Though the Catholic Education Office signalled their intent to in 2004 again challenge their rejection of an exemption, the Federal Government DELIBERATELY did NOT wait for an outcome from HREOC, knowing full well that the arguments to date put to the commission have proven insufficient and indeed hollow justifications for a policy shift of this magnitude for discrimination law.

As the Catholic's application prompted such concern from many sectors, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) decided public submissions would assist in ensuring a sound decision was made on the application for a temporary exemption. And in February 2003, they refused to grant the exemption based on the inquiry's strong findings that "the profession should be attempting to attract the "best and most suitable people into the profession, regardless of gender. If teachers mirror more accurately the society in which they operate – in terms of gender, class and ethnicity – so much the better. But teaching ability must remain the primary consideration."

Hence, the HREOC decision reflected the same sentiments, that discriminatory assumptions of the flaws of a feminised teaching profession are not enough to justify an exemption to the Sex Discrimination Act. And that, in fact, neither the Catholic Education Office's assumed causes, nor could solutions to the male teacher shortage be proven as a reason for such an exemption.

The HREOC decision outlines why such initiatives like that of the Federal Government's new legislation and arguments are flawed. The summary decision says, the Catholic Education Office stated that "the underlying goal of the Exemption Application was to increase the number of male primary school teachers so that boys have male role models. It was further suggested by the CEO that having access to male role models will help improve the 'substantive equality of boys and girls' in primary schools. Underpinning this argument are a number of assumptions (which are not clearly articulated in the Exemption Application), including that: male and female teachers have different teaching styles, employ different discipline techniques and interact with boys differently; there is a relationship between the gender of the teacher and the academic achievement of the student; and boys suffer a disadvantage in primary schools due to the paucity of male teachers."

HREOC, as does the AEU, sees such strategies as not necessarily producing the outcome they desire, that is, so that boys have male role models. Their decision goes on to say, "a number of the submissions opposing the grant of the exemption pointed to what was said to be a lack of evidence showing that financial hardship is the barrier preventing a higher number of males from enrolling in primary teacher training."

Therefore HREOC ruled "that the granting of that application would be inconsistent with the objects of the Act and unreasonable in that the discriminatory effects that would be caused by the proposed scholarship scheme outweigh the reasons advanced in favour of it".

It is self evident that the strategies education employers and policy makers use to address the imbalance should not mirror the gender assumptions and stereotypes, but acknowledge that many of the issues ARE (and should be treated as such) gender blind.

Importantly, the decision declared that there was "insufficient evidence before the Commission to support a finding that the gender imbalance in the primary teaching profession will have adverse social or educational effects or will detrimentally affect school culture or the education of boys enrolled as students in primary schools."

While the issue has been bubbling along as an insult, to the quality and leadership women in education DO provide to both girls and boys, the process of the Government's decision to go ahead with its legislation in favour of discrimination, actively ignores the advise of HREOC in favour of those who put the case for sensation – those of the “men's movement”, those of the feminist backlash.

The AEU extensively outlined in our submission to the inquiry in 2002 that gender equity means improved educational outcomes for both boys AND girls, and that the model of "competing victims" is rejected. We DO believe, strongly that boys' and girls' needs are intertwined and are parallel priorities; that initiatives for girls must not be diminished or exchanged for initiatives for boys.

### **MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework Review**

Despite these arguments, the greatest threat to gender equity now comes in the form of the Government's review of the MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework.

The 2003 Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, (MCEETYA) allowed Dr Brendan Nelson to follow through with the recommendation from the Boys in Education Inquiry that said the MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework needed to be reviewed, as it did not adequately address boys.

The progress for this review so far has been the successful tender from Gai Sheridan International (GSI). GSI's Richard Fletcher and Deborah Hartman are researchers from Newcastle University's Family Action Centre, 'Boys in Education Program' & oversee (amongst others) the Rock and Water program, used by many Boys Lighthouse Schools. The consultation process is underway and is due to report in February 2004. The brief requests the consultant to:

- (a) Collect and analyse information and reports relevant to the Framework, particularly those developed since its publication;
- (b) Consider these findings in a critical review of the existing Framework;
- (c) Present a draft revised Framework, incorporating recommendations arising from the critical review; and
- (d) Participate in and assist in synthesising the outcomes of up to two (2) national roundtable forums being convened to consider the draft Framework.

On the basis of that it could be a good thing to be reviewing a framework that is 6 years old. However the concern what is recommended after the consultation process, with what underlying assumptions/gender role stereotypes being factored into the review and how much influence can be had within that reporting process.

As the final “reviewed” framework will be put to the next meeting of MCEETYA in June next year, the AEU's avenue for pressure throughout the process will be via education departments, those the consultant DOES seek input from (if not us), and our respective State and Territory Education Ministers themselves who have the power to alter or veto any unsatisfactory elements of framework Review that may eventuate.

The MCEETYA Taskforce with responsibility for gender equity is the Targeted Initiatives of National Significance Taskforce (NSW).

## **Boys' Lighthouse Project**

Finally, the "grand initiative" the Government has come up with address issues of, (primarily) boys' literacy performance, is the concept of Boys Lighthouse Schools. The premise of the schools is that via specially funded projects the schools bid for and conduct to target boys, are assessed and if they produce the literacy and numeracy achievement the Government is looking for, those programs and schools become "beacons" for policy guidance for ALL schools in what's called "cluster" areas.

It is interesting to note that the sorts of programs the Government is actively looking for are NOT those innovative, gender deconstructing and expressive environments for boys, but necessarily those programs that can be "proven" to lift literacy and numeracy scores. Essentially the Government is focussing on this aspect of learning so narrowly because their entire premise for ANY action around boys and male teacher strategies is because statistics are indicating that SOME boys are doing less well than SOME girls in the area of literacy. And despite the fact that programs to address issues of gender construction, the acknowledgement of the way power dynamics and disadvantage works in society WOULD be a good starting point to address why some boys are falling behind, the Government appears to have an aversion to deeper ideological analysis of this kind. And in any case, much of the time this type of learning cannot be quantified in the way the Government is so obsessed with. At a greater depth, there are many problems with such performance testing methods and the effect they have on boys and their sense of underperformance/inadequacies.

In late November last year, the Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson announced that as part of a \$159 million Quality Teaching Programme, the Boys' Lighthouse project would be initiated and run over two years. This was part of their overall \$4.3 million "investment" in boys.

Under Stage One, almost at its evaluation end point, schools and groups of schools from around Australia have been awarded grants of up to \$5,000 to document and showcase how they successfully develop and use educational practices addressing the specific needs of boys. Curriculum Corporation manages Stage One on behalf of the Department of Education, Science and Training. Lighthouse schools are required to attend or participate in at least one state-wide briefing session or teleconference and prepare a project work plan at the beginning of the project, submit an interim report on progress in June and they all presented final reports to DEST on 19 September 2003.

The final report on this stage, (1) "Meeting the Challenge" was released by the Curriculum Corporation in January, and the AEU's response to the findings within the report, follows this summary. "Meeting the Challenge" essentially confirms that with resources, professional learning, smaller class sizes and adequate preparation time, the educational outcomes of students, (in this case a group of boys) improve markedly. However, what "meeting the Challenge" did not indicate, is that the improvements in boys' learning was at all attributable to a "new style" of teaching or than any of the programs were designed because of an identified "boys' learning style" unique to only boys. That is, whilst the Lighthouse Project was aimed at boys, the findings in the report demonstrates that the same can be successfully applicable to girls also, and simply goes to the matter of quality teaching.

Stage Two, will begin in 2004 after the schools' successes has been evaluated and a second round grants will be allocated for approximately 30 clusters of schools across Australia established to support successful practices in boys' education. Each cluster will contain a 'lighthouse' school to support the professional development of teachers in schools around them.

Lighthouse schools support grants, this time to the tune of up to \$60,000, will be granted "not intend[ing] to define a single principle or framework for what is best practice in boys' education and the 110 funded projects demonstrate a rich variety of approaches and styles which can be categorised under the five following broad headings:

- adapting pedagogy, curriculum and assessment for different learning styles, including interactive and experiential styles and information and communication technology
- improving literacy and communication skills and performance across the curriculum, including integration of structured phonics into literacy teaching
- developing effective and sustainable behaviour management programmes
- improving student engagement with schooling and motivation to learn
- drawing school and community resources together to provide positive role models for students.”

### **Mapping of Gender Specific and Gender Related Materials**

DEST has also recently commissioned a national mapping of curricula and related materials used by Australian schools that have been designed with a specific gender focus or are gender related, and is seeking your help to identify relevant resources.

They want the project to produce a list of curricula and associated material that have been designed to meet specific learning needs and/or are designed to raise awareness of gender issues. So they will gather any schools’ departments’ unions’ gender related curriculum materials (for example, Internet sites, professional development resources, textbooks, systemic programs, school based projects, departmental guidelines) that they believe are relevant and useful.

The consultant undertaking this project, Dr Kevin Donnelly, (at e-mail [kevind@netspace.net.au](mailto:kevind@netspace.net.au), by phone on (03) 9888 4250 or by post at PO Box 228 Deepdene VIC 3103.)

The mapping activity is then intended for wider dissemination to teachers and school communities, and to provide a broader range of options for teachers for engaging students in learning on gender issues. One of the outcomes of the project will be an Internet site with descriptions and details of such gender related materials.

# AEU report on “Meeting the Challenge”.

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## Introduction

Gender equity in schools is fundamental. Getting the balance right between targeting disadvantage faced by girls throughout their schooling, (and indeed as they continue into the workforce as adults) and particular challenges that some boys experience throughout their schooling, is crucial to the academic and social quality of Australia’s education systems. In respecting the importance of gender equity in schools, the AEU’s support for targeted programs for boys specifically (but also any gender specific programs) rests pivotally on ensuring the underlying goal of gender re-construction is central.

However, much of “Meeting the Challenge” indicates that most boys’ lighthouse projects highlighted only superficially acknowledge the element of gender and could in fact be applicable and successful for girls as well as boys because they simply highlight the impact of good teacher practise and proper resourcing. Without discussions of particular attributes of masculinities and how they interplay with educational outcomes and attitude towards schools, (without the application of stereotypes) the programs simply become pilots of quality teaching.

More reassuring however, is the clear indication from the recommendations and observations within “Meeting the Challenge” that the AEU’s long held view is supported, that preparation time, resources, smaller class sizes and professional development matter to educational outcomes as well as student motivation and behaviour. Much of this report will discuss further notions of quality teaching and how current research supports the broader fundamentals of “Meeting the Challenge”. Specifically, the Literacy element (as the original focus for government alarm for boys’ decline in measured results in this area) dealt with in the report particularly support the ideals of quality education and successful learning, rather than any evidenced notion of those teaching methods catering specifically for a particularly unique “boys learning style”.

Moreover, many of the areas of focus, (behaviour management, peer support targeted programs for ‘at risk’ boys) included recommendations for “positive male role models” and

many schools introduced such men into their activities. However, within the report there is miniscule mention across the board of any criteria, as determined by research or the school, of why male role models are required, the purpose they serve, nor the characteristics sought in the men being promoted as positive influences in the boys' schooling. Similarly the closest references to any gender analysis or re-construction of sex role stereotypes, (that would have assisted in understanding the behavioural problems 'at risk boys' are displaying) were some projects such as Batchelor Area School's Men's Business, that included discussions of 'what it is to be boy', 'alternate ways of being male' and 'experiences as young men'. However, without reference to how gender interacts and influences those experiences in society, the boys understanding of their behaviour in the long term may not be as comprehensive.

This trend within the report of not specifying "which" boys are being targeted and why, or even "what" qualities are desired in boys is contrasted by for a few specific comments up front in the report, recognising that boys are not a homogenous group. The report references this acknowledgement with regard to forms of masculinity expressed in schools and the importance, (albeit a glancing comment), of deconstructing those gender stereotypes. However, little is actually discussed about if programs are successfully targeting "at risk" boys or whether they inadvertently are treating boys as a homogenous group linked only by gender. And disappointingly, the report and programs see the reapplication of sex role stereotypes as opposed to their *deconstruction*, being evident in some of the schools' programs that included surfing, martial arts, Billy cart building, carpentry, golf, rock climbing and fire station excursions.

Nevertheless, as stated earlier, the main thrust of "Meeting the Challenge" identifies many recommendations that goes to the heart of quality teaching, and all these are positives in supporting claims teachers have had for years. However, it's important to argue that if such programs highlighted by the Boys Lighthouse process are seen to be producing desired outcomes for educational achievement and engagement, then these should be trialled and applied across the school for all students and incorporated as best practise. Further, surely if a program is successful because it demonstrates the positive effects of increased resources, preparation time, smaller student/teacher ratios and access to appropriate professional development on teaching and delivery, then it should move the government to invest MORE in these areas of education systems to enable such opportunities to be seized for ALL students, not just selected boys.

## Boys Lighthouse Project Process and Supporting Research

As reported in “Meeting the Challenge”, 110 schools participated in the Lighthouse process. Of these, the project areas focussed on by the schools/clusters were ‘Pedagogy, Curriculum and Assessment’, ‘Literacy and Communication Skills’, ‘Student Engagement and Motivation’, ‘Behaviour Management Programmes’ and ‘Positive Role Models for Students.’ In order, participation by schools in each of these 5 areas consisted in 34 projects on pedagogy/assessment issues, 24 projects worked on issues of literacy for boys, 28 projects concerned themselves with student engagement and at the smaller end of participation, 15 projects looked at behaviour management and only 9 on positive role modelling for students.

While it is disappointing that the 5 areas targeted for measured outcomes only addressed the symptoms of the underperformance some boys have been experiencing, rather than identifying and seeking to turn around the underlying factors as to why they boys are seen to be ‘at risk’ in the first place, it is also unfortunate that the process itself is founded on, and concludes, based on untested anecdotal evidence.

That is, the impetus of the Boys’ Lighthouse Project and Federal Government Inquiry into the performance of boys and their literacy standards was a combination of a conservative attack on the gender equity focus in schools in the past decade that catered for girls’ disadvantage, and an alarmist response to the trend of boys’ disengagement and school behavioural issues. Both these elements, it can be argued, dealt neither with the seriousness of how gender construction in schools profoundly impacts academic results and social interaction for both boys and girls nor acknowledged historical indicators of pattered disadvantaged by SOME boys and SOME girls. So whilst an inquiry was launched and pilots projects initiated in response to a perceived problem, the ‘symptoms’ were attributed to conservative value judgements as to what ought be the focus in schools and who ought be achieving in what areas.

In this context, the ensuing MCEETYA Gender Equity Review (2004) process (that is expected to follow the trend of the Boys Lighthouse Schools process and outcomes) seems to be more about “tipping the seesaw back in favour of boys” rather than ensuring gender equity initiatives balance the seesaw for both girls and boys. The 1997 MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework never weighted the needs of girls above those of boys, however the Federal Government has in response attempted to initiate and highlight programs which enables

better teaching and learning, in order to improve measured outcomes for all boys rather than deconstructing the factors influencing poor performance, (which clearly range further than gender). This shows that the Government's agenda is neither about creating a level, nor of gender analysis but about lifting performance and performance only.

The AEU's criticisms with process in this sense, rest not with the fact that schools are engaging in the programs, and attempting to be proactive in the area of disadvantage, but that the ideological drive behind the programs are being blindly accepted and replicated in promotional rhetoric.

With regard to the research used to support the Federal Government's action, it is the more recent the work of the likes of Mr Ian Lillico, who oversees the website, "Boys Forward", Peter West's "tough love" approach to masculinities, Ken Rowe and overtly Christian fundamentalists like Steve Biddulph who have all more recently begun analyses of boys' educational performance, that are the triggers, (as well as the public and purely anecdotal backlash), for the Federal Government's response. The question that needs to be asked is, when and how often has the Government actually evidenced, historically comparative figures of whether boys experiencing similar disadvantages as those highlighted as doing less well NOW, were also not performing as well in past decades? Longitudinal studies like those of, Richard Teese, Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod are those less utilised and referenced by the government, in favour of the more recent and it can be argued, reactionary works, which fit the Government's intent.

Further to historically narrow evidence used within the Lighthouse process, is also the shallow support for the repeated notion that there is a particular learning style unique to just boys as opposed to one just for girls. It is acknowledged within "Meeting the Challenge" that there are MANY learning styles and comments interspersed in the report reiterate that "boys are not a homogenous group", yet the level of generalisation, particularly regarding a 'boys' learning style' is at best academically lazy and at worst ideologically convenient.

## Quality Teaching

"Meeting the Challenge's", conclusions strongly supports the view that quality teaching and quality outcomes can be achieved when resources, time, professional development and smaller teacher/student ratios are present. However, it could be said that the attributes of quality teaching and supportive professional development detailed within this section have no direct link to the specific learning patterns (identified or otherwise inferred) of boys in

particular, unless the Federal Government wish to infer that girls do not require any of these things for them to succeed throughout their education? Ensuring a range of teaching techniques, structured teaching, encouraging participation, group learning, providing positive feedback and being fair and consistent, should be considered (and IS) essential for all students.

Gender bias, is characterizing the current Federal Government's response to student disadvantage rather than the concepts of gender equity and gender construction that has been the axiom of recent union, school, MCEETYA and governmental practice for the past few decades.

Indeed the quality teaching and learning goals desired by "Meeting the Challenge" are more substantially reinforced within DEST's recent report from the Inquiry into Teaching and Teacher Education. The Report, "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" overseen by Professor Kwong Lee Dow, interestingly identifies similar factors as "Meeting the Challenge" but in contrast does so to ensure quality teaching for *all* students and rarely deals with the interplay of gender at all, (and certainly not specifically for boys).

Moreover, "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" (DEST, 2003, pxxi) supports the AEU's long held belief that, "several factors underpin teacher satisfaction and retention. Among them are: improved remuneration; physical conditions within schools; availability and quality of curriculum resources; teaching loads; class sizes; access to and use of technology; appropriate in-service training and the opportunity for study leave and professional development." These measures go a long way to ensure the retention of a quality teaching force (which as we know is in drastic decline) but also in turn are the very factors associated with improving educational outcomes and learning for all students.

Further, professional learning is intrinsic to ensuring appropriate responses to all sorts of student needs and challenges, and "Meeting the Challenge" in many places supports this view. Hence, the quality of teaching, if resourced, does in itself go a long way to addressing disadvantage and/or disengagement by students. "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" also supports this, saying, "more extended professional learning is essential for the vitality of the profession. Teachers will be better placed to foster students' innovative capabilities, or respond adequately to students' diverse learning needs if they continue their own professional learning." (DEST, 2003, pxxii)

The importance of addressing disadvantage, however, was not lost within “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future”. On the contrary, it identifies the cost of those students who miss out on educational opportunities. “There are other categories of students who generally do not perform well. Where individual students and identifiable categories of students do not reach standards that are, in principle, attainable by all, they are all too likely to have reduced opportunity for full and active participation in society and the economy. Successful learning by every student is a worthy school motto.” (DEST, 2003, p183)

Thus, it’s important to remember that while throughout the report on the Boys’ Lighthouse Schools repeatedly reports positive teaching strategies and associates them specifically in the context of boys, “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” understands that for the sake of ALL students’ learning outcomes, “teachers need a rich understanding of the changing world of children’s experience, of youth culture and the lives of students, irrespective of the subjects they teach. Effective teaching requires that teachers are sensitive to and connect with this culture and build upon it. Learning is strongest and most meaningful when it engages students actively, connects with their own knowledge and understanding and relates to their interests and experience. To meet these challenges teachers need a great deal of support in the often difficult conditions of the contemporary school.” (DEST, 2003, xxiv)

The fact that a quality teaching report of this scope from DEST, (at the same time the Federal Government is trialing boys’ education pilots) deals only minimally with gender throughout its teaching best practice recommendations, is a telling element to support the perception that the Federal Government are approaching the issue of gender equity from a biased and ideological perspective of a backlash against feminist gender analysis.

## Targeting Disadvantage

Though recognising that one of the AEU’s major criticisms of the progress report and content of the Boys’ Lighthouse Schools lacks a concise objective for targeting the particular factors influencing those boys’ underperformance, (or even the data to identify historical patterns of similar disadvantage to establish whether this underperformance is indeed a contemporary phenomenon at all), a few of the lighthouse schools are worth highlighting for their efforts to undertake thoughtful targeting of their programs for boys.

Goondiwindi State High School successfully identified that the particular boys identified as underperforming, had common factors attributable to their learning outcomes and these factors formed the basis of how their project actually aimed to improve targeted learning

outcomes. The other positive with this particular project was that it successfully analysed gender roles and included a deconstruction of these.

“Meeting the Challenge” details how, by focussing on teaching and learning practices in the classroom, Goondiwindi’s project was successfully designed to strengthen boys’ engagement in learning almost as much as improving their learning outcomes; in large part because of the synergistic nature of these two objectives.

As they identify within the Report, (DEST 2003, p34) “the driving force in the cluster’s Mission: Boys in Transition (M:BIT) project was the coordinating committee’s belief that the academic and social under-performance of some boys that the data reveals can be attributed to two main factors that need to be tackled:

- The school system itself ‘discriminates against some boys’ – and some girls’ for that matter – learning styles and it is imperative that we, as educators, listen to our client group, examine possible reasons for underperformance, and critically explore the latest research on this topic so that we can understand how best to create an environment in which all of our students can flourish’. In this context, the cluster is very much driven by the Productive Pedagogies approach being pursued within Queensland.
- The ‘devaluing of education by some of our boys ... (as) a by-product of the cultural beliefs and values belonging to the community in which we live’. While Goondiwindi is more affluent than a lot of rural and remote areas, the district does hold certain beliefs about being male which ‘can make appearing “bookish”, exhibiting emotions (other than anger), or participating in the arts ridiculed as representative of feminine behaviour’.

The cluster’s project responds directly to these two beliefs by focusing on education of the community and staff to maximise opportunities for all students. ‘It is through education that we can challenge and expand teachers’, parents’ and community members’ practices and understanding of boys’ learning styles and inherent beliefs about being male’.”

Importantly, the school recognised that, in order to support their targeting, data was collected and professional development offered for parents as well as staff in areas of ongoing student performance, gender participation in various activities, innovative classroom practices targeting boys, and boys’ beliefs about schooling. “This was then used to inform an awareness-raising and media campaign to ‘provoke conversation and thinking in our local

community as to the impact our beliefs about being male might be having on our boys’, and professional development activities for parents and staff.” (DEST, 2003, p34)

Similarly, in identifying areas of common disadvantage, Homebush Boys’ High School (DEST, 2003, p66) recognised boys from Non English Speaking Backgrounds were having more difficulty in the area of literacy and communication. As did Southwell Primary School, identifying Indigenous students performing at ‘lower level’ than their peers, though Indigenous boys were also performing lower than Indigenous girls but also demonstrated attendance problems, thus maintaining a meaningful idea of why the boys were considered at ‘educational risk’. An important positive in this program was the essential component of staff professional development and preparation time prior to engaging with the boys.

As the Report details (and the AEU certainly advocates), “professional development undertaken by teachers in relation to both literacy and Indigenous education ‘alerted the staff to the wide range of learning styles and the necessity to present learning activities to cater for all students regardless of ability, culture or background’. Literacy Net, which is based on checkpoints and the development of individual profiles, was adopted as a ‘pivotal tool’ in this regard, to identify the students at risk and devise individual education plans with specific strategies to meet their needs.

This approach was positive because the support was offered as an important backing to the use of curriculum units like Literacy Net and therefore Southwell Primary School had the support of youth workers and family involvement to address the issues of attendance, but (as “Meeting the Challenge” says), they also tackled “a comprehensive array of pedagogical activities to engage students more. These covered:

- the arts – including engagement of a ‘highly successful’ dance instructor to take weekly lessons for a nine-week term culminating in a concert where all students participated and families attended;
- Aboriginal Studies – including adoption of an Aboriginal theme across all learning areas in the school during term 2 and the design and production of a mural by Year 5–7 students working with Indigenous grandparents who also shared the significance of the art and their cultural heritage;
- languages other than English – production of plays in English and Italian by students in Years 3–7;

- sports clinics – conducted by a range of outside sporting bodies, which not only exposed students to a range of physical skills, but also provided an opportunity to interact with some male role models; and
- whole class thematic approach – beyond the term 2 theme, each teacher now is committed to ‘an integrated class theme with the topic negotiated with the children each term’ and subsequent communication with specialist teachers to ensure that it is integrated across teaching and learning programmes.” (DEST, 2003, p66)

## Gender analysis

In contrast to other sections, (such as elements of quality teaching), the area of gender analysis requires much more emphasis than the Federal Government, and most Lighthouse schools, have actually afforded it. Academics such as Chris Mclean from Dulwich Centre Publications, Dr Maria Pallotta Chiarolli, Deakin University, Wayne Martino, Murdoch University and Jane Kenway, Monash University have been amongst the most comprehensive of explorations around the subject of how masculinity intersects with learning and educational outcomes. Their work over the past decade tackles the depth of the realities of boys’ experiences of schooling, without falling into the trap of replicating stereotypes and applying generalist terms to suggested solutions.

Nevertheless, despite the volumes of quality research work being produced well before and during the Federal Government’s launch of the Inquiry into Boys’ Education, “Meeting the Challenge” delves little into such complexities and instead becomes the antithesis of its own recommendations within “Meeting the Challenge” that ask that stereotypes be challenged and that gender matters to successful educational outcomes. Most of the projects highlighted that deal at all with masculinities and the construction of gender; treat the notion of “boys” in a homogenous sense both in terms of behaviour, role model choice and assumptions drawn from literacy performance.

However, one program often used by the Lighthouse schools, (and in turn informed the way the few schools successfully approached the subject of how masculinity impacts boys’ education), ‘Rock and Water’ actually recognised the importance of gender and how dominant masculinity intersects in a variety of ways but particularly Rock and Water focussed on the manifestation of aggression and sexual assaults. As Rock and Water originated in the context of addressing the subjugation of girls and their vulnerability to physical and sexual assault, but has since evolved for an boys’ educational purpose, it is important that the program still attempts to educate and re-evaluate dominant masculinity and

the affect this has on girls, as well as the effect on the individual boy's school behaviour and performance.

In this light, *Rock and Water* plays an important role in the necessary deconstruction of sex-role stereotypes and masculinities as re-enforced in schools. This approach has been successfully integrated by St Clair High School, who for instance, had a number of 'concerns about boys in the middle' at the school. Particularly, they wanted to address boys' "flagging interest and general ambivalence to school"; their sense of identity within school; and the need for positive male role models to show boys 'pathways of endeavour into the future'. (DEST, 2003, p104)

"Meeting the Challenge" reports the school's belief however, "that boys' self-esteem and enjoyment of education could be increased by providing 'opportunities, positive role models, teaching of gender construction (appropriately shaping their image of what it is to be male) and through providing exciting experiences they may not have or may never otherwise experience'. Sitting behind this view were conscious efforts to make boys aware that 'principal adults in their lives do care about them and... value their learning and development', and a strong belief that 'boys' needs must be nourished and nurtured through an extended programme of challenge, engagement and interaction'. This in turn involved a recognition and celebration of their maleness as a core component of the approach... [through their use of the *Rock and Water* Program] ... It is interesting to note, in this context, that the *Rock and Water* coordinator was a 'dynamic' female member of staff, who the school feels provided an important female authority figure for boys and 'an outstanding example ... to shape their perceptions and reactions to females in life'. And the warm, affectionate, yet consistent leadership she provided 'has shaped young boys' lives positively at St Clair High School'. (DEST, 2003, p104-105)

Moreover, where gender analysis in schools is concerned, it is of great consequence to the AEU that teachers are included. Because despite the false attack the Federal Government has mounted on female teachers, in advocating only more male teachers can act as role models for underachieving boys, significantly, "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" draw some important evidence about the gender of teachers and the impact, if any, it has in educational outcomes.

The entire chapter of "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" on teaching and teacher education that deals with educational leadership in schools, never talks of the need for

gendered role models, male or female in school leadership. However, where it does discuss areas of clear gender disparity in the teaching force, such as throughout aspects on the teaching of maths and sciences in both primary and secondary schools, it casts an entirely different light over the subject of role models and quality teaching. In fact, the report acknowledges that there are not only numerical teacher shortages in this area but also quality shortages, where teachers are teaching outside their area of expertise.

This section however, as the rest of the document also seems to be, is gender blind. The report neither acknowledges the shortages of female maths and science teachers, nor the steadily growing but still somewhat lacking participation of girls in such non-traditional areas. The authors do not advocate the need for more women teachers in Maths and Science to redress this gender imbalance, (as the Federal Government is arguing the case for male teachers in the industry) nor that the increased numbers are intrinsically linked to providing positive role models for girls wishing to study maths and/or science.

This is not to say that the correlation of gender shortages and the stereotyping of particular academic disciplines (even careers) should NOT be discussed within education debates. But it IS pertinent to demonstrate, that the Federal Government's own department appears "flexible" in where gender ought be paid attention and where is need not. Hence the great need for gender analysis to be part of any and all initiatives to address disadvantage and opportunities; both student and education professional.

## Role modelling

Similarly, though the Federal Government has got it wrong on the importance and the requirements of role modelling in schools, some of the schools within "Meeting the Challenge" got it right. The notable exceptions to the criticisms regarding male role model criteria and understanding masculinity came in various forms but unfortunately as the minority. Berri Primary School analysed boys' lives and creatively involved boys in the production of a play, "Boys Will Be Boys" at the end of a 60 hour, 16 week project. Riverside Primary School Cluster (WA) acknowledged that whilst they experience a shortage of male role models within and outside the school, their policy of adult leaders throughout their activities consisted of 50% male/females acting as positive role models for the boys. This highlights that though a program may be designed to particular focus on gendered influences in behaviour or learning, the delivery and the educational leadership offered does not have to have a male face, and in fact the women who teach in our schools as the majority can and are positive role models to boys in their own right.

The most in depth analysis and re-construction of masculinity, meaningful criteria for male role model selection and therefore the most heartening of all the boys lighthouse projects reported was that of Kormilda College in Darwin:

“The *Ten Good Men* project at Kormilda College grew out of broader school community efforts to create ‘a pedagogy that considers the total learning environment of its young men’. More specifically, the project was designed to simultaneously analyse and then change ‘bias’ in the school which may limit boys’ horizons and reduce their self esteem on the one hand, and assist boys to ‘live in a world where sex stereotypes need no longer dictate life patterns’ on the other. In particular, the school perceived a need to counter myths of masculinity that suggest to boys they ought ‘be ashamed of weakness, vulnerability, fear and despair’, and challenge ‘outmoded views of what it means to be male’. This was especially the case in a situation where numbers of the boys are boarding and hence have only the teachers as role models, good as they are, rather than tribal elders in the case of Indigenous boys and family members and, in the case of other boys, others such as pastoralists and miners....

Ten were selected on the basis of such criteria as their ability to communicate, success or potential success in relation to discipline, availability, and capacity to respond honestly to questions about ‘trials, tribulations and benchmarks of their journey through manhood’. Support was gained from the men’s employers where relevant and the participants briefed to inform them of their role, prepare them for what they were about to experience, and ensure that they were at ease with the task....

The boys particularly responded to the approachability of the men, and the message that came across ‘loud and clear’ to the college from the boys was that ‘they want their teachers to be more humane and approachable – not far off authority figures’....

Through the Ten Good Men project the boys were, the college concluded, ‘encouraged to recognise and express emotions and behaviours that are generally hidden from public view and to take off their masks of masculinity. Further projects of similar nature should be encouraged so that boys are challenged to modify traditional stereotyped patterns of behaviour in order to build relationships that do not require them to resort to rigid, masculine role models’.” (DEST, 2004, pp130-131)

This approach was positive for all the reasons others were not. The school identified why they needed to analyse and deconstruct masculinity, the sorts of positive qualities they wished to promote as positive masculine behaviour and sought this in the role models they chose and also encouraged the boys to not feel pressured into fulfilling stereotyped patterns of “masculine” behaviour.

# Meeting the Challenge's: 10 Main GUIDELINES Proposed for Boys' Education Initiatives.

The summary report from "Meeting the Challenge" (2003, p4-7) developed a common set of guiding principles that the Commonwealth Government identified from the good educational practice which has emerged from this lighthouse programme and their key chosen research in the area of boys' education.

The following set comprises 10 interrelated core propositions which the Commonwealth Government believe ought to inform the development and implementation of ongoing programmes to improve the education of boys in schools.

However, perhaps only two of the ten propositions adequately address the uniqueness of the disadvantaged boys who ARE underperforming face, and only propositions 4 and 6 offer a more complex understanding of the relationship gender, (is this particular case), has in impacting on students' education, rather than loosely relying on anecdotal evidence and stereotypical responses to underperformance of some boys. Therefore, a critique is offered for each of the propositions, and those points will be clearly highlighted in bold.

## **1. Collect evidence and undertake ongoing inquiry on the issue, recognising that schools can do something about it.**

Boys' education is an issue of concern within schools in Australia as evidenced by a significant body of research and the experience of the 110 project schools and clusters. It also is an issue that schools can do something to address. This requires the school to gather and analyse its own student achievement and other data (e.g. attendance, behaviour incidents, student opinion survey data) on a gender basis and identify the needs of specific boys and students 'at risk'. Such inquiry should involve sustained data collection, reflection and evaluation at the local level, informed by research in this area. The school then can develop, implement and continue to evaluate and amend appropriate strategies and targets tailored to the unique and specific needs of students.

Schools gather this information already, if not in such specific detail, however as indicators of students who are "at risk", such information should be gathered as part of any welfare in schools program and should encompass ALL students. The gendered basis of such information gathering processes should be null and void until decisions for responses to behaviour are taken into account and it is then that the welfare programs can and should be tailored to the specific needs of students. These may involve gender specific content/re-constructions but should also address the underlying factors influencing the behaviour resulting in their "at risk" status.

## **2. Adopt a flexible, whole school approach with a person and team responsible.**

Improving the educational outcomes of boys requires a whole school approach based on a common vision and a coherent, integrated set of programmes across the broad range of activity noted in this report (i.e. pedagogy, curriculum and assessment; literacy and communication skills; student engagement and motivation; behaviour management programmes; and positive role models for students). Such a whole school approach is more effective with the identification of a leader in the school who is responsible for its implementation, and the establishment of an appropriate team to support the leader. It also requires a degree of flexibility on the part of the school when needed in relation to structural and other arrangements to support the programmes adopted (e.g. single-sex classes and activities, withdrawal programmes). This approach should be integrated with existing school improvement strategies and should engage the broader school community.

This method of whole of school organizing is not new, however is much welcomed.

## **3. Ensure good teaching for boys, and all students in all classes.**

Improved education for boys depends, just as it does for girls, upon good teaching of all students in all classes. While there are many recipes for good teaching in schools, teachers demonstrating good practices all have the following features in common:

- \* Having high expectations for all students, knowing their students well and listening to their students.
- \* Reflecting on current teaching practice in terms of the information collected by the school and an informed evidence base of research.
- \* Using a range of teaching techniques – if all a teacher does is talk at the students and writes things on a board, they are unlikely to learn very much. All learners require variety and teachers need to vary the ways in which they pass on information to, and engage, students.
- \* Structuring their teaching so it supports student learning – the teacher is the trained, professional adult in the class, so must ensure that the key messages and lessons are learned. This means they need to make sure that students understand the main points as they proceed, make connections to other things that have been learned, build on what students already know and keep reinforcing key messages.
- \* Involving students in learning activities and encouraging their participation – learning requires that students do things, as well as having them explained or shown to them. Teachers need to actively involve students in solving problems for themselves and get students working together in groups so they learn social and cooperative skills.
- \* Providing positive feedback and praise – an important part of teaching young people is providing them with feedback on their work. Teachers need to let students know how they are going in general, what their strengths and weaknesses are and how they can continue to improve.
- \* Being open, flexible, fair and consistent in dealing with students, having a ready sense of humour and being prepared to negotiate and discuss teaching and learning with students.
- \* Making connections with the community – involving the students' parents and other important community members helps demonstrate to students the importance the teacher attaches to the programme and their work.

This section basically deals with the thrust of the Boys Lighthouse Project's general findings; that quality teaching and quality outcomes can be achieved when resources, time, professional development and smaller teacher/student ratios are present. However, it could be said that the attributes of quality teaching and supportive professional development detailed within this section have no direct link to the specific learning patterns (identified or otherwise inferred) of boys in particular, unless the Federal Government wish to infer that girls do not require any of these things for them to succeed throughout their education? Ensuring a range of teaching techniques, structured teaching, encouraging participation, group learning, providing positive feedback and being fair and consistent, should not be considered to be unique to boys. By extension, to say otherwise would be to infer that individual attention need not be given in the same quantities for girls! Examples such as the constant repetition

throughout the report of ‘praise the boys’ casts an air of unnecessary bias that can be taken as demonstrating how misogynistic gender bias is characterizing the current Federal Government’s response to student disadvantage rather than the concepts of gender equity and gender construction that has been the axiom of recent union, school, MCEETYA and governmental practice for the past few decades.

Indeed the qualities desired by this recommendation that encompass many ideals for quality teaching and learning are reinforced within DEST’s recent report from the Inquiry into Teaching and Teacher Education. The Report, “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” overseen by Professor Kwong Lee Dow, interestingly identifies many of the very factor recommended by “Meeting the Challenge” but in contrast does so to ensure quality teaching for *all* students and in fact rarely deals with the interplay of gender at all, (and certainly not specifically for boys).

First and foremost, “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” (DEST, 2003, pxxi) supports the AEU’s long held belief that, “several factors underpin teacher satisfaction and retention. Among them are: improved remuneration; physical conditions within schools; availability and quality of curriculum resources; teaching loads; class sizes; access to and use of technology; appropriate in-service training and the opportunity for study leave and professional development.” These measures go a long way to ensure the retention of a quality teaching force (which as we know is in drastic decline) but also in turn are the very factors associated with improving educational outcomes and learning for all students.

Further, as recommended by this section, (recommendation 3) professional learning is intrinsic to ensuring appropriate responses to all sorts of student needs and challenges. Hence, the quality of teaching, if resourced, does in itself go a long way to addressing disadvantage and/or disengagement by students. “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” supports this, saying, “more extended professional learning is essential for the vitality of the profession. Teachers will be better placed to foster students’ innovative capabilities, or respond adequately to students’ diverse learning needs if they continue their own professional learning.” (DEST, 2003, pxxii)

Thus, it’s important to remember that while throughout the report on the Boys’ Lighthouse Schools repeatedly reports positive teaching strategies and associates them specifically in the context of boys, “Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” understands that for the sake of ALL students’ learning outcomes, “teachers need a rich understanding of the changing world

of children's experience, of youth culture and the lives of students, irrespective of the subjects they teach. Effective teaching requires that teachers are sensitive to and connect with this culture and build upon it. Learning is strongest and most meaningful when it engages students actively, connects with their own knowledge and understanding and relates to their interests and experience. To meet these challenges teachers need a great deal of support in the often difficult conditions of the contemporary school." (DEST, 2003, pxxiv)

The importance of addressing disadvantage, however, was not lost within "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future". On the contrary, it identifies the cost of those students who miss out on educational opportunities. "There are other categories of students who generally do not perform well. Where individual students and identifiable categories of students do not reach standards that are, in principle, attainable by all, they are all too likely to have reduced opportunity for full and active participation in society and the economy. Successful learning by every student is a worthy school motto." (DEST, 2003, p183)

However, the fact that a report of this caliber from DEST, (at the same time the Federal Government is trialing boys' education pilots) deals only minimally with gender throughout its teaching best practice recommendations, is a telling element to support the perception that the Federal Government are approaching the issue of gender equity from a biased and ideological perspective of a backlash against feminist gender analysis.

"Meeting the Challenge", by contrast actually lacks much academically supported gender targeting in favour of purely anecdotal evidence which therefore highlights that gender is only addressed when convenient to the Government's ideology and yet when actual teacher quality and pedagogy is analysed, the Government's own department feels it unnecessary to specify that gender plays a part in quality teaching methodology.

This is not to say that gender DOES in fact intersect with educational opportunities and plays a major role in compounding disadvantage. Nor that gender construction and making meaning of sex roles in society does not impact drastically in the sort of life opportunities available to students. Educational settings have a fundamental responsibility in ensuring gender is adequately factored into whole of school approaches, however the notion that IS rejected as a result of analyzing "Meeting the Challenge" is that the gender of the student impacts on the fundamentals of quality teaching.

“Australia’s Teachers : Australia’s Future” strongly conveys these fundamentals observing that, “a distillation of the literature drawn on for this report, many of the submissions and the evidence gathered by the Committee in site visits suggests that learning is effective when students:

- are valued and taken seriously, with their different ways of learning, and treated as co-partners in learning with their teachers;
- know about, understand and actively participate in setting the goals and purposes, and so feel ownership of the process of learning;
- are helped to analyse and understand their own ways of learning and ways in which they can become more successful, effective learners;
- are enabled and encouraged to analyse their experience, to construct their own meanings and understandings and to evaluate their performance;
- understand relationships between educational objectives, values, learning tasks and processes, assessment and outcomes, and see them as mutually interdependent;
- can apprehend, understand and value the immediate as well as the longer-term consequences of their learning;
- experience pleasure, satisfaction and a sense of achievement in the context of the time and effort that learning tasks require;
- experience a whole-school organisational climate and style which fosters learning—the school as a learning culture, learning organisation; and
- are encouraged and well-supported in their homes.” (2003, p184)

**4. Be clear about the kinds of support particular boys require.**

Boys are not a homogeneous group and not all boys can be treated the same. Gender intersects with a range of other factors, including developmental and sub-cultural factors, to affect each student’s experience of school.

Some boys may experience a tension between being masculine and engaging with and being good at school; with the result that demonstrating their masculinity can inhibit participation and performance in class, making school a negative experience. Not all boys, however, experience or identify with aspects of masculinity that conflict with educational engagement, and there are many boys who do successfully integrate success in schooling and growing up as adult males. Hence the school needs to clarify how best to support each boy in his learning at school.

In contrast to the previous section, this area requires much more emphasis than the Federal Government has actually afforded it. Academics such as Chris Mclean from Dulwich Centre Publications, Dr Maria Pallotta Chiarolli, Deakin University, Wayne Martino, Murdoch University and Jane Kenway, Monash University have been amongst the most comprehensive of explorations around the subject of how masculinity intersects with learning and educational outcomes. Their work over the past decade tackles the depth of the realities of

boys' experiences of schooling, without falling into the trap of replicating stereotypes and applying generalist terms to suggested solutions.

Nevertheless, despite the volumes of quality research work being produced well before and during the Federal Government's launch of the Inquiry into Boys' Education, "Meeting the Challenge" delves little into such complexities and instead becomes the antithesis of its own recommendation. Most of the projects highlighted that deal at all with masculinities and the construction of gender, treat the notion of "boys" in a homogenous sense both in terms of behaviour, role model choice and assumptions drawn from literacy performance.

This contradiction is dealt with more extensively in section 6. See below.

#### **5. Cater for different learning styles preferred by boys.**

Students learn in different ways. There is, in this context, substantial research as well as school and cluster experience through these projects to suggest that boys, (as well as many girls, of course) commonly respond more positively to learning experiences that:

- \* have a practical focus and physical or hands-on dimension;
- \* they see as relevant and having a real world connection;
- \* use thinking skills focused on actual problems;
- \* challenge them by requiring higher order and conceptual thinking;
- \* have clear instructions and structured sessions in manageable chunks;
- \* enable them to work with others as well as individually;
- \* provide for a range of ways in which work can be presented; and
- \* provide them with a degree of involvement in decisions about content and opportunities to negotiate their learning as a valued stakeholder.

That said, good practice in boys' education also seeks to broaden the range of ways in which boys view themselves as learners and the strategies they adopt, while strengthening their capacity to develop responsibility and self-awareness, and to value success at school.

The assertion that boys have a biologically determined and inherent "learning" style that is common to all boys and that boys have little to no control over is a much repeated axiom of "Meeting the Challenge", (and in recent research), however is seldom supported scientifically. If it were true that all boys' learning style is unique to them, then the recommendations within "Meeting the Challenge" (designed specifically for boys' education) would be vastly different from those within "Australia's Teachers : Australia's Future" (as designed for quality teaching and learning standard for all students). This is not the case.

The last sentence in this recommendation is crucial when evaluating discussions in the report of understanding how gender influences in behaviour, and the impact setting up dichotomies between the terms, "stereotypical" masculinities and "dominant" masculinities can actually have in gender schooling debates. The Federal Government, by talking of "stereotypical masculinity" here, is preferring to use a term that infers gender is a passive attribute of students' identity and schooling, rather than acknowledging that where forms of masculinity are concerned, the "dominant" mode, whilst being that stereotyped, has an inherent power

relationship. Thus with the “non-conformity” of a boy’s display of masculinity in school, (the non-stereotypical), becomes “subordinaity” of some boys. This kind of disadvantage as a result of gender construction, the Government does not want to address via their programs; they simply wish to lift literacy rates. The wider problem, the more broad and complex ones that result in behaviour and performance would require acknowledging feminist theory on gender and power. It is easier to argue for more men in the teaching force and to make it harder for couples to divorce, than to acknowledge that inappropriate behaviour stems from the way “dominant masculinity” and thus patriarchy creates hierarchies of privilege and power in society.

Author on masculinity, Chris Mclean (cited in Kenway, 1997, p14) typifies this conundrum of disadvantage and gender when he says, “one of the most powerful myths of our society is that everyone can be a winner if only they try hard enough, and most men who fail to make it to the top believe it is because they were not good enough, rather than because the system is inherently wrong.” He goes on to explain why the view of the Government to ignore feminists’ approaches to gender, because “if we can identify the costs to men implicit in the system of gender inequality, then men may start to see that there are good reasons for them to join with women in seeking change.” (Mclean, cited in Kenway, 1997, p13)

#### **6. Recognise that gender matters and stereotypes should be challenged.**

Acceptance of gender identity is important for all students. Boys should be encouraged to value being male and the positive virtues this entails. Equally, the negative aspects of stereotypical views of masculinity, often manifest in bullying, aggressive and physical responses to conflict and difference, or a conscious disengagement from school, need to be challenged. Schools and teachers are well placed to promote and model values and behaviours that are fundamental to people learning and working together. Schools can enable boys to broaden the ways in which they relate to others as they develop and grow, and exercise power, control, competition, cooperation, freedom, responsibility and choice; thereby enhancing their development as adult males in modern Australian society. Schools should, in this context, seek to establish a culture where achievement is seen as ‘cool’ and desirable for all students and is accepted as something to be celebrated.

As stated above in 4, this aspect talks of challenge, yet throughout the report inferences, assumptions and anecdotes re-enforce the dominant masculinity and sex role stereotypes for boys. The Government highlights programs that include Billy cart building, surfing and martial arts, and though granted they do source those that include expression and dance, it is those that simply “allow an outlet for boys emotions” rather than those that deconstruct sex roles in society and re-construct how “a boy, a man” should act in society

In contrast, Mclean understands that, “boys are also deeply affected by the collective pressures of masculine culture but left to themselves they are unlikely to identify it as the source of their problems. Faced with bullying from older boys for example, they are more likely to think about taking martial arts classes, so that they can beat up the bullies in return,

than to question the ideals and practices of masculinity.” (cited in Kenway, 1997, p14 ) Such issues as these and what actually creates the pressures and confusion in adolescent boys are what should have been discussed within “Meeting the Challenge”. In contrast, observations Mclean has discussed are invaluable to teachers especially, attempting to break through the layers of disadvantage and towards life shaping educational opportunities. Mclean notes, “all of the major signifiers of manhood are continually under threat or intrinsically transitory: money, political power, physical strength, sexual performance—none can be relied upon to last. ‘Making a man out of a boy’ means teaching him that the human sacrifices of the power struggle are essential to the process of becoming a man. Institutions that make men out of boys have historically involved physical and emotional brutalisation, emphasis on hardness and strength, and contempt for sensitivity, delicacy and emotional intimacy.” (cited in Kenway, 1997, p13)

**7. Develop positive relationships, as they are critical to success.**

Relationships are crucial in any young person’s schooling, especially the teacher–student relationship within the classroom and in the broader learning environment of the school. Particularly important for success at school is that each and every boy should know and feel that there are people in the school who care about him and his development. Beyond this, boys will benefit where there is consistency of approach between the home and the school, and parents are actively engaged in the education of their children and in developing ‘shared values’ with the school. The experience of clusters in this programme also has demonstrated the benefits to be gained from increased cooperation between schools and, in particular, sharing of strategies and resources to improve the education of boys.

This recommendation clearly vindicates the AEU’s argument that smaller class sizes and in fact also the engagement of parents is integral to any teaching best practice. “Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future” clarifies however that, “Identifying and proclaiming the characteristics of good and effective learning and conditions that enable all students to become successful learners is a professional responsibility which goes well beyond classroom instruction and marking of assignments.” (DEST, 2003, p182)

**8. Provide opportunities for boys to benefit from positive male role models from within and beyond the school.**

Boys in school want and need to develop positive relationships with significant males within and beyond the school, most obviously their fathers and teachers, but also older male students and members of the wider community. Such role models provide inspiration and support for young boys seeking to develop their own understanding of how to become an effective adult male in the community, and also can assist in the development of clear goals and pathways to future learning and personal development.

The Victorian Department of Education’s gender education unit has put extensive resources into understanding the concepts of role modeling and positive masculinities in schools. Senior project officers have commented (AEU, 2003, p26) that expecting male teachers to come into schools as role models has a problem: what if they don’t have the professional development, skills and training to engage boys in issues of gender, and reinforce undesirable

notions of dominant masculinity? “[We] don’t speak in terms of teaching needing more men or needing more women,” he says. “I just believe we need more loving, firm, friendly, professional, educated people in teaching. We need a diversity of ‘masculinities’ and ‘femininities’, coming from diverse ethnic, sexual and social backgrounds—people who come into school with those multiple selves and show students the positives of those multiple selves rather than perpetuating certain stereotypes.” (AEU, 2003, p26)

This is again re-iterated, and a lesson not heeded within “Meeting the Challenge”, which irresponsibly allocates ‘role models’ to boys without considering how, “boys are also deeply affected by the collective pressures of masculine culture but left to themselves they are unlikely to identify it as the source of their problems... Unfortunately, much of the current men’s movement has responded to this situation by identifying women as the problem, rather than joining with women in challenging the gender system which impacts so negatively on both boys and girls in different ways.” (AEU, 2003, p27)

However, it is understood that it is vital that adult men play an important part, but “this assertion is not based on some belief that ‘boys need men’ in ways that women cannot fulfill. Rather, I believe it is unrealistic to expect boys to challenge the dominant culture of masculinity, if adult men are not challenging it themselves. This has nothing to do with ‘role modeling’. (Mclean cited in AEU, 2003, p27)

Moreover, due to the way dominant masculinities have in the past, and even now in some cases are re-enforced in schools inevitably correspond with the very disinterest and behavioural as well as academic challenges the Boys’ Lighthouse Project and other boys specific targeting aims to redress. Mclean demonstrates how, “on the one hand boys (as young people) are expected to be well behaved and obedient, but on the other hand they are expected (specifically as boys) to demonstrate a willingness to take risks and bend the rules. In some quite fundamental ways ‘being good’ is incompatible with the images of heroism, hardness, strength, and domination which we associate with masculinity (Davies, 1993, p.92). For many boys, the struggle against school authority becomes a testing ground for their emerging masculinity (Connell, 1989, p.291), while for many male teachers, putting down this challenge is experienced as essential to their own continued sense of manhood.” (cited in Kenway, 1997, p16)

#### **9. Focus on literacy in particular.**

There is little doubt that boys’ relatively weaker performance in literacy than girls has been one of the threshold factors leading to the focus on improving education for boys. Literacy, especially in the early years of school, is critical for educational success at school and subsequent successful participation in the community and its economy. There is substantial evidence to show that effective literacy for

boys requires a balanced approach which includes some whole language teaching, but also direct instruction of phonics and phonemic awareness to improve outcomes across the board. Effective teaching and assessment should incorporate a recognition of the range of literacies students require today, including multimedia and emerging literacies in which young people, and particularly boys, are achieving success. This is a strength that can be built on. Beyond this, there is a clear need to ensure that processes are in place to identify students at risk of under-performance (primarily but not only in literacy) as early as possible, so they can be provided with appropriate, targeted support (e.g. one-to-one or small group tutoring).

#### **10. Use information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a valuable tool.**

It is well documented that boys, and especially boys who are under-achieving at school, respond favourably to the use of ICTs as a means of engaging them in learning activities. Many of the schools and clusters involved in this programme have drawn on the motivational and educational powers of ICTs. The interactive nature of many new technologies helps create learning environments where boys can learn by doing, receive immediate feedback and continually build new knowledge and enhance their level of understanding. This enables students to develop a richer and deeper understanding of core knowledge and skills and to lead their teachers in an area where they are often experts and adults are learners. ICTs that include an emphasis on application and tailoring education to the needs of individual learners are also supportive of a shift in practice to more learner-centred approaches, which encourage the active participation of boys in the learning process, rather than the passive absorption of knowledge.

New technologies are indeed a focal element of the future schooling for all students and as such learning opportunities and experience with ICTs should not be limited or excluded from ANY student, whether under the guise of a gender targeted program or not. Moreover, as these technologies are so inextricably linked to the future of formal learning, programs designed for schools using ICTs must be supported by appropriate and extensive PD for teachers and those assisting in ICT in schools.

### **Conclusion**

CLEARLY Salisbury High (quoted as the conclusion to the summary report) is the “model school” the Minister wants to hold up for future Lighthouse Program funding and as guidance for the sorts of things he wants redressed within the MCEETYA Gender Equity Framework Review. It details it’s advise to other schools engaged in boys education programs to centre their efforts on:

- schools form boys’ education project teams to guide the implementation of changes that will improve outcomes
- for boys – ‘it has been an excellent way to keep boys on the agenda and raise whole school awareness’;
- schools collect data that give indications of the problems and issues that need to be addressed – ‘surveys of staff and students, student assessment results, attendance figures and behaviour management statistics provide data that paint a very clear picture for teachers’;
- change must occur in the classroom – ‘unless there is change in relationships, methodology and structures then boys will not be as

successful as they could be ... (and) key aspects to address are explicit instruction, support with personal organisation, flexible assessment and authentic learning’;

- schools should have value-added programmes that address the emotional needs of boys within a physically active context; and
- boys’ education should be a school priority and be an integral part of a school’s documented strategic plan.

Salisbury’s recommendations (who, incidentally had direct representation via their principal on the recent DEST Teaching and Teacher Education Review Committee, as well as being highlighted in a few Values Education Study and Literacy grants/awards) do not adequately reflect the ten recommendations of “Meeting the Challenge”. The focus of their recommendations fall into the trap that the AEU has been arguing against; that is treating boys as a homogenous group, lacking an understanding of appropriate targeting of disadvantage and encouraging a diversion from gender equity to resource saturation in favour of boys. Therefore, by singling out Salisbury, the Government’s intentions for boys’ education are revealed. And those are to continue its ignorance of quality research and evidence/outcomes that support programs that are not just educationally sound but deal with re-educative gender issues. By the Government finishing the executive summary advocating the lessons of one schools, as opposed to the best practise highlighted from the report as a whole, the Government is repeating and endorsing the same sex role stereotypes that drove it to act on the issue of boys rather than the concept to gender and disadvantage collectively.

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