

AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION INC.
SUBMISSION
INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ASPA welcomes this opportunity to present submissions and recommendations to this Inquiry. There has been a protracted public debate about various aspects of the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools for over a decade. To date, attempts to develop a coherent and effective response have too often been hampered by sensationalised and poorly informed debate. This submission provides an overview of the key issues and tests the disparate assertions and directions proposed against the best available data and research. On the basis of this exploration, our submission includes the following recommendations:

1. This organisation does not endorse the introduction of a separate boy's education policy. *Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools* already provides an appropriate national policy framework for addressing the educational needs of boys, however, adequate resources to support initiatives consistent with the principles for action and strategic directions outlined in the framework must be made available.
2. That DETYA supports the development of a 'social construction of gender' resource kit utilising a whole school approach to assist schools in implementing a response to social and educational issues relating to boys, masculinity and education.
3. That DETYA resources the establishment of actual and interactive website based networks auspiced by each state and territory Department of Education, to enable teachers and schools to discuss and share examples of good research and practice in gender education.
4. That further research into the interconnections between gender, race and ethnicity, rural/isolation and socio-economic factors which influence school and post school experiences and outcomes for boys and girls be commissioned.
5. That DETYA establish a research and evaluation regime to assess the effectiveness of intervention strategies and programs introduced to improve the school and post school experiences and outcomes for boys and girls.
6. That consideration be given to further research and effective prevention strategies targeting youth and young adult mental and physical health and well-being for boys and girls. More generally; that gender equity principles need to inform and enhance other systemic priorities such as drug education and student welfare.
7. That the delivery of pre and in-service professional development programs in gender education for teachers and teachers in training be included as a priority area for the DETYA Quality Teaching program and like initiatives.
8. That initiatives which encourage men into non-traditional areas of teaching, such as student welfare and the early years of Primary education be considered.

The authors and our organisation are available to discuss this submission and recommendations directly with the Committee if required.

**Inquiry into the education of boys.
Submission from
Australian Secondary Principals'
Association Inc.**

Dr. Brendan Nelson MP
House Education Committee Chair
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
House of Representatives
Parliament of Australia

ASPA welcomes this opportunity to present submissions and recommendations to this timely Inquiry. There has been protracted public debate about various aspects of the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools for over a decade. To date, attempts to develop a coherent and effective response have too often been hampered, by sensationalised and poorly informed debate. Fortunately, there is ample reliable research against which to test the disparate assertions and claims being made. This submission has endeavoured to canvass the key issues and claims against this research base with the aim of formulating coherent and appropriate recommendations to the Inquiry. The following key issues have been addressed:

1. Context
2. An policy framework
3. Areas for action
4. School retention and completion rates
5. Relative academic achievement
6. Middle Years of schooling
7. Post-school pathways
8. Mental health indicators for young people
9. The role of teachers

The authors and our organisation are available to discuss the submission and recommendations directly with the Committee if required.

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1. Context

There are economic and structural contexts affecting the education of boys as well as the social, cultural and educational factors which form part of the terms of reference of the current Inquiry into the Education of Boys. *The omission of economic and structural factors in the terms of reference is most serious and may reflect a lack of understanding of all the issues and may limit the scope of the Inquiry and the subsequent success of its recommendations.*

A. Economic/structural Issues

Economic and structural change in Australia since the 1970s has created a mismatch between the capabilities of school leavers and the nature/levels of skills required in the workplace. While this affects both boys and girls the most significant impact is on those boys with traditional “male” skills who leave school and line up for jobs which no longer exist. *It should also be noted that it is this structural change and resulting mismatch, not any deficiencies in schools, which has fuelled the so-called literacy crisis of the 1990s.* Lower skilled boys in particular are competing for jobs further up the employment ladder, jobs for which they are poorly equipped (and “illiterate”).

The restructured economy increasingly demands capabilities which have traditionally been identified with girls rather than those of boys. The key competencies outlined in the Meyer Report in the early 1990s, highlighted the need for schools to develop competencies such as the capacity to communicate ideas and information, planning and organising activities, working with others (and in teams) and cultural understandings. These competencies have tended to be culturally coded as “female” qualities, and as demonstrated in a recent DETYA report: ***Employer satisfaction with Graduate Skills*** (AC Nielsen Feb. 2000) are increasingly the skills sought by employers for both initial employment and subsequent career advancement.

Schools and school systems have certainly moved to adjust to the requirements of the new economy, with curriculum and assessment practices shifting to accommodate these new directions. Schools have always been justly proud of the way they prepare young people for the “real world”. In the process, however, the changes within schools have given rise to misleading accusations that schools have become “feminine” institutions which are somehow no longer “boy friendly”.

Despite these shifts, and despite a continuing focus upon encouraging students to consider non-traditional courses of study and career pathways, boys and girls continue to select studies from a narrow band of traditionally ‘gender-appropriate’ studies. A particular implication of this pattern for this Inquiry, is that boys are significantly absent from those areas of the curriculum such as personal development, health and human relations etc. which are more likely to expose them to the skills and knowledge needed to address the majority of the areas of social concern described below.

B. Social/cultural/gender Issues

Many of the social messages available to young men about masculinity are often divorced from these new social realities which boys face in school and beyond. Gender-related work practices have changed faster than is realised in many families, and in many families and communities (including schools) the dominant understandings held by boys about masculinity are still one based on unequal power relationships with girls and women. Boys have increasingly drawn upon unbalanced modes of masculinity which abound in the media, peer and popular culture. These other

sources readily model such qualities as restrictive emotionality, concern with power and status, excessive self-reliance, homophobia, anti-authoritarian bravado, anti-intellectualism and non-relational attitudes towards sexuality. Schools need to assist boys and girls to discover approaches to masculinity that are not formed at the expense of other people or destructive to themselves.

Finally, to place some of these issues in a broader historical context, it may be worth considering this description of familiar concerns in 1890 Auckland New Zealand:

“There were special concerns about the requirements of boys and young men ...rates of juvenile delinquency were causing alarm; their energy had to be harnessed. There were also concerns about the feminisation of boyhood. Boys were raised by their mothers and taught by women teachers; it was time for men to step in and take control.”

From: C. Daley edit. *The Gendered Kiwi* Auckland Uni Press 1999

2. An appropriate policy framework

It has been consistently claimed that at both a state and national level, there has been chronic inattention to the educational and broader social needs of boys and that consequently, a specific boy's education policy is required. Such claims cannot be substantiated at either a policy or implementation level. In 1996, the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsed a national policy to guide future action in this area. ***Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools*** was accepted by all state and territory Ministers of Education as an agreed policy platform and is clearly inclusive of the educational and broader social needs of boys

To address the differing concerns and educational experiences of boys and girls it is necessary to acknowledge that gender is a central issue for both girls and boys. It is clear that boys have needs that are not being met effectively by schools. Narrow versions of masculinity and obsolete views of men's and women's roles restrict boy's opportunities in relation to their educational and social development, vocational experiences, and therefore their subsequent life chances. (***Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools*** pp. 4-5)

This submission explicitly disavows proposals which advocate the introduction of a separate and exclusive boys education policy. Advocacy of such a 'gender apartheid' approach fails to recognise the *interrelational* nature of masculinity and femininity and will further exacerbate the already divisive and destructive environment which has surrounded discussion of gender issues in education. The most comprehensive survey of gender education in Australia, commissioned by DETYA: ***Gender and School Education*** warns that a gender-exclusive approach “is an indicator in itself of how gender is untruthfully and destructively constructed as a either-or matter, a zero-sum game between the sexes, rather than a mutual benefit matter” (ACER 1996 p.176)

A gender equity policy framework does not imply that the educational experiences and outcomes of girls and boys are the same, in fact, the ***Gender Equity framework*** explicitly identifies the many ways in which these are different. Nor does a gender equity policy preclude the adoption of strategies and programs to address the differing and specific needs of boys and girls. This submission directly supports the view that all of the issues consistently identified in research and public debate regarding the education of boys can be adequately addressed within the principles and areas for action outlined within this existing policy framework.

Equally, the claim that state and territory education systems and schools have chronically ignored the educational needs of boys and failed to implement appropriate programs cannot be sustained. The *Gender and School Education* report found that nationally, similar percentages of schools report allocating resources to programs for boys as for girls, (32% and 37% respectively) with both NSW and ACT allocating more resources and programs to boys than girls overall.

Nevertheless, it is quite reasonable to assert that insufficient attention and resources have been deployed to adequately address gender equity issues for both boys and girls. This same report also highlights the low percentage of schools which have implemented *any* programs in the gender equity area (over 60% of schools nationally)

Recommendation 1:

This organisation does not endorse the introduction of a separate boy's education policy.

Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools already provides an appropriate national policy framework for addressing the educational needs of boys, however, adequate resources to support initiatives consistent with the principles for action and strategic directions outlined in the framework must be made available.

3. Areas for action

The Inquiry's terms of reference call for consideration of the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys. There would be common agreement on many of the key areas of concern. Boys are generally over represented in school discipline statistics, behaviour management programs, remediation and support programs, particularly in literacy, and are under represented in school and community leadership roles and programs, as well as in many extra-curricula activities with the exception of sports. Further, that boys as a cohort, and some groups of boys in particular, more often exhibit:

- . delayed social and emotional development
- . attachment to an 'anti learning' culture
- .'high risk' potentially self-destructive behaviours
- . aggressive and violent behaviours
- . poor communication and interpersonal skills
- . homophobic attitudes and behaviours.

A substantial majority of these concerns have already been directly identified in *Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools*.

Such concerns also find reflection in broader social patterns and concerns where men generally are over represented in statistical indicators of:

- . suicide
- . road accidents and workplace injury
- . perpetrators and victims of most categories of violent crime
- . lower health and well being and life expectancy rates.

There would also be agreement in most quarters, that the key factor and most appropriate target for action underpinning these issues are the dominant assumptions and beliefs young boys come to hold about masculinity, and the ways in which these mesh poorly with positive attitudes and approaches to schooling. Currently, the dominant cultural messages available to young men tend to foster rather than challenge many of these problematic concerns. Similarly, they do not tend to place value on, or support positive approaches to schooling.

Put very simply, gender construction focuses attention on the degree to which differences we have come to associate with gender are not always predetermined, but socially derived, and as such, are subject to change and choice. For girls and boys, an understanding of the processes of gender

construction has been recognised as vital in equipping them with the skills and capabilities to critically examine the mismatch of cultural messages about what is ‘appropriate’ behaviour and beliefs associated with being a man or woman in our society.

Whilst an understanding of the process of gender construction has been a strategic focus for gender education programs in all States for several years, the recent *Gender and School Education* report (p. 58) found that this was the area students universally reported having the least access to at both Primary and Secondary level, and across all States and school systems. Yet at the same time teachers consistently ranked professional development programs which focused upon gender-inclusive practices, teaching for gender difference and the social construction of gender as the most useful in this field. (p.140) This submission therefore seeks to identify this as an area for urgent attention for this Inquiry.

Consistently, evaluations of the most effective approaches to innovation in schools, particularly where the target areas have included changes to attitudes and beliefs has been advocacy of what has commonly known as a ‘whole school approach’. Generally, this has implied an integrated action plan which has included attention to professional development, school leadership support, community involvement, changes to curriculum programs and teaching and learning practices and review of policy and processes. To be successful, a whole school approach must also be adaptive to the specific circumstances and priorities of individual schools. DETYA has previously resourced excellent resource and support packages designed to assist schools to plan a response in related areas utilising a whole school approach. These have included:

- . Boys and Literacy
- . No Fear - towards creating a non-violent school community
- . Mind Matters - a mental health promotion program

This submission identifies the need to develop a similar integrated set of resources which will enable schools to plan a response to the social and educational issues related to boys, masculinity and education. What has been often missing in assistance to schools to enable them to effectively utilise such resources has been the ongoing opportunity to share their progress and strategies with other schools. To this end, this submission also recommends the establishment and resourcing of professional networks to enable teachers and school communities to discuss and share examples of good research and practice in gender education.

Recommendation 2:

That DETYA supports the development of a ‘social construction of gender’ resource kit utilising a whole school approach to assist schools in implementing a response to social and educational issues relating to boys, masculinity and education.

Recommendation 3:

That DETYA resources the establishment of actual and interactive website based networks auspiced by each state and territory Department of Education, to enable teachers and schools to discuss and share examples of good research and practice in gender education.

4. School Retention and Completion rates.

The untested claim in this area is that the differentials in girls and boys relative retention to and completion of Year 12 has increased alarmingly in the last decade and is continuing to expand. The most reliable data on post-compulsory retention rates; from the most recent *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, indicates that whilst the current gap between boys and girls Year 12

completion is significant, (60% - 72% respectively) this rate has widened by less than 1% between 1994-8 and that there has been a decline in Year 12 completion for both boys and girls over that time.

This data also reveals that low socio-economic status is statistically a far more significant indicator of non-completion of Year 12 than gender. The 1999 DETYA study *Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and initial destination after leaving school* confirms that socio-economic status, aboriginality and remoteness, all have far greater influence upon retention rates than gender. The need for a more sophisticated analysis and focus upon the interconnection of factors such as gender and socio-economic status, as well as ethnicity and race upon the school and post-school experience and outcomes, is again, a key principle for action in *Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools*.

Recommendation 4:

That further research into the interconnections between gender, race and ethnicity, rural/isolation and socio-economic factors which influence school and post school experiences and outcomes for boys and girls be commissioned.

5. Relative academic performance

Concerns relating to the relative academic achievement of girls and boys have dominated this debate, particularly in the media. It has been claimed that over the last decade, boys' academic performance in most areas has significantly declined, and this is due in large part to both their increasing disengagement from schooling as well as the increased use of curriculum and assessment practices which have disadvantaged them.

In response to these concerns, DETYA commissioned the 1999 study; *Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and initial destination after leaving school*. The preliminary report of this study concluded that regardless of what assessment data is used, that a consistent pattern of achievement in the early and middle years of schooling is identifiable "the average female is a little ahead of the average male in literacy assessments at all levels of primary school in all Australian States. (and) there are no overall differences in the performance of the average male and the average female in numeracy assessments in primary school" (Preliminary Data Collation and Analysis Report pp. 11-12)

All reliable achievement data have consistently confirmed similar descriptions. As such, they represent a legitimate focus for attention and action, however, a more sophisticated analysis of these patterns is needed to direct appropriate action.

In many ways, it is the variations in achievement these findings disguise, that are more statistically and educationally significant. The Report identifies that whilst there is little variation in achievement between boys and girls at the top end of the performance range; that for the majority of students, in the medium range, girls are marginally outperforming boys, whilst boys are significantly over-represented at the bottom of the achievement scale.

Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools directs attention to the dangers of assuming that boys and girls constitute undifferentiated cohorts, pointing out that the variations this disguises *amongst* boys is in fact greater than differences between boys and girls. This report confirms Richard Teese's exacting analysis of achievement data *Who Wins at School* which has revealed that socio-economic status, has a far greater influence on achievement than gender, as to a less

predictable extent does rurality and remoteness. This reinforces the need to more closely examine these interconnections, as reflected in the previous recommendation.

Similar patterns of performance are observable at all years of schooling. There is however, nothing new in this. A recent doctoral study has closely analysed historical data of academic outcomes in NSW. The study reveals that girls have consistently recorded superior outcomes to boys at the Leaving level from 1916 onward and with the widespread introduction of Year 12 from 1946 onward, have outperformed boys in the majority of subjects examined at this level, except Mathematics, also, a trend that continues to this day. (cf: Georgia Kamperos unpublished Doctoral thesis Faculty of Education University of Sydney 1999)

Given the diversity of curriculum and assessment regimes that have existed over this time, as well as the significant changes to the composition and size of school cohorts that have occurred, the implications of this research are manifold. It calls into question both the assertions that the relative academic performance of boys and girls is recent phenomena, as well as the belief that it can be attributed to recent curriculum or assessment practices.

Nor are these patterns peculiar to Australia. They reflect a trend identified in most northern European based cultures. The United Kingdom National Foundation for Educational Research project *An investigation into gender differences in Achievement* has been a landmark report in this area and many of its observations are very pertinent to this Inquiry. These include:

1. Boys level of achievement have not in fact declined over the past twenty years, rather, girl's attainment levels have improved at a more rapid rate. As this is also true in Australia, it is worth asking what the intended goal of concerns regarding boy's achievement might be. If boys' achievement levels are in fact rising, then what will constitute an acceptable rate of improvement? Are we intending that boys must achieve as well as girls, when this has in fact never been the case?
2. There has been a consistent pattern of attributing the academic success of boys to innate factors such as motivation or ability, whilst their failure is attributed to external structures such as the style of assessment or curriculum. For girls on the other hand, the reverse has been true. This has certainly been true of this debate in Australia. As indicated above, claims that the cause and solution to boys relative under performance can be attributed or solved by changes to curriculum or assessment regimes are not substantiated by the material evidence.
3. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this Report has found that where schools have introduced best practice programs explicitly designed to improve the achievement of boys, it has achieved that end, *however the performance gap between girls and boys at these schools widened, as girls outcomes improved at a more rapid rate than before.*

Overall, this study found that a school focus upon improving boys' attitudes and perceptions rather than upon curriculum or assessment practices was critical. For these reasons, this submission does not endorse the search for a 'boy friendly' curriculum, but a focus upon strategies and programs which work towards improving boys attitudes and perceptions towards schooling and about themselves; especially the interrelationships between masculinity and education as reflected in previous recommendations is more appropriate. It is also worth reiterating that a focus upon improving academic performance *per se* is unlikely to have much impact upon the majority of the areas of concern detailed earlier.

6. Middle Years of Schooling

Having stressed the primary role of student attitudes and perceptions towards schooling, educational research has increasingly highlighted the centrality of the Middle Years of schooling in shaping these domains. Over the past decade, the research sophistication of studies such as the *Quality Schools Research Project* and more recently the *Middle Years Research and Development Project* (MYRAD) have used reduction research methodologies to accurately track not only variations in student learning outcomes, but also our capacity to cross references these with the patterns of student attitudes to schooling which underlie and contribute to such outcomes. The MYRAD project in Victoria, is currently providing the most detailed study of student attitudes across these years:

TABLE 1. Gender Differences in Student Attitudes to Schooling across the Middle Years

| Attitude Scale | Year 5 | | Year 6 | | Year 7 | | Year 8 | | Year 9 | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|--------|------|
| | B | G | B | G | B | G | B | G | B | G |
| Connectedness to School (variance) | 3.83 | 4.07 | 3.74 | 3.99 | 3.57 | 3.70 | 3.15 | 3.29 | 3.05 | 3.14 |
| | 0.24 | | 0.25 | | 0.43 | | 0.14 | | 0.09 | |
| Teaching & Learning | 3.83 | 4.03 | 3.75 | 3.97 | 3.52 | 3.61 | 3.16 | 3.25 | 3.04 | 3.13 |
| | 0.20 | | 0.22 | | 0.09 | | 0.09 | | 0.09 | |
| Disruptive Behaviour * | 3.20 | 3.10 | 3.12 | 3.02 | 3.19 | 3.12 | 3.29 | 3.23 | 3.17 | 3.17 |
| | 0.10 | | 0.10 | | 0.07 | | 0.06 | | 0.00 | |

* *High score on this scale denotes students perceive high levels of disruptive behaviour in their classes*

Source: MYRAD Data Report Centre for Applied Educational Research University of Melbourne March 2000

This data shows that whilst girls commence Year 5 with more positive attitudes to engagement with schooling, the quality of teaching and learning and perceptions of safe and productive school environments, the gender differences in these perceptions and attitudes are not dramatic. Furthermore, whilst there is a consistent decline in both boys and girls attitudes across the Middle Years, the decline is more marked for girls on all scales, so that by Year 9 girls' initially more positive profile has been largely eroded. Such findings illustrate that the increasing disengagement and disenchantment with schooling that is apparent across the Middle years, is not gender-specific, re-enforcing the need for a gender-inclusive focus.

The value of quality educational research such as the MYRAD project in providing authentic and verifiable data to guide and assess the effectiveness of intervention should be stressed in relation to the terms of this Inquiry.

The Inquiry's terms of reference call for review of the strategies schools have adopted which have proven to be successful. This submission strongly advocates the need to explore and make available example of good gender equity programs. At present, however, whilst numerous, often contradictory claims about the effectiveness of various gender equity approaches and programs are being made, few if any, have been subject to authentic review and evaluation. Despite considerable expertise in this field, the authors of this submission are unable to endorse any specific program which has been able to demonstrate its effectiveness with sufficient rigour. It would be inadvisable for this Inquiry to recommend or endorse any strategy which has not been adequately evaluated, and this submission recommends that DETYA establish an independent, rigorous and professionally credible research and evaluation regime to assess proposed strategies, and that the outcomes of such evaluation be made broadly available. The United Kingdom NFER project *An*

investigation into gender differences in Achievement, previously mentioned, is a useful example of such an approach.

Recommendation 5:

That DETYA establish a research and evaluation regime to assess the effectiveness of intervention strategies and programs introduced to improve the school and post school experiences and outcomes for boys and girls.

7. Post School pathways

Another trend commonly misrepresented in this debate has been the relative patterns of post school education for young men and women. The ABS study, *Transition from Education to work* (ABS 62270 May 1999) again demonstrates that the selective attention given to some aspects of these trends does not adequately represent the full picture. Presently across Australia, the number of men and women studying for a recognised post school qualification is almost identical, (49.9% and 50.1% respectively) however the style of course being undertaken by each sex differs considerably. Within TAFE, women are significantly over represented in the lowest level basic vocational courses (63%) whilst men dominate the higher ranked skilled vocational courses (85%). Within Universities, whilst women represent 52% of undergraduates, men make up 60% of higher degree students. Further, there are significant gender differences in the undergraduate courses young men and women elect to enrol in. As the table below demonstrates, Year 12 girls are significantly over represented in ‘lower status’ courses which are less likely to lead to either secure employment or higher earnings. It also demonstrates the critical need for continuing attention to programs that will encourage both boys and girls into non-traditional vocational and further study pathways.

TABLE 2. 1998 Australian Year 12 enrolment in Bachelor level tertiary courses

| Tertiary Course | Males % | Female % |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Arts | 28.3 | 71.7 |
| Education | 20.3 | 79.7 |
| Health/Nursing | 23.0 | 77.0 |
| Science | 54.2 | 45.8 |
| Business | 48.5 | 51.5 |
| Engineering | 83.9 | 16.1 |

Source: National Report on Schooling in Australia 1998 MCEETYA P. 199

On the basis of these patterns, it is clear that, as recommended in the recent DETYA study, *Factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and initial destination after leaving school* we need a more sophisticated analysis of the gendered relativities of educational outcomes, as well as an examining what the *real implications* of such variations are. The data assembled for the above study demonstrates that leaving school early is statistically far more likely to lead to unemployment amongst girls than boys, and that the average weekly earnings of young adult (and adult) males remains significantly higher than females. Again, this domain is already adequately covered by the Post-School pathways focus area of *Gender Equity: a framework for Australian Schools* which has recommended as a target “more equitable participation and attainment in schooling and in the range of post-school options for employment, education and training between all groups of girls and boys.” (P. 19)

8. Mental Health Indicators amongst young people

Here a consistent claim has been that mental well-being and particularly the suicide rate amongst young men has increased significantly in recent years and is continuing to grow, especially in remote/rural locations.

The 1997 ABS *Mental Health and Wellbeing Profile* (ABS 4326.0) found that the rate of mental illness in the young adult age group (18-24) is the highest for any age cohort, and that this rate is highest amongst young women. Young women are three time more likely to exhibit affective disorders such as depression and stress, whilst young men are twice as likely to have substance abuse related disorders.

Another ABS study; *Suicide in Australia 1921 –1998* (ABS 33090 March 2000) has demonstrated that the patterns of Australian suicide are quite different from those often presented in the media and misused in this debate. Since reliable record keeping commenced in 1921, male deaths have accounted for roughly 3:4 suicides. This is a tragic and alarming statistic, which justifiably should obligate us to explore explanations and responses. It is not however a recent phenomena, and since 1994, the male to female suicide ratio has been in decline, with females now representing an increasing proportion of total suicides. Equally, this study demonstrates that the male suicide rate has always been higher in the 25-44 age group than the 15-24 cohort and that until 1988, the 65+ male suicide rate was also higher than the youth rate. It also indicates that rurality/isolation is not a significant coefficient in suicide statistics. (17 per 100,000 compared to 15 for urban areas)

The study does however document the tragic increase in the rate of suicide in the 15-24 age cohort over the last decade, with higher rates of increase in this age group than any other. Whilst boys constitute 80% of total suicides in this age group, and the magnitude of that statistic is undeniable, the study also demonstrates that the rates of increase in this cohort has been almost identical for young boys and girls across this period. (2.7% per 100,000 and 2.6% respectively)

This waste of young lives is a tragic indictment, however these patterns do not support either an exclusive focus upon male youth suicide, nor youth suicide in particular. Within the context of this Inquiry, they demonstrate a need to support research and effective prevention strategies related to youth and young adult suicide for both sexes. The '*Mind Matters*' kit, recently developed through DETYA utilises a whole-school approach to addressing mental health and wellbeing in schools and may prove to be a highly effective resource in this area.

Recommendation 6:

That consideration be given to further research and effective prevention strategies targeting youth and young adult mental and physical health and well-being for boys and girls. More generally;, that gender equity principles need to inform and enhance other systemic priorities such as drug education and student welfare.

9. The role of teachers

Another common, but untested, claim is that the self-destructive attributes associated with young men's understandings about masculinity are in part acquired due to the absence of appropriate male role models at school, and for many, at home. Taken further some have claimed that the numbers of women in the teaching service means that young boys experience schooling as an alien, if not emasculating process.

Such understandings of gender construction are drawn from sex-role theory and the assumption that masculinity is acquired predominantly through exposure to men. As a theoretical approach to gender, sex-role theory has largely been discredited and abandoned as inadequate. (Cf. R. Connell *Gender and Power* 1987) Nor does this assumption rest well with youth studies research which indicates that young people increasingly acquire their social knowledge from the mass media and peer group, rather than family or school.

Further, the proposition that boys will achieve better outcomes with male teachers is not supported by the available research. Last year, DETYA funded the *Successful interventions Project* to assess which intervention programs could demonstrate the best improvement in student literacy and numeracy. Consistent with the Quality Schools Project and MYRAD data, the key finding of this project was that it is the quality of the relationship each student establishes with their teacher that has the greatest impact upon student success; more so than either the specific intervention strategy adopted, or the gender of the teacher. One of these studies explicitly found that in fact the most successful teacher-student pairings for literacy intervention support for both girls and boys were the opposite sex, not same sex pairings.

Nor is it the case that male teachers are necessarily better equipped, or more likely to successfully address gender issues with boys in their classrooms. The *Gender and School Education* report found that male teachers are less likely to implement gender-inclusive strategies and are less attentive to the needs of 'at risk' boys (p. 143)

Whether the current gender balance of the teaching service should be an area of concern has also been an issue of significant debate. It is first worth identifying clearly what these patterns are. The most recent *National Report on Schooling* (1998 p. 208) reveals that 76.9% of Australian primary school teachers are women, with the corresponding figure at secondary being 53.2%. These proportions have not changed by greater than 1% since 1995. Whilst the implications of a 1:3 sex ratio at primary level merits consideration of strategies to directly encourage more men to consider teaching as a career, the same cannot be said of secondary schools.

In Primary schools, male teachers are more densely clustered in leadership positions and teaching the later years, and are least represented in Early years classrooms. This reflects a broader pattern that is possibly of greater significance to the focus of this Inquiry. At both Primary and Secondary schools, men tend to be clustered into roles that emphasize authority and discipline whilst women predominate in areas of nurturance and support. Schools are often giving boys and girls mixed messages about appropriate gender attitudes and behaviour. These patterns embedded in school organisation serve to inadvertently re-enforces for students some highly traditional and unhelpful gender divides.

Given the aims of this Inquiry, it may therefore be more appropriate to consider strategies that encourage men to take up teaching positions in non-traditional domains, such as student welfare and early primary teaching, rather than the employment of more men into teaching *per se*.

Perhaps more important still, is the need to ensure that current and future teachers are exposed to quality professional development which will adequately equip them to respond to gender related issues in schools. The *Gender and School Education* report indicated that less than 50% of teachers had undertaken any professional development in this area.

Recommendation 7 :

That the delivery of pre and in-service professional development programs in gender education for teachers and teachers in training be included as a priority area for the DETYA Quality Teacher program and like initiatives.

Recommendation 8 :

That initiatives which encourage men into non-traditional areas of teaching such as student welfare and the early years of Primary education be considered.