What matters most: Evidence-based findings of key factors affecting the educational experiences and outcomes for girls and boys throughout their primary and secondary schooling

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Supplementary submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training: Inquiry Into the Education of Boys

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Abstract: Unfortunately, much of the prevailing public interest and media 'hype' surrounding gender issues in education – especially differences in boys' and girls' experiences and outcomes of schooling – amount to little more than anecdotal rhetoric and opinion. Moreover, the post-modernist claptrap espoused by academics promoting the de-construction of gender-specific pedagogy is equally unhelpful. Above all, a good deal of this 'discourse' is not supported by findings from evidence-based research. In this expanded, supplementary submission to the Inquiry Into the Education of Boys, key findings are presented highlighting 'real' effects from recent and emerging evidence-based research on teacher and school effectiveness. For example, whereas on average, boys' literacy skills, general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviors and experiences of schooling are notably poorer than those of girls – despite their socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds – these differential gender effects pale into relative insignificance compared with class/teacher effects. That is, the quality of teaching and learning provision with major emphases on literacy and related verbal reasoning and written communication skills are by far the most salient influences on students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes of schooling – regardless of either student or teacher gender. Indeed, findings from the related local and international evidence-based research indicate that 'what matters most' is quality teaching, supported by strategic teacher professional development!

Introductory rationale

Issues related to 'problems' in the education of boys have considerable international and local currency. In Australia, such issues have been brought into sharper focus in response to calls (initially during 2000) for submissions to the federal government's Inquiry Into the Education of Boys by the then federal government's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, and the now House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2002). At the center of these issues are concerns about the relative underachievement of boys (compared with girls) and their poorer attitudes, behaviors and experiences of schooling. Unfortunately, however, much of the related public and academic discussion, and the media 'hype' that has surrounded it, have been replete with 'myth', anecdote, opinion and uninformed comment that have little basis in findings from recent and emerging evidence-based research. Even a cursory inspection of the offerings submitted to the Inquiry to date suggest that such is the case. This is not to deny the legitimacy of such offerings, but in the absence of substantive, research-based evidence to support the Committees' deliberations, their task continues to be a particularly difficult one.

1 This paper is an expanded version of an initial submission to the parliamentary Inquiry Into the Education of Boys by Rowe and Rowe (2000a), and a subsequent invited address (Rowe, 2000a). Note that the views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily those held officially by the Australian Council for Educational Research, or by the Department of General Paediatrics, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Ken Rowe, Principal Research Fellow, ACER, Private Bag 55, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia; Tel: +61 3 9277 5584; Email: rowek@acer.edu.au; OR to Dr Katherine Rowe, Senior Consultant Physician, Department of General Paediatrics, Royal Children's Hospital, Flemington Road, Parkville, Victoria 3052, Australia; Tel: +61 3 9345 5569; Email: rowek@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au.

2 During the course of the Inquiry, submissions have been made available on the Committee's internet web site: http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edl/Eofb/index.htm

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By drawing on key findings from the existing and emerging evidence-based research in this area, the present paper is an attempt to provide support for informed debate, and to assist the Committee in its deliberations. At this point, a reiteration of the inquiry’s stated ‘terms of reference’ is helpful.

‘Terms of Reference’ for the Inquiry

In letters of invitation to make submissions to the Inquiry dated May 25 2000, and April 17 2002, the stated ‘terms of reference’ for the Inquiry are to inquire into and report on:

- The social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialization skills in the early and middle years of schooling, and
- the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

What follows is an up-dated version of the initial submission made by Rowe and Rowe (2000a).

Focus of the initial and supplementary Rowe and Rowe submissions

On the basis of research experience that spans the past 25 years, it is respectfully submitted that the ‘Terms of Reference’ for the Inquiry as stated in the submission request and reiterated above, are largely misplaced. The reasons for this are explicated in what follows. In outline, both the initial and supplementary Rowe and Rowe submissions focus on:

- The differential schooling performances and experiences of boys and girls throughout their primary and secondary schooling in terms of: academic outcomes, attitudes and behaviors;
- Key reasons for these differences and their implications for policy and practice;
- Identifying the major sources of variation in students’ achievements;
- Barriers to reform; and
- Suggested strategies for supporting the learning needs of boys, and key characteristics of ‘effective’ teachers as nominated by students themselves (both boys and girls).

Since most of the empirical evidence in support of the findings summarized here is already published, the source references are given for the related technical detail. In the case of yet to be published evidence, illustrative graphical presentations of the relevant data are provided.

Differential schooling performances and experiences of boys and girls

The evidence indicating that boys, on average, achieve at significantly lower levels than girls on ALL areas of the assessed cognitive curriculum throughout their primary and secondary schooling is not in dispute. Moreover, this evidence is universal (Arnold, 1997, Carvel, 1997, Collins et al., 2000; Dean, 1998; Masters & Forster, 1997a,b; Millard, 1997; Rowe, 2000a,b,c, 2002; Sukhnandan et al., 2000). Indeed, there is a widening gap between the academic performances of girls and boys in Australia, as well as in English speaking countries world-wide (Ainley, 1999; Buckingham, 2000; Cassidy, 1999; DETYA, 2000; Lokan et al., 2001; MacCann, 1995; MacDonald, 1999; McGaw, 1996; OECD, 2001; West, 1999; Wilhelm & Smith, 2001). Furthermore, compared with girls, findings from the extant and emerging evidence-based research consistently indicates:

- Boys are significantly more ‘disengaged’ with schooling and more likely to be at ‘risk’ of academic underachievement – especially in literacy (Bowne & Fletcher, 1995; Epstein et al., 1998; Fletcher et al., 1999; Hinshaw, 1992a,b; Irvine, 1992, 1999; MacDonald et al., 1999; McGee et al., 1988; McGee & Share, 1988; Martino, 1994; Rowe, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 2000b,c; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002);
- Boys exhibit significantly greater externalizing behavior problems in the classroom and at home; i.e., anti-social, inattention, restlessness – particularly inattention (Barkley, 1996;
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- Fifty per cent of consultations to pediatricians at tertiary referral hospitals relate to behavioral problems, including Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), with a ratio of boys 9: girls 1. Further, 20% of referrals relate to learning difficulties – being made up of predominantly boys demonstrating poor achievement progress in literacy (Rowe & Rowe, 1998, 1999, 2000b);

- In the early years of schooling, boys constitute between 75-85% of those children (typically in Grade 1) identified ‘at-risk’ of poor achievement progress in literacy, and selected for participation in a Reading Recovery intervention program (Clay, 1998, 2001; Rowe, 1998, 1999a, 2000d).

- Boys have a higher prevalence of auditory processing problems. Unless appropriate classroom management strategies are put in place, these problems impact negatively on their early literacy achievement and subsequent progress, as well as their behaviors (Rowe, Pollard et al., 2000; Rowe & Rowe, 2000e; Rowe, Rowe & Pollard, 2001, 2002a,b);

- Boys report significantly less positive experiences of schooling in terms of enjoyment of school, perceived curriculum usefulness and teacher responsiveness (Hill et al., 1996a,b; MacDonald et al., 1999; Rowe, 2000b,c; Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe & Rowe, 1999);

- Boys are more likely to ‘drop out’ of schooling prematurely. Recent Australian national estimates indicate that between 1994 and 1998, 30% of boys failed to complete their secondary schooling cf. 20% girls (Marks et al., 2000). This results in reduced employment opportunities and general quality of life chances; and

- Comorbid with underachievement, boys are subject to more disciplinary actions during schooling (including bullying behaviors and expulsions), are more likely to participate in subsequent delinquent behaviors, alcohol and substance abuse, and during adolescence, are 4-5 times more likely than girls to suffer from depression and commit suicide (Buckingham, 2000; Collins et al., 1996; McGee et al., 1988; Mitchell, 2000; Sawyer, et al., 2000; Toppin, 1999; Zubrick et al., 1997).

Listening to the ‘voices’

In addition to the empirical evidence reported in the studies and references cited above, comprehensive interview data have been collected from both students and teachers. A brief selection of these is sufficient to illustrate the consistency of sentiment that is experienced by students and teachers. For example, the following response from an articulate 13 year-old boy illustrates the dilemma faced by many boys and their teachers:

My English teacher wants me to write about my feelings, my History teacher wants me to give my opinions, and my Science teacher wants me write on my views about the environment! I don’t know what my feelings, opinions and views are, and I can’t write about them. Anyway, they’re none of their bloody business! I hate school!! I only wish I could write about the things I’m interested in like sport and military aircraft.

Another response from a 15 year-old boy:

This is girl stuff! This school is run by girls for girls. I can’t wait to get out!

From a girl in a Year 10 all-girls Maths class:

It’s great not being with the boys. We can talk with each other about what we’re doing and ask questions of the teacher without being put down by the boys.

A response from a Year 11 boy about his Geography class and teacher:

There’s just bits of it that sink in, but most of it doesn’t really register. You just kind of half listen and half not listen. She raves-on and you switch on only sometimes just in case she asks you a question, but her voice is always there.
A comment by a female Year 9 Coordinator in a large coeducation secondary college illustrates a further dilemma faced by boys and their teachers:

I’m really worried about the boys at this Year level — the girls give them a very hard time. The ‘sisterhood’ are bitchy, socially and sexually aggressive, and nastily intolerant of the boys’ less competent verbal and academic skills. I’m having real difficulties dealing with the problem.

Key reasons for differential performance

Before outlining suggested reasons underlying the available and emerging research-based evidence accounting for the differential schooling performances and experiences of boys and girls, it is important to locate this evidence in context.

Over the last 25 years there has been a notable shift in the pattern of educational performance on monitoring-type achievement tests and on public examinations, to girls outperforming boys on all areas of the assessed ‘cognitive’ curriculum (Arnot et al., 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Gallagher, 1997; Rowe, 2000a, 2002; Warrington & Younger, 1996). Consistent with international trends, this shift has been particularly marked over the last decade in Australia (Ainley, Fleming & Rowe, 2002; MacCann, 1995; McGaw, 1996; Rowe & Hill, 1996; Rowe, Turner & Lane, 1999a, 2002; Teese et al., 1995; West, 1999). For example, in his review of the New South Wales, Year 12, Higher School Certificate (HSC), McGaw (1996, p. 108) notes:

In 1991, males were over-represented at the top and bottom of the Tertiary Entrance Ranks, while females were over-represented in the middle ranges. By 1995, the position had changed markedly... Females are now over-represented in all the high Tertiary Entrance Rank ranges, and males are even more over-represented at the bottom.

Similarly, the gender effect in favor of females on achieved subject scores in the Year 12 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) between 1994 and 1999 had an average magnitude of +0.26 standard deviation units per subject (Rowe, 1999b, Rowe, Turner & Lane, 1999a,b, 2002). Since the inappropriate publication of ‘league-table’-type rankings of schools’ Year 12 results in major daily newspapers in several Australian states (see ACT, 2000a; Rowe, 1996, 2000e), senior staff of coeducational secondary schools have been acutely aware that their school average ‘results’ are “...dependent on the relative size of the female/male enrolments in a given year’s cohort...” (Rowe, 1999b, p. 14). This superior performance of girls is further underscored by the differential effects of gender/class/school groupings on students’ ‘ability’-adjusted mean scores for 53 VCE studies — as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Plot of mean ‘ability’- and ‘sector’-adjusted VCE scores for 4 gender/school/class groupings of students on 53 studies (1994-1999)

[N ≥ 270,000 students drawn from 600 VCE providers; from Rowe, 2000b,g.]

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Additional analyses of the data summarized in Figure 1 indicate that for those students taking 5 studies, females in all-female classes/schools achieved an average of 11.5 score points more than their male counterparts in coeducational settings, yielding a mean difference of > 20 percentile TER or ENTER ranks. Against the background of this evidence, several former all-boys schools in Victoria have chosen to become co-educational, whereas some coeducational schools have adopted single-sex class groupings. However, it is important not to over-interpret the ‘importance’ of these gender and gender/class/school-grouping effects, since they pale into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects — regardless of either student or teacher gender (see below). Nevertheless, in commenting on McGaw’s (1996) findings cited above, West (1999, p. 41) exclaims:

Nobody seems to be able to explain satisfactorily what happened from 1990 onwards to assist girls, on average, to do better than boys and improve this performance year after year, nor why boys have begun to do so poorly, relative to girls.

The importance of literacy and particularly, verbal reasoning and written communication skills

In response to West, a key reason for the observed gender differences in performance, attitudes and behaviors, it is evident that since the early 1990’s there has been a notable increase in the demand for higher levels of operational literacy and especially, verbal reasoning and written communication skills in school education — areas in which girls, on average, have distinct maturational and socialization advantages (Hill & Rowe, 1998; MacDonald et al., 1999; Rowe, 1999c,d; 2000b, 2002a; Rowe & Rowe, 1999). This demand is reflected in curriculum design and content, as well as the way it is taught and assessed — at all stages of primary and secondary schooling. It is evident in school-based assessment and statewide achievement testing in the early and middle years of schooling, as well as in certifying examination programs at Year 12. For example, MacDonald et al. (1999) observe: “...recent changes in curricular design and assessment practices tend to favor the traditional strengths of girls” (p. 17).

The case of changes to mathematics curriculum and its assessment since the early 1990’s is illustrative. Due to shifts in pedagogical emphases from mathematics to numeracy by mathematics educators, the demand for verbal reasoning and written communication skills continues to be a feature of curricula content and assessment in mathematics. For Year 12 4-Unit Mathematics in NSW or Specialist Mathematics in Victoria, for example, there is a requirement for students to demonstrate extremely high levels of such skills. That is, the verbally presented, ‘in-context’ problems require to be read, understood, translated into relevant algorithms, solved, then explicated and justified. Such a process requires sophisticated levels of both verbal reasoning and written communication skills — more ably handled by girls. Indeed, from Kindergarten to Year 12, girls on average, consistently outperform their male counterparts in literacy, numeracy, and in all other academic curriculum areas.

It should be noted that an important positive predictor of higher average VCE scores by females for English and for all other VCE subjects was their significantly higher scores on the Written Communication component of the General Achievement Test (GAT). Detailed accounts describing the use of the GAT in moderating students’ school-based common assessment tasks (CATs) in the VCE, are provided by: Hill, Brown, Rowe and Turner (1997), Hill and Rowe (1995), Rowe, Turner and Lane (1999a, 2002), and by Turner (1998).

Despite a serious lack of evidence-based findings for the effects of single-sex schooling, several studies are notable. For example, in a well-controlled study, Lee and Bryk (1986) found that in terms of academic achievement, aspirations, locus of control, attitudes and behaviors, single-sex schooling delivers specific advantages to both girls and boys. Lee and Bryk conclude: What has been considered by some to be an anachronistic organizational feature of schools (i.e., single-sex) may actually facilitate adolescent academic development by providing an environment where social and academic concerns are separated. Perhaps a second look at this disappearing school type is warranted (p. 381). More recent evidence provides qualified support for Lee and Bryk’s contention (see: Daly, 1996; Elwood & Gipps, 1999; Rowe, 1988, 1999; Rowe & Rowe, 1999; Rowe, Turner & Lane, 1999a, 2002; Woodward, Fergusson & Horwood, 1999).
Consistent with a growing body of research, findings from longitudinal studies of factors affecting students' achievement progress consistently indicate large differences between male and female students on all key factors affecting their learning outcomes (see: Ainley, Fleming & Rowe, 2002; Campbell et al., 1998; Hill & Rowe, 1996, 1998; Hill et al., 1996a,b; Rowe & Hill, 1996, 1998). That is, girls indicate significantly higher levels of achievement and rates of progress than males, and demonstrate more attentive behaviors in the classroom. To illustrate one aspect of this phenomenon, Figure 2 summarizes both the cross-sectional and longitudinal data for the achievement levels of boys and girls in each of Years K to 11 on the Reading strand of the Victorian English Profiles (Victoria, 1991) in the form of 'box-and-whisker' plots — used to describe the 'shape' of the distributions for each Year Level.

The 'boxes' in Figure 2 ('open' for males and 'shaded' for females) describe the range of achievement of the 'middle' 50 per cent of students at those Year levels. The top of each 'box' indicates the level of students achieving at the 75th percentile, the bottom of the 'box' shows the 25th percentile and the asterisk indicates the 50th percentile, or median value. The top and bottom 'whiskers' indicate the 90th and 10th percentile levels of achievement respectively.

![Figure 2. Box plots showing distributions for male and female students' progress on the English Profiles - Reading Strand, by Grade/Year Level (n = 13,700)](image)

The distributions shown in Figure 2 for the Reading strand indicate a period of rapid growth in both girls' and boys' achievements during the first few years of schooling, coinciding with the period during which students acquire basic skills, and thereafter show a consistent rate of growth to Year 9. In addition to the marked gender differences in achievement, it is noticeable
that the range of achievement increases markedly over the years of schooling, with more than four band widths separating Year 9 students at the 10th and 90th percentiles.

Figure 2 also provides evidence of a discontinuity between primary and secondary schooling for Reading achievement, with a ‘dip’ in the rate of progress of students in the first year of secondary school (Year 7). This pattern has been observed in several studies using common measures over primary and secondary schooling (e.g., Campbell et al., 1998; Elly, 1992; Lunberg & Linnakylä, 1993; Purves, 1973). An interesting feature of this pattern is its striking similarity with that shown by pediatric percentile growth-charts for height and weight during the pre-pubertal to early adolescent period of development. In commenting on this phenomenon Rowe (1995) notes: “It is possible that what has become known as an ‘educational phenomenon’ [i.e. ‘apparent dips’ in literacy performance during the transition from primary to secondary schooling] may also have developmental psycho-physiological correlates” (p. 78).

Of particular concern is the flattening out of the ‘growth trajectory’ at the 10th percentile (particularly for boys), indicating a trend of less than one ‘band width’ of growth from Year 4 to Year 9. Note also, the minimal growth between Years 9 and 10 – especially for boys. It should be noted that while similar findings applied to the two additional measures of Literacy in this study (namely, the Writing and Spoken Language strands), both the higher achievement levels and rate of growth indicated by girls compared with boys were even more evident on these two strands.

In reporting key findings from this study in terms of students’ achievement progress in literacy, Hill and Rowe (1998, pp. 326-327) note:

Of the predictors of student Literacy Achievement, the most salient was students’ attentiveness in the classroom. By far the major proportion of the variance in student Attentiveness was found to be at the student-level and the most influential predictor of Attentiveness was Gender, with female students being significantly more attentive than male students. Whereas the higher attentiveness levels of girls is familiar to most teachers, the implications for literacy curriculum and its assessment may not always be recognized.

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis within Australian elementary schools, both in approaches to teaching and learning and to assessment of student achievement, on activities that require high levels of sustained attention. Such activities include on-task-demanding behaviors such as the production of written portfolios, the writing of extended pieces of prose, and the completion of written research projects. There has been a corresponding move away from short answer and ‘check the box’ type activities to tasks requiring increasingly higher levels of verbal reasoning skills – activities in which girls have a well-established achievement and maturational advantage. It is possible that these changes in pedagogy may have placed, albeit inadvertently, a greater premium on attentiveness that have contributed to the phenomenon of substantial gender differences in students’ literacy progress, mediated especially through Attentiveness (see Rowe, 1991; Rowe & Rowe, 1992a,b).

More recently, in a report of key findings from the 1998 statewide Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Program for Year 3 and Year 7 students in Tasmanian schools, Rowe (1999c, p. 39) makes the following summary comments:

Given the limitations of the ‘one-off’, cross-sectional nature of the present data, the implications of the findings in terms of both policy and practice, are clear. In addition to the annotations noted in the body of the analyses presented above, the following comments are noteworthy.

At the student-level (regardless of students’ background or ‘intake’ characteristics), it is vital that teaching and learning priorities be focussed on the development of individual students’ Literacy skills and achievements – especially in reading (READ) – since reading (albeit mediated by inattentiveness – INATTEN) is the foundation competency that has the dominant effect on all other literacy and numeracy achievements. Moreover, the development of number skills and working numerately (WRKNUM) underlies all other numeracy competencies. Note also the strong reciprocal effects between READ and INATTEN, suggesting the importance of reading competency in reducing the negative effects of inattentiveness. As already noted for the comparable Year 3 findings, it is important to emphasize that the 1998 Year 7 numeracy test items all had excessive requirements for high levels of verbal reasoning
skills. As such, the composite constructs of Literacy and Numeracy are confounded — as evidenced by the strong positive correlation between the two variables (r = 0.607; see Fig. 1, p. 6). In such circumstances, it is vital that invalid inferences are not made about students’ levels of achievement in mathematics (per se). Whereas the postmodern ‘information society’ is requiring increasingly higher levels of verbal reasoning ‘abilities’ (VRA) of persons in the workplace and in educational settings, there is a danger of over-emphasizing VRA to the detriment of developing equally important non-verbal reasoning skills — especially in educational performance assessment and monitoring. As recommended previously, to minimize this problem in future monitoring projects, it is recommended that numeracy test items in each domain be included that place minimal demands on students’ verbal reasoning ‘abilities’ and skills. Such items are typically presented in simple symbolic or algorithmic forms.

In respect of students’ inattentive behaviors in the classroom, we know from large-scale, longitudinal research that students’ early growth in reading skills have a strong and enduring effect on reducing their current and subsequent inattentive behaviors, and have positive impacts on their achievements in cognitive areas of the curriculum, as well as in affective and behavioral domains. The findings related to analyses of the Year 7 data have provided strong support for this proposition.

In brief, the research evidence suggests that throughout the entire duration of their schooling for a large proportion of boys, the verbal reasoning requirements and general literacy demands of school curricula and assessment are beyond both their developmental capacity and normative socialization experiences to cope successfully. Bray et al. (1997) suggest that a key socialization factor contributing to boys’ literacy underachievement compared with girls is their relative reluctance to read\(^5\). Bray et al. (1997) identify the increasing prevalence of video and computer use by boys as being particularly erosive to boys’ propensity to read, and note that there are major differences between adolescent girls and boys in their patterns and quality of interpersonal communication among their peers. That is, girls are more likely to have social lives that revolve around verbal interaction and communication, whereas at this developmental stage boys were more likely to have socialization experiences that revolve around play. In commenting on these phenomena, MacDonald et al. (1999, p. 15) record:

> The increasing use of solitary computer games, more favoured by boys than girls, can only exacerbate these differences. Patterns of behaviour outside school could either contribute to girls’ greater ease with language, or be a reflection of it.

Whatever the case, large numbers of boys can be said to fall into the category of ‘underachieving readers’, in the sense that they can decode print but cannot read in a sustained and flexible way, using a variety of contextual clues to extract meaning in the fullest possible sense.

This underachievement by boys and inability to ‘cope’ with the operational literacy demands of school curricular and assessment are frequently manifested in boys’ ‘acting-out’ behaviors, chronic inattentiveness and disinterestedness, low self-esteem and disengagement or withdrawal from willing participation in schooling. However, the good news arising from findings based on fitting multilevel, non-recursive structural equation models to relevant data (see Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe & Rowe, 1992b, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2000c,d) is that while students’ inattentive behaviors have negative effects on their literacy progress, it is literacy achievement that more strongly reduces inattentive behaviors, and provides crucial evidence for improving both educational and behavioral outcomes of students—especially those for boys

It has been noted elsewhere (Rowe & Rowe, 2000c) that among the reasons for higher incidence of problem behaviors among boys in the middle and later years of schooling is that they frequently express feelings of alienation from a school curriculum that has become increasingly ‘contextualized’, and (in their words) “feminized”. In interviews, for example, boys frequently express disenchantment about their academic progress, particularly in literacy and following the transition from primary to secondary schooling. This is especially evident in coeducational secondary schools where, for example, a Year 9 boy claimed recently:

> I’m a second class citizen here; the girls get all the positive vibes from teachers because they talk and write better.

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\(^5\) See also: Smith and Wilhelm (2002); Telford (1999).
To compensate for this, many such boys place a premium on success in sport and some of the more macho (and often delinquent) activities that yield positive feedback from their peers, rather than recognition from school staff – most of whom (the boys note) are women.

Implications

There are two major implications arising from the evidence summarized above that warrant emphasis. These are:

1. At the outset, it should be stressed that the demand for enhanced operational literacy and related verbal reasoning and written communication skills by students throughout their schooling is consistent with that required for functional and effective participation in a postmodern, ‘information-rich’ society. Given this, it is vital that curriculum planners, designers and teachers do not ‘dumb-down’ the curriculum or its assessment to meet the differential needs of boys – or indeed, any other sub-group of students. Rather, with consideration given to the particular interests and needs of such student sub-groups in an overcrowded curriculum (Hill, Hurworth & Rowe, 1999), the provision of quality teaching and learning in literacy, supported by on-going teacher professional development, must be given the highest priority (see Ramsey, 2000).

2. Of crucial importance is the need to maximize the literacy skills of ALL students (boys and girls) as early as possible, since what should be an education issue will become a major health issue – even more than is currently the case. The ever increasing number of anxious parents seeking help from pediatricians and other health professionals for their distressed children whose learning difficulties and behavior problems have arisen as a consequence of (or are exacerbated by) failure to acquire literacy skills is, by any criterion, a massive problem (Rowe & Rowe, 1997b, 1988, 1999, 2000b). Since ‘prevention’ has always been more cost-effective than ‘cure’, governments and their school systems will stand condemned for their neglect if they merely provide ‘ambulance services’ at the bottom of the ‘cliff’ when they should have first built a ‘fence’ at the top. In any event, issues related to the formulation and implementation of strategies to ensure that all students maximize their literacy learning potential require urgent attention – especially for boys. Drawing on the work of Teese (2000), Milburn (2000) refers to “…chronic illiteracy is a shameful and damaging secret” and writes: “In the outer west of Melbourne more than 40 per cent of boys and more than 20 per cent of girls fail VCE English” (p. 4). In response, the following is reiterated from Rowe and Rowe (1999, pp. 78-79):

   It is now well established that strategically-designed initial teacher training and subsequent professional development programs in both early and later literacy teaching and learning have major positive impacts on both teacher competence and student performance. In particular, unequivocal evidence from research related to the efficacy of Professor Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery intervention program (Clay, 1991, 1993, 1997) points to its efficiency and effectiveness in relocating students identified as being “at risk” (mostly boys) on a positive growth trajectory that is sustained (Askew & Frazier, 1997; Lyons, 1997; Rowe, 1997). Moreover, the use of similar methods by teachers in whole-class settings has been demonstrated to have profound ‘value-added’ effects on students’ learning outcomes (Crévola & Hill, 1997, 1998a; Hill & Crévola, 1997), as well as significantly reducing both the salience and incidence of inattentive and disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Hill et al., 1996a; Rowe, 1997a; Rowe & Rowe, 1992b, 1997c, 1998).

   Further evidence from this research strongly supports the benefits of strategic approaches to: (1) early identification and intervention for “at risk” students, (2) on-going teacher professional development, and (3) a relentless commitment by the whole school community, including the direct involvement and participation of parents, to ensure that success for all students becomes a reality. Above all, this evidence suggests that unless resources are directed at targeted professional development (PD) programs for teachers, the “literacy priority” that is central to current efforts directed towards the restructuring of schooling – and loudly espoused by national governments throughout the world – will remain as mere rhetoric. Moreover, it is our contention that unless the content of this PD is informed by sound empirical research from cognitive and behavioral science, and transcends the crippling ideological partisanship that has for too-long
been endemic to teacher education in literacy (see: Singer & Ruddell, 1985; Stahl, 1992; Stahl & Miller, 1989), such PD will be a waste of time.

That is, if we are genuinely serious about improving students' literacy achievements and their attentive behaviors in the classroom, it is vital that PD support strategies be provided to assist teachers in maximizing their own 'efficacy' and student learning—especially those that are firmly grounded in research evidence. If we are not serious, what should be an education issue will become a major health issue— even more than is currently the case. The ever increasing number of anxious parents seeking help from pediatricians and psychologists for their distressed children whose behavior problems have arisen as a consequence of (or are exacerbated by) learning difficulties and failure to acquire literacy skills, is a massive problem (Barkley, 1995; Lyons, 1997; Rowe & Rowe, 1997c, 1998). In highlighting issues related to "future directions" for ADHD research and intervention policies, Farrelly and Standish (1996, p. 81) note: "The impact on mental health and educational systems needs to be examined."

Fortunately, at least one Australian State government has recognized this problem (NSW, 1997, p. 1)—expressed in the following terms:

 Improved literacy levels have the potential to increase students' self-esteem and their achievement in all key learning areas, and to contribute to the reduction of behavioral problems that impede the learning of individual students and disrupt the learning of others. ... Sound literacy development in the early years is essential for students' future success in schooling and lifelong learning. Literacy development remains a priority for all students as they progress through the grades (their emphasis).

In advocating that priority be given to a "whole-school focus on literacy improvement", this government document (NSW, 1997, p. 19) emphasizes the crucial need for: (1) "professional development on literacy teaching practice", (2) the importance of establishing and maintaining "effective partnerships between teachers, parents and students", and (3) the implementation of "appropriate intervention strategies" that "recognize the links between poor literacy skills and inappropriate behavior or poor attendance..."

Further, an edited extract from Rowe and Rowe (1999, p. 92) reads:

A central aim of educational systems is to generate, stimulate and maintain efforts towards the on-going improvement of teaching and learning practices that link directly to the quality of educational outcomes for students (see Hill, 1997a,b,c; Crévola & Hill, 1998b). In our view, such improvements are not likely to be brought about by academic polemic, nor by the 'top-down-driven' administrative fiat of bureaucracies, since the products of these enterprises (mercifully, in most cases) have an established record of rarely penetrating the classroom door. Rather, with the 'informed' support of parents and health professionals, sustained improvement can be achieved via teacher professional development that maximizes their teaching and behavioral management skills in the classroom. It has been our experience that under such circumstances, teachers themselves become the empowered agents and purveyors of change, having consequent 'domino' effects on the teaching and classroom behavioral management practices of other teachers, and throughout the profession. Ultimately, of course, the measures of success or otherwise of such efforts, like all endeavors to improve the quality of school education, will be judged in terms of their impact on the key areas of improved student learning, behavior, and the enhancement of teacher professionalism.

For what is demonstratively the most salient and problematic issue in child and adolescent mental health, the challenge into the 'new millenium' is to refocus the prevailing models accounting for the overlap between inattentive behavior problems and poor academic achievement—together with their related intervention emphases—to educational ones. In our view, the personal, social and financial costs of failure to meet this challenge will be both unsustainable and unbearable.

**Identifying the major sources of variation in students' achievements**

It is now well documented that studies of educational effectiveness in terms of estimating the effects of schooling on student learning over time "...share two key features: the fact that student growth is the object of inquiry, and the fact that such growth occurs in organizational settings" (Raudenbush & Bryk, 1988, p. 424). Raudenbush and Bryk go on to note that these features correspond, in turn, to two of the most troublesome and enduring methodological problems in educational research, namely: (1) the problem of measuring change, and (2) the problem of
analyzing multilevel data. In the preface to their edited collection of related research papers, Raudenbush and Willms (1991, p. xi) observe:

An irony in the history of quantitative studies of schooling has been the failure of researchers’ analytic models to reflect adequately the social organization of life in classrooms and schools. The experiences that children share within school settings and the effects of these experiences on their development might be seen as the basic material of educational research; yet until recently, few studies have explicitly taken account of the effects of particular classrooms and schools in which students and teachers share membership.

Unfortunately, until recently relatively few studies have been undertaken that have accounted for the inherent nested or multilevel organizational structure of schooling with students grouped into classes and taught by particular teachers, despite mounting evidence for the importance of instructional effects at the class/teacher-level (Hill et al., 1996; Hill & Rowe, 1996, 1998; Schaffer, Nesselrodt, & Stringfield, 1994; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe & Rowe, 1999; Teddlie, 1994; Willms, 2000). Indeed, a powerful conclusion arising from this research is that much of the between-school variation in students’ achievements is in fact due to variation among classes. That is, when the organization of students in classes is taken into account, the unique variation due to differences between schools over and above that due to class/teacher-differences is very small indeed. This conclusion is exemplified in a comprehensive review of research into education production functions by Professor David Monk (1992), who cited a number of studies in support of the observation that:

One of the recurring and most compelling findings within the corpus of production function research is the demonstration that how much a student learns depends on the identity of the classroom to which that student is assigned (p. 320).

One of the more significant studies to provide evidence regarding the importance of class/teacher effects was that of Scheerens et al. (1989). This study presented findings from a secondary analysis of data from the Second International Mathematics Study (SIMS). The findings, as summarized in Table 1, indicated that for eight of the nine countries for which between-class/teacher information was available, estimates of the proportion of variance in students’ achievements due to class/teacher effects in several countries exceeded 40%, while school effects were significantly smaller, ranging between 0-9%.

### Table 1. Comparison of Class/Teacher- and School-Level Effects in Eight Countries*

(Secondary Mathematics scores adjusted for father’s occupation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Class/Teacher Effects (%)</th>
<th>School Effects (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Scheerens et al. (1989), p. 794

In reviewing this study and related research, Reynolds and Packer (1992, p. 173) observed:

On the causes of school effects, it seems that early beliefs that school influences were distinct from teacher or classroom influences were misplaced, since a large number of studies utilizing multi-level modeling show that the great majority of variation between schools is in fact due to classroom variation and that the unique variance due to the influence of the school, and not the classroom, shrinks to very small levels.
Similarly, Scheerens (1993, p. 20) notes:

...teacher and classroom variables account for more of the variance in pupil achievement than school variables. Also, in general, more powerful classroom level variables are found that account for between-class variance than school level variables in accounting for between-school variance.

Further, based on multilevel analyses of students' results on the Year 10 General Certificate of School Education (GCSE) and final year A-levels assessments in the United Kingdom, Tymms (1993, pp. 292-293) noted:

In every case (subjects) more variance was accounted for by the departmental level (than between schools), and the proportion of variance accounted for at the class level was more than for the departmental level. A general principle emerges from data such as these, and that is that the smaller the unit of analysis and the closer one gets to the pupil's experience of education, the greater the proportion of variance explicable by that unit. In accountability terms the models indicate that teachers have the greatest influence (my emphasis).

Findings from the Victorian Quality Schools Project (VQSP) have confirmed this phenomenon (see Hill & Rowe, 1996, 1998; Hill et al., 1996a; Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe et al., 1993, 1995; Rowe & Rowe, 1999). When the variance in student achievement data for English and mathematics were analyzed by taking into account the organization of students within classes within schools, estimates of the proportion of residual variance due to school and class/teacher differences were obtained, as summarized in Table 2. The residual variation at the class/teacher-level ranged from 38-45% for English and 53-55% for mathematics, whereas school effects over and above those due to differences at the class/teacher-level shrunk to 4-9%. This is not to say that differences among schools were not substantial in terms of their effectiveness, but rather that these differences were largely accounted for by internal within-school variation among classes and teachers.

### Table 2. Proportional Class/Teacher and School Effects for Victorian Schools: Achievement Adjusted for Prior Achievement

(13,700 students in 90 government, Catholic and independent primary and secondary schools)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class/Teacher Effects (%)</th>
<th>School Effects (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>English</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The magnitude of class/teacher effects on students’ experiences and outcomes of schooling are not limited to academic achievement. For example, findings from the 1996 Elementary School Climate Study in the province of New Brunswick (Canada) are compelling (see Willms, 2000). The study obtained both achievement and affective data using standardized tests and questionnaires administered to the entire population of students in Grades 6 and 8. The questionnaire included four affective outcomes of schooling, namely: self-esteem, sense of belonging, general well-being, and general health. Table 3 records the proportion of variation in student outcomes, at the district, school and student/class levels.

In commenting on these findings, Willms (2000, p. 241) notes: "These results have...important implications with respect to the design of monitoring systems for standards-based reform. The first is that the pressure and support for change needs to be directed at particular teachers within schools, not simply at entire schools". Indeed, the findings summarized in Tables 1-3 —
of large class/student effects and small to insignificant school effects – are primarily a reflection of variations in teaching quality, and point to the conclusion that it is primarily through the quality of teaching and learning provision that ‘effective’ schools make a difference (see Rowe, 2002b). In an early paper reporting these results from the VQSP, Rowe, Holmes-Smith and Hill (1993, p. 15) suggested that: “...on the basis of our findings to date it could be argued that effective schools are only effective to the extent that they have effective teachers” (p. 15).

Table 3. Variation Among School Districts, Schools and Classes for Eight Schooling Outcomes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Per cent of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Between Districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General well-being</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General health</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similarly, Professor Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University (USA) has summarized the evidence-based findings for the effects of teacher quality on student outcomes as follows:

The effect of poor quality teaching on student outcomes is debilitating and cumulative...The effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from students’ backgrounds...A reliance on curriculum standards and statewide assessment strategies without paying due attention to teacher quality appears to be insufficient to gain the improvements in student outcomes sought...The quality of teacher education and teaching appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels or teacher salaries (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

In this context, the work of John Edwards provides poignant insights into the negative effects of ineffective teaching and learning practices by highlighting the typical “teacher-talk-dominated” classroom experiences of many students who are differentially attentive in what he calls “the sea of blah” (Edwards, 2000, pp. 4-5):

The teacher stands at the front of the room and blahs all over the place – blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The sea of blah fills the room and the students bob up and down in this sea. Every now and again they go under and take a gulp then bob up again for air, and then down again. The gulps are somewhat random. So students spend their days gulping from the sea of blah (his emphasis).

For every one delivered lesson or lecture using the sea of blah technique, each listener takes home a different lesson (his emphasis). The reason is that when you come back from your mental tangent, all that I have been saying has gone. You can’t press rewind on John Edwards, and then press play and out it comes. This is where books and computers have a great advantage over us as information givers. The best analogy I can give you is to imagine you are reading your favorite novel, you go off on a mental tangent, when you come back half of the page has just vanished. Imagine the frustration. That is what sea of blah learning is like for the listeners. Yet teacher talk is almost certainly the major mode of instruction still in schools (see, for example, Goodlad, 1984) and universities across the world, even though we all know better.

Even more compelling evidence for the influence of class/teacher-effects on students’ achievements derive from the VCE Data Project (Rowe, 2000f; Rowe, Turner & Lane, 1999a,
What Matters Most

This population study of 270,000 Year 12 students’ achievements on 53 subjects over a 6-year period (1994-1999) has yielded several findings of interest. Whereas there were strong gender effects in favor of girls (~ + 0.3 standard deviation units), as well as gender/class/school-grouping effects in favor of single-sex classes/schools (see Figure 1), the magnitudes of these gender-related effects on students’ achievements paled into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects. After adjusting for measures of students’ ‘abilities’, gender and school sector (government, Catholic and independent), class/teacher effects consistently accounted for an average 59% of the residual variance in students’ achievement outcomes, compared with a mere 5.5% at the school-level.

That is, there was significantly more variation within-schools than between-schools, indicating that the quality of teaching and learning provision was by far the most salient factor accounting for variation in students’ achievements at Year 12. Above all, such findings serve to emphasize that it is at the level of the classroom that learning takes place and that there can be very substantial differences in the progress made by students in different classes within the same school. Indeed, teachers make a difference – regardless of student gender, intake or other background characteristics! (see: Rowe, 2002b).

In summarizing key findings from a literature review of research related to boys’ achievement progress, motivation and participation at school, MacDonald et al. (1999, p. 17) draw a similar conclusion in the following terms:

The role of the teacher was particularly highlighted in influencing boys’ propensity to read as well as their choice of reading. Teachers’ attitudes more generally may diminish or increase the problem of underachievement. The role of the teacher is crucial in helping pupils develop a positive attitude to learning.

In one sense, there is nothing either ‘new’ or ‘surprising’ about such findings – whether they be at the student-level, class/teacher-level, or at the school-level. For example, results from a national Australian survey of community views of What makes an effective school?, McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans (1992) found that the most frequently mentioned factor was the quality of the teachers, constituting 65 per cent of all responses. What is ‘new’, is a growing uneasiness related to how little is known about ‘teacher quality’ from the students’ own perspectives throughout their progress in contemporary primary, secondary and tertiary education settings. Whereas there have been several attempts to investigate and measure the quality of students’ educational experiences at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels,

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6 That is, there was considerably greater variation in students’ achievement outcomes within-schools than between-schools.


attempts to document and synthesize students’ actual perceptions and experiences of the characteristics of ‘effective’ teachers and teaching in their own words are rare. Nonetheless, there are several notable exceptions that are currently in progress (Trent, 2000; Trent & Rowe, 2002; Slade & Trent, 2000). For example, based on comprehensive interviews with 600 boys drawn from a representative sample of South Australian secondary schools, Slade and Trent (2000) have provided compelling evidence for the salience of teacher quality in ‘shaping’ boys’ experiences of schooling in terms of their engagement, motivation and achievement progress (see Postscript 3, below).

Barriers to reform

There continues to be several barriers to reform that generate misinformed and misdirected rationalizations of students’ differential educational outcomes. Perhaps the most notable of these is a persistent tendency to place undue credence on various outmoded forms of biological and social determinism which assume that individual children – whether they be boys or girls – do poorly or well at school because of developmental differences, because they are ‘dumb’ or ‘smart’ or come from ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘advantaged’ backgrounds. Sadly, the longstanding and widespread acceptance of these assumptions (and their related expectations) at the teacher, school and system levels amount to little more than avoidance ‘cop-outs’ that have little substantive justification in the emerging research-based evidence (see Ainley et al., 2002; Crévola & Hill, 1998; Hill & Crévola, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1996, 2000; Hill & Rowe, 1996, 1998; Rowe, 2002; Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe & Rowe, 1999; Slavin, 1996; Willms, 2000). As Slavin and colleagues’ evaluations of the “Success for All” program among low SES schools in Baltimore and Philadelphia have shown, students who, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds, are taught by well-trained, strategically focussed, energetic and enthusiastic teachers, are fortunate indeed (see Slavin, 1996; Slavin et al., 1994, 1997). Alternatively, the negative effects of teachers’ low expectations of students’ success aspirations, and the associated explicit or implicit discouragement, are crushing. Such effects are poignantly illustrated by a recent Letter to the Editor of The Age newspaper in Melbourne, titled ‘Apathy starts with the teachers’ by Phobe Talbot (Talbot, 2002) who writes:

I am a first-year law student at Melbourne University. Why is it that I know of only three people (including myself) in the course who did the VCE at government schools? It is a sad indictment of our egalitarian society that teachers are so disillusioned they cannot inspire and support the aspirations of their students. I was laughed at by the Careers Counselor in Year nine when I said I wanted to study law. In the following four years I saw the dreams of many of my classmates slowly fade, as they were discouraged from believing in their ability to succeed. Our state education system must be rescued in the name of the principles on which our society is founded.

In contrast to mainstream, ideologically-driven opinion (e.g., Blackmore, 2000; Collins et al., 2000; Lingard et al., 1998; Slee et al., 1998; Teese, 2000), the empirical evidence suggests that the proportion of variation in students’ achievement progress due to differences in student background and ability (~ 9-15%) is considerably less important than variation associated with class/teacher membership (~ 30-60%). Rather, the key message to be gained from the school effectiveness research cited above, is that schools and especially teachers and their professional development do make a difference, and that it is not so much what students bring with them that really matters, but what they experience on a day-to-day basis in interaction with teachers and other students in classrooms. While it may be difficult to legislate quality teaching into existence, the fact that teachers and schools make a difference (as

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See: Beare (2001); Cumming and Owen (2001); Cuttance (2001); Darling-Hammond (2000); Darling-Hammond and Sykes (1999); Ingvarson (1998, 1999, 2001, 2002a,b); Istance (2001); Kennedy (2001); Ramsey (2000); Rowe (2002b); Rowe and Hill (1998); Willms (2000). More recent impetus for this mounting evidence was published in a series of articles in The Age newspaper, Melbourne (see Dunn, 2002; Milburn, 2002a,b,c). Highlighted in these reports was the positive impact on student achievement outcomes of quality teacher recruitment and strategic teacher professional development at two formerly low-performing Victorian secondary schools: Frankston High School and Korumburra Secondary College.
summarized above) should provide impetus and encouragement to those concerned with the crucial issues of educational effectiveness to at least invest in quality teacher recruitment, initial training, and on-going professional development.\footnote{In their longitudinal study, Hill et al. (1996a) showed strong direct effects (>0.4 standard deviations) of teacher participation in literacy in-service, professional development programs on students’ progress in literacy. By any criterion, these are large effects.}

Another barrier to reform is the persistent tendency for National and Statewide curricula to treat learning as continuous and cumulative rather than recognizing the different interests and teaming needs of students—especially during the ‘middle’ years of schooling (i.e., Years 5-10)—for both girls and boys. In this regard, MacDonald et al. (1999) argue: “Too many strategies are put in place based on untested assumptions about what boys think, do and feel” (p. 17). This has led to a plethora of popular literature—replete with lists of largely untested intervention techniques for dealing with the claimed educational interests and needs of boys (eg., Alloway & Gilbert, 1997a,b; Frater, 1997). Whereas some of these techniques may be helpful, their evidential status in terms of ‘effect’ is often little more than aspirational.

Clearly, research into educational effectiveness, whether it be evidence-based or case-study-based cannot be reduced to simple ‘blueprints’ or ‘recipes’ for improvement such as ‘check-lists’ of strategies for enhancing the achievement progress of boys or girls, nor those related to the provision of frameworks for the development of students’ attitudes, values (Pascoe, 2002). Nevertheless, there are some powerful messages for policy-makers, school administrators and teachers seeking dramatic improvements in learning outcomes for both boys and girls.

Foremost among those messages is that there are strong empirical grounds for believing that schools and teachers can and do make a difference and that consistent high-quality teaching, supported by on-going teacher professional development, can and does deliver dramatic improvements in student learning (Beare, 2001; Clay, 2001; Crévola & Hill, 1998; Cuttance, 2001; Ingvarson, 1998; Rowe, 1997; Rowe & Hill, 1998; Rowe & Rowe, 1999, 2000b,c,d; Rowe, Rowe & Pollard, 2001, 2002). Indeed, the key message from Richard Fletcher (Director of the Men and Boys Program, Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle) is: “We are after good teaching that builds resilience and purpose” (Fletcher, 2000, p. 2).

Another important message relates to the power of information about educational effectiveness as a catalyst for improvement and reform. All too frequently, systems, schools and teachers have lacked credible information regarding the magnitude of their relative contributions to performance and effectiveness. Fortunately, this is changing (see Hill, 1995, 1998). The trend now is towards the development of indicator systems that facilitate benchmarking of performance against external standards or reference points (eg., ACT, 2000b; Hill & Crévola, 1999; Forster, Masters, & Rowe, 2001; Rowe, 2001, 2001 October; Rowe & Lievesley, 2002; Tymms, 1999; Victoria, 1999). At this stage, however, most of this effort is focused on the measurement of students’ achievements rather than on identifying sources of variation and estimating the magnitudes of key factors that explain variation. Indeed, the evidence from systems that have put in place indicator systems and more especially those that have begun to collect and use measures to explain variation in students’ measured outcomes, is that such information is a powerful stimulant to strategic policy and practice interventions that lead to improvement (Coe & Visscher, 2002; Rowe & Lievesley, 2002; Rowe, Turner & Lane, 2002).

Sadly, little use of ‘value-added’ measures of educational effectiveness occurs outside research projects, and there is notable reluctance by some within the profession to countenance any systematic collection of comprehensive data on student achievement and factors that affect it. Nevertheless, with increasing recognition of the power of information to motivate and shape improvement efforts, this situation is changing rapidly (see: Rowe, 2001a,b, Tymms, 1999).

A further barrier to reform relates to a key reason why so many improvement initiatives in education fail to live up to initial expectations. Hill (1995, 1998) observes that most reforms in education are directed at the preconditions for learning rather than at influencing teaching and learning behaviors per se. For example, many schools see the ‘middle years problem’ of

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ACER & RCH
schooling, or the ‘education of boys’ as a structural one, leading to the establishment of middle schools, P-12 colleges, special transition programs, and single-sex classes/schools (Daly, 1996; Rowe, 2000c,f, 2002b). With the possible exception of the differential effects of specific gender/class/school groupings (see Figure 1), research-based evidence indicates that such structural interventions are preconditions, and their effects on learning per se are, at best, small to negligible.13 By contrast, effective improvement initiatives such as strategic teacher PD are concerned not just with establishing preconditions, but with making teaching and learning more effective (Crévola & Hill, 1998; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Hill et al., 1996a; Ingvarson, 1998; Rowe, 1997; Slavin, 1996). They typify attempts to make strong connections between knowledge about school and teacher effectiveness and the design of effective improvement programs and initiatives aimed at the enhancement of student achievement progress – especially in literacy and the related skills of verbal reasoning and written communication.

Similarly, while it may be desirable that schools have flexibility in the ways they utilize resources at the school level, including flexibility in the use of staffing resources, improvements in student learning is not a guaranteed outcome of providing such flexibility. This will only occur if the preconditions for learning (i.e., quality teachers and their on-going PD) are then used to change the ways in which students are taught and learn in and outside the classroom. Many reforms stop short of changing what happens beyond the classroom door and thus fail to deliver improved teaching and learning outcomes for teachers and students, respectively. Rather, real reform in improving outcomes for both boys and girls calls for substantial change in teaching and learning strategies, but unless there is total commitment of all staff to new ways of working, reform efforts soon falter.

What matters most? Certainly NOT the ‘pimple’ of gender differences, but the ‘pumpkin’ of quality teaching and learning, supported by strategic teacher professional development! In this context, the present authors are encouraged by, and strongly endorse, the announced initiatives by Dr Brendan Nelson, the Australian Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training,14 namely: (a) a Teachers for the 21st Century initiative – focused on high quality teaching standards supported by teacher professional development programs; (b) a Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, and (c) a “…strategy to focus on equipping teachers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities, and with other learning difficulties

12 Understandings are emerging from the research evidence suggesting that co-educational settings are limited in their capacity to accommodate the large differences in cognitive, social and developmental growth rates of girls and boys – especially between the ages of 12 and 16 (see references cited in footnote 4). Despite some strong opinions to the contrary (e.g., Robinson & Smithers, 1999), this evidence suggests that during these key adolescent years, single-sex settings better accommodate the specific developmental needs and interests of students (Rowe, 2000g; Watterston et al., 2000). However, it is vital that this evidence is placed in perspective. As noted above, if it is over-interpreted we miss seeing where the major effects lie. That is, the magnitude of effects due to specific gender-based groupings for schooling pale into insignificance compared with the effects of quality teaching and learning experiences in the classroom that account for up to 59% of the residual variance in students’ achievement outcomes – regardless of any structural preconditions for learning that might be imposed, including the establishment of specific gender/class/school groupings of students. In other words, teachers make the difference, not the gender composition of classes or schools!

13 A key reason for the “small to negligible” effects of ‘structural’ interventions is they are based on the fallacious assumption that schools and their administrative arrangements for teaching and learning are independent of the stakeholders they serve (i.e., teachers, students and parent community). The fact that this is not the case requires emphasis – reflecting a failure to understand operationally the fundamental distinction between structure (e.g., single-sex schooling) and function (teaching and learning). Schools and their ‘structural’ arrangements are only as effective as the those responsible for making them work (school leaders and teachers) – in cooperation with those for whom they are obligated to provide a professional service (students and parents).

14 See Nelson (2002) – a Media Release issued from the Minister’s Office on April 4 2002, and on the same date announced at the National Meeting of Professional Educators, Canberra. Essentially, the initiatives announced by the Minister focus on “…a national framework for quality teaching supported by teacher professional development”.

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such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorders", via the funding of "...projects at the national and State levels in both the early and middle years of schooling”. Nelson (2002) concludes:

In terms of improving educational outcomes for our children there is no higher priority than ensuring that we have quality teachers. A nationally agreed framework on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism is a crucial step in this direction.

For the sake of this nation’s social and economic future (or indeed that of any nation), the enduring hope is that such laudable political ‘rhetoric’ will be evident in ‘reality’.

Postscript 1: Suggested strategies for supporting the learning needs of boys

The fact that teacher-factors have strong positive effects on students’ experiences of schooling, including their attitudes, behaviors and achievement outcomes, is of vital importance with profound implications – for the education of both boys and girls. At the very basis of the notion of educational effectiveness, operational literacy, verbal reasoning and written communication skills are crucial, and need to be emphasized as keys to improving the achievements and experiences of boys throughout their primary and secondary schooling. To this end, the present writer concurs with MacDonald et al. (1999, pp. 18-19) in outlining the following as being effective strategies that support the learning needs of boys:

- Focus on support for literacy across the curriculum, and especially PD for teachers;
- Early diagnosis and intervention for those ‘at-risk’ of literacy underachievement;
- Highly structured instruction and lessons, with an emphasis on challenge and frequent changes of activity;
- Greater emphasis on teacher-directed work in the classroom in preference to ‘group’ work;
- Clear objectives and detailed but simple instructions; provide explicit criteria for presentation of work;
- Short-term, challenging tasks and targets with frequent changes of activity;
- Establishment of assessment and monitoring systems designed to identify underachievement in key skills across the curriculum, as well as in individual subjects;
- Regular personal interviews for the purposes of target-setting;
- Positive reinforcement: immediate and credible awards for quality work, increased effort and/or improved behavior;
- Providing opportunities for extra tuition/revision;
- Planned program of differentiated personal and social development; and
- Meaningful work experience placement aimed at informing students about changing roles in adult and working life.

Postscript 2: Teaching strategies that ‘work’ for both boys and girls

From the research evidence on teaching practice, there are three major principles that ‘work’ for both girls and boys:

1. Focus on support for literacy across the curriculum, remembering that girls typically respond to the personal, whereas boys are more likely to respond to the physical;
2. Provide frequent changes in structured activity; verbal for girls, visual for boys;
3. Boys respond positively to structured challenges and encouragement, while girls respond positively to encouragement and popularity.
Postscript 3: What students (both males and females) nominate as key characteristics of ‘effective teachers’

Evidence cited in the recent NSW Report of the Review of Teacher Education (Ramsey, 2000, p. 12) indicates that students want their teachers to:

- Know and understand their subject(s);
- Treat each student as an individual;
- Make learning the core of what happens in the classroom; and
- Manage distractions that disrupt and prevent learning.

From the work of Rowe (2002, May), Slade and Trent (2000), students consistently report that ‘good’ teachers are those who:

- “Care about me and encourage me”;
- “Are enthusiastic about what they teach and want me share in their enjoyment of learning”;
- “Are fair”.

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