

## 12. Gender Equity in Schools

The issue of gender equity in schools has a long history and indeed deals with a wide breadth of influencing factors as well as resulting impacts. The contemporary focus of gender equity debates essentially grapple with three distinct yet wrongly linked issues; the male (and overall) teacher shortage, the literacy rates of some boys and absent fathers/single parent families. These have resulted in specific policy discussions such as the scope of the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill, scholarships for male teachers, the Boys' Lighthouse Program and a review of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Gender Equity Framework.

The AEU believes that many assertions being used to justify both male teacher scholarships and remedies for the underperformance of some boys' literacy levels, stem from misinterpretations and generalisations about role models, masculinity, parenting, 'feminised' industries and quality teaching.

Above all, the gender equity approach aims to promote educational settings that bring about a safe and challenging learning environment for all students, whilst acknowledging that gender (as a social construct) impacts in differing ways, the educational experiences/successes of students and teachers.

Inequity IS a reality for some students and some teachers, and is manifest in a variety of ways from sexist remarks, gender based harassment and promotional opportunities in the workplace to gender stereotypes, homophobia, constrained notions of 'how to be a boy or girl' and discriminatory levels of expectation placed on students, as a reflection of their backgrounds.

There is much research available that deals with both the underlying reasons why SOME boys are performing less well than in the past in the area of literacy, and equally as much research that addresses the complex underlying reasons for the current and continuing shortage of teachers (particularly males) in Australia. Currently the focus of public debate however, is not on these complexities, but on 'quick fix', stereotyped, and inherently discriminatory views of traditional sex roles and behaviour.

The AEU does have a strong stance on all these issues, and can be found within policy documents, The Australian Educator (and other union journal articles), on the internet and in some media releases.

The current challenges are:

- to inform members and thus the public about the underlying discrimination and sexism behind much of these debates;
- to provide members with quality information about all aspects of boys' schooling and of the teacher shortage;
- to ensure the Gender Equity Framework Review productively and intelligently addresses the gender issues currently in focus, without yielding to quick fix solutions or stereotyped notions of gender;
- to stop the misguided and wasteful use of funds on minimal male teacher scholarships, but to campaign for the re-direction of funding into targeting disadvantaged students and addressing the concerns of educators in a holistic way that WILL make teaching attractive and valued;
- to be involved with remedying and support concerns around absent parents in the lives of Australian children, without responsibility being laid predominantly on schools – as with so many other wider social problems.



## What Can I Do?

### Activism around Gender Equity

Getting active to challenge gender stereotypes and promoting equity in teaching, learning and working environments, is all about information dissemination – what educators do best!

The Australian Education Union Federal website now has a comprehensive set of resources for members around Boys Education and Male Teacher debates. Go to <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/> 'What's New' section and you will be directed to the newest editions on the **Women's Focus** page – for research articles, journal pieces, newspaper opinion pieces and comprehensive academic studies. The resources cover boys' literacy rates, the 'feminisation' of the profession, notions of masculinity, quality teaching and achieving quality learning outcomes.

Because the arguments around gender equity necessarily deal with several complex issues being grappled with, and especially rely much more heavily on research so broad in scope, this does not easily translate into neat media quotes.

Therefore, combating the misinformation and outrageous comments more recently circulating about male teacher scholarships and boys' literacy rates, needs to be more about the **promotion of quality information**, rather than **repeating gender stereotypes and unhelpful generalisations**.

The AEU encourages members to view the resources available on the web and to challenge these stereotypes and half-truths whenever the opportunity arises.

**READ** – Your union will inevitably have a raft of information and facts sheets, or journal articles on issues of gender – your women's officer, women's contact or workplace contact may be the person to ask where to find this information.

Although time is precious, updating your knowledge in key educational debates is just as much professional as it is activist. Your union may also run Gender Equity TRAINING that would also provide a greater basis for action within your workplace to ensure equity IS at the forefront of decision makers' and educators' minds. Again, talk to you union rep or other contacts to find out what training is offered, and go along with a work colleague or ten!

**TALK** – Once the complexities of the Gender Equity debates make sense to you, tell others about the resources available and expose the arguments that are silenced by the media. The more knowledge school councils/staff meeting debates are based on around the issue of boys' education and/or male teachers, the better the outcomes for students. Union members have the ability to support each other in these debates and achieve more comprehensive strategies to deal with gender (or otherwise) challenges.

**WRITE** – Again, though it's the oldest tactic in politics, writing to you local Member of Parliament (State/Territory or Federal), or writing letters to the editor and local paper stories can make a huge difference to public opinion, particularly of decision makers. If 'voters' don't hear the opposition to politicians' 'bright ideas' in education they will accept them. Similarly, if MPs (particularly the Opposition parties) also think no one opposes Government policy, they are more likely to support them.

Letters and articles could challenge assumptions about how boys and girls should behave, should learn; why teachers shouldn't be asked to be substitute parents; the real reasons why teaching isn't attractive (pay, status, conditions); factors that impact students learning far more than being a boy – ethnicity, socio-economic status, aboriginality; or how quality learning are actually best facilitated when schools are well resourced, class sizes are small, and teachers have adequate preparation time and professional development, and are valued and rewarded for their work.

