



GENDER BLIND

Good teaching is not about gender. Catherine Davis reports.

It's well known that male school teachers are a rare breed—especially in the primary school classroom. It is also well known that men make up the majority of senior management positions in schools and education departments. From a gender-equity perspective, none of this is ideal.

Much of this has its beginnings in the history and tradition of classroom teaching that saw it as 'women's work'. But the profound problems facing the profession today—the failure to attract the next generation of teachers, the impending retirement of the majority of the teaching workforce, plus low

salaries and heavier, more complex workloads—have little to do with the predominance of women.

The solution to the critical issues facing school teaching is an industrial one. It is about significantly increasing teacher salaries, recognising and remunerating valued classroom experience, and properly supporting teachers inside and outside the classroom, during and after initial training.

Not the answer

The idea that having more male teachers will help solve the teaching crisis—and fix the failure of some

boys to thrive in education—has become popular currency. The Federal Government's education minister Brendan Nelson, for example, has announced that he is looking into changing the Sex Discrimination Act to increase the number of male trainee teachers.

Nelson can expect strong opposition on this from the AEU—as well as others, including, it seems, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

In a recent decision, HREOC refused to grant an exemption to the Catholic Education Office to offer university study scholarships for male high school students to become primary school teachers.

The HREOC decision is an important rebuttal of the argument that there's something wrong with the 'feminised' teaching profession that can only be fixed by the recruitment

providing boys with male role models.

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

The HREOC decision also did not accept that males needed additional financial incentive to become teachers. "A number of the submissions opposing the grant of the exemption pointed to what was said to be a lack of evidence showing that financial hardship is the barrier preventing a higher number of males from enrolling in primary teacher training."

Therefore HREOC ruled "that the granting of that application would be

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ATAGLANCE

■ The description of the teaching profession as 'feminised' is misleading

■ The predominance of female class teachers is not a problem

■ The crisis facing the teaching profession can only be answered by industrial solutions—better salaries, improved class sizes and workload

of more male teachers through lucrative scholarships.

According to the HREOC summary decision, the Catholic Education Office stated that "the underlying goal of the exemption application was to increase the number of male primary school teachers so that boys have male role models.

"It was further suggested by the Catholic Education Office that having access to male role models will help improve the 'substantive equality of boys and girls in primary schools.'"

HREOC was doubtful, however, that such strategies would actually achieve the desired outcome of

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

A misleading description It needs to be understood that describing school teaching as a 'feminised' profession is incorrect—or misleading at best.

The AEU's 2000 submission into the inquiry into the education of boys stated: "the use of the word 'feminisation' of the teaching profession can be misleading.

MODEL NOT GENDER

Excellent teaching style is not dictated by gender. Rather, it is made up of certain attitudes and abilities and includes the following:

- understanding of gender construction and its impact on students and teachers
- actively and democratically involving students in their own learning
- providing for a range of learning styles
- being explicit about the outcomes they are working towards, and the criteria they will apply for assessment
- confronting dominating, disruptive and harassing behaviour
- ensuring all students can take an active part in class discussions, express feelings and take risks without fear of being considered to be 'wrong'
- encouraging students to compete against themselves rather than against others
- allow students to have some control over the pace and direction of their learning
- encouraging students to support each other in their learning

Research has found that the sex of the role model is less important than the modelled behaviour.

AEU BOYS IN EDUCATION SUBMISSION 2000, P25.

Certainly the majority of the workers in the system are female and the percentage is growing. Women, however, are under-represented in the positions of management in the schools and systems.

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THE NUMBERS

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from 2002 show that 21.3 per cent of primary school teachers are male. In secondary schools, 54.1 per cent of teaching staff are male—a decline of about five per cent over 10 years.

According to Commonwealth figures, the number of males enrolled in education studies from 1997 to 2002 dropped from 26.03 per cent to 25.8 per cent. As a percentage of all enrolled students—in all fields and levels—men in education accounted for 2.9 per cent of all student numbers in 1997, as opposed to 2.5 per cent in 2002. Men in education accounted for 6.4 per cent of male students in 1997, and 5.7 per cent in 2002.

“The fact that women have always been under-represented in areas of senior management means that they have had little influence and control over policy directions, the informal and formal curriculum, the allocation

the status of the profession has fallen to the extent that men have little interest in joining it.

“Women have fought hard against teaching being devalued,” she says. “This whole [feminisation] debate is buying into that process of devaluation and continuing to blame women for the fact that a profession they have largely held together is seen to be falling apart because there’s no men.”

of resources and the appointment and promotion of staff. With women making only very slow inroads into positions of senior management, and in some cases no movement, the education system remains in the control of men.”

And certainly, women teachers themselves are part of the overall teacher shortage, and in particular are not overly represented in shortage areas like the maths and physical sciences.

Critics who want to blame women for the problems in the teaching profession have also taken up the ‘feminisation’ tag.

According to Janet Smith, a lecturer in social and environmental education with the University of Canberra, the word ‘feminisation’ is often used pejoratively—implying that the trend is a worrying one that needs to be reversed. Smith, who is writing a thesis on men in primary education, says that, while low status and pay contribute to teaching being unattractive to men, the main barrier is that the profession is regarded by society as women’s work.

For Alison Xamon, women’s officer for the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia, there is an “ongoing devaluation of anything that is seen to be women’s work”.

“It’s not the fault of women that

Role models

The AEU believes that “the preponderance of male role models throughout the media, business and society is another factor to consider in rebutting any statements of a lack of influence by males on boys in schools ...Dominant masculinity saturates the world of boys—and girls.”

Tim Delany, senior project officer with the Victorian state government’s gender education unit, says expecting male teachers to come into schools as role models has a problem: what if they don’t have the professional development, skills and training to engage boys in issues of gender, and reinforce undesirable notions of dominant masculinity?

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

According to author Chris Mclean, “boys are also deeply affected by the collective pressures of masculine



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teachers mirror more accurately the society in which they operate—in terms of gender, class and ethnicity—so much the better. But teaching ability must remain the primary consideration."

According to Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, a senior lecturer in the faculty of health and behavioural sciences at Deakin University, and co-author with Murdoch University's Wayne

culture but left to themselves they are unlikely to identify it as the source of their problems... Unfortunately, much of the current men's movement has responded to this situation by identifying women as the problem, rather than joining with women in challenging the gender system which impacts so negatively on both boys and girls in different ways."

It is vital that adult men play an important part, says Mclean. "This assertion is not based on some belief that 'boys need men' in ways that women cannot fulfil. Rather, I believe it is unrealistic to expect boys to challenge the dominant culture of masculinity, if adult men are not challenging it themselves. This has nothing to do with 'role modelling'.

Ability is the issue
The idea of increasing the number of male teachers in order to improve the status of teaching is misguided and discriminatory.

In its submission to the National Inquiry into the Status of Teachers 1997, the AEU said: "unfortunately the media and some politicians have focused on a narrow argument that increasing the number of male teachers will improve status. Previous experience shows that will not ensure that the pattern of gender segregation within the industry is altered, or that the status of the profession will be changed.

"For example, from 1969 through the 1970s in New South Wales and Queensland, teaching scholarships were distributed on a preferential basis to male students in order to increase men's participation rates within public education. What occurred, however, was a loss of these male graduates over time to other more lucrative positions elsewhere."

The inquiry findings strongly concurred, stating that "the profession should be attempting to attract the best and most suitable people into the profession, regardless of gender. If

W The AEU policy on Gender Equity is at:
www.aeufederal.org.au/women/index2.html#BIE

Martino of *Boys Stuff* and *So What's a Boy*, research shows that students are concerned about the quality of a teacher, not the gender. Yet views pointing to this are ignored, she says.

"Students want firmness in terms of negotiating boundaries, they want friendliness, they want teachers who are realistic about life, study and students' lives," says Pallotta-Chiarolli.

"They admire teachers who are informed about the diversity of their family backgrounds, about what's out there, who don't just make assumptions about young people, but ask questions; teachers who are honest, who will talk about structures and inequities, who will actually address why things are the way they are," she says.

"And it doesn't matter to them what gender they are." ■

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