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Gender Equity

*at work in
secondary
schools*



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New South Wales Department of Education and Training
Student Services and Equity Programs

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SCIS 102 84 60

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SINCE gender issues can both help and hinder the behaviour, learning and success of boys and girls at school, it is important that school communities take gender issues seriously.

Introduction



This document shows schools doing just that. The first part outlines some of the issues of gender in education.

The second part contains outlines of nine common starting points used by secondary schools to start work on gender issues with staff, students and parents.

All the schools mentioned have built on the work outlined here and continue to investigate and challenge the myths and realities of gender issues in school communities.

Gender and success for boys and girls at school

Gender has a lot more to do with success at school than many teachers, parents and students think.

Years before they start school, children develop ideas about how boys and girls should behave. Their ideas about gender are reflected in their decisions about toys, play and relationships with other boys and girls.

By the time they reach secondary school, those pre-school ideas have settled into beliefs and patterns of 'appropriate' behaviours that many of the girls and boys will expect from themselves and other men, women and children for the rest of their lives.

The Australian research report *Gender and School Education* provides detail about how gender is working in school communities. It shows that common beliefs are having some less than helpful results. For example views about gender:

- push too many boys to turn their backs on reading, the humanities and the arts
- encourage too many girls to under-play their talents in mathematics, science and technology
- result in too many girl/girl, girl/boy and boy/boy relationships becoming constrained or dysfunctional.

The research also shows that in both direct and indirect ways the rules, organisation, climate, policies and practices of schools often support the gender rules that have such negative impacts on the lives of many boys and girls.

Faced with such evidence, schools must take action to counteract the limiting impacts of gender in the education of girls and boys.

Taking action to counteract the limiting impacts of gender in schools is about giving real freedom of choice to boys and girls. It targets outdated ideas that set unnecessary limits on what boys or girls should or should not do. It also challenges sanctions such as ridicule, harassment, homophobia and violence that are dealt out against those whose behaviours challenge or ignore the boundaries set up by others.

Boys and girls at school

Participation and performance data does not support the generalisation that 'all girls' do better than 'all boys' at school.

The data shows that:

- some boys and some girls do well in all subjects they study
- some girls and some boys do well in some subjects but not so well in others
- some girls outperform most boys and other girls
- some boys outperform most girls and other boys
- some girls and boys under – achieve at school.

Research reveals that a range of other influences have more impact than sex on how well girls and boys do at school:

- personal study habits
- Aboriginality
- ethnicity
- geographic locality
- socio economic status.

Ideas about gender can convince some students that being a girl or being a boy means that they can't or shouldn't succeed in some subjects or at anything at school. Those ideas should be challenged.

Success comes as a response to the complex interplay of personal, family, community, school, peer group and social influences on an individual – not just because they are a girl or a boy.



Taking action on gender issues is not achieved by narrow-focused and isolated strategies. Nor does it bring instant relief from complex concerns or educational under-achievement.

Research does show, however, that a comprehensive whole-school approach to taking action on gender issues can bring results over time. It requires staff to take time to find out if their personal explanations for student behaviours match the experience of students. It demands that the complex and often subtle influences of gender issues in education are acknowledged and allowed to inform other more familiar approaches to tackling difficult issues.

For example, many schools tackle concerns about bullying by implementing curriculum and playground management strategies focusing on inappropriate behaviours. The inclusion of gender perspectives would complement such strategies by asking boys and girls to become 'gender smart', to look below the surface of the behaviours to see the gender rules beneath. This investigation may lead to the realisation that getting rid of bullying requires both boys and girls to challenge peer group beliefs that boys prove they are 'tough guys' or girls prove they are 'top of the heap' through intimidating and bullying others.

When action is taken to counteract the limiting impacts of gender in a school community, (that means amongst students, staff and parents), boys and girls can follow their individual interests, strengths and talents without concerns about harassment or ridicule. They can develop respectful relationships that enable them to respond appropriately to different people and in different contexts. Diversity is welcomed not feared.

Taking action to counteract the limiting impacts of gender also has a wider impact beyond the lives of individuals, that of promoting a society in which personal preferences rather than sex and gender determine the boundaries of behaviour.

Tackling gender issues and bringing long-term change



Being able to recognise and challenge biased or limiting messages about gender that come from home, school, the media, popular culture and peer groups is one of the most powerful and long lasting skills that schools can teach boys and girls.

Applying these skills can lead girls and boys to alternative action.

Some girls may:

- study subjects more frequently studied by boys
- take up more sports
- become expert travellers in cyberspace.

Some boys may:

- admit to reading for pleasure
- get involved in student leadership or community service activities at school
- speak more openly of their personal fears and concerns.

When girls and boys start behaving 'differently', it is highly likely that other boys, girls or adults will react.

Since reactions can be strong, even violent, it is important that parents, teachers and friends give girls and boys ongoing support for their decisions and 'new ways.'

Adults also need to be prepared for girls and boys to focus their new skills beyond themselves. For example, to examine and point out the inconsistencies of beliefs and behaviours in others – particularly their teachers, parents or community leaders.

Understanding the basics – common early issues

Confusion between sex and gender

For many people, the word 'gender' is a polite way of talking about being male or female. Such politeness confuses the understanding of gender.

Put simply, we are born male or female and most of us remain that way for life. That is our sex.

The label given to our gender, masculine or feminine, also usually stays the same throughout life. But, there is not a 'one and only right way' to be masculine or feminine.

The masculinity or femininity of individuals is as different as there are individual men and women — often similar to others of their sex, but never exactly the same. Our masculinity or femininity develops, shifts and changes over the span of our lifetimes.

In summary, sex and gender differ in that:

- sex is given at birth, we are male or female
- gender labels are determined by our sex, we are masculine or feminine
- gender in action is a lifetime development of accepting, rejecting or adapting our own and other people's beliefs, behaviours and expectations into our personal way of being masculine or feminine.

Debate about the influences of nature and nurture on the emerging gender of boys and girls

Some people believe that genetics and biochemistry determine 'natural' ways for boys and girls to behave. Testosterone, oestrogen, right-brain, left-brain — boys will be boys and girls will be girls, they can't help themselves.

Other people suggest that there are no 'natural' ways. The behaviours of boys and girls are responses to messages they receive from peers, families, communities and the media. Their behaviours focus on gaining them social acceptance and approval.

As in other areas of education where the nature versus nurture debate has raged, the truth is likely to be a subtle interplay between biological and social factors.

Schools can do little to affect the biochemistry of students. Experience does show, however, that schools can exert strong influence on the social behaviours of young people.

Girls, boys and study

Some commentators suggest that more girls than boys do better at school today because the curriculum gives them an unfair advantage.

A recent research study by Kamperos (2000) looked at matriculation results since 1854, (girls were first allowed to take the exam in 1884).

It reveals that even in the nineteenth century curriculum, which was set up originally for boys alone, girls as a group performed better than boys in the exams.

One gender based explanation suggested for these performance differences is that:

- many girls think it is important, and consequently devote adequate time to study at school and at home;

on the other hand,

- many boys have a casual disregard for study – some disrupt rather than participate positively in class and devote more time to other activities, e.g. sport, computing, 'hanging out with mates', than to studying at home.

From this perspective, it's not sex, nor bias in the curriculum that leads to success - it is application. Those students, boys and girls, who put in the time, are usually successful. Student results support this idea.



The language of gender equity

A consistent criticism of gender equity programs is that too many buzz-words make understanding the issues difficult for the uninitiated.

To be fair, gender equity is not alone in the specialised use of language. Teacher-talk and discussions in the wider community abound with specialised words, phrases and concepts.

It took time to learn the meaning of ‘text types’, ‘dice the onions’, ‘constant velocity joints’, ‘off-side’, ‘modulation’ and ‘downloading’. In the same way, ‘multiple masculinities and femininities’, ‘the social construction of gender’, ‘gender relations’, ‘gendered behaviours’ or ‘doing gender’ can quickly become clear.

The way ahead does not lie in simplifying the language, but in making unfamiliar terms more familiar. After all, it wasn’t so long ago that the common understanding of ‘hardware’ was building materials and tools, not computer equipment.

‘Boys’... ‘Girls’... complexity

We all experience our femininity or masculinity so differently that talking about the combined experience of ‘men’ or ‘women’ is almost impossible. It’s complex for boys and girls too.

Beware generalisations about ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ at school. They are made for easy reading and high impact, but they rarely give the full picture of what the data says.

Reliable studies describe what is happening for ‘most’, ‘a few’, ‘many’, ‘some’, or ‘a group of’ girls or boys. This is because they recognise that although the influences they are describing have an impact on some girls or boys, they do not apply to others. Girls and boys are not homogenous groups.

Maintaining a healthy and respectful gender climate in a school requires acceptance and careful attention to the diversity in experience of boys and girls.

Why ‘gender equity’?



Research of the mid-1990s showed that despite the successes for individuals of separate initiatives for girls and separate initiatives for boys, equality of opportunity for both sexes was not being realised at anything like the hoped-for pace.

For schools, the research demonstrated the need to integrate ‘non-sexist education’, ‘girls education’ and ‘boys education’ within a broader framework of gender equity.

Programs are still needed to broaden opportunities for girls and boys as well as to support students with particular learning and behaviour needs.

However, more action is needed in schools to promote gender equity. That is, getting to the point where being a boy or being a girl no longer limits experiences and opportunities.

Understanding the basics – special terms of gender research

Gendered behaviours

For centuries, societies, cultures, families, peer groups and individuals have labelled some behaviours as things men do (masculine) and others as things women do (feminine). This social process is how behaviours become gendered.

For example, many people consider house cleaning to be feminine behaviour. In the same way, lawn mowing is said to be masculine behaviour.

Behaviours often maintain their gendered history long after the reality changes. For example, many men clean their homes and lots of women are keen gardeners who mow lawns.

Boys, girls, men and women learn from an early age that to avoid disapproval, embarrassment, ridicule or harassment they must stay within the boundaries of what is said to be appropriate for their sex.

The social construction of gender

In the 1950s a male athlete wearing a skin tight, fluoro-coloured outfit would certainly not have been considered 'masculine'. At the same time, a woman wearing a tailored pantsuit was thought to be pushing the limits of 'femininity'.

Without concern these days, many men wear bright clothing and many women wear jeans and trousers. These examples show how community ideas about acceptable behaviour change over time.

We all monitor the behaviour of others and contribute to constraining or broadening the boundaries of masculinity or femininity. Our monitoring can be as subtle as joking about 'girly' or 'macho' behaviours or as heavy-handed and ugly as homophobic violence.

Sometimes, the desire to fit in or the threat of rejection, ridicule or harassment persuades us to match our behaviours to the expectations of those around us.

At other times, we decide to behave in ways that feel right to us as individuals, however much others suggest that our behaviours do not match their perception of our gender.

This ongoing and evolving process involving internal and external elements is the social construction of gender.

Girls and boys and VET

The number of students participating in vocational education and training (VET) in the senior secondary has increased rapidly in the last decade.

From a gender perspective the good news is that girls and boys are participating in VET in relatively equal numbers.

Also, an increasing number of girls are choosing courses taken mostly by boys. Few boys, however, cross the gender boundary into courses taken mostly by girls.

Look at the list below. Can you pick which courses are taken by more boys and which by more girls?

- ▲ construction
- ❖ community services
- ▲ manufacturing
- ❖ health
- ▲ information technology
- ❖ tourism
- ▲ engineering
- ❖ hospitality
- ▲ transport

Even without detailed knowledge about VET, you probably correctly selected courses marked ▲ as those taken by more boys and those marked ❖ as those taken by more girls.

You may not agree with the reasons behind the choices, but your ability to identify them shows that old gender expectations still have strong influence on VET course selection for boys and girls.



Multiple masculinities and femininities

Australian society promotes many images of masculinity and femininity.

Crocodile Dundee, the Prime Minister, John Laws and Ian Roberts are some images of masculinity. Kylie Mynogue, Kathy Freeman, Margaret Whitlam and Bronwyn Bishop are images of femininity. Such images, as well as those within our families and communities, demonstrate multiple masculinities and femininities being lived in society.

On the personal level, men and women can behave in ways that others may label masculine or feminine. Sometimes we choose behaviours we think display our masculinity or femininity. More often, our choice of behaviours depends on how we are feeling, who we are with and where we are.

This blending of 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours in the lives of individuals demonstrates multiple masculinities and femininities being lived at the personal level.

'Doing' gender, masculinity or femininity

The behaviours that boys, girls, men and women choose from the range of masculine and feminine behaviours is the way they 'do' their gender — their version of masculinity or femininity.

What students say about the impact of gender



I: Who does most of the housework at home?

S: My mum. She does it all.

I: Is that fair, do you think?

S: Yeah, because my dad goes to work and gets the money.

I: Does your mum work?

S: Yeah, she works in a bank.

I = interviewer S = student

Many people find it hard to be the person they want to be because other people are not tolerant of those who are different.

(Year 10 girl)

I feel safe as far as physical harassment goes, but occasionally I feel depressed, unwanted and unliked due to my looks, abilities etc.

(Year 10 boy)

If guys aren't tough they suffer. Girls suffer too if they don't suck up to the guys. *(Year 9 girl)*

I've been called a girl all my life. I'm not. I'm not gay either. I'm just better at doing things that people expect only girls to do. And I'm hopeless at sport and fighting. *(Year 11 boy)*

To make things better we all have to share and leave other people alone to be themselves.

(Year 11 girl)¹

Getting beyond 'education for boys' and 'education for girls'

Under dramatic headlines like 'Boys, the new disadvantaged' or, 'Girls get nowhere when they leave school', media reports and commentators suggest that schools give either boys or girls unfair advantages over the other sex.

Behind this unhelpful idea of a competition between the sexes, lie valid concerns about the schooling of many boys and about the outcomes of schooling for many girls.

Concerns for boys like:

- why so many boys are highly motivated and excel in learning the skills of sports and cyberspace, but don't apply the same energies to learning at school
- why many boys can be caring and nurturing in private, but in public, particularly with peers, can ridicule, harass or physically assault others
- why so many boys feel that expressing their emotions or fears makes them less 'masculine'.

Concerns for girls like:

- why lots of girls continue to study arts and humanities subjects in preference to mathematics and physical sciences
- why being successful at high school doesn't translate into career opportunities, equal salaries and promotion in the workplace for girls
- why many girls avoid physical activities and sport at school.

Concerns for boys and girls like:

- why school for some is a happy place where learning is nurtured, while for others it is a place where learning is constantly interrupted by fear, harassment or violence
- why so many boys and girls attempt suicide
- why boys and girls from poorer families often have a harder road to success than those from wealthier families.

Confronted with even this short list of concerns it is obvious that both boys and girls need ongoing support if they are to get a firm foundation for life from their schooling.

The more important question becomes, not whether boys or girls are more advantaged or disadvantaged, but rather, why aren't all girls and boys achieving their educational and personal potentials?

An essential part of helping girls and boys in this comprehensive way is ensuring that gender equity is part of their day to day experience at school.

Gender reform

'If we are genuinely committed to gender reform we need to examine our underlying assumptions about schools and schooling, and ask what is it in our ideas and practices that contributes to the masculine culture of hardness, competition, the obsessions with strength and power, emotional distance, and boys' determination at all costs not to be female. We need to identify the costs of this culture to boys as well as girls.'¹²

'Even though girls are succeeding educationally, this is not translated into success in later life. Young women tend to find employment in a restricted range of occupations and have lower incomes compared to young men.'¹³



What would good gender equity practice for boys and girls look like in action?

Some things that are already seen today would remain:

- boys and girls who need it receive additional reading and learning support
- boys and girls who need it are involved in behaviour management programs
- boys and girls who need it attend support programs for underachieving or at-risk students
- policies and programs ensure the personal safety of students at school and quality time in class for learning by all students
- firm sanctions against inappropriate behaviours such as homophobia, bullying, harassment and violence.

However, good gender equity practice goes further. The differences would be seen in the ways that school policies, organisation and classroom teaching put gender reforms into practice.

- Boys and girls would be encouraged and supported to study subjects selected because of their personal talents and interests rather than just because they are subjects usually selected by boys or girls.
- Classroom activities would assist boys and girls to recognise that their choices, decisions and lives, and those of their friends and peers, need not be limited by outdated gender expectations.
- Boys and girls would feel free to establish respectful friendships with each other, confident that they would not be ridiculed or harassed by others.
- Study, sport, caring and community service activities would be part of school life for most boys and girls.
- Staff, students and parents would understand that if boys and girls are to change, then their male and female peers, their teachers and their families may have to give up some long-held expectations about the ways boys and girls behave.

Outdated ideas like, 'You're a boy, you can't....' or 'You're a girl, you should....' would be replaced by the advice to all boys and girls, 'Give it a go — follow your talents and interests.'

Gender equity - changes needed from both sexes



Commentators often like to talk as if gender issues are simple— women vs men, boys vs girls, good vs bad, victim vs tyrant.

In the real world, gender doesn't work in such simple ways. Each of us, woman, man, boy or girl both support and inhibit gender reforms.

Whether the focus of reform is on males or females, success requires change from both sexes.

Reforms for girls and women cannot be obtained without the participation and support of men and boys.

For example, getting more women in senior positions requires women who can do the job as well as men and other women who will give them the chance.

This means that reforms for men and boys cannot be obtained without the participation and support of girls and women.

For example, encouraging men to be more emotionally expressive and nurturing requires men who are prepared to change and women and girls who value these qualities in their male partners, friends and bosses.

Gender equity strategies at school can help to promote these reforms and to limit the negative impacts of gender on the learning, lives and relationships of boys and girls.

A whole-school approach to gender issues

A comprehensive, whole-school approach to addressing gender issues means involving all staff, administrative and teaching. It means involving all students, girls and boys. It means letting all parents know what is happening and getting as many of them as possible involved.

A comprehensive whole-school approach:

- examines the organisation, decision-making practices and policies of the school, faculty and key learning areas to identify the gender rules that are operating
- examines curriculum practices from program content, assessment and resource allocation through to the activities of teachers and students in the classroom
- looks beyond the classroom to examine interactions in the office, on the playground and on the sporting field.

A comprehensive whole-school approach brings awareness and understanding to all members of the school community so that boys and girls get consistent messages from staff, parents and other girls and boys. Those messages emphasise that behaviours and school subjects in themselves are neither masculine nor feminine, they are just options available equally to boys and girls if they so choose.

Initially the whole school may decide to:

- establish a gender committee
- introduce special gender days or a one-off gender program
- encourage individual teachers to work on gender issues in class with their students
- conduct professional development for interested staff members
- teach about gender in some key learning areas
- invite some parents to gender awareness workshops.

As separate strategies these activities cannot bring about comprehensive change — they are too easily overwhelmed by opposing messages from within and beyond the school.

A comprehensive whole school approach moves on from the successes of individual strategies such as these to build a consistent message.

Schools support gender boundaries as well as challenge them

Many schools focus most, if not all, of their gender equity strategies on learning activities for students.

Experience shows, however, that while classrooms can promote change, the behaviours of teachers, executive members, administration staff and other boys and girls at school can also significantly support or counteract change.

For example, consider strategies for teaching boys and girls about the need for respectful relations between the sexes.

The teaching program will be supported if outside of the classroom students observe respectful interactions between teachers and students and between teachers and other staff members.

The teaching program will be undermined if outside of the classroom students observe interactions between teachers and students and between teachers and other staff members that do not demonstrate respect and equality.

Schools send very strong, though often unintentional messages about what and who is valued in their communities, about what are acceptable behaviours and about the expectations they have of students, parents and staff.

Boys and girls are keen observers and interpreters of these messages.

Schools need to ensure that young people not only gain a theoretical understanding but also observe respectful relations in action while at school.



The message is that gender matters, but gender is not enough reason to stop boys and girls from following their personal interests, talents and strengths at school. It is not enough reason for boys and girls to be threatened, ridiculed or injured for following their personal interests, talents and strengths even if their behaviours are more often associated with the opposite sex rather than their own. Gender should not hinder the success of boys and girls at school.

Implementing a comprehensive whole school approach to gender issues often follows a four-stage process:

- establishing a starting point
- taking some tentative early steps
- developing, reviewing and keeping things moving
- evaluating effectiveness to ensure long-term change.

The remaining material in this booklet describes the starting points some schools have taken. It also provides ideas to confront the deeper gender issues and move towards greater freedoms and successes for girls and boys at school.

Collecting school data – don't forget the students



School data is an effective starting point for whole school approaches to dealing with gender issues.

One often-overlooked source of data is student perceptions.

Surveys of student opinion can reveal a very different picture of what is happening to that obtained from teachers, parents and caregivers.

Try this mini survey with students in your classes.

	G	B	Both
Gets most teacher time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is listened to by teachers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delivers messages.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Asks questions in class.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Completes work in class.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shares jobs in groups.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enjoys lessons.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does homework.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Collection and analysis of this data with students can generate lots of talk in class.

Teachers may find that the data conflicts with what they think is happening in their classrooms.

Locating the influences of gender in school communities



A planning framework can assist schools to cater more comprehensively for gender equity by directing attention to areas of school life that could be exerting a strong impact on the gender climate but whose influence may often be overlooked.

The focus areas and questions in *Boys and Girls at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996 – 2001*, provide one effective evaluation and planning framework.

Another way of looking at the influences of gender in all areas of school activity is represented by the planning diagram on the left.

Such planning frameworks assist schools to broaden the scope of their gender reform strategies. For example, with the target issue *How is success acknowledged in our school?* in mind, the planning diagram prompts the following questions:

School culture

Do the school choir, debating teams or drama group receive the same praise for success as the first grade footballers?

Faculty and KLA

Are boys and girls who opt for non-traditional subject choices supported or considered disruptions by staff?

The lesson

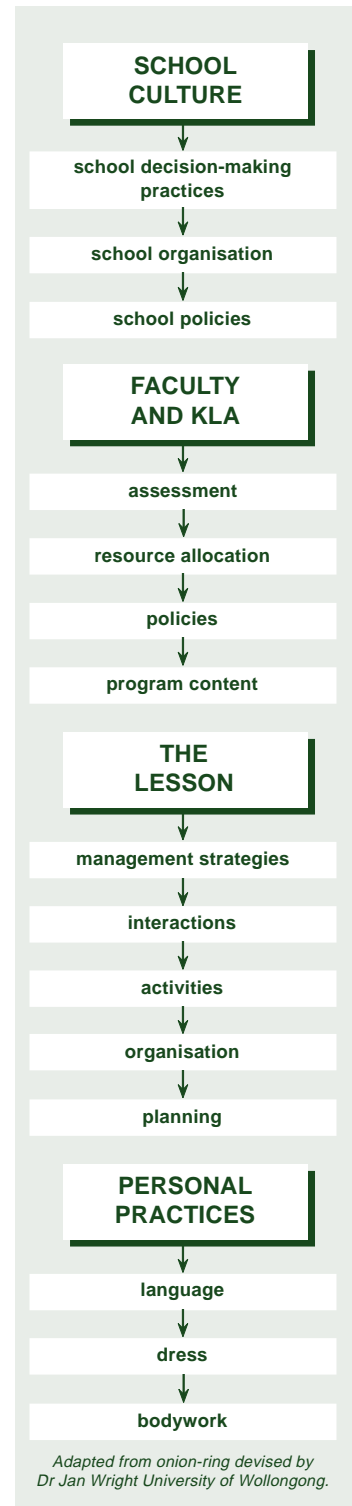
Are the successes of girls and boys acknowledged equally in class?

Personal practices

Do I praise girls who do well or do I just expect it from them?

Gender rules

Do peer groups and school community expect boys and girls to downplay or reject praise?





REFORMS in schools are often hindered by approaches that tackle only part of an issue rather than take on the issue in all its complexity. This tendency can lead to implementation of narrow focused initiatives that have only limited impacts.

In many schools gender reform starts in this way. For example, schools may invite guest speakers to address staff or students about gender issues, they may establish single-sex classes or performing arts groups to encourage greater participation by boys or girls or they may promote reforms by teaching units of work about gender issues in particular key learning areas, usually English or Human Society and Its Environment.

Informative as these strategies can be, they do little to change the way a school operates or the ways staff and students interact. Participating in special classes or initiatives may provide some peak experiences for young people, but the benefits are often eroded or overwhelmed by the disinterest, resistance or ridicule of peers or family who did not participate or who do not understand.

Nevertheless, many of the initiatives currently used by schools make good starting points when incorporated into a comprehensive strategy of gender reform that is taken up by the whole school.

The remainder of Part 2 outlines nine common starting points used by secondary schools to address gender issues with staff, students and parents. Each outline draws on school experience, research and literature:

- to suggest what may prompt schools to start with the identified concern to outline preliminary successes
- to show how understandings of gender can deepen the effectiveness of initiatives.

Schools at the forefront of gender reform suggest that embedding such strategies within a multi-focused, coordinated approach has a greater chance of bringing long-term changes to the operation of schools, and to what happens in staffrooms, classrooms and the playground.

2 **Starting points for gender equity in secondary schools**

T

Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:
Teaching and learning

Explicit teaching about gender

For many schools teaching about gender is stimulated by implementation of *Girls and Boys at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996 – 2001*.

Teaching about gender can also become a concern after evaluations of other curriculum or student welfare initiatives point in this direction.

For example, evaluation of initiatives designed to broaden the range of subjects boys and girls choose to study may indicate that only small numbers of boys and girls chose alternative options. Something stronger than the school's information and support blocked change. Gender issues can be that 'something'.

Whatever the stimulus, explicit teaching about gender attempts to expose the strong and often constraining influence that the desire to act 'properly' as a girl or boy can have on girls, boys, men and women.

Most commonly teaching about gender occurs within the key learning areas of *English, Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE)*, or *Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE)*.

Some schools develop and implement specific programs or units of work teaching about gender within the flexible curriculum in Year 7 or Year 8.

Successes

Through explicit teaching about gender, girls and boys learn how their ideas about gender are formed and influence their behaviours in their daily lives.

By becoming familiar with key concepts in gender reform, students are better able to make informed decisions and also to challenge inappropriate behaviours in others.

Explicit teaching sessions in a 'gender day' or gender education program conducted over a period of time, can effectively introduce boys and girls to the need to challenge outdated ideas of how to be masculine and feminine that inhibit their learning and success at school, as well as their life opportunities.

Teaching about gender at Casino HS

Background

The school became concerned that conflict was common in relationships between some boys, some girls and between some girls and boys.

The conflict ranged from provocative jibes and jokes, to exchange of insults, verbal confrontations and sometimes violence.

Staff were concerned that students seemed to have only a limited range of conflict resolution skills to take into adult life.

Strategies

- The Teacher-Coordinator Gender researched and developed the RESPECT program.
- RESPECT aims to: develop students' understanding of the construction of gender and how gender can influence decision making, choices and behaviour; broaden the range of skills students bring to developing relationships and resolving conflict.
- RESPECT is a 2-stage program in PDHPE in Years 7 and 8.
- Staff who conduct the program participated in a training program to ensure that they felt equipped to teach the course.

Improvements

- Year 7 evaluations show that students appreciated the new skills and understandings developed. (Year 8 was being implemented for the first time in 2000.)
- There has been a noticeable improvement in the quality of relationships at school.
- Teachers report fewer outbreaks of sex-based harassment in class and in the school yard.

Gender considerations

Discussions and learning experiences within such explicit programs also challenge boys and girls to examine their own behaviours and the impact of their behaviours on others.

Through explicit teaching about gender, boys and girls can move beyond what happens at school to consider the myths and realities of the changing roles of men and women in society, the workplace and the family. They can come to realise that both men and women can and do adopt characteristics that some people consider to be uncommon for their sex.

Such study moves beyond learning the concepts of gender reform to exposing the positive and negative impacts that concepts of gender can have on individuals and their relationships. It also reveals gender in action in classroom interactions, subject choices, career aspirations, self-concepts and in the life goals and outcomes of boys and girls.

Explicit teaching about gender can:

- give boys and girls opportunities to look at themselves, their families, their peers and their communities to identify how often gender ideas influence decision making and behaviours
- help boys and girls to see themselves as individuals with interests and potentials, not bound by inappropriate gender stereotypes
- give boys and girls tools to expose and challenge gender bias in media reports, advertising and popular culture that attempts to influence their decision making
- provide opportunities to discover how the boundaries of appropriate behaviours are maintained by males on other males, by females on other females, by males on females, by females on males.

An important goal of teaching about gender is assisting students to develop skills that enable them to critically assess messages they receive from families, communities, schools, media, popular culture and peer groups about how they should behave.

Explicit teaching about gender can also assist students to understand that girls and boys do not experience the influences of gender in the same way nor to the same extent.

For example, the research of Davy (1995)⁴ showed that the gap between achievements of students from wealthy families and those from poor families was greater than the much reported gap between the sexes.

Teaching about gender at Griffith HS

Background

The school appointed a supervisor of boys and a supervisor of girls who promote strategies to address gender issues across the school.

Staff were concerned for a small number of boys and girls whose narrow ideas about gender were limiting their success at school,

Strategies

- Students in Years 7 and 8 participate in a social skills program that also targets gender issues. The program deals with bullying and harassment, conflict resolution and communication skills.
- Staff identified 'at risk' students for participation in specific gender awareness activities with Year Advisers.
- Year Advisers worked with small groups of boys and girls to assist them to recognise how their ideas about the 'right way' to be a girl or boy were interfering with their learning at school.
- In addition to these specific gender strategies, some single sex classes were established in Years 9 and 10.
- Boys and girls were encouraged to take up Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in the senior years.
- VET was promoted among girls in Year 10 to obtain a better gender balance in courses.

Improvements

- Staff and students found the gender and social skills sessions valuable.
- Students who worked with Year Advisers became more aware of the impact of gender in their lives.
- Single sex classes had a positive effect on behaviour, but had limited impact on academic achievements.
- VET participation in Year 11 increased from 52 per cent the previous year to 75 per cent with a good balance of girls and boys.

T

Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:
Teaching and learning

Girls and boys as student leaders

These days schools offer a wide range of opportunities for student involvement. Structured activities such as peer support, peer mediation, peer tutoring, student representative councils as well as the traditional School Captain and Prefects systems are just the tip of the iceberg.

Fund raising activities, special initiatives focusing on particular issues like anti-racism and awareness raising competitions of all sorts further broaden opportunities for student participation, leadership and service.

Schools can become concerned that some girls and boys avoid participating in leadership and community service activities and therefore miss out on valuable learning experiences. They may also find that lots of girls are involved but not many boys, or vice versa.

For this reason, schools often implement strategies to encourage girls and boys to get involved.

Successes

In their attempts to encourage student involvement, many schools focus on getting students involved in one activity, such as the SRC or peer support programs.

Another common focus is bringing a balance between the sexes in their school captain and prefect teams and as members of the SRC and its executive.

Initiatives frequently achieve the desired results in the targeted activities. For example, increased numbers of students participating in peer support programs or greater balance in the number of boys and girls on the SRC or as captains and prefects.

Through specific training and with support from teachers, students come to understand that participation in leadership and community service activities is not a waste of time but an opportunity to develop important skills like:

- communication, including public speaking
- leadership
- empathy for the needs of others
- conflict resolution.

Girls and boys as student leaders at Evans HS

Background

Regular evaluation of our teaching and student welfare programs identify current and emerging needs of boys and girls at school.

One such concern was the number of boys in literacy and learning support programs.

In addition, teachers were concerned that many boys had a negative attitude towards reading.

Strategies

- A peer tutored reading program was considered to be a good way to promote reading as well as to provide opportunities for student leadership.
- Parallel reading support programs were devised for boys and girls Boys in Literacy Legends (BILL) and Girls in Literacy Legends (GILL).
- Underachieving readers in the junior school, girls and boys, were identified by support and mainstream teachers.
- Boys and girls in senior years who could act as peer tutors were identified.
- Selected students were trained in peer tutoring techniques and how to support the reading of younger students.
- Regular reading support sessions operated throughout the year during reading time. Senior boys acted as tutors for younger boys. Senior girls acted as tutors for younger girls.

Improvements

- The reading skills of all but two of the reluctant readers increased.
- The abilities of the two students who didn't increase remained static as did the results of a control group of students.
- Junior students came to enjoy the support of the seniors.
- Senior students mentioned the added confidence and self-esteem they derived from being a peer tutor.

Gender considerations

By participating in leadership and community service activities girls and boys can develop valuable skills that they can use in their personal, family, work and social lives as well as at school.

However, data from the *Gender and School Education* research shows that many more girls than boys participate in peer support, leadership and community service activities at school.⁵

From a gender perspective this data shows that student leadership initiatives are a really good context in which to promote gender reforms.

Gender aware strategies go beyond ensuring male-female balance in SRC representation and school prefects. They prompt schools to look at how they provide opportunities for all girls and boys to learn and practise leadership skills.

Gender aware student leadership strategies offer all girls and boys numerous opportunities in the classroom and beyond to:

- participate in learning teams as active participants — researcher, note taker, spokesperson, artist and sometimes as team leader
- maintain respectful relationships with both girls and boys
- use advanced skills that they have developed through personal talents and interests to assist the learning of other students
- develop skills in respectfully supporting others and being supported by others at learning and in personal matters.

An often-used strategy is to ask boys and girls why they avoid caring and community service activities. Such questions quickly expose unexpected gender expectations and bias in school communities towards certain activities, often games and sports.

One barrier to participation is that many boys believe that taking on leadership responsibilities and community service activities are feminine activities, things that girls do. And, if girls do them, then they are not masculine activities. They are not things ‘real boys’ should do or care about doing well. It is said that boys ‘do’ their leadership in sports, cadets and in the school yard.

By restricting their leadership opportunities to such narrow options, boys, and some girls, severely limit their chances for practising these skills. It also prevents them from learning and practising the complementary skills of supporting and nurturing others — skills that are essential to effective relationships and parenting.

Girls and boys as student leaders at Murwillumbah HS

Background

The Gender Equity Committee identified the importance of obtaining an accurate picture of students' attitudes about gender issues.

The school was also concerned that boys and girls be given opportunities to learn and demonstrate leadership skills.

Strategies

- Qualitative research (survey) using focus groups of students in Years 7-10 was selected as the way to collect attitudinal data.
- Members of the SRC were used as the first focus group.
- SRC leaders were trained by staff in how to co-lead the focus groups.
- The SRC leaders and teachers then co-led a mixed age focus group of SRC members.
- SRC members and staff co-led focus groups with Years 7-10 students.
- Information collected from the focus groups was collated and presented to the Gender Equity Committee.
- The research provided directions and starting points for further work in gender, but also in school organisation and discipline.

Improvements

- The focus groups provided some helpful insights into the ways students see the school operating.
- A very important finding was that although the school thought it was doing well at supporting all students, there was still an ongoing need to address some discipline and personal safety issues.
- Student leaders gained significant skills in leading groups and dealing with contentious issues.
- Students in focus groups had the opportunity to talk about the role of gender in their lives and in their schooling.

T

Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:
Teaching and learning

Boys and the performing arts

Research and media reports suggest that lots of boys feel confused and alienated by the mixed messages they receive about their 'role' in contemporary society.⁶

On the one hand, the need for a 'macho' image demands displays of bravado, self-assuredness and a carefree disregard for authority. On the other hand, allowing vulnerability to show or being emotionally expressive can lead to ridicule, harassment or violence. Sadly, some boys see no way out of their difficulties and seek release in high risk behaviours that can lead to serious injury and early death.

The performing arts are sometimes used to broaden the educational experiences and life-skills of boys.

Many schools extend their teaching resources by inviting male artists and performers from the local community to work with groups of boys. In this way, boys experience direction from committed and professional artists while observing men at work in the arts.

Successes

The performing arts can provide a powerful and safe setting for students to explore and express personal responses to difficult issues. In this setting boys, and girls, are freed to feel or behave in ways that they may self-censor from expression at other times. This experience can be transforming.

In a similar way, learning dance, drama and music skills gives boys alternative means of expressing or releasing ideas, emotions and feelings. These are skills that can be used in private as well as in public.

Interacting with teachers, artists and other boys in the safe setting of the arts also brings the understanding that other men and boys experience doubts and strong emotions. Boys realise they are not as alone or isolated as they might have thought.

Having participated in boys and the performing arts strategies many boys say that they no longer consider the arts the domain of girls, that they feel greater self-esteem and no longer feel as personally isolated.

Many boys enjoy the boost to self-esteem that they feel from the positive feedback after performing to peers and family.

Teachers and parents say they notice benefits in the changed attitudes and behaviours of boys in the classroom, the playground and at home.

Boys and the creative performing arts at Campbelltown HS

Background

Issues in the education of boys, including emotional and expressive needs, were issues of concern to staff and parents.

Staff were concerned that many boys limited their range of potential learning experiences by avoiding the creative and performing arts.

Strategies

- It was decided to establish a Boys Vocal Ensemble (BVE) to encourage participation of boys in performing arts.
- The BVE would also be used to demonstrate that boys can do well in the performing arts.
- The group was selected from across the broad spectrum of boys who attend the school.
- The group rehearsed regularly and performances were scheduled within formal school assemblies and performance days.
- The Boys Vocal Ensemble also received invitations to perform outside the school.
- The group was a success within and beyond the school.

Improvements

- Boys came to see that the performing arts are a good learning environment for boys.
- Boys developed musical and performance skills.
- Participating boys received boosts to self-esteem.
- The BVE challenged ideas in the school that the Arts were not for boys.
- Boys who sing and dance are now more likely to be admired than ridiculed.
- An increasing number of boys choose to study arts subjects.
- A Boys Dance Group is planned.

Gender considerations

A number of schools use performing arts strategies for boys, and girls, as a gender equity strategy. Often underachieving or at-risk students are identified within specific years, across the school or from a number of schools to participate in a performing arts project which has a gender spin.

There is no doubt that individuals can derive enormous pleasure and personal benefit from participating in such a performing arts strategy. However, the personal benefits of one-off strategies undertaken outside their usual setting can quickly be overwhelmed by counteracting forces when individuals return to their local school community.

To significantly advance gender reforms it is not enough for boys to have positive experiences that lead them to increased self-esteem and less negative attitudes to the performing arts.

Using the performing arts as an effective gender equity strategy gets students considering how gender issues influence the decisions and behaviours of the characters they play, the instruments and style of music they choose to play or the medium they choose in the visual arts.

For example, ideas about 'masculine territory' within the arts may lead many boys to choose to perform in boisterous, physical ways or to play guitar or drums in rock or jazz ensembles.

These are valid activities, however, a gender focus would encourage students to consider the reasons behind the choices.

Within drama programs, gender-focused activities give students chances to experiment with behaviours and ways of expressing themselves that they might feel too embarrassed, frightened or intimidated to try in other settings.

In the course of such a gender focused performing arts strategy boys, and girls too, can experience a wide range of performance skills and responses.

The success of such a gender-focused performing arts strategy can be enhanced by support from teachers within other parts of the curriculum.

In this way the positive changes in attitudes and behaviours of students in the arts strategy can stimulate and challenge other students to consider the gender rules at work in the school community.

Boys and the creative and performing arts at Toronto HS

Background

Past programs had been successful in encouraging girls to increase their participation in science and technology subjects.

Analysis of school data revealed a need to focus some additional attention on the learning needs of boys.

Strategies

- The school funded a Boys' Supervisor to complement the activities of the Girls' Supervisor.
- A boys' education team was formed to coordinate gender reform activities targeting boys.
- The team decided to focus its early attention on devising strategies within the Creative and Performing Arts. The strategies targeted increases in self-esteem and expanding the vision of masculine behaviours in the school to include arts.
- Boy Kulture, a boys only dance group, was formed to give boys opportunities to experience dance as an alternative means of expression.
- Boys from across the school were invited to join the dance group.
- Expanded opportunities to join in activities of the musical rock bands that had already been successful in the school enabled more boys to participate in performing arts activities.

Improvements

- Boy Kulture successfully performed in class and at school functions.
- Rock bands continue to be a popular success.
- The self-esteem of boys who participate in performing arts activities is given a real boost.
- The quality of social interactions in classrooms and the school yard between boys and between boys and girls are much improved.

T

Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:
Teaching and learning

Girls and physical activity

Concerns about girls and physical activity frequently arise from teacher observations of students in the school yard. Whereas most boys are up and active in many ways, most girls are sitting around the yard in groups talking or engaged in less active games.

These informal observations are supported by research in Australian schools revealing that between the ages of 14 – 17 many girls stop playing competitive sports and vigorous games.⁷

Schools respond to these concerns by developing strategies to encourage girls, and some boys, to include regular physical activity in their lifestyle.

Strategies promoting physical activity amongst girls can focus on: school organisation and procedures that limit the participation of girls, use of the school yard space, supervised activities at breaks and increasing the range of sports and non-competitive physical activities in the curriculum and within the life of school.

Successes

Through PDHPE programs, schools become aware that while many boys and girls remain involved in physical activities throughout their high school years, many do not.

Schools have promoted greater participation of girls in physical activities by:

- getting girls involved in assessing, and if necessary changing, school uniform codes so that they can wear shorts or tracksuits that allow their involvement without fear of boys glimpsing their underwear
- rostering and monitoring use of playground space, courts and fields so that girls have equal opportunities to use these areas for active play
- setting up and supervising physical activities for girls at lunchtime
- arranging teacher/student matches where both sides have a good balance of females and males
- ensuring that the successes of girls' sport teams receive similar acclaim to the successes of boys' teams
- broadening the range of sports available to girls to include non-traditional activities like soccer, touch football and basketball
- conducting an 'Active Girls Week' as an annual event which includes a variety of sports, games and recreational activities.

Girls and physical activity at Randwick Girls HS

Background

Staff observed that many girls were not physically active during recess times.

Many girls also seemed reluctant to participate in team sports either inter-school or in the sports programs at school.

PDHPE staff became concerned that many girls were opting out of physical activity at an early age.

Strategies

- PDHPE staff evaluated faculty programs and decided that more emphasis was needed on encouraging girls to include regular physical activities within their lifestyles.
- The evaluation showed that the range of options available to girls could be broadened away from the focus on traditional girls-only sports.
- PDHPE staff restructured their programs to promote physical activity as a lifetime pursuit for pleasure and wellbeing.
- The range of practical activities was expanded to include more traditionally 'male dominated' sports such as soccer, touch football and golf.
- The school arranged a combined athletics carnival with Randwick Boys HS to promote track and field events as options for girls.
- The carnival included some novelty events for staff and students to promote physical activities as fun.

Improvements

- PDHPE programs were restructured to better cater for the needs and interests of girls.
- More girls took up physical activities during recesses.
- The non-traditional games proved very popular.

Gender considerations

The success of strategies promoting the participation of girls in physical activities can be limited by outdated beliefs about what girls should or shouldn't do.

For example, girls can stop themselves from participating in activities that include running, throwing or kicking because they think these activity are too 'masculine' for their sex.

To free girls from such outdated gender ideas, strategies need to be developed to undermine gender based ideas such as:

- sport is for boys and men, not girls and women
- once a girl matures into a young woman, she should stop vigorous physical activity because it is 'un-lady like'
- sport and games are all about winning
- sport is only for those who have the skills to succeed, if you can't help the team win no-one wants you to play
- boys play the important games, girls play the games that no-one is interested in
- it's better for girls to play sport without boys around because the risks of embarrassment and ongoing harassment after the game are too high.

But changing ideas is not enough. Research has shown that for the participation of girls to increase, strategies also need to:

- provide opportunities for girls to develop and practise the skills needed for non-traditional sports and games
- assist girls, and boys, to consider why sports like cricket, football and basketball have higher status than games like softball, hockey and netball
- assist girls to find culturally, socially and personally appropriate ways of including physical activity within concepts of being feminine
- give lots of positive experiences in physical activities other than competitive sports and team games.

Many of the gender beliefs held by girls about physical activity are promoted by media reports and wider society. One way to expose these influences is to examine the gender balance in reporting of sports at school, in local newspapers and on TV.

Another focus is allowing for diversity. Some girls enjoy competing against other girls or against boys. Many girls prefer non-competitive activities that focus on fitness, enjoyment and social interaction — as do some boys.

Successful strategies that promote greater physical activity among girls, and boys, cater for this diversity through the curriculum and the wider life of the school community.

Girls and physical activity at Grantham HS

Background

Staff have been working to develop greater understanding of gender issues and increasing non-sexist teaching approaches.

From observations in the school yard and sport afternoons, teachers were concerned that lots of girls avoided physical activities.

Strategies

- A staff meeting was conducted on gender issues and ways to promote greater physical activity among girls.
- T&D for staff to equip them to: understand the role gender can play in education; implement non-sexist practices in teaching; act as credible models of masculinity and femininity; identify structural and organisational barriers to gender reforms in school life.
- The school implemented an 'Active Girls Project' which targeted barriers that limited girls' participation in physical activity.
- Games, sports and other activities that girls would like to play were identified.
- Active spaces were made available to girls and boys.
- Time was spent in PDHPE lessons discussing the health benefits of regular physical activity.
- Lunchtime sporting activities were set up and supervised by staff to encourage play by girls.
- A *Being a boy in the 90s* strategy encouraged alternative behaviours among boys in class and the playground.

Improvements

- Active spaces available to both girls and boys in the school yard.
- Greater understanding of the benefits of physical activity.
- Increased participation of some girls in physical activities at recesses.
- More girls participating in non-competitive fitness activities in house sports.

T Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area: **Teaching and learning**

Boys and literacy

In recent years, results from Basic Skills literacy tests in Year 3 and Year 5, as well as the English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) in Year 7 have revealed that many more girls than boys have learned what is needed to meet the literacy demands of the school curriculum.

In response to poorer than expected public test results, many schools evaluate their literacy development strategies. The evaluation can include analysis of classroom observations and assessment strategies by teachers. Such analysis often indicates that while lots of boys acquire substantial literacy skills, many boys do not.

Clearly something distracts some boys from developing the literacy skills required to achieve success at school.

Many schools respond to these concerns by implementing specific literacy development strategies for boys. These strategies may be offered to targeted groups of students or taken up by the English faculty, by other faculties, by interested teachers across faculties or as a whole school approach.

Successes of boys and literacy approaches

Initially some teachers may suggest that literacy development should be the responsibility of the English faculty. Many schools report, however, that greater improvements occur when an explicit focus on literacy development is adopted by teachers across all key learning areas.

A whole school 'boys and literacy' approach usually leads to improved basic skills results and public examination results.

Focusing on the literacy needs of boys leads many teachers to greater understanding of the language and literacy demands that their key learning area makes on all students. This understanding results in enhanced classroom teaching strategies.

A focus on literacy often leads to assessment of the appropriateness and diversity of reading resources for both boys and girls in the textbook and resource collections of the school.

Successful literacy development programs can lead to increased participation by boys in subjects that they previously avoided. Boys benefit from greater exposure to subjects such as, history, social sciences and languages.

'Boys and literacy' at Mudgee HS

Background

Teacher observations and classroom assessments revealed that many boys were not meeting the literacy demands of the curriculum.

Most of the students in the school's structured behaviour management program were boys.

Some disruptive behaviours in class were attributed to students being unable to complete tasks because of limited literacy skills.

Strategies

- A number of staff attended Boys & Literacy and other boys' education seminars to better understand the possible links between gender and literacy development.
- Underachieving Year 7 boys were selected as the target group for intervention because they were starting their secondary education and the benefits could be tracked over time.
- Throughout the year, small groups of boys were withdrawn for literacy and learning support.
- Part of the sessions focused on building self-esteem and greater understanding of the influence of gender in boys' lives.
- At the same time, a strategy was introduced to encourage girls to make non-traditional subject choices for study in later years of schooling.

Improvements

- Literacy results of participating students improved.
- Subject choices show the impact of gender work: 35 per cent of students studying computers are girls; 15 per cent of students studying food technology are boys
- Satisfactory balance of male and female in Year 7 A-stream classes.

Gender considerations

Schools put a lot of energy into supporting the literacy learning of boys and girls. But boys remain the most frequent clients of literacy support staff. So what is it that disrupts the literacy learning of so many boys?

One suggestion from a gender perspective, (Alloway and Gilbert), is that much of a girl's early experience teaches her to be submissive, passive and courteous. Applying these skills to teachers and learning in the literacy classroom usually brings success.

On the other hand, the early experiences of many boys teach them to be active, to develop a 'larrikin individualism' and to show that they are 'real boys' through competitive, aggressive, non-conforming and homophobic behaviours. Applying these skills to teachers and learning in the literacy classroom does not usually bring success.

Whereas many girls may passively accept their literacy difficulties, lots of boys learn to respond to failure by demeaning the activity itself. For boys and men, the ultimate put down is to say that an activity is for girls and women. No 'real man' cares about doing well in 'female' activities.

The research of Martino (1995)⁸ reveals that lots of boys think that reading and writing are female activities.

The research also showed that exclusion from peer groups, ridicule, harassment and violence threaten boys who show up the weaknesses of other boys by doing too well in literacy learning. For this group, the higher the perceived literacy demands of a given subject, the less masculine it is perceived to be. Consequently fewer boys choose to study history, languages, visual and performing arts and the social sciences.

Schools can assist boys and girls to move beyond such restrictive beliefs.

Boys and girls need opportunities to learn to name and challenge barriers to them developing literacy skills and doing well in school.

As in other areas of gender reform, both girls and boys need to accept that it is OK for boys to do well at school and for them to read and write with confidence.

'Boys and literacy' at Orara HS

Background

Initial focus was on strategies within PDHPE and careers lessons to build the self-esteem of boys and girls.

Action on this key issue revealed the limited literacy skills of many boys.

Many of the identified boys felt that the reading and writing expected of them by teachers and the curriculum was beyond their interests and for some, beyond their current skills.

Strategies

- The English faculty took up the issue of assisting boys to greater proficiency in literacy.
- Training sessions were conducted for English teachers using the 'Boys and Literacy' package.
- The sessions developed teacher understandings of the impact of gender in the literacy development of boys and girls.
- Initially units of work from the 'Boys and literacy' package were used.
- Faculty members then developed additional units of work to extend the scope of gender teaching within literacy learning lessons.
- Other key learning areas followed the work of the English faculty, first in using the 'Boys and literacy' materials and then in using the suggested strategies within school-devised units of work.
- The literacy development framework in Boys and literacy was made available to staff in the Resource Centre.

Improvements

- Staff became more aware of how gender was influencing outcomes for boys and girls.
- The literacy skills of students developed.
- Students became more aware of the impact of gender on their decision making.

S Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area: School culture and organisation

Dealing with sex-based harassment, bullying and homophobia

Concern about sex-based harassment, bullying, teasing and homophobia can arise in a school community from many sources. For example, anti-discrimination strategies, data on school discipline strategies, including suspensions, exclusions and participation in behaviour management programs, conflict or violence in the school yard, corridors, classrooms or on the sporting field as well as student welfare strategies revealing harassment behind the truancy, underachievement or personal problems of students.

Schools frequently respond to such concerns through student welfare and discipline approaches that incorporate:

- sanctions against inappropriate behaviours
- encouragement of students to report and challenge sex-based harassment, bullying, teasing and homophobia
- developing the assertiveness and conflict resolution skills of individual students.

These strategies are sometimes incorporated into a school's gender equity plan because improvements can have a significant impact on the behaviours of boys and their schooling.

Successes

A focus on reducing the level of harassment and violence between students can bring dramatic improvements in the safety of schools.

Many schools report that comprehensive strategies to discourage sex-based harassment give girls and boys the language and tools to name the harassment and to see that something is done to eradicate it.

A large number of schools have worked with students as partners to make the school a 'no go' zone for sex-based harassment. Students have also been involved in designing and delivering strategies to stop bullying.

Many schools have achieved remarkable turn-arounds in safety for students at school. Where previously there had been conflict and violence, joint efforts of staff, students and communities have:

- made school yards, facilities and corridors safe
- greatly reduced, or eliminated suspensions, exclusions
- given students the skills to name and counter sex-based harassment, bullying, teasing and homophobia.

Dealing with sex-based harassment, bullying and homophobia at Ku-ring-gai Creative Arts HS

Background

In 1998 the school's gender equity committee collected and analysed school data on student learning needs and achievements.

The committee undertook extensive surveying of staff and students to establish attitudes and understandings about gender equity.

The data raised a number of concerns including 'the education of boys' and 'dealing with bullying and harassment'.

Strategies

- Professional development strategies were conducted to develop a whole school approach to countering bullying and harassment.
- Information from the survey of students about the level of bullying and harassment at school provided adequate evidence that something needed to be done.
- The Gender Equity Committee worked with small groups of staff to develop: gender issues workshops for students in Years 7 and 8; programs across the KLAs that were more gender inclusive.
- Gender Issues workshops conducted for students in Year 7 and 8.
- School-wide awareness and skills development training ensured that all staff and students were aware of their rights to say 'no' to all forms of bullying and harassment.
- The Department's Anti discrimination Policy and Grievance procedures were made more widely known as a mechanism for handling complaints.

Improvements

- In the survey, both boys and girls identified hygiene and safety in toilet blocks as a major concern. In response, student toilet blocks have been refurbished.
- Greater awareness amongst students that harassment and bullying can be dealt with effectively and do not need to be suffered.
- After initial increase in the reporting of bullying and harassment fewer cases have been reported.

Gender considerations

Some schools have found that even after lots of work to counter bullying, for example, students still report the presence of bullying and intimidation. The same can be the case for strategies that targeted the eradication of sex-based harassment, teasing and homophobia.

While single-focused strategies like getting rid of bullying or sex-based harassment can overcome significant difficulties for students, the limited success of such strategies suggests that more powerful influences are at work.

From a gender perspective, at least some of these powerful influences could be the gender foundations of such behaviours that are so often left unexposed.

Students may hear messages from the school that bullying, sex-based harassment, teasing and homophobia are not acceptable, but stronger opposing messages can come from:

- authoritarian school and classroom discipline practices that rely on fear, threat and intimidation
- peer group pressures among boys and girls that value bullying and harassment as badges of courage and strength
- family, friends and community attitudes suggesting that bullying, harassment, intimidation and homophobia are valid responses if an individual feels threatened or is not getting their own way
- popular culture that praises personalities with the identified behaviours, for example the excessive 'masculine' behaviours of some football players on and off the field, or the 'bitch' or 'bastard' character in popular soap operas.

The way to challenge these influences is not additional attention on the inappropriateness of the behaviours. Rather it is to expose and directly challenge the influences themselves and the ideas about gender that support them.

At the heart of these influences are ideas about how individuals exert and maintain authority and power over others.

Men have traditionally asserted their authority and power with the threat of violence. Over time this has been accepted as 'masculine' behaviour.

There are many women and an increasing number of men who recognise that there are better ways to maintain authority and influence than by bullying and harassment.

Dealing with sex-based harassment, bullying and homophobia at Jamison HS

Background

The Student Welfare Committee was concerned about the level of bullying reported by students and the number of detentions, trunancies, exclusions and suspensions.

Strategies

- The school was guided by the assistance of Ken Rigby to devise effective anti-bullying strategies.
- The strategies were implemented progressively over three years with a group of students beginning Year 7 and continuing into Years 8 & 9.
- All students, boys and girls, participated in the program.
- Strategies focused on naming bullying and identifying its effects on individuals.
- Students explored what bullies get out of their behaviours. They also came to recognise that bullies rely on others to keep quiet, to tacitly support bullying as part of the 'rough and tumble' of growing up.
- Students identified as bullies, underwent specific behaviour management techniques.
- As well as classroom activities and whole school emphasis against harassment, an anti-bullying poster competition was conducted.

Improvements

- The poster competition proved successful with students.
- Increased awareness among students that bullying is not appropriate behaviour.
- Decrease in the number of bullying and harassment incidents reported.
- A disturbing fact to emerge from evaluations was that some students still perceived high levels of bullying. Continued effort is needed to counteract the idea held by many boys, (and girls), that bullying others demonstrates tough masculinity.

S Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area: School culture and organisation

Professional development in gender education

The *Gender and School Education*⁹ research showed that there is a great range of opinion, knowledge and understanding among teachers of gender issues and the influence that gender has on decisions, behaviours and educational outcomes for girls and boys.

Initially, professional development programs on gender in education usually focus on particular issues such as:

- the impact of gender on the education of boys and girls
- how to help boys and girls succeed at school, particularly in literacy and in subject choice
- effective teaching strategies that are gender inclusive
- ways to promote respectful relationships between students.

Successes

Professional development on gender in education has been an obvious and effective starting point for virtually all advances in gender equity in schools.

Professional development has brought initial awareness of the impact that gender can have on the education of boys and girls. That awareness has stimulated the development of strategies countering the negative influences of gender in many areas of school life including:

- the use of gender inclusive language
- the adoption of gender aware teaching and assessment strategies
- eradicating gender bias in the policies and procedures of the school.

Beyond these specifically focused strategies, professional development on gender in education has also promoted a range of other activities that have tremendous positive benefits for girls and boys:

- encouraging girls to take up more physical activities
- ensuring privacy and safety in attending to personal hygiene
- supporting students to follow their personal interests and talents in making subject choices
- boys and literacy strategies.

Much recent professional development on gender in education has assisted schools to understand how they can better assist boys and girls to broaden outdated ideas of masculinity and femininity that often constrain their educational opportunities and success at school.

Professional development on gender education at Asquith BHS

Background

Asquith Boys HS is an example of a school which has created whole school cultural change over a long period of time.

The changes are mostly contextual and have been focused on organisation, student welfare and curriculum structures and practices.

Professional development, discussion and participation among staff has been an important factor in the successes achieved at the school.

Strategies

Professional development strategies have focused on:

- matching quality teaching and learning practices to needs of students — this work overcame assumptions that all boys are left brain learners who need structure, competition and ranking
- a change to one-hour periods that has reduced movement around the school and encouraged diversity in learning and teaching
- a limited introduction of a flexible (vertical) curriculum — retaining music, expanding visual arts, introducing drama, cooking and horticulture
- introducing wider choice of activities in the sports curriculum
- strategies to overcome violence and to encourage boys to take personal responsibility for actions and their consequences
- changes to school organisation to eliminate non-functional rules and hierarchies and to make school more student-friendly
- establishment of 'civilised and quiet areas' to provide space for activities other than those of 'active areas'.

Improvements

- peer support has evolved over many years and provides opportunities to relate to younger boys in supporting ways
- increased numbers of boys taking arts subjects, charity work and leadership programs
- schools perceived as a place where boys feel safe and to a large degree are free to be different without fear of threat from others.

Gender considerations

Most teaching and non-teaching staff feel relatively comfortable helping boys and girls to overcome restrictions that gender can impose on their lives. On the other hand, staff are often less comfortable when the focus turns to the values and attitudes behind their own decisions and behaviours.

For example, staff members may support initiatives promoting the message that ‘boys and girls can do anything’, whether that ‘anything’ be subject choices, sports, peer support or extra-curricular activities.

At the same time, staff members may unconsciously only ask boys to set up the school hall for speech days and only ask girls to usher guests to their seats.

The message students receive from this example is that people ‘say’ girls and boys can do anything, but they really ‘believe’ that there are some things that boys should do, and other things that girls should do.

Professional development in gender in education gets staff thinking. It often challenges the values and attitudes that are the basis for the unconscious behaviours that contradict the strategies we are implementing consciously.

From this perspective, effective professional development programs bring understanding of the impact of gender on both:

- personal decisions and behaviours
- professional decisions and behaviours.

Because of its focus on the professional and personal, professional development on gender in education develops new skills and new ways of thinking and behaving. It can be a transforming experience.

There is no doubt, however, that this sort of professional development can be uncomfortable. It can expose inconsistencies of thought and action. It can challenge deeply held values and beliefs about our own ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’. It can threaten individuals and draw strong responses.

For this reason, professional development on gender in education often remains focused on professional decisions and behaviours.

Effective professional development on gender in education challenges staff to overcome personal and professional barriers to change so that boys and girls can be freed from the self-limiting impacts of gender.

Professional development on gender education at West Wallsend HS

Background

Student achievement data revealed that girls as a group were consistently performing better than boys as a group.

There was a higher retention rate of girls remaining to complete Years 11 and 12.

Over 80 per cent of students being assisted by learning support programs were boys.

Staff wanted greater understanding of what might be holding back the academic performance of boys.

Strategies

- Training and development sessions were arranged for staff to: raise awareness of the influence of gender in the learning of boys and girls; train teachers to identify gender bias in texts and resource materials; develop ways to encourage and support girls to take up non-traditional subject options.
- Training also focused on assisting teachers to become ‘gender smart’ themselves – to be critical consumers of media representations and popular culture.
- Teachers incorporated the skills learned in training sessions within the teaching and learning strategies of their classes.

Improvements

- Staff found they were able to identify gender bias in texts and resources.
- Some resources needed to be replaced, however, many other texts were able to be used by teachers as examples of subtle gender bias.
- The need to start as early as possible to challenge the gender bias and beliefs exhibited by secondary students led to the development of a Gender Equity Plan Years 5-8 with feeder primary schools.
- Girls increasingly enrol in subjects that were previously only taken by boys. For example, girls have enrolled in the VET Electronics course.
- Increased focus on boys and literacy including support from a peer tutoring remedial reading program conducted each morning and a parent tutors program.
- A boys-only Year 7/8 class was established to better support the learning of a targeted group of boys in those years.



Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:

The school and its community

School community education

Support from parents, caregivers and community members can increase the impact of gender reform strategies in schools and this is why so many schools conduct community education sessions.

Community education sessions can raise awareness and understanding of the obvious influences of gender on the lives and education of boys and girls, for example, when intimidation and ridicule from girls and other boys persuade boys not to study home sciences.

Sessions can highlight some of gender's not so obvious influences, for example, when school uniform policy demands that girls play sport in gym tunics. Where is the problem in that?

Girls say that when they play high energy games in tunics the skirt can fly up to reveal their underwear. That shouldn't be a problem except that seeing girls' underwear can prompt humiliating comments or ridicule from boy onlookers. Rumours of the incident then generate ongoing harassment from boys and other girls.

Successes

Community education programs successfully use school data to show the possible impact of gender on the education of boys and girls. Discussion of the data usually leads to concerns and questions from community members about what the school is doing to overcome the problems or issues raised.

As a result of information sessions, parents and other community members often get directly involved in the gender reform activities of the school.

In schools where this happens, parents and caregivers have:

- attended staff meetings and discussed gender issues with staff
- joined the school's gender equity committees
- conducted information sessions for other parents
- participated in tutoring sessions at school
- promoted gender equity strategies within school and community organisations and the P&C
- encouraged and supported their sons and daughters who decided to follow their interests and talents to study subjects that are not usually studied by their sex
- supported the school's reforms at home.

Effective community education strategies encourage consistent messages from school and home about the impact of gender.

School community education at Albury HS

Background

Gender education lessons are part of Years 7 – 10 curriculum.

Staff were concerned that parents also needed to understand the issues if gender reforms being encouraged at school were to be sustained.

Staff concerns led to the establishment of a Boys' Education Committee (BEC).

Strategies

- Staff delivered a presentation to a school community meeting on gender issues including the education of boys.
- Data from school records was used to show that girls as a group do better than boys.
- The presentation highlighted the roles that school and home can play in both maintaining and loosening gender boundaries for boys and girls.
- Parents were shown how gender concerns can influence decisions about: subject choice; study habits; learning styles; school/TAFE NSW options; career goals.
- Concern at a P&C meeting led to participation of parents on the BEC.
- The BEC established a project to investigate where gender was affecting the participation of boys and girls at school.
- Analysis showed that gender expectations supported the learning of many girls but disrupted the learning of many boys.
- The school newsletter and meetings were used to keep parents informed.

Improvements

- Participation of parents on the BEC.
- The rights of boys and girls are recognised in the development and implementation of school policies and procedures.
- Parental support for gender reform strategies implemented at school.
- Boys and girls choosing to study non-traditional subjects.

Gender considerations

Presenting school data about student behaviours, achievements and needs is an effective first step to raise awareness among parents of the need for change. But, that is not enough.

Knowing about the results of a behaviour doesn't necessarily lead to changes in behaviour. For example, quit smoking campaigns have provided graphic information about the health risks of smoking, yet lots of people continue to smoke.

The implication of this for gender reform in schools is that if boys and girls are to change they need not only to hear and learn about the need for change, they need to see words translated into action by their teachers, families, friends and peers.

Effective community education programs help parents, caregivers and other school community members to consider the impact of their behaviours as well as their words on boys and girls. They need to focus on both:

- developing understanding of the impact of gender on the decisions and behaviours of girls and boys
- providing practical ideas about how reform strategies can be supported from home.

As a result of explicit teaching about gender to students and professional development programs for staff, schools usually have the resources to demonstrate the impact of gender on the lives of boys and girls.

Practical ideas about supporting gender reforms from home can effectively and powerfully come from participants themselves when school community education sessions assist them to:

- recall experiences that formed their ideas about 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviours
- consider the differences between 'sex' and 'gender'
- identify current influences of gender on their own lives and behaviours
- examine recent interactions with their children to reveal any differences in the behaviours they expect from their sons and daughters
- reflect on, and if necessary challenge, any values and attitudes that limit their expectations of boys and girls
- develop skills in monitoring their language, behaviours and interactions with their children for gender bias
- encourage their children to become critical consumers of media, television, advertising and other messages from popular culture.

School Community education at Kurri Kurri HS

Background

Concern about the participation and achievements of boys prompted the school to establish a Boys Action Team (BAT).

With support from the School Improvement Team, the BAT developed a research circle that identified areas for investigation within the school. A significant aspect of the research strategies was the participation of individuals across the whole school community.

Strategies

- identify parents, teachers, support staff and students to become members of the BAT research circle
- research circle collected and considered school data to identify areas of concern and to prioritise issues for investigation
- investigations were set within a gender equity framework to ensure that the learning of both boys and girls was supported
- the areas selected for research investigations were: academic performance of boys and girls; gender ratio in streamed classes; gender balance in cultural, performance and art activities; bullying and harassment; community awareness of gender issues
- a combination of school records, discussions and data collection was used to develop an outline of what was revealed by investigations in each research area
- the results of the investigations were presented to meetings of staff and school community members
- strategies were developed in response to the needs identified by research investigations. Implementation, monitoring and evaluation of strategies continues as an ongoing part of school planning cycle.

Improvements

- awareness of the impact of gender issues increased within the school community
- Gender Equity Strategies established at school were supported at home
- increased participation of parents and students in the school through implementing the gender issues framework.

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Gender Equity Strategy Focus Area:
**Monitoring, evaluation,
review and development**

Collecting and analysing school data

A desire to improve the performance of students in ELLA tests or HSC examinations is a common stimulus to deeper analysis of results data.

Schools also collect a large range of other data about students and about the operation of the school itself that can show where gender is having unwanted effects.

Because it shows what is happening with their students or their children, presenting an analysis of school data can have a powerful and persuasive impact on a staff or parent meeting.

Successes

Collecting and analysing school data usually leads to successful strategies that overcome, at least in part, the concerns originally identified by the data.

Gender equity strategies devised by schools in response to school data have brought significant improvements in:

- the number of detentions and suspensions
- the level of truancy and sickness among students
- participation of girls in physical activities and sport teams
- the number of boys needing learning support programs
- decision making about subject choices and the subjects eventually studied by boys and girls
- the level of harassment, bullying and violence at school
- referrals to the school counsellor for behaviour management support.

Another frequently used strategy that brings powerful results is conducting surveys of staff, students and parents to determine current attitudes and expectations. Such information can effectively and unthreateningly undermine the often heard claim that 'gender is not a problem in our school'.

Data collection and analysis not only stimulates action, it also:

- establishes base data against which improvements can be measured
- shows that gender equity strategies are already having positive impacts on the schooling of boys and girls.

Collecting and analysing school data at Penrith HS

Background

Examination results showed that a number of girls and boys were underachieving.

Staff were concerned that additional support be provided for underachieving boys and girls.

Strategies

- Exam results were used to identify underachieving students in Years 8-10.
- Students were surveyed about the subjects they studied, why they had chosen them and other subjects they might like to study.
- Students were also asked what they saw as the major factors influencing poor results. They suggested: boredom; staff turnover; unsuitable subject choices; psychological problems; limited post school options.
- Survey data revealed that a key factor for many boys and girls in choosing subjects was what other boys and girls were choosing, not their own abilities and interests.
- The junior curriculum was reorganised to include four electives that all girls and boys experienced — Food Technology, Hospitality, Technics and Drama.
- Targeted students were assisted to develop structured career path plans that included appropriate subject choices.

Improvements

- A focus on the needs of underachieving students increased their self-esteem.
- Elective experiences in junior school improved the gender balance in Technics and Food Technology.
- Many students have followed their skills and interests when choosing subjects to study rather than staying within gender boundaries.
- Participation and performance of many previously underachieving students has improved.

Gender considerations

Collecting and analysing school data identifies specific concerns about some boys and girls that schools need to do something about.

Schools can find, however, that although strategies successfully achieve their specific goals, gender still has unhelpful influences on boys and girls in other areas of their lives at school and beyond.

For example, school data may show imbalances in the numbers of boys and girls studying drama and economics. The school could respond to this data with strategies to encourage more boys into drama and more girls into economics.

Evaluation data could later reveal greater balance in the number of boys and girls studying drama and economics. It may also show that although attitudes about studying economics and drama have changed, there are still subjects that boys and girls do not study because they think they are better suited to the other sex.

For example, while promoting greater balance between the sexes studying particular subjects, staff could:

- collect and analyse data on which subjects students, staff, parents and other school community members consider to be 'masculine' and which 'feminine'
- encourage boys and girls to choose subjects by following their talents and interests rather than beliefs about the appropriateness of subjects for their sex
- demonstrate to all sections of the school community the importance of maintaining a consistent gender message
- identify any barriers to change that are contained within school policies, organisation and practices.

Comprehensive gender equity plans ensure that staff collect and analyse school data to develop a clear picture of the gender climate.

The data also directs the development of strategies to respond to the needs of specific individuals or groups of students. Such strategies move beyond a focus on student behaviours alone to highlight the contributions that school policies and practices as well as staff and families have on the school's gender climate.

In these ways, the gender equity strategies of schools respond to their own specific and local concerns while supporting reforms in the wider community.

Collecting and analysing school data at Blacktown BHS

Background

A whole school approach has been adopted to developing and implementing a statement of beliefs and values about the outcomes of school desired for all boys.

Developments have been based on thoughtful analysis of school data — and not just data about students.

Strategies

- Data on student achievements (including literacy), welfare statistics (truancy, absenteeism, detention, suspension), and community perceptions was collated and analysed.
- The data and alternatives were examined by the staff and the school community.
- A key goal was to help boys to perceive participation in broader experiences at school as expanding masculine behaviour and life opportunities.
- Training and development for staff and parents introduced proposed strategies and changes.
- Specific strategies included: developing a new and simple set of school rules; a Glasser-based discipline system; peer mediation, with not just best boys as mediators; training for staff on promoting literacy in KLAS, gender issues and outcomes based assessment; vertical curriculum structure in Stage 5 with increased music, media studies, textiles & design and drama; longer learning times; self-defence program in Year 7.

Improvements

- Greater awareness among staff and community about the impact of gender on boys' learning and behaviours.
- 60-minute lessons allowing for increased variety for staff and students.
- Support for boys moving out of a narrow range of subject choices.
- Emphasis across the whole school to resolving conflict through negotiation.
- Experiences at school promote diverse expressions of masculinity among boys, not just stereotypes.

Notes

- ¹ Collins et al. 1996, Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.
- ² McLean, C. 1997, p 15.
- ³ NSW Department of School Education 1994, p 11.
- ⁴ Alloway & Gilbert 1997, p 4.
- ⁵ Collins et al. 1996, p 76.
- ⁶ Browne, R. & Fletcher, R. (eds) 1995.
- ⁷ NSW Department of Education and Training 1998.
- ⁸ Martino 1995, p 131.
- ⁹ Collins et al. 1996, p 157.

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Professional development materials

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NSW Department of Education and Training 1997, *Food for Thought and Action — A professional development resource to assist schools in implementing Girls and Boys at School, Gender Equity Strategy, 1996-2001*, Sydney.***

Resources on the Internet

Girls and boys at school, Gender Equity Strategy
NSW Department of Education and Training
www.det.nsw.edu.au

Construction of gender
Tasmanian Department of Education
www.tased.edu.au/eddiv/equity/gender

Gender and cultural equity
Queensland Department of Education
education.qld.gov.au/tal/equity/gcequity/home.htm

In Gear (Integrating Gender Equity and Reform)
American site with materials to help teachers maintain gender equitable classrooms.
www.coe.uga.edu/ingear/welcome.html

* sent to schools in the
Gender Equity Resource Kit
** sent to schools
*** sent to Student Services
and Equity Coordinators in
District Offices