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Education Equity: Is the System serving boys and girls equally?



Lynne Whitney



Carol Mutch



Rosemary Hipkins

Barbara Mabbett, MBE, chaired a panel for the June meeting where the discussion was centred on the apparent high achievement of girls versus the seemingly lower achievement of boys.

The three speakers were:

Lynne Whitney (Senior Manager Research at the Ministry of Education)

Dr Carol Mutch (Senior Advisor to the Chief Review Officer in the Education Review Office)

Dr Rosemary Hipkins (Chief Researcher New Zealand Council for Educational Research).

Barbara noted how much had changed in the years of her association with the education system, as pupil, teacher, and administrator. She commented that to achieve equity you must treat unequal cases unequally. This was a theme taken up by all the speakers.

Dr Lynne Whitney gave a broad overview of the subject. She demonstrated that girls now had greater access to education and were gaining better results in subjects formerly seen as male domains but this did not mean that the boys were performing less well than formerly. The distribution of achievement for boys and girls was far greater than the difference between genders. Lynne acknowledged that boys tend to underachieve in reading and writing and that can have an effect on other subjects requiring a good standard of literacy. But there was little difference between boys and girls in the science subjects, and boys were more likely to succeed at the higher levels of these subjects.

There was also concern that boys are more likely to become disengaged with school, to have behaviour problems and to leave with fewer qualifications. Achievement differences associated with socio-economic status and ethnicity tended to be as large (if not larger) as

those of gender. These traits were evident in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

All the speakers stressed that the teacher was the most critical point of influence, together with the recognition that systems need to be sufficiently flexible to identify and adjust to the needs of individual children.

Dr Carol Mutch identified some traits particular to boys:

- the importance of boys maturing later
- they prefer exams to assessment
- they do enough to pass but do not want to excel
- they have a dip in engagement around the age of 16yrs.

She provided statistics to show how ethnicity and socio-economic factors related to achievement as much as, if not more than, gender.

The Education Review Office has provided schools with guidelines for improving the position for boys by looking specifically at cultural and social issues such as leadership, role models, male identity, self management skills and tradition. She noted that boys needed to know why they were being asked to do something and that they responded better to real life problems.

Carol saw particular value in having high expectations for pupils and in engaging parents where possible.

Dr Rosemary Hipkins challenged the audience with the question, “Equal education for what?” She identified girls as being better at traditional ‘just-in-case’ learning, but less successful in risk-taking, or ‘just-in-time’, knowledge acquisition. Thus girls are succeeding in higher numbers in traditional areas like law and medicine which still require the acquisition of a lot of knowledge, but boys are more successful in the entrepreneurial and commercial fields which offer high financial return.

She warmly endorsed “*Catching the Knowledge Wave*” by Jane Gilbert. It is Gilbert’s view that there is a deep seated opinion that “feminine” is everything other than “masculine” where masculine is recognised as “normal”. Therefore as girls increase their success in subjects these areas become less attractive to boys.

Rosemary presented the view that we need additional outcomes to education as we are now in the knowledge-plus era. Pupils need to know how knowledge is constructed and she saw the key competencies in our national curriculum as an important part of this process. She rejected the idea that this resulted in the feminisation of teaching and quoted UK academic, Ronald Barnett’s, list of dispositions for citizens who will “know what to do when no-one knows what to do”: carefulness, thoughtfulness, humility, criticality, receptiveness, resilience, courage, stillness. Unfortunately Dr Hipkins had to leave and did not participate in the following Q & A.

Questions and Comments;

1. Members were interested to know how the new National Standards would affect the development of individual pupils. They were assured that there are a range of tools which teachers might use to assess progress. Panel members felt that teachers would be more articulate about how they made their judgments. The attitude would be, “How can we support this child to move upwards.” There would be no single exam or test that a child must pass in order to progress.
2. A further question asked to what degree the school could compensate for problems in the home or social group. The panel felt that flexibility was a key word. The wider community should be involved and where possible personalised learning should be developed.
3. A supplementary question asked how do we operate the *system* for the benefit of a particular child. The panel stressed the importance of teachers presenting and demonstrating the competencies which they expected the child to learn. Only 6% of New Zealand schools have no top achieving science scholars.
4. Members raised the question of teacher training and asked whether the increased number of training opportunities were maintaining standards. The panel explained that the Government appointed Teachers’ Council was the register for teachers who had to come from an approved institution. Most Primary and Secondary teachers came from Training Colleges and Universities. There were a number of private early childhood training centers but these also had to be approved by the Council before teachers could receive registration.

References: www.success-for-boys.tki.org.nz/
and
www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/25052/2489

Reported by Jean Fuller
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