


PUTTING GIRLS ISSUES



Boys' struggles in the classroom have dominated education policy for a decade. But has it been at the expense of girls? **Rachel Power** investigates the return of feminism in education.

Pictured: Anna Treasure (left) with Year 10/11 girls at Point Cook SC
PHOTO: ANGELA BAILEY

BOYS have been the focus of attention when it comes to literacy and gender issues in recent times. Meanwhile, girls have been “silently imploding”, educator Danielle Miller warns.

“Boys tend to explode, and so they draw lots of attention to themselves,” she says. “Girls implode. The statistics on eating disorders, binge drinking and self harm are starting to filter through now and I think this has put girls back on the radar big time.”

Miller, CEO of Enlighten Education and a former secondary teacher, is one of a number of women in education attempting to address some of these issues.

AEU women's officer Barb Jennings agrees that the recent focus on boys' failure to thrive in the classroom has led to a paucity of resources for programs and strategies directed at girls.

The exception is the issue of girls and body image, which has gained increasing attention. A 2008 AEU survey of female members found over 90% indicating they were either “very concerned”

or “moderately concerned” about girls and women with body image difficulties, eating disorders, self esteem concerns or who were self-harming.

High numbers reported the issues as prevalent in their own school communities and at all levels of schooling, even preschool.

Miller is deeply concerned about the sexualisation of children in the media and its impact on their mental health.

For young women, the ultimate glass ceiling has become the bedroom mirror, she says.

“Behind the facade of success — academically, socially and on the sporting field — our girls are in trouble. Girls exist in a subtle, insidious world created by marketing hype, peer pressure and unrealistic self-expectation, and it is poisoning them at a most vulnerable age.”

Since 2003, the national Enlighten Education program has gone from having “three or four clients to literally hundreds” — mainly secondary schools looking for a way to address body image

and self-esteem issues and enhance outcomes among their female students.

Miller says parents and teachers are increasingly aware that the “sexed-up lifestyle” being marketed to children is having a devastating impact — on all young people, but girls in particular.

She wants to give girls the tools to critically evaluate the messages that bombard them every day and develop ways of responding intelligently and objectively. Enlighten Education delivers workshops for girls on everything from time management and coping with stress, to safe partying and maintaining positive friendships.

Among those contacting Enlighten Education for help are schools confronting a rise in inappropriate behaviour among their female students, with several reporting that Mondays are spent “cleaning up the carnage” of what happened on the weekend.

Welfare officer Fiona Isles was one such client, seeking a strategy for dealing with bitchy behaviour among female students in her region.

back on the radar

“There were concerns from teaching staff about the types of behaviour they were seeing, particularly exclusion [of peers],” says Fiona, former wellbeing officer for the Portland Education Network. “It’s mainly in the playground, but of course that filters back in to the classroom.”

Enlighten Education offered what she wanted: a program that would help the students develop conflict resolution skills, as well as celebrate what it means to be a girl. Over the past three years, 180 Grade 6 girls from the town’s three main primary schools and the shire’s smaller rural schools have come together to take part.

• For young women, the ultimate glass ceiling has become the bedroom mirror •

“There was a lot to organise and some schools were less receptive than others about the whole ‘girls’ thing,” Fiona says. “But to see the girls so receptive and willing to listen and share their thoughts was so brilliant.”

Its success has reinforced her belief in the need for programs that nurture girls and create a bond between them, without the pressure to “show off” for the boys, she says.

Fiona has since devised a program called “Power Girls” for her Grade 3/4 students at Baimbridge College in Hamilton, based on resources gathered while working for the Education Department.

“We ask them to develop their own image of what a Power Girl would be,” she says. “Girls can be passive and worried about hurting someone’s feelings. So we teach them how to be assertive without being aggressive, how to stand up for themselves and have a voice.”

The “F” word

Other educators are taking it one step further and introducing their students to the “F” word.

Teacher Anna Treasure’s “intuition” told her that the female students at Point Cook Secondary College were “starved” of information about feminism.

With the Year 12s away on a special study camp, and “teachers throwing up a whole lot of ideas for workshops they wanted to do”, Anna took the opportunity to trial a women’s studies program with small groups of Year 10/11 girls over three days.

The school’s 2009 student opinion survey had shown a negative self-perception among the Year 11 girls when it came to the differences between themselves and their male peers.

Anna says today’s celebrity-obsessed culture is pronounced at Point Cook, in an isolated corner of Melbourne’s west.

“It’s a new school in a new area — there’s nothing else here — so the playground becomes a kind of theatre, with everyone on show.”

While students study health and sexuality — and sometimes look at texts from a feminist perspective as part of English lessons — there is no dedicated gender studies program at the school.

In fact, South Australia is now the only state that offers Women’s Studies among its Year 12 elective subjects.

Anna drew on various resources to create her program but “pre-empted all of this (by saying) how much I love men,” she says. “I have five brothers, and male colleagues and a partner who are all great.”

She used psychologist Martin Seligman’s three primary conditions for happiness — feeling that you can “be yourself”; fulfilling work; and a strong relationship with a significant other — as a starting point to look at why each of these prerequisites was compromised for women of previous generations.

She also used material from the Miss G project, a Canadian gender studies organisation, to create a multiple-choice quiz and a timeline exercise. “When they had to work out which events happened a long time ago and what happened more recently, they flipped out!” Anna says. “They couldn’t believe that homosexuality was still considered a disease until the 1990s, or that pay disparity still exists.”

Her final activity was to present the girls with two images, one of a woman in a full-length burqha and one of women in a beauty pageant, and ask them to discuss “who was more free”.

She says the girls developed a whole new sense of history and their place in it. “So when they arc up about doing their work, it’s now in the context of women’s struggle for equal education!”

Where to for feminism?

Author Monica Dux isn’t worried that your average teenage girl is still wary of describing herself as a feminist.

How to give young women a new way of using the term was the central motive for her latest book, *The Great Feminist Denial*, co-authored with Zora Simic.

“I don’t think a 17-year-old girl needs to be calling herself a feminist,” says Dux. “If you educate 14–17 year old girls that ‘This is feminism’, it’s like leading a horse to water. Many of the challenges that will sharpen their sense of gender injustice still lie ahead.”

She believes that feminism has in many ways been the victim of its own success. “It’s easy to see how the marrying of the sexual revolution and increasing body obsession has diluted empowerment messages and created this fallout of ‘raunch culture’.”

But if young women are given a sense of their legacy, they will be more likely to recognise the value of feminism later in life, she says.

“A feminist consciousness is often there; it’s just having an opportunity to articulate it. If you don’t have that awareness, when you come to certain moments in your life where you think something’s wrong or unequal, you’re not going to identify with feminism.”

When surveying young women, Dux and Simic found that most were alienated from feminism by distorted stereotypes created by its detractors, such as former PM John Howard. That makes it all the more important that feminist history now be

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Equity in the classroom

Although there are policies in place which legislate for equality of opportunity and outcomes for girls in education, academic success among girls has not necessarily translated into success in employment.

“Any initiatives or curriculum in schools need to have a focus of gender equity,” says AEU women’s officer Barb Jennings.

“The culture should be inclusive, transmitting strong messages about the value placed on participation of both boys and girls in the education system and the wider society.”

Last year the AEU launched its Girls’ Toolkit, a classroom resource aimed at empowering young women to make positive decisions about their education and employment futures.

The toolkit highlights matters of ongoing concern, and equips educators and careers advisors with an understanding of why gender is still relevant when assisting students’ decision-making.



Danielle Miller with students in an Enlighten Education workshop.

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part of the national curriculum, says Dux.

"It is really important to educate young people about the massive impact that feminists have had on so many aspects of our lives — culturally, socially and politically. It's not a marginal aspect of history; it's about the way we all work and live."

Girl Power

Enlighten Education is also urging girls to reclaim the feminist tag with its newest workshop, "Real Girl Power".

Miller finds that while girls initially feel disconnected from feminism, their attitudes change once they realise there is diversity of appearance and opinion within the women's movement.

"We need to bring it to this generation in a way that's more palatable. They can still like fashion and boys; they can still shave their legs and be a feminist."

She says the media never portrays feminism in a positive light, so educators have to demystify feminism and make it relevant.

"The adolescent female brain is driven by emotion and impulse," says Miller. "You have to make them see that it matters; make them passionate about it. They get really charged up once they become informed about the history of feminism and the battles still being fought."

Dux agrees: "We've just got to start claiming back the label, and I think standing up and arguing against all the misconceptions about feminists and feminism is one of the keys to achieving this." ♦

Making it HAPPEN

AEU Active is the union's most popular training course. **Nic Barnard** finds out why.

"IT'S given me a voice," is how Rae Macardy describes the AEU Active course she took earlier this year.

"It meant I could go back and represent my members with confidence and knowledge of our agreement and our rights at work. Because I've done the course, aides are coming to me to ask (about issues)."

Rae is an ES member and AEU rep at Footscray City College. She was speaking at an AEU Active follow-up event — a chance for members who took the course earlier in the year to get together, compare notes and discuss issues that have come up since they returned to their schools.

AEU Active is the AEU's most popular training program. A two-day course run across the state, it's not just intended for reps but for anyone who wants to know more about their agreement, how to put it into practice, and how to be a more effective and organised union member.

The "third day" is a new addition — and has quickly shown the difference the course has made in workplaces.

Simone Carrafa, from Northern School for Autism, echoes Rae's comments about her higher profile since taking the course.

"I've had a lot of ES approach me with different concerns," she says. "Being in the special needs sector can be very stressful. We've been talking about local agreements, goodwill, sick leave, holidays... There's been a big range."

Simone called a meeting at her school when she returned from the course to pass on what she'd learned. "I'm not the union rep, but we felt it was important to have people with the knowledge that could support people."

One of the best features of the course, many of the returnees agree, was the chance to meet other members. Rae was particularly pleased to find so many ES members on her course.

"I was so excited," she says. "We all had stories about issues that were affecting us as union members in our schools, and being on the course we got so much knowledge and support, strategies that we were able to go

back to our schools (and use)."

John Box, a teacher at Lilydale Secondary College says: "One thing I've noticed is not so much what I'm doing, but that what I'm saying or putting forward makes more sense and gets things done."

As well as problem sharing and problem solving, the course is also a chance to celebrate what sub-branches are doing.

"Every school does great things," says AEU training officer Kim Daly who, with Rowena Matcott, runs the program.

She reels off a list from a course run at Koorinal. "Woodville Primary School releases its literacy co-ordinator one day a fortnight to carry out her responsibilities. Point Cook Senior Secondary runs an advisory program for 30 minutes a day across all year levels focused on pastoral care and building relationships.

"Carranballac College staff are strongly encouraged to use their holidays for themselves and not do too much school work. ... Western English Language Centre runs a very successful breakfast program.

"What comes out so strongly is that programs and activities that make a school stand out are done through cooperative, respectful relationships that are built between teachers, ES staff, principals and the union."

She says consultation is at the heart of the agreement — the mechanism set down in the document which gives staff a voice in decisions at their school including workforce planning.

"Consultation is the benchmark by which the health of a school can be judged," says Kim. "Where the staff members feel valued and included, and change and new initiatives are incorporated, taking into account workload and professionalism."

Making that happen is what AEU Active is about. ♦



Sisters doing it for themselves

SISTERHOOD took on an extra meaning at one AEU Active course — among the members were sisters Rebecca and Kathryn Boyden.

Rebecca had signed up for the course as a new rep at Taylors Lake SC. Meanwhile Kathryn was aware that with the retirement of a female rep at her school, someone needed to step up and offer another female voice in the union. She heard about the course from Rebecca and joined in.

The sisters come from a strong union family and remember marching as kids with their nurse mother at ANF rallies. Kathryn said the course had "answered so many things that had been bobbing around in my head for a few years".

For Rebecca, the course confirmed to her that her school was on the right track with consultation, voting and keeping staff informed.

"It also helps with knowing what you're getting for the (union fees) you pay." ♦