

Sex and gender : what parents want

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## Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the national organisation representing parents of over 2 million children in government schools. It is comprised of eleven affiliates from the states and territories, one each from the ACT, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania, and two from South Australia, NSW and Victoria. These affiliates elect their parent representatives onto national committees like the MCEETYA Gender Equity Taskforce, and national projects such as DEET's Gender and Violence Project, as well as the state-based forums on violence in schools. ACSSO also had a representative on the Schools Commission committee that wrote the National Policy for the Education of Girls. In this way, ACSSO is very much a part of the education reform agenda.

ACSSO is built on a commitment to a public education system which is fully funded by the state; inclusive, that is, available, accessible and attractive to all young people from all social backgrounds; and determined by administrators, teachers, parents and students (ACSSO, 1994/5). Gender equity and anti-homophobia are part of this commitment, and feature in ACSSO's own policy document which is determined by parents from across the country when they meet in conference once a year. Gender equity and girls' education are located under the policy section on 'equality of outcomes', and anti-homophobia in the 'human development programs' under the policy section on curriculum and assessment. They are included because of ACSSO's commitment to equity and parents' deep seated concerns about the number of children who struggle with their sexuality, and about the spate of gay-hate violence that effects so many people in our school communities. The ACSSO policy document published yearly is regarded as a part of the historical record of the thinking of the parent movement in Australia since its establishment in 1946 (ACSSO, 1994/5). Next year, the organisation celebrates its fiftieth anniversary.

## Parent participation

To talk about what parents want is to invoke a political rationale for parent participation in their children's schooling. ACSSO is also

built on a commitment to the principle of participatory democracy, which underpins the provision of public education insofar as those students, parents and teachers involved in the system are enabled and empowered to be partners in the decision-making about their needs and concerns (ACSSO, 1994/5). Brown, Cahir and Reeve (1987) recognised that parents, teachers and students have some authority to participate in determining the school experience. For parents, that authority derives from their role as parents and their responsibility to and for their children, and their right to participate in decisions affecting their children's education (ACSSO, 1994/5).

In ACSSO's 1994/5 Policy Document, the principle of participatory democracy is combined with the principles of equality and excellence to

form an essential statement of principles to guide the organisation's practical activities, which are geared towards achieving a high quality public education system for everyone. ACSSO's brief involves parents arguing on behalf of girls and boys and putting the case that schools and school systems should take the responsibility for ensuring equality of outcomes for all young people. Through schooling, all young people should have independent access to knowledge and the skills and understandings necessary to shape their own lives and to participate in shaping society. Learning outcomes should not be effected by gender or sexuality, nor ethnic origin, racial background, class, ability/disability, and geographic location (ACSSO, 1994/5).

Ross Free (1995), the Federal Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training, acknowledged and welcomed the parent perspective that ACSSO contributes to the educational debate. He invited all government and non-government education authorities to recognise the need to strengthen the role of parents in school education. "When this occurs, the quality of schooling in Australia will be further enhanced as parents, teachers and education authorities work together to improve the learning outcomes of students" (p.3). Other state and territory Ministers of Education have done the same with respect to the state-based parent organisations' contribution to educational reform.

At the time of writing this paper, the MCEETYA Gender Equity Taskforce has completed its work and developed a national Gender Equity Framework, which is about improving educational outcomes for girls and boys in Australian schools. The final draft goes to the MCEETYA meeting on December 8 for approval to release the document for consultation, so we are unable to comment on it now; but whatever happens, ACSSO wants to see that work put to good use.

ACSSO also wants state and territory governments to undertake research into the different needs and concerns of girls and boys, and different groups of girls and boys, from different language backgrounds, from low

socio-economic backgrounds, those who live in remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. ACSSO wants schools to develop strategies that attends to teaching, learning and assessment suited to the different needs of girls and boys; that breaks down male and female stereotypes, including paid and unpaid work in and outside the home; and that addresses the separate areas of disadvantage particular to girls and boys (ACSSO. 1994/5).

Parents have challenged the meaning of gender equity, and the way some "gender" programs have focussed on girls, but looked like they ignored boys. That said, ACSSO recognises that the problems boys experience are not simply "gender" problems. A lot of children struggle with learning, different approaches to teaching, quality of teaching, the curriculum content, competition and assessment, and various behavioural problems and their effects. Parents want a thoughtful and imaginative response to their concerns about girls and boys, and different groups of girls and boys, through programs that identify the gender dimension in children's struggles at school. They certainly want boys to benefit from gender equity initiatives, particularly on the construction of masculinities. They recognise that some versions of masculinity, especially the 'macho' version, can be harmful and damaging to boys as well as girls. Parents also want gender work to move beyond critique to provide hope and possibilities, so that girls and boys can learn about thoughtful ways of being and living in a society which is not characterised by domination and oppression.

### Productive partnerships

ACSSO wants Departments of Education to provide the opportunities for parents to participate in decision-making about educational goal setting for girls and boys at the state level and the school level, and to ensure collaboration before decisions are made and then during the implementation of sensitive curriculum issues (ACSSO, 1994/5). ACSSO recognises there is some resistance to parent participation, when principals and teachers have little regard for parents, when schools do not have a policy on parent participation, and do not bother to develop the appropriate infrastructure of support. As Brown and Reeve (1993) pointed out, parents are often relegated to the roles of fund-raising or lobbying the Ministers in centralised school systems.

In an effort to break down these barriers, ACSSO encourages productive partnerships between parents, teachers, and students. Productive partnerships demonstrate not only more equal power relations in the school community but good relations between men and women, boys and girls, and respectful ways of working together. Everybody needs to feel secure and valued in terms of what they have to offer. This is different to parent involvement which simply means informing parents about what is happening in school and education more generally. This

is also different to the common approach to parent participation, where teachers and others acknowledge the influence of parents and families on students' learning and their behaviour, and initiate a form of parent education to complement the school's teaching program. For instance, programs on violence in schools which revolve around student behaviour often use parent education in the form of parenting courses to reinforce the school's work, to develop parent effectiveness, conflict resolution skills and positive parental role models.

ACSSO recognises the limits of this approach to parent participation. To continue with the example, parental programs and behaviour management are simplistic solutions to addressing violent behaviour in schools. Violence in schools is a part of the complex problem of violence in society. Parents' role modelling and behaviour change strategies are not enough to address the incidence of violent behaviours, including homophobic violence. Encouraging more positive role models and managing student behaviour does not challenge the practices and power relations that contribute to the social problem of violence in schools. As the Gender and Violence Project's "No Fear" kit (forthcoming) pointed out, these sorts of programs are limited because they do not necessarily problematise the underlying attitudes and assumptions that underpin and perpetuate violent behaviours. At the same time, they do not address the school practices that may unwittingly reinforce the particular behaviours that are of concern.

ACSSO agreed with the 'Sticks and Stones' Report and the "No Fear" kit that violence is a critical social issue. The parent organisation is concerned about students' and teachers' experience of violence, and wants to address girls' and boys' involvement in sex-based harassment, bullying and other forms of violence. Parents are disturbed about the effects of violence on schooling and learning outcomes. When the Gender and Violence Project materials are released (and they went to print on November 16), ACSSO wants its affiliates to have copies of the "No Fear" kit. We are hoping to produce and distribute a "parent pack" that will develop an understanding about violence and its relationship to gender and power within the networks of school parent organisations, and through them, the wider parent body.

### Sexuality education

In an ironic twist to parent participation, parents are supposed to be invited to participate in discussions about sexuality education, which is about teaching children, or helping them learn, about all the things that constitute sexuality (Murrow, 1995). Wilson (cited by Murrow, 1995) provided a list of ways to make parents partners in the decision-making. She suggested teachers should invite parents on to advisory committees to review and approve the teaching program and resources. Parents should be invited to meetings to discuss and view all the resources. Parents should have the opportunity to undertake

the course, and be asked for an evaluation of the teaching program to determine its effectiveness. Children should be asked to complete homework with their parents. Most importantly, parents should be given the opportunity to withdraw their children from classes.

Parents' entitlement to participate in their children's schooling experience is particularly significant in sexuality education. However, the idea of consulting parents on sexuality education has had more to do with the sensitive and controversial nature of the teaching program, and with Ministers and school administrators wanting to minimise conflict. The rationale for parent participation should not be built on the fear of teaching sexuality education. Whatley (1992) called it a defensive teaching position that is designed to avoid conflict and controversy.

Parent participation in sexuality education, like parent participation more generally, rests on the importance of parents in the teaching and learning process. ACSSO's (1994/5) policy asserts that parents have a unique knowledge and understanding of their children. Parents are the child's first educators, and they have talents, interests and energies that can enrich and diversify the school's teaching program. ACSSO's policy is underpinned by the educational rationale for parent participation spelt out by Brown, Cahir and Reeve (1987) and Brown and Reeve (1993), where parent participation is integral to the development of curriculum which builds on the knowledge and experiences of students (and their families). Parents are important because they provide access to the social backgrounds and cultural frameworks that are part of the known world each child brings to school. This is crucial to the school's task of building a relevant curriculum, responding to children's needs and concerns, and moving girls and boys forward in their educational and social lives.

In sexuality education, productive partnerships mean parents and the home join with teachers and the school to work together in a way that takes into consideration young people's different family backgrounds and the different cultural expressions of what it means to be sexual. It means teachers, parents and students draw on the knowledge that derives from their experience of living in traditional family settings; of living in settings characterised by separation, estrangement, and divorce; of living in defacto relationships; of sole parents with or without partners; and of people who live in different family situations; not to forget those young people who experience homelessness. This helps girls and boys and adolescents learn about the complex social processes of sexuality.

Murrow (1995, citing Calderone and Johnson) indicated that sexuality has to do with "the entire self as girl or boy or man or woman, including 'sexual thoughts, experiences, learnings, ideas, values and imaginings, as these have to do with being male or female" (p.2). It has to do with gender identity in that a person is male or female, and

gender roles in that a person acts like a man or woman, but it is not just about biological definitions of men and women. Sexual identity is complicated by the ways people actively negotiate meanings about

sex, sexuality and sensuality from home, school, popular culture, the media, sport, fun times, friendships and relationships. For young people, sexual identity is determined by age-related social definitions of sexuality, which find expression in intimate homosocial friendships, 'mixed group' activities, and teenage romance.

In the absence of parents and teachers, young people rely on youth culture to inform their expectations of sex and sexuality. As Thomson and Scott (1992) pointed out, the possession and acquisition of sexual knowledge for adolescents is not straight forward. The most popular form of peer sex education is built on male sexual discourse or dominant male 'sex talk', which positions and defines boys and girls in particular ways. This sort of thing teaches adolescents about a dominant sexual order where the agenda revolves around boys, 'who is going out with who', and often actual sexual experience. It is naive to think that young people are not sexually active. In a report on adolescent sexual involvement in New Zealand, Murrow (1995) cited two studies which indicated that sexual activity is relatively prevalent among 15 year olds.

The traditional response to sexuality education staunchly promotes family life education, youth abstinence from sexual activity, the avoidance of disease, reproductive heterosexuality, and conformity to moral absolutes. We cannot assume that this sort of sexuality education is useful to young people. There are some who simply do not identify with the biological reproductive model; there are some who are not interested in delaying sexual activity; and there are some who refuse and reject the moralistic approach. Young people need more than information about sexual activity and genital contact, 'the birds and the bees', and married life. They need more than "Chinese whispers" from their peers (Thomson and Scott, 1992). They certainly need more than ridicule and hostility if they question their sexuality.

To counter this situation, parents, teachers and students can work together on understanding the friendships and relationships between girls and boys, and between girls and between boys. They can determine what constitutes an acceptable sexuality, given that young people live in different social groups and come from different cultural backgrounds. Kitzinger (cited by Murrow, 1995) provided a lead for discussion. "Sexuality... is seen as an integral part of human existence. (It) is about the acceptance of ourselves as sexual beings, our feelings about being male or female, the way we express our sexual feelings, and the way we communicate those feelings to others" (p.2).

## Overcoming conflict and controversy

ACSSO offers the advice to individual teachers or groups working on matters of sex and gender to tap into the parent network. ACSSO and its affiliates have a huge network in place to support the operation of parents working in schools, where parents are active in decision-making. The parent organisations also have guidelines that provide some direction and instruction to school teams of parents, teachers, students and others wanting to work together in the school setting on projects of interest.

ACSSO supported the Gender and Violence Project's encouragement of a whole school approach to understanding the problem of gender and violence, and the "No Fear" kit's intention to create a non-violent school community. Productive partnerships are an important ingredient in the whole school approach and in groups working together on sensitive and controversial issues. The school parent organisation

would be receptive to teachers wanting to make a presentation at a parent meeting. The parents would then have an opportunity to hear about teachers' proposals to address matters of concern, and express some support. The parents at the meeting would also be able to share their concerns and anecdotal stories, and hear the teachers' response to what they want. Another strategy is for teachers to invite the school parent organisation to identify two "key parent representatives" to work on a school team, which would be supported by the school parent organisation and the school generally.

The idea of a genuine partnership between the two "key parent representatives" and others is also informed by the educational rationale for parent participation, which has to do with the knowledge the parents bring to the task of working on the school team. As Brown, Cahir and Reeve (1987) pointed out, parents' knowledge embodies their insights and understandings about the world which comes from life experiences as well as knowledge that is relevant to the task of teaching and learning. The task of developing an understanding of violence, power, gender, and sexuality requires not only the school team working together but regular and on-going discussions in the parent forum and parent newsletters. As Brown, Cahir and Reeve (1987) reminded us, parents in government schools will distill a set of common understandings and principles from their collective knowledge through the on-going process of discussion and negotiation. Parents, mothers, fathers, men and women, will relate to discussions about gender and what it means to be male and female, and about the exercise of power. Their own life histories and their children's daily experiences provide them with first-hand knowledge of the way power and violence, gender and sexuality impacts on their life chances.

By discussing and negotiating national and state gender equity

strategies and the contents of the "No Fear" kit, the school parent organisation and the wider parent body will support and contribute to the school team's efforts to provide hope and possibilities for girls and boys. As the "No Fear" kit indicated, "Schools have significant potential to be the agents and contexts for positive change in responding to such concerns by developing understandings, positive values and skills about gender relations and violence among students, staff and parents" (p.5).

#### Endnote

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