Submission to Inquiry Into the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004 by the Australian Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee

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1.0 Context

As indicated in the letter of invitation to provide a written submission to this inquiry, the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004 proposes to permit the provision of scholarships to persons of one sex in relation to school teaching courses. Specifically, the purpose of the Bill is to amend Section 38 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 to permit the provision of teaching scholarships to males, in order to address the imbalance in the number of male and female teachers in schools.

The proposed amendment to Section 38 of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 entails the insertion of a sub-section 38A (Preference to address gender imbalance in school teaching), that reads as follows:

(1) Nothing in Division 1 or 2 renders it unlawful for a person to discriminate against another person, on the ground of the other person’s sex, by offering scholarships to persons of the opposite sex in respect of their participation as students in a teaching course, if the scholarships are offered in order to redress a gender imbalance in teaching.

With the aim of assisting the Committee’s deliberations, the present submission focuses on two areas of relevance (with brief summaries), namely:

1. The ‘declining’ trends in male to female teacher ratios in Australian schools during the last decade, and possible reasons for the ‘gender imbalance’. Despite prevailing anecdote and popular myth, there is a pressing need to know more about senior secondary students’ attitudes towards, and perceptions of teaching as a career – particularly those of males – prior to any proposed amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act 1984.

2. It is important to be informed about relevant findings from local and international evidence-based research that shed light on the relationship between teacher gender and students’ cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes of schooling throughout their primary and secondary years. In brief, this evidence indicates that whereas students’ general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of schooling are influenced by their background and intake characteristics (~9% of the variance), the magnitude of these effects pale into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects (~50% of the variance) – regardless of teacher gender. That is, the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes of schooling – not teacher gender.

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² teaching course means a course of study that leads to a qualification for teaching students at schools in Australia.
³ gender imbalance in school teaching means an imbalance in the ratio of male to female teachers in: (a) schools in Australia generally; or (b) a particular category or categories of schools in Australia; or (c) a particular school or schools in Australia.
2.0 ‘Declining’ trends in male to female teacher ratios in Australian schools

The data summarised in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below are instructive.\(^4\)

These data indicate that the proportional ‘decline’ in male to female teaching staff in Australian schools over the 11-year period (1993-2003) has been a mere 4.7\% for

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primary schools, and a corresponding 4.2% for secondary schools. Given teacher employment increases over this period (i.e., 18.3% in primary schools, and 9.3% in secondary schools),\(^5\) this apparent ‘decline’ is negligible. In the event that the observed trends in male to female teaching staff ratios over the past 11 years continue to ‘decline’ at the same rate, it would take ~47 years before reaching ‘zero males’ in primary schools, and ~118 years in secondary schools. The likelihood of this scenario is highly improbable. Further, for the ‘reasons’ outlined briefly in #2.1 following, it is the firm view of the present writer that the effects of the proposed Bill are unlikely to have an impact on the ‘gender imbalance in school teaching’ – at either the primary or secondary levels of schooling.

2.1 Reasons for ‘gender imbalance’ in teaching?

Evidence-based explanations for the ‘gender imbalance’ in teaching (especially in pre-primary and primary education) are unknown. Nonetheless, anecdote and popular myth about ‘ignorance’ and ‘ineptitude’ within the teaching profession abound (see Shulman, 1986). Perhaps the best known and most infamous aphorism that has plagued those choosing teaching as a career for more than a century (particularly for males) is George Bernard Shaw’s (1901) maxim: “He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches”\(^6\). According to Lee Shulman (Professor of Education at Stanford University and former President of the American Educational Research Association), Shaw’s maxim “...is a calamitous insult to our profession, yet one readily repeated even by teachers” (1986, p. 4). More recently, views of school teaching as: “a low-paid, low-status and predominantly female occupation”,\(^7\) are expressed by persons within and without the profession. Indeed, the current Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training has responded to such views by asserting: “There is no higher goal in my portfolio than raising the quality of professionalism and status of teachers” (Nelson, 2002).

The evidence for such ‘low-status’ views is, at best, anecdotal. Moreover, it is not known how widely these views are held throughout the Australian community, and particularly by young males. To this end, it would be invaluable to know more about Year 11 and Year 12 students’ attitudes towards, and perceptions of teaching as a career by conducting a national sample survey to provide baseline data on what students ‘think’ about teaching. The purpose of such a survey would be to identify:

(a) reasons why more highly competent students (both males and females) do not choose teaching as a career; and
(b) conditions and/or incentives that would be attractive to competent young males and females to undertake teacher education and training courses in preparation for a teaching career.

Occasional surveys would allow changes in attitudes and perceptions to be monitored over time, and provide valuable feedback data to assess the impact of any intervention policy initiatives that might be implemented to address such attitudes/perceptions. It is the firm view of this writer that, at the very least, such a baseline survey should be

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\(^5\) That is, between 1993 and 2003, FTE teaching staff in Australian primary schools increased from 98,526 to 116,568 (18.3%), and FTE teaching staff in secondary schools increased from 103,385 to 113,008 (9.3%).


\(^7\) Professor Jean Russell (personal communication). Centre for Applied Educational Research, the University of Melbourne.
undertaken prior to promulgating amendments of the kind proposed by the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004.

3.0 The importance of teacher quality - regardless of gender

From recent and emerging local and international evidence-based research related to educational effectiveness, much has been and continues to be learnt about key factors affecting students’ general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviors and experiences of schooling.\(^8\) Whereas such outcomes are influenced by students’ background and intake characteristics, the magnitude of these effects pale into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects. That is, the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes of schooling, regardless of either student or teacher gender, as well as students’ backgrounds. Indeed, findings from the related local and international evidence-based research consistently indicate that:

(a) the effect sizes for teacher gender on students’ educational outcomes throughout their primary and secondary years of schooling are not significantly different from zero; and

(b) ‘what matters most’ in terms of students’ outcomes and experiences of schooling is quality teachers and teaching, supported by strategic teacher professional development – not teacher gender!

Clearly, the issues of quality teachers and teaching are not gender-specific. The overwhelming evidence is that ‘good’ teachers, whether male or female, have positive impacts on students’ experiences and outcomes of schooling, and ‘poor’ teachers have deleterious effects. For example, Professor Linda Darling-Hammond (2000) has summarized extant research findings for the effects of teacher quality on student outcomes as follows:

The effect of poor quality teaching on student outcomes is debilitating and cumulative...The effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from students’ backgrounds...A reliance on curriculum standards and statewide assessment strategies without paying due attention to teacher quality appears to be insufficient to gain the improvements in student outcomes sought...The quality of teacher education and teaching appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class sizes, overall spending levels or teacher salaries.

Economic and industrial issues surrounding school effectiveness and teacher quality are especially sensitive ones at the present time given the level of consensus regarding the importance of school education as an essential element of both micro- and macro economic reform, and in meeting the constantly changing demands of the modern workplace (OECD, 1983, 1986, 1989, 1993, 1995). Proclamations by the international media magnate Rupert Murdoch at the National Press Club on 12 October 2001, serve to underscore this importance. On this occasion, Murdoch asserted that if Australia continues with its reluctance to invest in the quality of its primary, secondary and tertiary educational infrastructure, and especially in teacher quality, “…Australia will

end up even further behind the international economic ‘8-ball’ than it is at present, such that Paul Keating’s ‘banana republic’ prognostications will become a reality”.

In this context, Australian teachers should be encouraged by, and endorse, the announced initiatives by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), namely: (a) a Teachers for the 21st Century initiative – focused on high quality teaching standards supported by teacher professional development programs; (b) a Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, and (c) a “...strategy to focus on equipping teachers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities, and with other learning difficulties such as dyslexia and attention deficit disorders”, via the funding of “...projects at the national and State levels in both the early and middle years of schooling”. Nelson (2002) concludes:

In terms of improving educational outcomes for our children there is no higher priority than ensuring that we have quality teachers. A nationally agreed framework on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism is a crucial step in this direction.

In support of this ‘crucial step’, the recently released ‘10-point agenda’ discussion document from DEST, titled: Taking schools to the next level: The national education framework for schools, constitutes a sound basis for ensuring that Australia builds capacity towards quality teaching and learning provision that is unequalled by ANY previous Australian federal or state government in memory. It is hoped that this ‘agenda’ is not distracted by ‘red herrings’ related to ‘gender imbalance in school teaching’.

4.0 Concluding comments and recommendations

In the opinion of the present writer, the amendment proposed by the Sex Discrimination Amendment (Teaching Profession) Bill 2004 constitutes a ‘Pandora’s Box’ that opens the way for ‘inclusion’ by other occupational groups that may, from time-to-time, experience a ‘gender imbalance’ – all for inappropriate and unjustified reasons. If the Australian Government is serious about promoting the status of teachers in terms of the invaluable contributions they make to the enrichment of students’ wellbeing and ‘life chances’, as well as to capacity-building for the nation’s social and economic future, it is vital that the persons of the highest quality (regardless of their gender) be encouraged to enter teacher training and the teaching profession.

To this end, it is recommended that scholarships be made available to both male and female persons of high calibre; ensure that they receive high quality teacher education and training; and are subsequently maintained by on-going, strategic professional development.

A challenge that needs to be addressed urgently is the development of standards for highly accomplished teaching and school leadership, accompanied by assessment procedures, and a national certification system based on these assessments. Employing authorities then need to be convinced to pay more to teachers who achieve these certified standards. Whether the proposed National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) will advance this agenda remains a question at this stage. It will also be important that the profession itself develops and owns standards for highly accomplished practice. The work of the mathematics, science and English associations to develop standards and accompanying assessment procedures is

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9 This work has now been completed. See: Commonwealth of Australia (2003).

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pointing the way. But Australia now needs a NATIONAL SYSTEM to bring all this together.

In the event that the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee requires additional verbal or written information and/or clarification of the contents of this submission, the writer is willing to comply.

5.0 References


10 The work of my ACER colleague Dr Lawrence Ingvarson (Director of ACER’s Teaching & Learning Research Program) in the area of teaching standards and teacher professional development should be noted here. For examples of this work, see: Ingvarson (1998, 1999, 2001, 2002a,b); Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2004).


