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## **Innovation in an Emasculated Profession: Please Ma'am, can we have some more blokes teaching in Primary Schools?**

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### Abstract

This paper argues there is a need for more men and 'blokes' in the Primary School teaching workforce. The argument is supported with reference to recent data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) about overall student academic performance among Australian students and the contributing effect of poor classroom management. It is also supported by data derived from research undertaken with parents and Year 6 Primary School students in Sydney, Australia.



## **Innovation in an emasculated profession: Please Ma'am, can we have some more blokes teaching in Primary Schools?**

### **Introduction**

This paper argues there are compelling reasons for more men and 'blokes' to take up Primary School teaching as a profession. The argument rests on a number of well-known conventional issues which we interpret differently. For example, historically and still today the gender make-up of the Primary School teaching workforce has been female-dominated. Received wisdom and feminist scholarship especially would have it that this is not necessarily a problem, but we argue that there are valid reasons for believing that it is.

More specifically, a brief review of relevant literature shows that the bulk of Australian research and policy intervention into matters of gender in schools has been feminist in origin and has focused largely on the perceived disadvantages suffered by girls. Moreover, while there has been some interest in the male gender in schooling, it has focused on issues such as the fortunes of boys in the absence of male role models. We take a different approach that is not focussed solely on male teachers substituting for absent fathers, namely, we argue that encouraging more men and 'blokes' into the profession of Primary School teaching would benefit all students.

Our support of this position is two-fold. We draw on an empirical study of the views of parents and primary-aged students about their perceptions of the need for more male primary school teachers. We also reflect on recent discussions of the declining performance of Australian school children on measures of academic performance including performance attributable to poor classroom management that omit teacher gender as even a partial explanation of these phenomena. In order to develop the discussion we now turn to the gender make-up of the Primary School Teaching workforce.

### **The Gender Make-up of the Primary School Teaching Workforce**

Martino (2008) argues that males have been a longstanding numerical minority in the primary school workforce and that the feminisation of the classroom can be traced back to the mid-



1800s and is therefore 'nothing new'. In our context, the NSW teaching workforce, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics data the number of male primary school teachers is decreasing in schools, as shown in Figure 1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; 2013).

Figure 1 compares aggregate male and female full time equivalent teachers in all NSW primary schools over the period 1993 to 2012. The graph shows that the total number of female teachers in all NSW primary schools has increased since 1993 (by 10,069 teachers), while the total number of male teachers has decreased (by 721 teachers). This slow decrease in male teacher numbers appears more dramatic considering the comparatively rapid increase in the number of female primary teachers. As a percentage the number of male teachers in NSW primary schools has decreased in relative terms from 25% in 1993 to 17% in 2012 and during that period was highest in 1994 at 26%.

Figure 2 compares the number of male teachers in all government and non-government primary schools in NSW. It shows that between 1993 and 2012 there was a decrease in the number of male primary teachers in government schools but a gradual increase in the number of male primary teachers in non-government schools.

As Figure 2 indicates, despite the increase of male teachers in non-government schools the overall number of male primary teachers in NSW has decreased. Systemic differences notwithstanding, one has to wonder why a growing gender imbalance in the teaching workforce of these proportions is not the subject of more as well as more intense discussion. One possible explanation is the history of Australian educational research concerned with gender issues in schools.

### **The Focus of Australian Educational Research on Women and Girls**

The bulk of Australian educational research concerned with gender has been about girls and women and the perceived disadvantages visited upon them. Figure 3 summarises this historical context and is then explained.



### Pre-Feminism.

19<sup>th</sup> century Australian schooling was primarily for males with women only taking subjects relating to household duties (Hayes, 1996). Until the late 1800s Australian universities were exclusively for men. The first woman to graduate from an Australian university was Bella Guerin in 1883 from the University of Melbourne (Selleck, 2003 as cited in Vickers, 2007). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (1959), Dorothy Hill became Australia's first female professor (Vickers, 2007). These last two events indicate the first steps towards gender equity in education that would be built on by later waves of the feminist movement.

### Feminism (1970s- Early 1990s).

From the early 1970s into the early 1990s feminism significantly influenced Australia's education system. According to Hayes (1996) the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, followed by the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, contributed to a focus on the education of girls beginning with the formation of the Australian Commonwealth School Commission. In 1973 this commission presented the 'Karmel report' (Hayes, 1996) which made a brief mention of the disadvantages faced by girls. It was followed by the Australian Commonwealth Schools Commission's *Girls School and Society* (Australian Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975). Later, in 1984, *Girls and tomorrow: The challenge for schools* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1984) attempted to establish a national policy to address the issues raised in *Girls School and Society*. The policy was released three years later (in 1987) namely, the *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (Australian Education Council, 1987). It was the first national policy in the area of schooling and a milestone for girls' educational welfare. While schooling is the responsibility of the Australian states and territories, this national policy showed commitment and collaboration between the federal government and the states and territories (Hayes, 1996). The implementation of that policy was later reviewed; namely the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97* (1993, see House of Representative Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002).

Education policy and advancements remained focused on girls, leading to tremendous improvements in the education of girls and women. So much so that girls were soon 'outperforming' boys in school and beginning to also lead university enrolments in some areas. Changes such as these, which had previously evidenced male advantage, were now seen to indicate that men were somehow becoming disadvantaged (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). This reverse disadvantage, in university enrolments and test scores, led many to believe that boys were



becoming victims of a feminised education system. Many academics and feminists in particular saw this change of focus to boys' disadvantage, labelled the 'boy turn', as unwarranted and unwanted.

### **The 'Boy Turn'.**

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the shift or as feminists termed it the 'backlash', from girls' to boys' education created a phenomenon in media and research. Described as the 'thrill of the new' (Weaver-Hightower, 2003), the attention on boys' education examined why boys had become such a concern and offered a range of possible answers. Indeed government reports have indirectly contributed to a focus on boys' education. First, the Australian federal parliament inquiry into boys' education, *Boys: Getting it Right* (House of Representative Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002), was released. The Australian government announced a \$19.4 million commitment to the *Success for Boys* program three years later (Vickers, 2007; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2008). The *Boys: Getting it Right* inquiry focused on factors affecting the academic performance of boys. Additionally, a part of the inquiry attempted to clarify the importance of male role models in schools:

*Just as it is considered helpful for girls to see women in positions of authority and involved in activities outside traditional feminine roles, it is helpful for boys to see men supporting and caring for others and men who are at ease with women exercising authority (House of Representative Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002).*

The need for male role models has become a longstanding solution to overcome boys' perceived disadvantage, hence arguments for more male primary school teachers. The type of man who should fill this gap in Primary Schools is quite an issue. The justification for male role models offered in *Boys: Getting it Right* implies a desire to see metrosexual, submissive men entering the profession. Certainly, men who conform to what feminists and policy-makers may argue are traditional modes of masculinity are not evinced by it. Indeed while we agree 'masculinity' is multi-faceted, as far as traditional masculinity embodied in the concept of 'blokes' is concerned it could be argued the State is untroubled by the emasculation of blokes from the primary school teaching profession. This State view stands in contradistinction to what Weaver-Hightower (2003) classifies as the 'boy turn', typified by 'popular-rhetorical' literature. So-called 'popular-



rhetorical' literature contrasts the State and feminist-leaning academics with a public not totally enamoured with the idea of classrooms absent of blokes.

According to Weaver-Hightower (2003) 'popular rhetorical' literature offers the loudest voices, the most visible headlines, and is often taken to be the source of the 'boy turn'. It often indicates that more men than women are involved in crime and violence; that more boys than girls drop out from school early and suffer from drug addictions, depression, and academic failure; and it locates the blame for these problems in the 'feminised' education system, that is, an education system run mostly by women for girls which has seen girls 'outperforming' boys in some areas.

Popular-rhetorical literature has gained momentum via bestselling books. Also labelled 'backlash blockbusters' (Mills, 2003) and 'recuperative masculinity politics' (Martino & Kehler, 2006), these publications argue that boys are being systematically disadvantaged by schooling. Prominent authors include Biddulph (1995; 1998), Sommers (2000), Pollack (1998), and Gurian (2001). Biddulph (a bestselling author in Australia) has claimed that a lack of fathers and the increased proportion of single parent families makes boys violent, causes boys to perform poorly at school and makes them more likely to join a gang (1995; cited in Martino & Kehler, 2006).

Other sources of popular-rhetorical literature are newspapers and current affairs television programs. These sources argue that boys are educationally disadvantaged and use various national standardised test scores in literacy, dropout rates and university enrolments to support their claims (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). A more recent example of popular-rhetorical literature is The Daily Telegraph's article '*A good man is hard to find for schools*' (McDougall, November 6, 2010). This article outlines the declining number of male teachers in NSW primary schools and refers to the male teacher as a role model, a "multi-talented ... priceless asset", a "hero" and an "endangered species" (p. 110).

Martino and Kehler (2006) criticised media 'truths' in this type of literature from Australia and North America as spurious and a cause of moral panic surrounding boys' education. They argued that the call for more male primary school teachers is driven by 'recuperative masculinity politics'. By 'recuperative masculinity politics' they refer to media portrayals of a crisis of masculinity in primary schools which, when combined with public anxiety and media hyperbole, produce a 'moral panic' positioning boys and male teachers as victims and offering a call for



more male primary teachers as a solution. They go on to say that positioning boys and male teachers as victims proposes that female teachers are emasculating boys (Martino & Kehler, 2006).

While we do not conceive of men as victims we certainly drew inspiration for the title of this paper from propositions such as those of Martino and Kehler. Accordingly, instead of proposing that men are victims we argue that it is long overdue for voices in addition to feminist academics and education bureaucrats to be considered valid in discussions of gender and the gender make-up of the Primary School teaching workforce in particular. For example, students' opinions combined with those of their parents on the issue of the gender of primary school teachers matter, even if they are almost entirely absent from popular-rhetorical literature and underrepresented in research literature (McGrath and Sinclair, 2013). It is to these opinions we now turn.

### **Parents and Primary-Aged Students Want More Men and Blokes Teaching in Primary Schools**

This part of the discussion draws on a mixed method, interpretive study involving year six students and parents of year six students from one government and four non-government primary schools in the northern suburbs of Sydney. It also builds on published research about the social reasons parents and students give for an overarching perceived need for more male primary school teachers (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013).

In total 184 students and 97 parents took part in the research study reported here. The numbers of participants for each method and type of school is outlined in Table 1 below.

### **Results and Discussion**

In recently published research drawn from this study (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013) we identified that parents and students were not especially concerned about the gender of primary school teachers in relation to student academic performance. Instead, parents and students expressed social reasons for a perceived need for more male primary school teachers that would benefit boys and girls. These reasons include:



- To act as role models;
- To act as father figures;
- For boys to relate to, seek help from and confide in;
- For girls to relate to and develop an understanding of men; and
- For girls to learn how to interact with men.

We have already explored some of these issues elsewhere (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013). We reiterate that there are benefits for both boys and girls in having more men teaching in primary schools. For the purposes of the present paper we focus on the type of male teacher most envisaged by parents (fathers and mothers) and students (boys and girls), noting that all participants depicted what feminist scholars would call conventional ‘stereotypes’ of male and female teachers. The stereotypical view of a male teacher across participant groups was of a humorous, relaxed and sport oriented person. A male teacher was seen to tell jokes, use sporting anecdotes and teach outside the classroom. In other words, however stereotypical in terms of masculinity, the type of teacher envisaged was a ‘bloke’.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all students and parents want only blokes. Some girls’ survey responses indicated teacher gender is a non-issue:

*I don’t particularly [sic] mind who I have as a teacher as long as I have someone that I can relate to and who is a good teacher, and explainer. This person should know my strengths and weaknesses (Girl 28). Girl 8 opined I don’t really mind what gender teacher I have, but it would be nice to have a male teacher for a change.*

However, other girls’ survey responses indicated clear preferences for male teachers:

*I think Male teachers are more funny and energetic then [sic] Female teachers. Male teachers teach in a more fun and playful and not boring way, but sometimes Female teachers teach in a boring [sic] way (Girl 35).*

*From the male teachers I’ve had I think they make everything more fun, and made me enjoy school a lot more (Girl 43).*

*Male teachers; So far I have had 1 males teachers but I also had a teacher for a term and then he left. Male teachers are really fun and make learning fun they also are quite good teachers. I also think that there should be a few more in schools (Girl, 56).*



Like some girls, some boys were not particularly concerned about the gender of their teachers:

*It doesn't matter what kind of teacher you have wheather [sic] its male or female. As long as their [sic] fair and they teach well it doesn't matter (Boy 10).*

Like some girls, some boys saw teacher gender as somewhat important:

*Having a male teach [sic] they are kind and are funny and if you are a boy you can speak to him about sport. Having a female teacher they are a bit stricter than male teacher but are very caring. Having either would be good. If we had a variety of male and female teachers would be great (Boy 9).*

Some boys liked male teachers for similar reasons to their female peers:

*I would say that male teachers are more relaxed and funny. I have had far better experiences with male teachers (Boy 22).*

*Male teachers are more fun and you play games with when the class has done well and kept quiet (Boy 23).*

For their part parents expressed similar sets of views as students, albeit in a more sophisticated way. For example, like students some parents were not especially concerned about teacher gender:

*I believe that having positive male teachers is very important for our boys however, the quality of the teacher and their ability to relate, respond and educate our child is the most important point, regardless of their gender. In an ideal school world, we would have both female and male teachers that were all effective, strong and committed to their role as guides and mentors of their students (Mother 6).*

*I absolutely agree that boys in upper Primary classes (3-6) would benefit from having more contact with male teachers. Perhaps even for certain classes eg. PE or Mathematics. However all teachers should be employed on their merits regardless of gender. A good female would be preferrable [sic] to a bad male teacher (Mother 14).*

Some parents were more strongly of the view that there should be more male primary school teachers. One mother put it this way:

*My son's one and only male teacher in his 5<sup>th</sup> year of primary was a really happy and positive school year for him. He still talks about him and regards him as the best teacher of his schooling. This man came to teaching in his forties after a career change from an I.T. background. My son, now aged 12, is extremely disappointed that he has not had another male teacher and is looking forward to secondary schooling for this reason (Mother 2).*



There was also a concern among many parents that a balance of male and female teachers in primary schools might be a good idea:

*I'm a strong believer in co-ed schools + education systems. Teaching staff should also be male/ female. This year is the first year my daughter has had a male teacher & she's enjoying it very much (Mother 26).*

*I believe that particulrly [sic] for boys a reasonable percentage of teachers being men is a good thing (Father 11).*

A recurring theme among some parents was that of classroom discipline. Two mothers expressed their views as follows:

*I think male teachers can bring a balance to the classroom that maybe needed with 'active' boys that may need a male prospective [sic] (Mother 11). I believe male teachers are great. Especially for boys. Hard to explain but I think they receive more respect from the children (Mother 18).*

Father 12 held similar views to the mothers above; *Male teachers appear to be "stricter" i.e. I think this is good.*

Interestingly, some students held similar views to this father. According to Girl 20: *I think that male teachers are more strict and are very good at their job.* Similarly, Girl 42 stated: *I think male teachers sometimes have more control (especially over boys) but I think Female teachers are better for private girl things and issues.* Some boys felt similarly to these two girls. According to Boy 14, *I think male teachers have better ways for dealing with kids.* Some boys also claimed maltreatment by female teachers, a theme mentioned in some research literature that scoffed at the idea of boys being emasculated. Boy 13 put it this way; *I think sometimes Female teachers are sterotypical [sic] because they think boys are bad and girls are good but Male teachers usually know that that's not always the case.* Boy 17 was more blunt; *Female teachers tend to be sexist.*

Much could be made of these data excerpts we have presented. For the purposes of the present paper, we wish to emphasise two themes. First, the type of male teacher that is envisaged or described by parents and students alike as desirable is a 'bloke'. This is not to say that less 'blokey' men are inadequate or undesirable as teachers. Rather, we suggest the data simply tell a story of a desire among the parents and students interviewed for more 'blokes' to teach in primary school classrooms. A second theme is the idea that male teachers make better classroom managers than female teachers. We propose that this second theme is neither universal across



our data sample nor across the primary school teaching workforce. We simply suggest that it is a theme that may have relevance and currency, especially in relation to recent PISA research (OECD, 2011) about the effects of poor classroom management on student academic performance.

Strong attention is being focused on schools and teaching in the newspapers of late (2013), as well as by state and federal departments of education and relevant agencies in light of a decade's worth of OECD findings showing constant decline in Australian student performance in Literacy, Maths and Science (OECD 2000; 2003; 2006; 2009). Although these data refer to 15 year old students their Literacy, Maths and Science performance at this age is to an extent a function of their Primary Schooling. That is, students who exit Primary School and transition into Secondary School with poor Literacy, Numeracy and weak Science knowledge and skills are highly unlikely to reverse their predicament once in Secondary School. Additionally, recent national testing results of years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students have shown mean scale literacy scores for female students to be higher than those of male students across year level, States and Territories and Australia overall (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2012). Returning to the OECD findings, a recent subset of this focus has been classroom discipline (OECD, 2011) showing that noisy/disruptive classes tend to be more associated with lower academic results than classrooms that are well-managed. Part of this effect may be attributed to the use of Direct Instruction as the primary mode of instruction in countries that perform well in comparison with more child-centred modes of instruction prevailing in countries that fare less well (Donnelly, 2013). This is particularly pertinent to Australian Primary Schools where children are socialised into the latter mode of instruction as the 'norm'. Certainly feminist and constructivist views of 'appropriate pedagogy' cohere with child- or student-centred pedagogies and in Australian Teacher Education Direct Instruction has been demonised for at least 30 years. However, another potential cause of classroom misbehaviour not discussed in this recent debate is teacher gender. Thus, it may be that the portion of Australia's poor results that are a consequence of poor classroom management are in turn in some part attributable to the female dominated primary school classroom which also tends to be 'child-centred'. Put another way, given that 83% of the New South Wales Primary School teaching workforce is female it is possible that this gender skewing is a contributing factor to poor classroom management both during Primary School and in later Secondary School life as indicated by OECD findings. This



possibility ties into academic results which are progressively declining in Australian schools in aggregate terms.

### **Conclusion**

In light of our discussion we suggest there is much more potentially at stake in school systems with female dominated primary school teaching workforces than some might believe. First, domestic statistics show that the academic performance of boys in Primary Schools continues to decline relative to girls. While it would be ridiculous to attribute this phenomenon entirely to the gender of teachers, it would also seem that the failure of primary schools to achieve widespread high levels of literacy and numeracy among boys is a cause for concern and this may be influenced by teacher gender because it is an issue of teaching performance and it happens that 83% of teachers responsible for this performance in New South Wales Primary Schools are women. Second, international statistics indicate that aggregate student academic performance, that is student academic performance that seemingly is not gender-specific, is in part a function of classroom management and high levels of noise and disruption in particular. Australian schools fare quite poorly on these teaching performance indicators and again, women are 83% of the primary school teaching workforce that prepares students for secondary school. Third, international statistics about the performance of high school students in the areas of Science and Maths show Australian students are falling behind their international peers. Certainly culturally determined pedagogic preferences such as a partiality for Direct Instruction in many Asian nations must explain some of this discrepancy. However, it is plausible that some of the discrepancy may also be explained by a poor grounding in Maths and Science in primary schools where women are the dominant part of the teaching workforce. In its own small way the empirical part of our research focused on the views of parents and students implies that it may well be time for academics and policy-makers to listen to voices other than their own, even if it means accepting that blokes have a legitimate place in the primary school classroom and there is a need for more of them.



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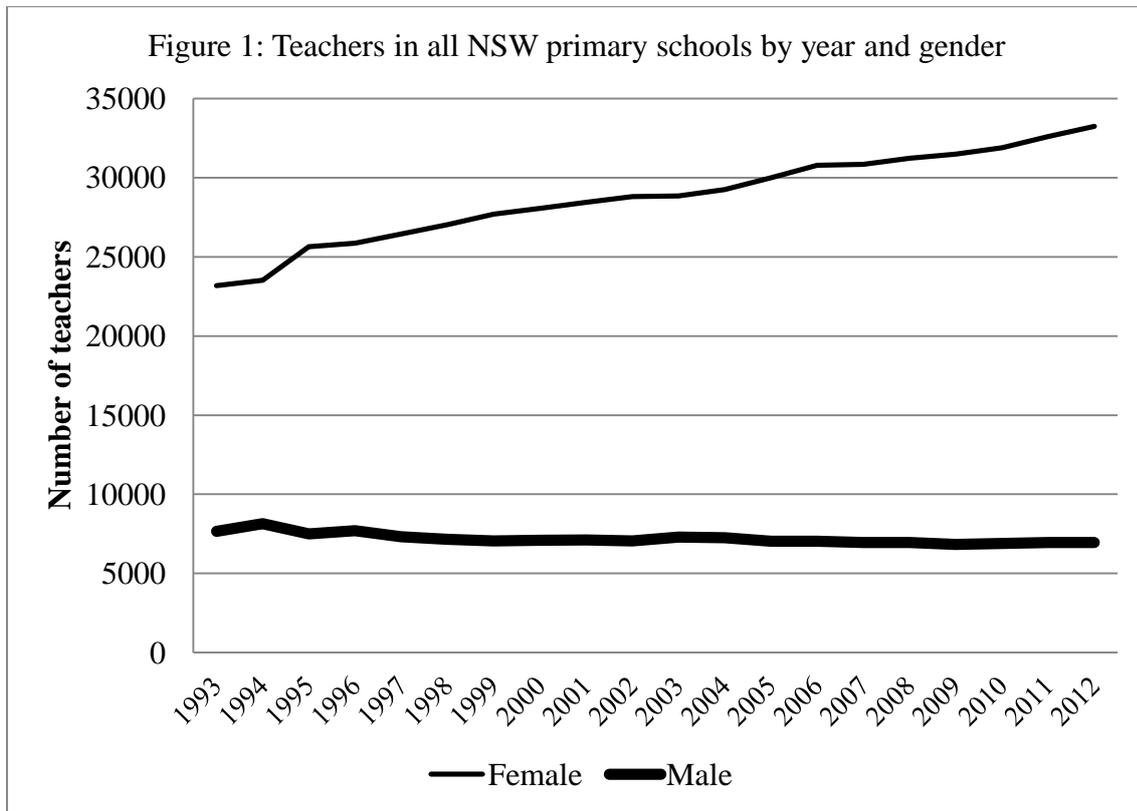


Figure 1. The numbers of male and female full time equivalent primary school teachers in all NSW primary schools from 1993 to 2012 (data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; 2013)

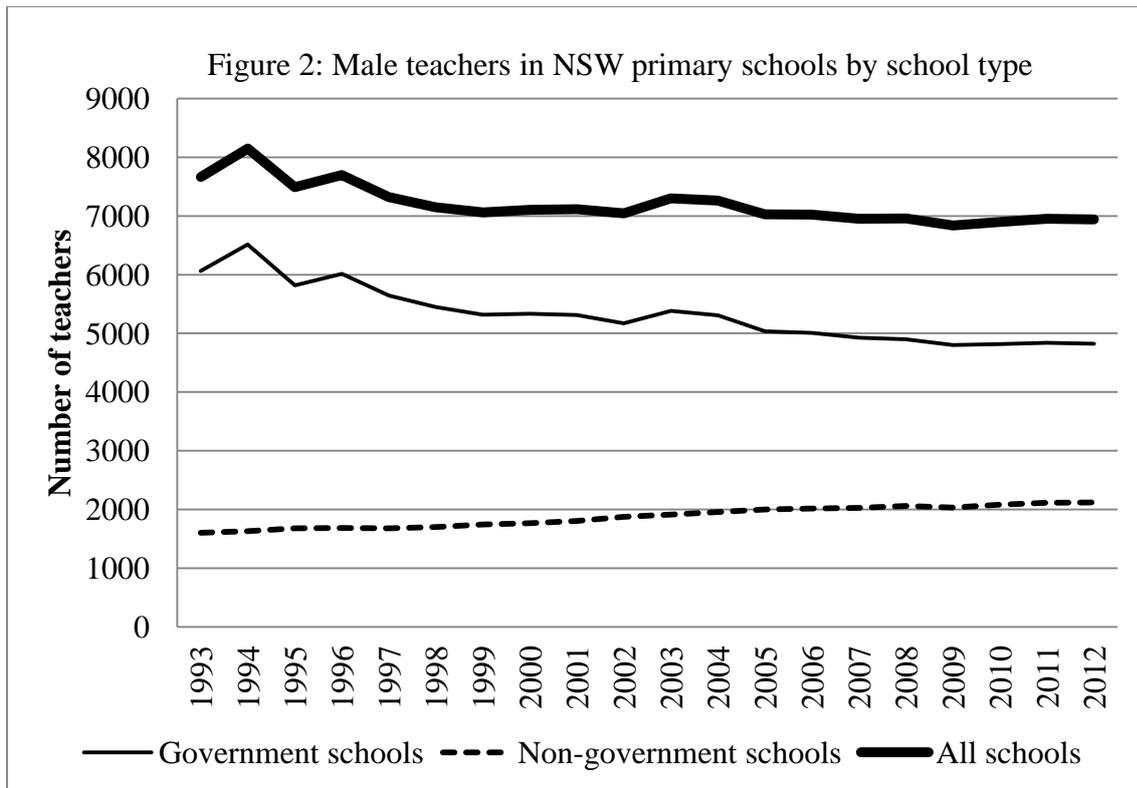


Figure 2. The numbers of male full time equivalent teachers in government and non-government primary schools in NSW from 1993 to 2012 (data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; 2013)

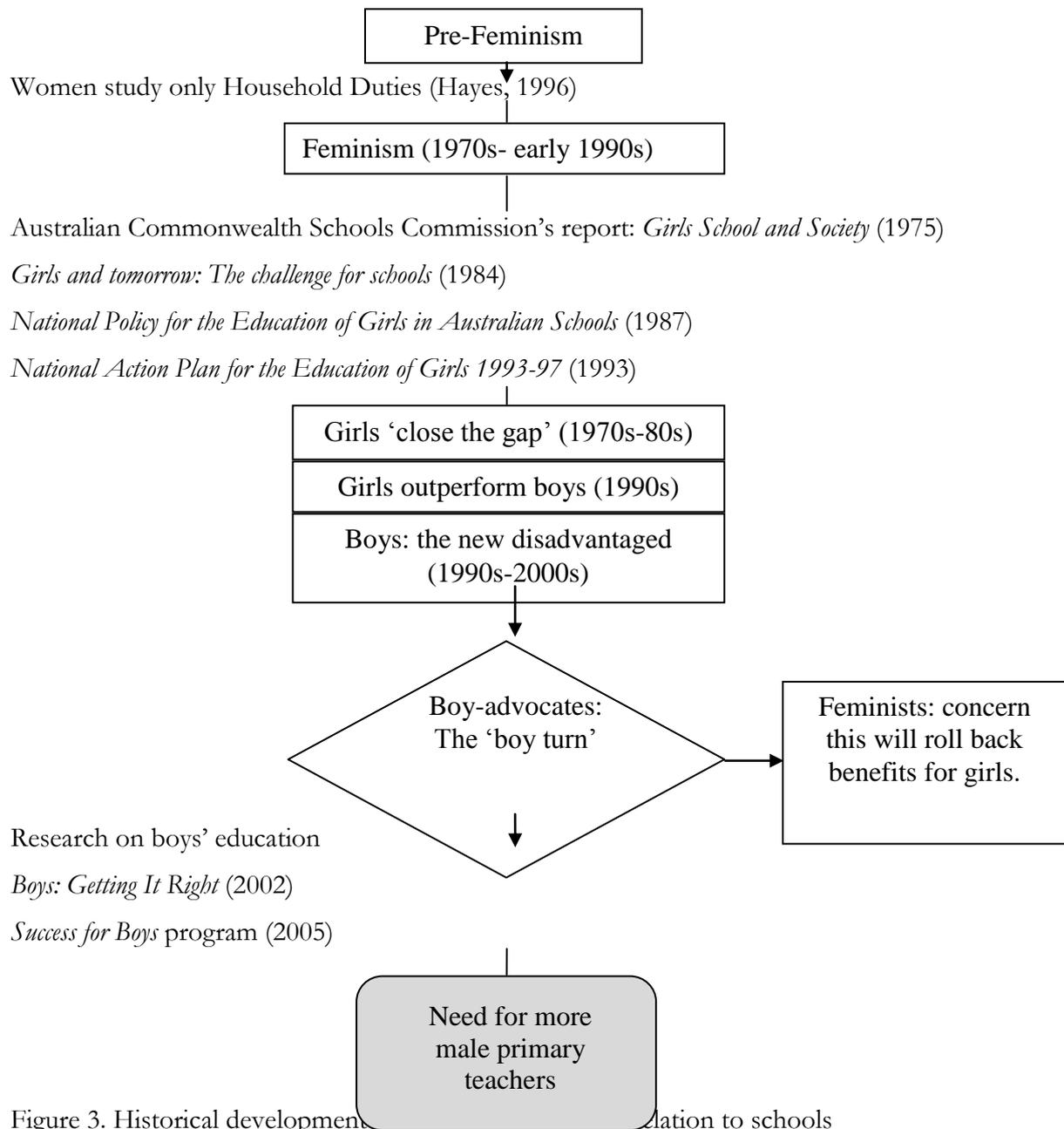


Figure 3. Historical development of gender equality in schools

|                        | Survey Participants |            |            |           |           |          |           | Focus Group Participants |          |           |          |          |          |
|------------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|--------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
|                        | Students            |            |            | Parents   |           |          |           | Students                 |          |           | Parents  |          |          |
|                        | M                   | F          | T          | M         | F         | N        | T         | M                        | F        | T         | M        | F        | T        |
| Government Schools     | 41                  | 32         | 73         | 13        | 22        | 3        | 38        | 0                        | 0        | 0         | 0        | 0        | 0        |
| Non-Government Schools | 39                  | 72         | 111        | 22        | 33        | 4        | 59        | 5                        | 5        | 10        | 3        | 5        | 8        |
| <b>Total</b>           | <b>80</b>           | <b>104</b> | <b>184</b> | <b>35</b> | <b>55</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>97</b> | <b>5</b>                 | <b>5</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>5</b> | <b>8</b> |



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Key: M = Male, F = Female, N = Gender not identified, T = Total

Table 1. Number of participants by method gender and school type