

Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Gender stereotyping and inequity in the primary school environment

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Introduction

I am writing this submission as a parent of three primary school aged children: a ten year old daughter in Grade 5, an eight year old son in Grade 3 and a seven year old daughter in Grade 2. Over the past five years I have observed a number of ways in which the school environment reinforces gender stereotypes. More recently, I have been aware of the way in which unconscious bias, assumptions and collective myths reinforce gender inequality and stereotypes in a way that is potentially damaging to both boys and girls.

In their seminal paper, *Preventing Violence Before it Occurs*, VicHealth identifies the determinants of violence against women as:¹

- Institutional & cultural support for, or weak sanctions against, gender inequality and rigid gender roles
- Belief in rigid gender roles and identities, weak support for gender equality
- Masculine orientation/sense of entitlement
- Male dominance and control of wealth in relationships
- Culturally-specific norms regarding gender and sexuality
- Masculine peer & organisational cultures

This submission will reflect on some of the ways in which these determinants of violence against women are created and reinforced within the primary school environment. As a result, primary schools, rather than being part of the solutions to violence, may inadvertently reinforce societal norms. This pattern will contribute to gender inequality and gender based violence continuing into the next generation.

The information in this submission is based on my personal observation of events and situations that have occurred within my children's primary school. I acknowledge that other people in the school community will hold different perspectives on the situations and events that I describe and that no one perspective is likely to be 100% accurate. I am active in the school community and am a parent member of the school council.

The school in question is a mid to large school in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs. The area is generally very progressive (as evidenced by having one of the lowest conservative votes in the country) and the school community is increasingly affluent (the school has an ICSEA value of 1140 – average 1000).

I have not written this submission and made these observations because I wish to criticise the school. On the contrary, there are many things about the school that are fantastic and I am generally happy with the education my children receive. I have written this submission because I suspect that the situation in this school is being mirrored in primary schools around Victoria. It is my hope that the Royal Commission will investigate ways in which primary schools can more effectively promote gender equity and ensure that all students

¹ VicHealth (2007) *Preventing violence before it occurs A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria*

have an appreciation of the importance of respectful and equal relationships. Primary schools are great settings for prevention work.

Example 1

In March this year, teachers in the school facilitated a process for the election of 12 students from grades 5 and 6 to the Junior School Council. The election process resulted in 8 boys and 4 girls being elected. When challenged about this outcome in relation to the obvious gender inequality that it reflected, the teachers involved stated that they were respecting the students' wishes as expressed through the voting process. They further stated that they had held discussions prior to the election with the students about the importance of electing students based on merit not popularity. Accordingly, they felt that this outcome reflected a merit based process.

There seemed to be little appreciation within the school that adherence to a "merit" based process has resulted in only one woman in the current Federal Cabinet!

As a result of a number of letters from concerned parents and a firm intervention by myself and another parent, the school subsequently held an additional election to elect four more girls to Junior School Council.

Example 2

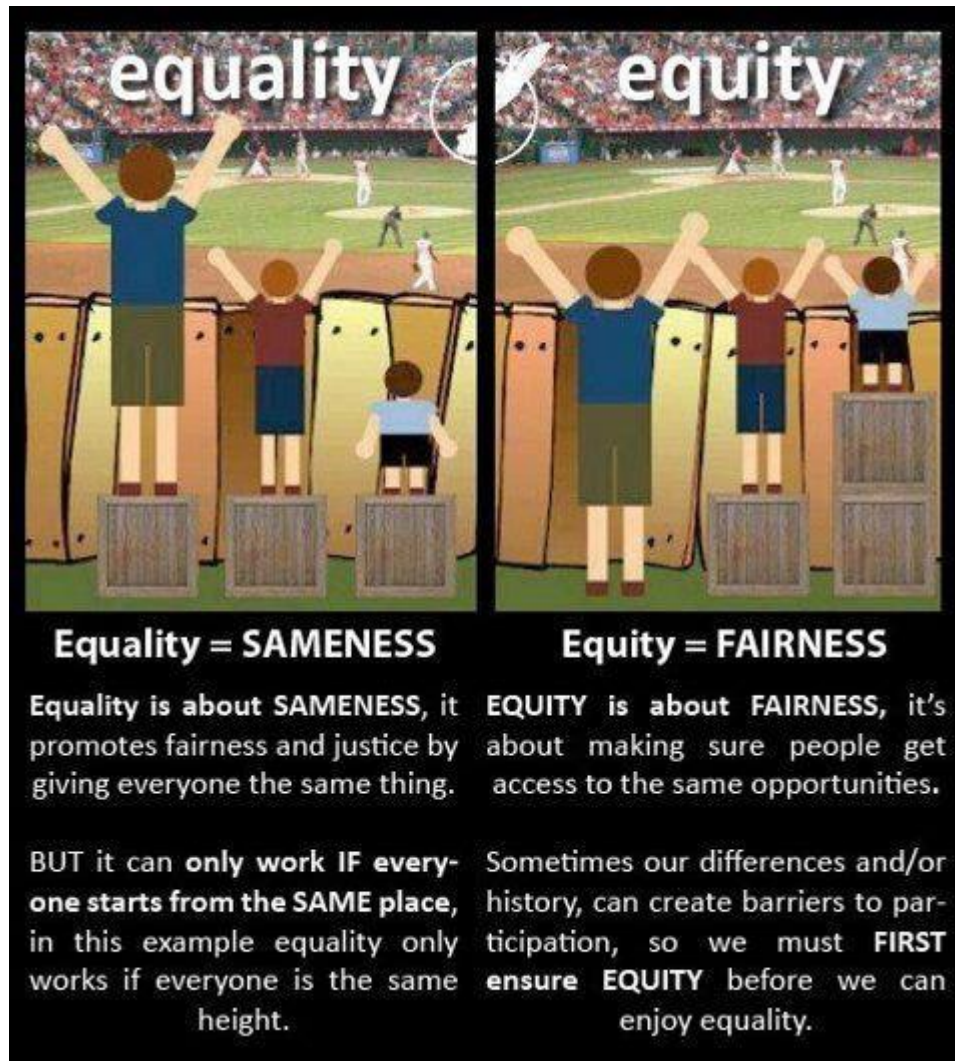
In April this year, the school held try outs for the interschool sports teams. This involved the selection of Grade 5 and 6 students to sports teams in a number of different sports to play against other schools in a catchment wide competition. There is a very large number of girls within the school who play soccer for a local club (the local Darebin Falcons have an Under 11 team made up almost exclusively of students from the school). Despite this very high level of interest in soccer from girls at the school, the selection process for the **mixed** interschool team resulted in 15 boys and 4 girls being chosen. In response to being challenged about this obviously inequitable outcome, the school said:

1. The process was based on merit
2. Everyone was provided with equal opportunity
3. The process possibly favoured girls because approximately 55% of girls who tried out got selected but only 35% of boys who tried out made the team.

In presenting these arguments the school failed to recognise that:

1. Merit had very little to do with the process. Indeed the strongest player in the Darebin Falcons team who is also the top goal kicker, failed to get selected. This was well understood by the dozen female students from the school who play with Falcons. This made a mockery of the concept of merit.
2. Equal opportunity does not equate to equal outcomes – the difference between equality and equity is aptly illustrated in the picture overpage.
3. The process did not favour girls because a number of girls did not try out despite being interested in soccer because they did not feel safe or comfortable playing with the boys. This was the case of my daughter who indicated that the size and roughness of the boys made her feel as if she had no chance.

Many girls were fairly despondent about the process and outcome. Given the way in which team selection proceeded this year, it is likely that even fewer girls will try out next year if the system is not changed.



Example 3

In 2013, the school council made a decision to invest in a new synthetic turf oval. Works were completed early in 2014 and the space was immediately much coveted. The amenity offered by the new area was so appealing that demand for the oval quickly exceeded capacity. Very quickly, older boys dominated the space. Girls and younger children complained that they were not getting a go. In response to this, the school reserved the oval for younger children during the recess break and made Tuesday lunch "girls' day". Girls' day was very unpopular with the boys and subsequently resulted in a number of complaints from parents of boys. By the end of the year, it had fallen by the wayside. This year a number of parents have started talking about how this happened and from discussion with girls, it appears that on Tuesdays the boys frequently stood around the outside of the oval heckling the girls and reportedly yelling (among other things) "why don't you get off our oval".

From the outset the “girls’ day” response was inherently problematic. It embedded inequity rather than address it. Even if it had been maintained, it would have resulted in girls getting 20% of the use of the oval, hardly cause for celebration.

The school has struggled to adequately address this issue. As well as having become an almost exclusively male dominated area, the oval space is now unsafe for younger children (my seven year old daughter is one of many who will not walk across it because of fear of flying soccer balls and footballs). When I raised this with teachers, I was met with the response, “yes, some teachers don’t feel safe walking across there either”. I find this situation totally unacceptable, whether viewed through a gender equity or OHS lens. I am clearly not alone as a number of parents of girls are now refusing to pay the voluntary school oval levy which was instituted to cover the cost of this wonderful facility.

Conclusion

I believe that these three examples, when taken together, paint a pretty bleak picture of our collective lack of progress when it comes to promoting gender equity in primary schools.

These examples reflect the way a number of key determinants of violence against women are embedded within the primary school environment. In particular:

1. Unequal access to power and resources - as evidenced by male domination of the oval and the election of twice as many boys as girls
2. Masculine sense of entitlement - as evidenced by the boys’ dominant use of the oval and the acceptance of a situation in which boys gained 75% of places on the mixed soccer team.
3. Rigid gender stereotypes, as evidenced by the school’s “boys will be boys” attitude inherent in their reluctance as an institution to take decisive action to address gender issues within the school.

These determinants are reinforced by a series of collectively held myths about typical roles of boys and girls. The myths include the ideas that:

1. “It’s okay because we treated everyone equally”
2. “It was based on merit”
3. “Boys will be boys”, “girls don’t like / need to play sport as much anyway”

These myths not only deny girls the opportunity to achieve their full potential, they equally deny boys the opportunity to experience masculinity differently. I am as concerned for my son as I am for my daughters in this environment. I do not want my son growing up thinking that to be a man means being rough, dominating, having an entitlement to more based on his gender, superior, etc. Addressing gender effectively in a primary school environment is good for boys as well as girls.

I do not believe that there is any particular or widespread opposition to gender equity within the school. However, there appears to be a general lack of understanding about the full importance of promoting a gender equitable environment and how to go about it. This is an area where prevention work could reap significant rewards.

I am very happy to be contacted to further discuss any of the points raised in this submission.