



Speech by

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LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SCHOOLS

Mr FENLON (Greenslopes—ALP) (12.15 p.m.): I rise to address certain issues arising from the report to the Minister for Education, the Honourable Dean Wells, on the Statewide performance of students in aspects of literacy and numeracy in Queensland in 1995, 1996 and 1997. In doing so, I also applaud the Minister's massive funding boost aimed at literacy which will see Queensland schools receive a \$28m funding package, primarily for teacher aides. Indeed, this is what teachers really want out there; they want help, not further testing. I know that testing has a role in terms of finetuning the resource allocation decisions in relation to each school, but this is exactly what teachers, parents and school communities in general have been calling for—help directly in solving the problems. This sort of help with teacher aides is really hitting the nail on the head.

First, a number of issues raised in the report deserve particular comment. In 1997 test results of Year 6 aspects of literacy show that in reading and viewing as well as writing, the performance of boys is markedly below the performance of girls. Similarly, the performance of ATSI students is markedly below the whole cohort. Rural students are below, to a large extent, the performance of the whole cohort in reading and viewing and are markedly below the performance of the whole cohort in the area of writing. As a result of these findings, a research study into identifying alternative and authentic pathways for developing greater competency in literacy and numeracy skills for the student groups identified as at risk will take place in 1999. The outcomes of this research will inform syllabus and source book development.

The report tabled by the Minister reflects the changing face of literacy demands and concerns in society in general. It is not too broad a statement to declare that literacy demands go to the heart of how we view ourselves—as citizens, as men, as women—for literacy is, in fact, an issue for the individual as well as the whole of society. It is something that pertains to our being, to our very gender. While Governments can do a certain amount, according to the experts in literacy, much also rests with the family and the home, and indeed much of this rests in those very vital years before school begins.

In response to the Australian situation, the Australian committee for the International Year of Literacy in 1990 formulated a definition of active literacy. It says—

"Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to organise or use language appropriate to different social situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society."

It used to be the case that as long as people had enough literacy to function at the level of society in which they operated then that would be satisfactory. In 1998, with issues surrounding rapid changes in the workplace, greater competition for jobs, multiskilling and the expectation that a person will change jobs an average of seven times in their working lives, the role and importance of literacy skills cannot be underestimated.

No longer do we have a situation, as in my father's day, where a boy or girl could leave school at the age of 12 or 13, after finishing the Scholarship year, walk into a factory or an apprenticeship—or, as in my father's case, the Lakes Creek meatworks in Rockhampton—and remain in that job, often never needing to pick up a pen or a book, for the rest of his or her working life. Young people are

staying at school because they now have no choice. Employers and society at large are demanding more diverse literacy, more efficient communication and more flexibility and adaptation in the workplace.

I now turn to the factors marshalled against the possibility of widespread literacy improvement in our schools. First, one of the most reliable indicators of a child's literacy success has been the education level of the mother. This is the greatest single correlate with the literacy level of children. In the early years, when attitudes and performances are being formed, the mother's interaction with the child can shape a lifelong love of learning, books and writing. This is not to say that men should not become involved in the early role modelling of literacy habits; however, this statistic reveals that in our so-called advanced technological society women are still the primary care givers, resulting in this sort of correlation.

The message from this is that dads should get out there and read to their kids. Dads have a much more important role in this process of reading to kids than we ever considered. More importantly, kids have to see dads read to their kids, and particularly to boys. It is about time the Wally Lewises and the Alfie Langers dropped the footballs for a while and took the book out onto the field. It is about time more prominent people, role models in our society, took a greater role in showing that they love books, that they love reading and that they do read to their kids.

I am very happy to reveal the book I am currently reading to my daughter at bedtime. I think I am enjoying it more than she is. It is *Finn the Wolfhound*, published in 1908 by A. J. Dawson. It is a wonderful book which certainly indicates the great wealth of children's literature that is out there. It shows that parents can enjoy a good read with their kids and simply enjoy the wonderful richness of children's literature. Not only is children's literature developing in a wonderful way; if we look hard enough we can see that there is a wonderful wealth of historical material written for kids. People can really enjoy it.

This leads me to the next factor which seems to be acting against boys' success in particular in the area of literacy in schools. Our images of masculinity in 1998 apparently do not include for many boys the desirability of reading, writing, listening and speaking for the purpose of creative thinking. Rob Gilbert, Associate Professor of Education at James Cook University in Townsville, says that it is not because of insufficient funding during the early primary years. At the moment, the dominant image boys think they have to conform to to be male contradicts what the schools offer.

In his recently published book *Masculinity Goes to School*, written jointly with Pam Gilbert, also an Associate Professor in Education, the topic of masculinity is considered. The Gilberts maintain that the heroic tradition associated with men and boys puts enormous pressure on boys to be special, leaders, courageous and so on. Even our top-level sportsmen are reporting that fear of failure or of losing a match is superseding their enjoyment of the game.

Academic success is seen by many boys these days as something which only nerds do, because so many girls are now overtaking the boys, even in the subject areas that are and have been traditionally male. One has to spend only five minutes in any school playground to hear the derisive epithet "you're just a girl" delivered by boys to other boys. Gilbert's research shows that many boys associate being good at school and academically bright with being quiet and unsociable and with "being a girl". This trickle-down effect continues into career choices. Men do not go into teaching—especially preschool or primary teaching. Therefore, role models of men valuing education and transmitting cultural knowledge are largely absent in the early school years.

In a section "Responses to findings", the report notes that the effects of socioeconomic background of students and schools had not yet been reported upon. School authorities are attempting to establish a common index for collection of data that would allow valid reporting on the effects of socioeconomic background on students' performance. This collaborative effort is progressing.

When considering ways of solving the problems isolated in the report, it is interesting to consider the Belgian Government's decision in the early 1990s to increase teachers' salary levels. Indeed, this resulted in a very major injection of males into the system. Another solution, according to the Gilberts, is to make masculinity and gender issues part of the school curriculum in the way sex education has been incorporated as a normal part of education today. This may indeed be a way of breaking down the stereotype of the so-called heroic male. It is necessary for society at large to accept and act upon the notion that men can be nurturers and carers, just as women can be leaders and heroes, and indeed to take up that very important matter of males being a model for these sorts of learning activities. The UK Government, in grappling with a similar situation in its schools, embarked in 1997 on a huge advertising program for literacy skills aimed at boys.

Time expired.
