

The Issue:

Being at an all-girls' school, many of subjects that are currently offered as part of our curriculum are considered traditionally 'feminine' subject. These include the likes of 'fashion technology' and 'food and nutrition'. A few subjects that are available at the local boys' school are not offered as part of our curriculum, these include the materials technologies, like wood and metal, or agriculture. The issue we want to address is to improve our school's curriculum so that traditionally 'masculine' subjects are also offered.

By not offering these subjects as part of our school curriculum, it reinforces stereotypes about the types of careers that young girls and women are interested in and likely to enter. Women are already under-represented in lots of career areas, like engineering, building and farming. Of all the trades, there are only 3% women. And techwomen.co.nz found that "less than 1 in 20 girls considers a high-paid career in science, technology, engineering or maths, compared to 1 in 5 boys". By not even offering it as a possible option at all girl's schools, it will make the problem worse as they won't have the knowledge or interest they need, to get into the subject after school.

The system:

The system that we want to challenge is our school system. We have selected the school system, as they are the people who are in charge of deciding what subjects we are offered. Each high school in New Zealand can decide what subjects it offers (if it fits the New Zealand curriculum). Community Law states that according to the Education Act "schools have a lot of flexibility to decide how to shape their own curriculum to fit the needs of their community. They should design the curriculum in partnership with their local community".

The people at our schools who make the decisions around the subjects are the school leadership (the principal and the deputy principal). The Board of Trustees also gets a final say as they must sign off all the big decisions that the school makes. To challenge the system, we need to make it clear to the school leadership and the board of trustees that the subjects they offer at our school, do not fit the needs of the girls and that they may be doing more harm and limiting opportunities. To convince them we will also need to show the community agree.

Actions and Impact:

So that we could effectively challenge the school system, we knew that we needed to get some good data to present that supported our case that students would be interested in taking these subjects if they were offered. To do this, we made a poster that had a QR code on it so that students could scan the code, and it would connect them to our survey. We also posted this on social media to help extend the reach and get more data. In the end we have over 100 students from different year levels do our survey. The results from the survey confirmed that many students would like to have these more 'male' types of subjects available at school.

[Here the student inserted evidence of the poster, the survey they made and graphs of the data which they had annotated].

By having this data, it put us in a stronger position to challenge the school about their subject choices. Over 50% of girls who responded to the survey said they would be interested in wood technology or engineering, and over 30% said they were interested in horticulture and electronics. Across the 100 submissions, they also came from across Yr 9 – 13, which helps to show that it is felt widely across the school. The impact of having these stats will be that it proves our challenge to the school system is valid as the statistics support the change we are advocating for. These statistics demonstrates to the school leadership that many students agree with us and that they should consider making changes, as what they currently offer doesn't reflect what many students would like. Importantly, it also makes them aware of an issue they may not have even known existed.

The next action we then took was write a letter to the Board of Trustee's asking them to consider adding these traditionally more 'male' subjects to our subject choices. In this we included the data we collected so that they would be more convinced. *[Here the student inserted a copy of the letter that was sent to the Board of Trustees]*

According to the Ministry of Education website, the Board of Trustees is "group of people that make the big decisions and set the overall direction of the school" and that they have responsibility for "policies and procedures, planning for the future, employing all school staff, complying with the law and managing budgets". By making them aware of the issue and providing data, the impact of challenging them to think more carefully about how the curriculum supports their students want and what is best for their future. We eventually received a response back from the Board of Trustees *[the student inserted a copy of the response below]*. They thanked us for the letter and that they have passed this onto the curriculum committee within the school. This shows that we have had some impact on the school system, as they considered our points and the teachers in charge of deciding subjects will continue to consider this. A long-term impact of this has been that it has shown the Board of Trustees and school leadership that it is important that they "partner with the community" as expected because otherwise, they may remain unaware that the subjects on offer are not meeting our needs and reflect old stereotypes. It has also shown that as students we are able to work positively with the adults in school leadership towards trying to implement change that benefits all girls, and this may also have a knock-on effect and bring about further change (like uniforms or better mental health support).

Suitability:

This social action was suitable in challenging the system at our school because the main reason behind trying to get these types of subjects to our school was so that girls had the chance to, if they choose, take these courses as jobs so when they leave school it would give them an advantage as they have learnt some of the skills they would need to know to do that kind of job.

Along with that if we could have access to these kinds of subjects early on like year 9 and year 10 instead of having to wait till you are a year 11 for Trades Academy to have a chance to get into that type of course it would improve the students chances of getting that type of job if it's the career they choose to go for when they leave school. It would be good for them to have these kinds of opportunities as if they have a good amount of experience in what they want to do as a career they will be more prepared for the career they choose to do which would lead to them succeeding in that career.