

Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Employment,
Education & Workplace Relations,
House of Representatives,
Parliament House. ACT 2600

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS:

We would like to make the following submission (as parents) into the Education of Boys Inquiry.

Details: Damian & Toni Ryan,
91 Andersons Road,
Tower Hill. Vic. 3283.

Children: Carina (17) Brauer College, Warrnambool
Genevieve (15) Brauer College, Warrnambool
Adrian (12) St. Patricks P/School, Koroit
Samuel (10) St. Patricks P/School, Koroit

Background: Carina & Genevieve high/very high achievers, all-round achievement. Both girls attended same primary school as our two boys, with similar teachers.

Adrian – very low progress in literacy/good maths.
Grade 5 LAP result – Language Level 1
Maths Level 3
Grade 5 assessment – CSF Level 1 Language
Reading Age 6.7 yrs I.Q. level to age 16
(actual age 11 years)
Visual Child – possibly dyslexic
- poor short-term memory

Sam – slow progress in literacy/good maths
One year Reading Recovery – Grade 1
L.A.P. result grade 3 – Prep/1 Level all subjects
Grade 3 assessment – low spelling/reading
- good maths
Visual child – low auditory memory
- high visual memory

1. Our daughters have achieved a much higher level of literacy than our two boys, despite attending the same school, having similar teachers and similar intelligence levels.
2. We noticed the lack of progress with the boys from prep level.
3. Our early concerns with the boys were explained by their teachers as typical boy results, and that we should not expect the same level of achievement as our two daughters.
4. We had concerns that the boys did not show good letter/sound connection when learning the alphabet.
5. Whilst Adrian was a 'good boy' in the lower grades, by grade 3 he was becoming reluctant. He was taught by a gay (hearsay) female teacher who seemed to pass on rejection of boyish behaviour, and along with other boys in his class, he would say 'our teacher just hates the boys!' Even show-and-tell was politically correct. Nice things only! No competition! 'Learning Oils' were burnt in class and children practiced meditation. Adrian made little progress.
6. By grade 4, we were becoming very concerned, despite reassurance that most of the boys in this class were working at a similar level to Adrian. We asked for a different teacher to work with Adrian to give us an accurate idea of his literacy level. We received a letter from the school to say he was working at a satisfactory level for a grade 4 boy. It also stated that he needed some help with literacy. We were again advised that whilst his literacy was down, this was fairly normal, and he was not low enough for any extra help. His work ethic began to deteriorate, we were advised he wasn't working hard enough, and we began to 'coach' him at home each night. Again he and his friends felt that the teacher 'only liked the girls – or the sooky boys '.
7. In grade 5, we made it immediately clear to Adrian's teacher and the principal that we were becoming very anxious about his literacy. We felt he had not made much progress since the lower grades. Again we were told that there would be no help due to the number of children in the same position or worse. In his grade 5/6 class of 33 pupils, 11 children had low literacy skills –10 of them boys.

8. We asked in writing for Adrian to sit the LAP test. The school rang and asked us to withdraw him. There was no explanation for this. We presumed the school didn't anticipate a good result. We insisted on him sitting the test.

9. Adrian's grade 5 teacher wanted to purchase a class-set of remedial spelling programmes, however, the school didn't have the funds required. There were no computer programmes available at the school to aid literacy. We went to other schools to get advice on good computer spelling programmes.

10. We approached the principal, advising him unless he gave Adrian assistance with literacy, we would have to change schools. He was working well with his new teacher, however his self-esteem was now very low. He knew he was not performing well, and he suffered a great deal of frustration. Again, we were advised there was little the school could do due to a lack of funds, and the number of children requiring help. It was suggested by the principal that more discipline was appropriate, the boys needing to work harder. He was upset at having to change schools.

11. We approached the parish priest, advising him of our reasons in removing Adrian from the school. He was very supportive, and spoke to the principal and teacher on our behalf. Adrian was able to gain an assessment, and the other ten low achievers had their work also assessed by the catholic regional speech therapist. Adrian was working at Level 1 for literacy as were a number of boys in the class (some of whom were grade 6 pupils). Adrian had not passed the phonetic stage of literacy. We found it difficult to understand how a child could get to grade 5 without anyone noticing such a low level. Remedial programmes were advised, with the children concerned working in appropriate groups. No other aid was available. A number of these boys went onto secondary school with a literacy level of grade 2/3.

12. Adrian has had a male teacher in grade 6. Very firm, but fair. He is now working around grade 4 level for literacy. He is well below par, however he has now surpassed survival literacy. We have had him tutored once a week this year to provide one-on-one help. Most importantly, we have seen a huge change in his self-esteem, not

just at school. Although he is working hard, we are not seeing the frustration and anger he had last year. He feels accepted for himself this year, and we finally feel confident in him attending secondary school. We firmly believe his improvement is due to the correct teaching method for him, his teacher's recognition of his ability, and diligent teaching this year. His teacher has him on his own instead of attending Japanese classes, and has encouraged rather than disciplined him.

If we were not able to get some specialised help, we feel Adrian would not have been able to participate in secondary school, and most likely would have had increased behaviour problems.

13. We have been very disappointed in the lack of help available from our school, especially the acceptance that it is normal for boys to be underperforming.

14. Our second son Sam had trouble settling into school straight off. A very active child, just sitting down all day was difficult. He was a happy and confident child, with very high physical skills. He seemed to show flashes of brilliance, along with bouts of reluctance. His prep teacher tried a number of tactics to get him to maintain a steadier rate of achievement. He was being 'kept in' the first term of preps!

15. Sam seemed to learn in a disjointed fashion, and received reading recovery in grade 1. He made progress, however he seemed to guess a lot, and could be very good or very ordinary. He had two teachers time-share his teaching.

16. Sam had three teachers time-share in grade three. He performed very low in his LAP test. His three teachers had trouble working him out, so we asked for an assessment. Sam worked highly visually, but had a very poor auditory memory. Consequently, the more a teacher talked to him, the less he took in. The school was advised of appropriate literacy programmes, as well as his preferred style of learning. His spelling was much weaker than his reading. It took a year to complete his assessment.

17. In grade 4, Sam had 2 teachers time-share. It seemed that the school had decided that more discipline was the answer, as again we were informed there were a number of poor achievers, mostly boys. One of these teachers was so extreme, she was eventually removed for physically hurting five of the pupils, all boys, and the lowest achievers. She refused to implement the recommended spelling program. This period of teaching produced anxiety and anger in Sam, requiring a number of visits to the principal. There were periods of him refusing to attend school, or wanting to run away. The replacement teacher for the remainder of the year also seemed to prefer a highly-controlled classroom. On requesting the spelling program recommended for Sam, we were advised he was considered quite bright (academic even!) and needed to pay more attention. We had meetings between his teacher, ourselves and the principal regarding his behaviour. This included pretending to shoot some-one with a stapler when kept in during a wet-weather day, spit-balling – exposing the class to deadly viruses - and worst of all – passing wind during class! Whilst encouraging Sam to keep silly behaviour out of school, we did not feel he passed the boundary of normal boyhood behaviour. He was never disciplined for hurting other students, being destructive or not doing his work. He was sociable, well-liked and the one most likely in trouble! Outside of school, it is often remarked to me what a likeable, happy and sociable child he is. The year was extremely stressful for Sam, his confidence was very low and he was convinced all teachers hated him. The only time he felt encouraged was when he was on school camp – his teacher seemed to appreciate his physical skills out of his school environment. (After winning a number of challenges with his teacher – he actually shook his hand and congratulated him!)

18. Sam is in grade 5 this year. He has a female teacher who has worked hard to restore Sam's self esteem. She quickly implemented his spelling program, along with other remedial programs with other children. She has removed the emphasis on discipline, and has introduced some 'hands-on' lessons, especially with technology, which Sam really enjoys. She has had no problems with him (just one of the crowd), and he is working happily and feels accepted. The change in him this year has been very noticeable. His maths is strong, his literacy improving, but still behind.

We believe the following has affected our sons learning:

1. Poor connection between letter and sound during initial learning.
2. Failure to identify and teach to preferred learning style.
3. Failure to accept that the boys prefer to 'see and do' rather than sit and hear.
4. Failure to have 'hands on' methods of teaching.
5. Failure to use other aids, such as computers.
6. Expecting that boys will perform lower than girls.
7. Large Classes – exceeding 30 pupils nearly each year level.
8. Failing to know the child. Having Two or Three teachers each year in lower grades (often for different subjects). Often this was the principle who was often away, requiring a lot of fill-in teaching.
9. Failure to detect and correct poor progress.
10. Failure to advise of poor progress when recognized. Particularly in comparison with other children.
11. Failing to advise or encourage individual assessment when poor learning was apparent.
12. Discouragement of LAP testing (a teacher union reaction)
13. No specialist help available when required.
14. Failure to implement recommended remedial programmes.
15. Using discipline as the only reaction to errant behaviour, rather than treating poor learning as a possible cause.
16. Not accepting boyish behaviour as normal. Banning anything competitive, physical or games indicating battle, heroes, etc. (Modified games with no scores!)
17. Expecting boys with serious literacy problems to do another language.
18. Poor selection of books to interest slow learners – books have become 'correct'.
19. Readers are in 'old print' , children have to write 'cursive print' – this caused continual problems during initial learning.
20. Failing to appreciate the whole child. (There is a life outside school!)
21. Failing to appreciate the effect good/poor teaching has on a child and his well-being.

We would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on our son's learning. We would also like to add that this is a common situation amongst my son's friends, and our extended families son's in other schools.

Apart from the lack of progress our son's have made, and our having to 'fight' for help and understanding, our biggest concerns have been for the loss of self-esteem and confidence that can accompany school problems and the possible future outcomes. We live in a country that has a high rate of young male suicide, we wonder how serious these situations for some boys may become.

As parents, we often face the same behaviour that school teachers face in young boys. We are aware that boys (we include all the boys we know here!) are a lot noisier, more active and often less mature than girls. They are often more honest (yes, I did it!), less hurtful and less selfish. In order to appreciate the 'more male' boys we believe they must be accepted and cherished for who they are, and taught accordingly, as it is often the unaccepted child who cannot find his place in society.

Yours faithfully,

Damian & Toni Ryan,
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Tower Hill. 3283.

August 23rd, 2000.

Footnote: Both boys are using 'Chimp' spelling method.
Adrian was taught to 'visualise' text in his head.
Sam is having memory exercises.
We are having talks with Brauer College so that any help available is given to Adrian in secondary college.