

Submission to the
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education
and Workplace Relations
Inquiry into the education of boys

Dr Lori Beckett
Faculty of Education
University of Technology, Sydney

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee. I want to take this opportunity to comment on the response to the issue of how we are educating boys, and support a program of Personal and Social Development across the Key Learning Areas.

The education of boys is a politically significant issue, and one that stirs passions in schools and universities as well as in the community. It requires a considered response as well as bi-partisan support.

I am well pleased that the House Education Committee Chair, Dr Brendan Nelson, stated in his media release dated June 19, 2000, that programs for boys do not have to be, and should not be, at the expense of girls. He acknowledged that boys' programs should ultimately benefit women, girls and society generally. Dr Nelson indicated that programs should be developed in a thoughtful way.

This needs to be underlined because there are some who are not satisfied with boys' education being addressed within the parameters of a gender equity framework. They are a small but active and vocal minority who are intent not only on advocating a boys' education strategy but on exploiting populist concerns about raising boys.

I worked on the MCEETYA Gender Equity Taskforce as ACSSO's representative, and contributed to the development of *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, which is intended to guide state and territory policy-making. I also worked on the NSW Gender Equity Consultative Committee as P&C Federation's representative, and contributed to the development of *Girls and Boys at School. Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001*, which was guided by the national framework¹.

¹ I was the representative for the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) from 1994-7, and the representative for the NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Associations (P&C Federation) from 1995-8.

An enormous amount of work went into these two documents, and they were well informed by high quality research, which contributed to our knowledge of the ways gender plays a part in schooling and education.

In all those years, the parent organisations and most parents were satisfied with a gender equity strategy because it reflected their own policies². They were cognisant of the more public debates about girls' and boys' education which were ill-informed if not a-theoretical.

This also needs to be underlined. A considered response to the current concerns about boys' education in the early to middle years must be based on insightful analyses of boys' schooling experiences, that is, of what actually happens to them at school. The social, cultural and educational factors affecting boys are crucial in this regard. However, of greater significance is the way they are theorised³.

I will begin by acknowledging that boys are having problems at school. Some are experiencing learning difficulties and some are experiencing behavioural problems. Literacy is certainly an issue for some boys at a young age through the primary school years to the middle years and beyond. I regularly come across boys and young men who experience difficulties with literacy in schools and in tertiary education. I also come across some boys who are struggling with their academic performance and self-esteem, as well as some boys who are having problems with their behaviour and communication. I certainly share a concern about boys and alcohol abuse, drug use and dysfunctional personal and family relationships⁴.

In view of the Committee's concern with the social and educational outcomes for boys and the significant personal and social consequences, it is my recommendation that a program of personal and social development be developed for boys.

² See Beckett, Bode and Crewe (1995)

³ It is important to note that gender research has moved beyond biological models of explanation and sex-role socialisation theory (see Connell, 1987, 1994; Davies, 1989). As Davies (1989) pointed out, sex-role socialisation theory is generally accepted as the common-sense way of theorising about gender, and some researchers, teachers and parents are influenced in their thinking and actions by this model. More sophisticated analyses are guided by the social and cultural construction of gender. For further discussion of the theoretical developments in girls' and boys' education in Australia, see Yates (1996).

⁴ I am currently undertaking research on Gender, drug use and young people for the NSW component of the National Drug Education Strategy, for the NSW Department of Education and Training.

Such a program should be built into existing teaching programs across the key learning areas in order to attend to boys' personal and social development as young people but also as future workers, citizens, partners and parents. This means teachers and boys, in conjunction with parents and others, begin to define the kind of young men they want the boys to become. They begin to articulate the kinds of knowledge, attitudes and skills they think the boys need now and when they leave school.

This recommendation is based on my doctoral research and more recent research on case stories with boys in schools⁵. While my thesis work generated insights into the gender reform policies, the work on the boys' educational biographies has been invaluable in helping me articulate what is at issue.

In what follows, I address the terms of reference and sketch an outline of a personal and social development program. Its platform is gender equity, where boys are encouraged to learn about gender and more considered ways of being.

Social factors affecting boys

Boys are not familiar with gender. It is not part of their education. Yet they are so often constrained and compromised by gender.

Before proceeding, it is critical to articulate an understanding of gender and boys' education, because it should not be a mirror image of girls' education. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) noted, the appropriation of early girls' education work on access and equity and the effort to have women's knowledge and experiences valued is worth investigating, but there are some differences to the boys' agenda. Where gender work for boys and girls aligns, however, is through more recent reforms that focus on different and diverse experiences of masculinity and femininity and understanding the social and cultural construction of gender, gender relations, and gendered subjectivities and personalities⁶.

One of the boys in my case story work, Barnaby in grade 3, was described by his mother as a little character who dances to the beat of his own drum, an individual who shows no respect for authority. He may have started school too early and he has a few learning difficulties, which prompts some concerns about his progression through school and just where he will fit into the school system.

⁵ See Beckett, L. (1997a, 1997b) and Beckett, L. (forthcoming).

⁶ Also see Salisbury and Jackson (1996) and Lingard and Douglas (1999).

Accordingly, gender or more particularly dominant constructions of masculinity⁷ offers some explanation for what is happening to boys in school. It helps us understand the ways boys and young men construct their identity and on the ways this impacts on their approach to schooling and attitude to education, their behaviour and regard for others including other boys, girls and staff, and their participation, performance and learning outcomes.

It is important to reiterate gender as a social and cultural construction. This includes children's and adolescent's society and school-boy customs like acting manly, conforming to a group identity, needing to belong, pressuring peers, putting down boys who are different, scape-goating, denigrating girls and anything regarded as feminine, and deriding any form of intellectualism and academic achievement⁸.

This also includes other influences, including youth culture and the mass media in terms of music, films and sport, and technology⁹.

The point is that boys are active participants in constructing their own masculinity and their own identity, and they know the benefits of dominant constructions of masculinity.

This is often reinforced in schools, and it is not always confined to the boys themselves. This was apparent in two of my case stories.

Mitch in grade 5 was described by his father as a gentle, creative, thoughtful boy, who enjoyed school until he came up against a manner of teaching that made things difficult for him. His teacher espoused a view of dominant masculinity, and used classroom strategies more in keeping with expectations that boys should be treated aggressively, verbally harassed and bullied. It had a detrimental effect on Mitch who lost interest in school.

⁷ I have deliberately chosen the phrase 'dominant constructions of masculinity' to indicate my subscription to the idea of the social and cultural construction of gender and to signal my political commitment to boys' education within the context of gender equity. Boys' dominant constructions of masculinity speaks to a hierarchy of social positions of power which places some boys in advantaged positions (see Connell, 1987, 1994).

⁸ Thanks to Alan Scully in the Faculty of Education, University of Technology Sydney (UTS) for sharing his stories of boyhood and the culture of dominant masculinity in schools.

⁹ See Mac an Ghaill (1994); Skelton (1993)

Joel was in year 9 when he was typecast as a behaviour problem, but other factors were at work. The school's discipline code provoked the boy to act tough and act out more and more extreme versions of masculinity. This included his experimentation with soft drugs. The policing practices of the teachers, mainly to do with suspension, exclusion and expulsion, only convinced the boy that they didn't care about his schooling and education.

Of course it would be instructive to do more case story work and further interview the boys, their teachers and parents to get a more rounded perspective on what happens at school.

cultural factors affecting boys

Boys are not knowledgeable about their own masculinity, given that it is mostly taken for granted. Boys are not self-consciously aware that there is more than one version.

Most boys, irrespective of social and cultural background, subscribe to a particular dominant version of masculinity, which is an unproblematised construction. As I have shown, they act out their masculinity and masculine identity and this often causes the boys damage because their participation, performance and learning outcomes can suffer.

The effects can be far reaching because the boys' ways of acting out their masculinity and identity impacts not only on the boys and young men concerned but everyone else. They can disrupt the learning and working environment of the classroom and school, which impacts negatively on others' learning and work.

At the same time, it should be noted that not all boys are limited by this dominant construction of masculinity. Some boys like some girls do quite well at school. As Boulden and Parker (1998) put it after examining large-scale achievement data, boys from privileged urban backgrounds for example are achieving better educational outcomes than most girls (and boys) from rural areas, working class families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, and non-English speaking backgrounds.

For this reason I would counsel the House Education Committee to disaggregate the data when it comes to the analysis of boys' academic performance. I noted that Dr Nelson's media release stated that boys' performance is slipping behind girls as early as grade three.

Following Teese et al (1995), the question must be asked 'which boys?' and 'which girls?'. It cannot be all boys slipping behind all girls. Rather, it will be some boys from different social and cultural backgrounds slipping behind some girls. Again, as Boulden and Parker (1998) noted, girls in any group tend to "do better" than boys from the same group. For example, the literacy performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls is higher on average than that of their brothers, but those same girls are not necessarily doing better than many, or even most, boys in schools.

This draws attention to the plight of different and diverse boys and groups of boys, and recognises that middle class boys as a group fare well at school¹⁰.

However, boys who are slipping behind their classmates cannot go unremarked, just like the girls who are slipping behind their classmates cannot go unremarked. In turn, this draws attention to patterns of school success¹¹.

Some middle class boys do not do well in a climate that over-emphasises winning and success, and rely on their masculinity to prove they are worthwhile and valued¹². One of the boys in my case story work, Caleb in senior high school, went from a high achiever to a youth obsessed with manliness in order to cover up his sense of helplessness¹³.

Some boys with learning difficulties and disabilities use their masculine identity to compensate for their perceived lack of abilities. Another one of the boys in my case story work, Sebastian in grade 4, proved to be a problem because of his physical impairment and low muscle tone. With his bodily abilities lacking, he was not readily accepted by his peer group, which prompted him to be more and more macho. This translated into a negative attitude towards school.

Some gay boys are more aware of masculinity and spend some time fashioning their own homosexual version, but because they are constantly exposed to derision and discrimination, their schooling and education are badly affected. Yet another boy in my case story work, Michael in year 10, was always concerned about the threat of violence

¹⁰ For a critical discussion of 'which boys?', see Davy (1995); Teese et al (1995); Collins et al (1996); Boulden and Parker (1998); Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), Martino (1999a); and Lingard and Douglas (1999).

¹¹ See Collins et al (1996); Yates (1996).

¹² See Salisbury and Jackson (1996) and Seidler (1991).

¹³ This case story was reported in NSW Department of Education and Training. (1999) Exploring Gender Book 2. Becoming Gender Smart. Activities for Parents and Teachers. Sydney: author.

which sparked his bouts of insecurity and anxiety, and his acting out irritability and anger. This jeopardises his learning outcomes.

Similar things can be said about boys who are from working class backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds and different language backgrounds¹⁴.

As the disaggregated data shows, social and cultural background can be linked to patterns of participation in education and post-school destinations.

educational factors affecting boys

Dominant constructions of masculinity need to be considered as an educational issue and teachers need some advice on teaching and learning about gender¹⁵.

This is not a concern with healing the damage through the mythopoetic masculinity therapy described by Connell (1995), although there is need for a responsive teaching program geared towards boys' needs, now and in the future.

Rather it is a concern that there be some acknowledgment of the ways gender actually plays a part in boys' educational and social lives, as well as in the making of boys and young men. This means that masculinity, the meanings of manhood, and gender relations be given some consideration.

It should be noted that not all boys are wedded to the ideas of dominant macho versions of masculinity.

In recent interviews with three boys in my case story work, their responses to a question about masculinity were illuminating.

As Caleb put it, he thinks everything is changing. He wants to be not so much macho but a more considerate and caring sort of person. Joel was quick to say he did not believe in hitting women. He thought he should behave diplomatically, like his parents, and treat

¹⁴ See Martino (1999a, 1999b).

¹⁵ Clark, M (n.d.) developed this notion in her unpublished paper, *Gender as an educational issue*. It is available from the NSW Gender Equity Unit, Student Services and Equity, Department of Education and Training.

women equally and with respect. Michael was more sensitive to masculinity and was familiar with the term.

LB: Talk to me about masculinity. What is that for you?

Michael: It's about being masculine. It's maleness. Like people try to prove their masculinity. Like the boys who play football, and get a girl and get laid. It's like they prove their sex. (My friends) don't try to be this type of masculinity. There's different kinds. There's charming and sophisticated and gym-fit. That's me I guess. That's what I'd like to be. Like my friends. They play handball, and they read books, and use computers, and play computer games...

This speaks to the fluidity and changing character of masculinity (Kimmel, 1996; Mills and Lingard, 1997; Clark, n.d.), which is critical to understanding gender as an educational issue.

There is a long way to go with this sort of gender equity work, as the boys in my case stories made abundantly clear.

LB: Talk to me about what it means to be a man, a young man.

Joel: I don't know...a broad chest...I don't know...to be able to drive.

LB: What is your understanding of gender equity?

Caleb: I don't understand what gender equity is, one hundred percent. The way it sounds is the way males and females are treated against one another, like in comparison. That would be my understanding. I have never actually listened to, read or talked about gender equity. I probably have, but I haven't known I have talked about it really.

The strategies which schools have adopted

The MCEETYA national framework, *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, and the NSW gender equity strategy, *Girls and Boys at School*, provides the direction for schools.

They are based on principles of equity, and they are intended to achieve improved educational outcomes for boys and girls.

They are concerned with the ways in which boys experience and express their masculinity. They recognise that current beliefs about masculine behaviour shape the differences in boys' educational and social outcomes.

In NSW, schools use *Girls and Boys at School* to develop gender equity projects on concerns that range from boys' non-engagement with learning, disruption in the

classroom, bullying and harassment, and homophobia to boys' preferred learning styles, participation in extra-curricular activities, and achievements¹⁶. This list is not exhaustive.

In my experience, teachers and Principals are keen to learn about gender as an educational issue, so that they can seek out and apply best practice and help boys learn about masculinity.

Teachers and Principals are keen to engage the four focus areas of *Girls and Boys at School*: teaching and learning; the school culture and organisation; the school and its community; monitoring, evaluation, review and development.

Each of these focus areas put pedagogical questions to schools. The intention is to guide teachers, parents and students – men and women, boys and girls – through their concerns about boys' school experiences.

The pedagogical questions are informed by a sophisticated gender analysis to do with understanding the social and cultural construction of gender and working to alter dominant concepts of masculinity.

In my case story work, *Girls and Boys at School* provides the schools with a way forward. For Barnaby in grade 3 who had no respect for authority, gender equity work helped him learn about himself and different ways of being, and focus on his schooling. For Sebastian in grade 4 whose physical impairment saw him struggling with his masculine identity, gender equity work helped him see he was a valuable human being quite capable at school. For Mitch in grade 5 whose teacher prompted him to hate school and renege on his homework, gender equity work helped the teacher reinvent classroom strategies that generated high expectations of the boys.

For Joel in year 9 who was into mischief and further troubled by the school's response to his misbehaviour, gender equity work helped the teachers learn about the tensions and contradictions between dealing with boys and reinforcing their dominant and disruptive ways. For Michael in year 10 who is hounded and harassed, gender equity work helped him learn to counter violence and would help the other boys to be more accepting, supportive and protective, which made for a better learning environment. For Caleb in

¹⁶ This is the case for teachers and Principals who came to professional development sessions on gender equity at the Northern Beaches, Ryde, and St George District Offices of the NSW Department of Education and Training, and Principals who came to the Combined Western Sydney Principals' Council. I was engaged as a speaker in 1998 to help them articulate issues and concerns.

year 12 who bombed out of his HSC, gender equity work prompted him to reflect on boys' struggles around manhood and encouraged him to reconsider his study options.

As my case stories suggest, *Girls and Boys at School* can not only help improve the lot of boys, it can help improve the lot of teachers who often do it hard with dominant and disruptive boys.

Improving successful strategies

One way to improve the success of gender equity work is to address the constraints on schools who want to do it.

There is never enough time for teachers to develop gender equity projects.

There is no timetable allocation for teachers to engage in professional conversations about boys and their problems.

There is little funding for professional development, and support from the district and state offices is stretched to the limit.

At the same time, a commitment to gender equity is not widely shared. There are a few probable explanations.

Given the constraints on teachers' time and professional development, there is no in-depth understanding of the relevance of gender equity work.

The problems with boys are more likely dealt with as they have always been dealt with, as problems that are caused by boys who are considered solely responsible. Lingard and Douglas (1999) referred to this as psychologising the boys' concerns and problems.

There is no doubt a sense that gender equity has been achieved, given early feminist arguments about equal opportunities.

The men's rights lobby focus on populist concerns about raising boys does not always resonate with teachers because they need insightful analyses, workable solutions and useful classroom strategies¹⁷.

Another way to improve the success of gender equity work is to provide it with some impetus at the national level. The response from this Inquiry will give it that impetus.

At issue are the social and educational outcomes for boys and the significant personal and social consequences.

A personal and social development program¹⁸ undergirded by gender equity merits serious consideration.

As I said earlier, such a program should be built into existing teaching programs across the key learning areas in order to attend to boys' personal and social development as young people but also as future workers, citizens, partners and parents¹⁹.

There is a practical and theoretical focus for this work. Practically, there needs to be a debate about boys' personal and social development. This equates with Dr Nelson's concern that the issues surrounding the education of boys needs to be brought out in the open and discussed as frankly as possible.

Theoretically, there needs to be some conceptual work done on boys' personal and social development in the early to middle years of schooling²⁰. This requires some attention to the relationship between personal and social development goals, the aims of schooling in the early to middle years, and the traditional structure of primary and secondary education.

The crucial issue is how schools define their boys' education, and how this links to the school curriculum *as a whole*, especially as it responds to the challenges facing schools in the form of rapid economic, social, and technological change.

¹⁷ See the NSW Department of Education and Training (1999) *Exploring Gender. Book 1 Becoming Gender Smart. Information for Parents.* and *Book 2 Becoming Gender Smart. Activities for Parents and Teachers.*

¹⁸ For a discussion of this sort of work in the UK, see Young, M.F.D. (1998).

¹⁹ See Clark, M (n.d.)

²⁰ The proposed NSW inquiry into the middle years of schooling should provide another opportunity for this conceptual work.

At the same time, this rapid economic, social, and technological change affects boys in schools, especially in the early to middle years because it already shapes their identity and their education. It follows that boys' personal and social development needs to be more formalised and it needs to have some meaning for the boys themselves.

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