

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT

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TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS.

By

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The major themes of this submission are:

- **that there is an urgent need to focus upon the "connectedness" of boys to their school**
- **that specific strategies to enhance the learning outcomes and self esteem of boys will be most effective in the middle years of the K-12 continuum, ideally Years 5-8**
- **that a boy who is not academically and socially secure by Year 8 is at a greater degree of risk for the remainder of his schooling than is a girl.**

Dr. Peter Ellyard has commentedⁱ that we have been unable to transform our role model for maleness as we attempt to make the bigger transformation from the *cowboy culture* to the *spaceship culture*. Where the former speaks of individualism, patriarchy and confrontation, the latter speaks of communitarianism, gender equality and negotiation.

His remark illustrates that preparing boys for the 21st Century *spaceship culture* sits within a powerful set of social dynamics that must by necessity impinge upon what happens to them in schools. This submission, however, focuses specifically upon boys' lives in school, although implicit within it, is an acknowledgment of the hugely complex social context in which modern institutional schooling must find its place.

The schooling experience must be more "boy-sensitive" and teacher-training programs should include researched understandings of how gender socialisation affects learning and self-esteem. **We have been inclined to view gender stereotyping as a social consequence; we now need to understand it more in terms of the impact it has on learning outcomes for boys. We are educating boys in "a post-feminist age", an age where justice in gender relationships sits upon mutual, ethical respect for each other's differences.**

In 1987, the National Advisory Committee on the Education of Girls openly and deliberately asserted a feminist agenda with policies of positive affirmation of girls.ⁱⁱ The Committee's aim was to use education to redress the inequalities girls and women undeniably experienced in society and in the workforce. It was never an "action plan" to achieve gender justice. Questions about stereotyping impacting upon boys were seen to be less worthy than the bold generalisation that the forces of sex biased socialisation perpetrated by boys had caused problems at school for girls.

Educational strategies in schools were selectively applied. By its own admission, the Committee's focus was not on process - upon the absurdity and immorality of gender stereotyping - but upon outcomes, which were manipulated by interventions that favoured girls and restrained boys.

It is not the intention of this submission to adopt a silly "boys fight back" stance. But it was an extraordinary situation to be so interventionist in the cause of girls in the 1980's, when we had known for years that boys presented inexplicable examples of educational and social dysfunction far in excess of the rates in girls.

This research is now well established and universal. But it is unsatisfactory research because we remain unclear as to whether this "dysfunction" is a product of sex-based uniqueness or the result of deeply entrenched social constructs of meaning – the prejudice of stereotype which has persuaded boys to think and act in certain ways.

However, some of the data is worth repeating here to emphasise an important point. Boys enter the schooling process far more likely to falter than do girls. They will start school four times more likely to present specific learning disabilities, and the range of attention deficit disorders, three times more likely to have a speech impediment and twice as likely to present indicators of mental retardation or developmental delay. Close to eighty per cent of Australian children in schools who present learning difficulties or serious emotional problems will boys.

It makes no sense to assert simplistically that young males occupy a position of power and advantage when there are such statistics of trauma and failure. We must stop judging their hardy, noisy, clannish, risk taking, testosterone-driven rushes of bull dogging behaviours as necessarily toxic or threatening or power waging. Richard Hawley, widely respected in the United States as writer and educationalist, uses the term "boy-toxicity" when he laments how we talk about boys in school.ⁱⁱⁱ

We must change the language we use when we consider the plight of boys in schools. Repeatedly surveys reveal that when teachers describe the social and learning habits of boys in the classroom, they apply negative descriptors. When boys are described relative to girls, terms such as immature, less motivated, disruptive etc are applied.

The recent spate of popular social commentaries about boys and what we must try to bend them into becoming as "sensitive new age males" is equally unhelpful. Much of this literature runs the risk of creating new stereotypes of what boys are and further increasing their anxiety about how they fit into the real world.

Research into adolescent physical and emotional health that attempts to identify what gives adolescents resilience towards the stresses of everyday life repeatedly identifies the centrality of caring relationships between children and adults, at school and within the family.

Research such as that done in 1993 by the National Adolescent Health Resource Centre at the University of Minnesota, USA, indicates that disturbed boys are more likely to demonstrate "acting out behaviours" whilst disturbance in girls is more manifest by "quietly disturbed" behaviours. A proportion of both is represented across the genders. However for both genders, the most salient protective factor against acting out behaviours is school connectedness. If it is true that acting out behaviours are more likely to be represented among boys, then school connectedness for boys becomes of paramount importance. Put simply, the evidence suggests that if a boy becomes alienated from his school, the implications for him are far more psychologically serious than the same problem would be for a girl. We begin to understand then why the incidence of social dysfunction demonstrated by boys is so much higher.

We must ask whether some of the practices of contemporary schooling are failing young males and what must be done to introduce well considered "boy-sensitive" approaches particularly in the compulsory years.

We do know already of certain boy-preferred learning styles. They are more literal and concrete than girls with a strong preference for kinaesthetic learning. On the other hand they are very poor auditory learners. We also know the style of pedagogy which boys need for their formative development. A "boy-sensitive" approach would emphasise negotiation, collaboration and co-operative learning. It would value the "boom and bust" approach of boys, rather than dismissing it all as foolhardy or disruptive. It would respond to new understandings of whole brain learning and metacognition.

This failure to run "boy-sensitive" schools explains their alarming rate of disaffection with school and a sense of pessimism about their futures - their lack of school connectedness. Dr. Ken Rowe, a research fellow at the University of Melbourne, investigated 300 schools. Curiously his work received major publicity in the United Kingdom.^{iv} He was quoted as saying: "We're almost in danger of developing an educational underclass - consisting of boys."

Dr. Rowe believes that school curriculum has become "female". The increased emphasis on skills of verbal reasoning and analysing context has placed girls into an advantaged position because both represent a learning style that suits them best.

Rowe's work suggest that given the enthusiasm which boys bring to computers and the context of technology in which they now learn, there needs to be a corresponding emphasis upon developing their skills of verbal reasoning, research processing and written discourse in high technology learning cultures.

In their book *Brainsex-the Real Difference between Men and Women*, Moir and Jessel^v state simply: "For a boy the world is a think to be challenged, tested and explored. The discipline of school is deeply unnatural to boys."

The point being made here is not to challenge the basic paradigm of institutional schooling. It is, however, an argument that how we describe the social and learning behaviour of boys should be in empathetic rather than critical terms, and that specific understandings of how to be "boy-sensitive" in teaching and school management practices need to be developed.

No educational practitioner should be drawn into the argument of the alleged merits of single sex schooling or coeducation. There is no conclusive research that wins the case for either type of school. What is the issue, however, is whether both types have a considered and well-researched understanding of how gender constructs are influencing the whole life of the school and that non-discriminatory but gender-sensitive strategies are in place. I do not mean to suggest here that all boys, or all girls, fit comfortably into this dual model of gender-sensitive schooling. Those who don't fit the stereotypic definitions are often the most challenging and exciting children in our schools who not only deserve appropriate pedagogy but also a school culture where social justice is a core ethic.

The American social researcher, Michael Gurian,^{vi} argues that boys in school and in the outside world need engagement with both male and female "nurturing systems". He points out that society more readily understand the concept of female nurture but that male nurture is not so easily assimilated into the social milieu in which boys grow up.

He comments: "A male nurturing system is a male driven structure of discipline, morality teaching and emotional nurturance. It is elder men, with women, helping high-density male groups. It is older boys nurturing younger boys. It is younger boys seeking both challenge and kindness in environments full of male energy". Gurian has impressive data that validates his claim that "without men and their nurturing systems in boys' lives, the boys are more likely to die younger, live in poverty, be malnourished, become drug addicted, and become criminals. They also stay with mates for shorter periods of time and abandon their own children than boys raised with men's systems in place".

Gurian points to the problem currently confronting boys in Australian schools: the growing absence of "male nurture" because of the lack of males entering the teaching profession, a situation which is not helped by equal opportunity legislation which prevents schools from actively seeking out male teachers.

One of the most important Australian government initiatives in recent years was the Compulsory Years of Schooling Project coordinated by the now defunct Schools Council. This led to a specific concentration on the middle years of schooling and the establishment of the National Middle Schools Project at Flinders University, South Australia. In general terms, it has now become clear that the "growth graph of learning outcomes" for both boys and girls is steady and consistent from Kindergarten through to about Year 4, but sketches a plateau in Years 5-8 before beginning its upward trend again in Year 9. There is additionally evidence that for many boys the growth actually declines in those middle years. It is clear then that school connectedness for boys becomes very fragile in those years and if not corrected, will place the boy at risk for the rest of his schooling.

There is a fundamental need to have the resources and the “boy-sensitive” strategies in place during a boy’s early adolescent years. If he does not develop the skills and values of resilience, empowerment and “learning for life” between the ages of about 10-13 years, he will enter secondary schooling and educational experiences thereafter, in complete disadvantage relative to his more confident age-peers.

ONE MODEL FOR A BOY SENSITIVE APPROACH

I offer to the Inquiry six themes which, if represented in the schooling of boys, might lead to their increased sense of engagement and resilience within the contrived world we call school ^{vii}:

I. Modelling by older males

Riordan, in a 1990 study of high school students^{viii}, identified the distinct differences between how boys and girls established value priorities within their school subcultures. The sub-culture appears to be more manifest for boys than it is for girls and is particularly reliant on definitions set in place by older boys. If the most important socialising dynamic in school is the modelling provided by the older males, this means not only the male teachers but also the senior boys. This suggests that we should structure the socialising framework for boys in school vertically wherever we can. **We must demand of our older boys that they exercise compassionate and moral leadership of their younger colleagues and we must design mechanisms that empower them to do so.** The older the boy is the less he should be allowed to dwell upon his own pre-occupations and that in his own process of values clarification he cannot be introspective with his age peers. He must recognise the profound responsibility he bears to those who look upwards towards him. Gurian’s concept of male- nurture systems should be constantly reflected in the culture of the school through its discipline and pastoral care procedures. It should be manifest in the language - both verbal and body - of male staff.

2. Hail the Renaissance Man!

William Pollack, Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School has identified the importance which boys place on corporate experiences, pointing to the very real significance of competitive team sport for many in their self image and their connectedness with school.^{ix} Many independent boys schools in Australia have held firm on to compulsory sport, to resist cynicism about some of the symbols and practices associated with it - school war cries and the like - but also to be wary of the cultural stereotype of the macho-competitive male. They also work hard to value all sports equally and to ensure that boys participate in a vigorous cultural program facilitating participation - but also demanding excellence in outcomes -especially in the visual and performing arts. In essence this means **that a budgeting priority has to be supported and established for the support of music and drama in a school. I see no reason why similar priorities cannot be declared in a government school.**

3. Striving for power - but ethically

If this planet is to survive, humankind will not only need to find the experts to design solutions, but will also expect those experts to know how to work with each other. The potential of an expert in the technological age to exercise power will be unlimited. Boys must not be denied access to the chance to be a powerful expert. **They must not, however, claim exclusive rights to power. If aspiring for power is held before them to be legitimate, so too must they learn the accountabilities which the exercise of power always involves. What I am describing here, albeit very briefly, is geared to a commitment to empowering boys in the life of the school by giving them, legitimately, a sense of what the school is and does.** Boys must be exhorted to step forward and look for where they can make a difference. Of course, the school must also acknowledge that mistakes will be made, and that there is always a component of risk.

But even if the adult perception is of risk, it is more important to say to the boy he is active in deciding the stake he has in the world and he is expected to control his future rather than be a victim of it. Consequently schools should be prepared to have boys sitting on curriculum and assessment management committees. They should enable boys to be involved in the tutoring of younger boys, taking boys needing remedial assistance for additional reading, supervising playgrounds and coaching teams. They should perhaps even submit shortlisted candidates for teaching appointments to a formal interview by a panel of boys. Part of the teachers’ appraisal system should allow for input from the boys they teach. Senior staff should take senior boys into their confidence and enlist their assistance in proving pastoral care for troubled younger boys. The care and responsibility boys will show in such

tasks firmly puts to rest the reified fallacy about boys lacking solicitude or a sense of compassionate justice

4. Two levels of accountability

Schools are not democracies - we learnt that lesson in the 1970's - but it is possible to make a distinction between the jurisdiction of the professional educators, and the accountability boys bear to **them** and those things which impact directly upon the student culture and within which student decision makers will stand directly accountable, not to the school, **but to their peers** for the moral integrity, equity and respect for others they show. Boys can learn that they, and not the staff, are responsible for the maintenance of a healthy student culture. The school can therefore define precise areas of jurisdiction which the students themselves are responsible for protecting and which impact directly upon the morale, rights and safety of the student body. Boys who disrupt class, who discredit the school in public, or who invade the privacy and rights of other boys, for example, should feel that accountability, and not get away with thinking that they have merely broken school rules - which they turn into peer kudos anyhow. The challenge for the school is **to design the mechanism whereby peer-accountability in the maintenance of a healthy school culture is actually more intimidating than school or institutional accountability.** My experiences in observing boys over the years have persuaded me that the cornerstone of a successful school for boys' - be it co-educational or single sex - is the quality of relationships and by that I mean the relationships boys have with each other. **Boys who are held by each other to be accountable to each other, are boys who learn the wisdom of caring for each other.**

5. The romance of tradition

Many will react to this with a wry smile, but the old fashion values of "school spirit" are in fact important factors in the development of boys, because, as Riordan observed, they place such emphasis upon their own sub-culture. We should be positive and energetic in helping boys to respect the traditions of the school, the success and failures of former students. Schools should give positive reinforcement to some of the quirks and eccentricities which have developed in the school during its history and about which it might have previously been inclined to be a little abashed and awkward. Boys are hugely influenced by the stories of the past and many schools have allowed those stories to be lost in the cultural relativism which so strongly impacts upon them from contemporary society. I remember being very moved by that scene in the Dead Poets Society, where Mr. Keating takes his boys to peruse and ponder upon the photographs of former students. The heart of an adolescent boy responds quite distinctly to such influences.

This is not sentimental symbolism. It actually demands of the teaching profession that they be less pre-occupied with industrial issues of class sizes, contact hours etc and begin to develop diversified whole school cultures both within and without the classroom, with which boys can engage and find a niche for themselves.

The decline in the co-curricular life of Australia schools in recent decades has had a devastating effect upon boys in schools. There is an urgent need to persuade the teaching profession that rich whole school cultures improve the quality of what happens in classrooms because for many students, especially boys, their sense of school connectedness is so enhanced.

6. Becoming "bilingual" in matters of gender

This could be the core of the challenge. Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, analysed thousands of conversations between men and women and boys and girls.^x She concluded that men and women in their use of language are prone to interpret each other from differing gender perspectives, even when there is no apparent or overt misunderstanding. Her central hypothesis does not describe the complexity of the whole issue but it does encapsulate the predicament and points to the potential for boys to be steadily disadvantaged in the language of unthinking, politically correct feminism. Tannen comments, for example, about the differences in language brought by women when they share personal troubles with each other with how they enter conversations with men about those same troubles. "Women tend to show understanding of another woman's feelings. When men try to reassure women by telling them that their situation is not so bleak, women hear their fears being belittled or discounted... (women) encounter a failure of intimacy just when they were bidding to reinforce it. Trying to trigger a symmetrical communication (with men) they end up in an asymmetrical one."

In a "boy-focused curriculum" the theme of "gender bilinguality" leads to some specific strategies to guide boys towards an understanding of the experience of womanhood. One strategy, for example, would be for schools to conduct an audit of the curriculum to see where gender constructs are operating and where stereotypic assumptions influence meaning, but I would like to concentrate on one vital issue here, if only to return to boys and power. It is to do with boys and sexuality.

Boys must understand their own sexuality, how to value it and how to express it without oppressing the rights of other human beings. Adolescent boys have a powerful sexual drive. Michael Schwartz of the Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Adolescent Health suggests quite seriously that a fifteen year old boy will have a sexual thought about once every seventeen seconds! Aspects of this sexual drive will be covert and experimental. We know from valid research that many will wander with curiosity into the world of the homoerotic. Some will disguise their apprehensions by resorting to the vulgar and the smutty, and virtually all will anguish over whether their very private sexual urges and behaviours, such as masturbation, are legitimate sexual explorations or merely the self indulgence of the less than true male.

Our task is to teach boys explicitly about these matters and to explore the range of value-laden considerations, which surround them. They must be led to understand that sexuality is one of the great joys in life but also expresses some of its most profound imperatives. **Boys must know that negative applications of sexuality cannot be tolerated, sexual harassment of either sex is inexcusable and there is great variance among individuals about what actually constitutes sexual harmony in the cultivation of relationships.** However, entering into constructive conversations with boys about male sexuality and the options in front of them for its expression cannot escape legal, religious or conventional norms and protocols relating to sexual behaviour.^{xi}

Which leads me to the core of the issue: *ethical considerations can be the only imperatives brought to bear upon boys in the task of releasing them from the social constructs of gender. This means then that the need for a structured approach to values education becomes inescapably linked to gender education.*

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) that strategies to improve learning outcomes for boys should focus upon years 5-8
- 2) that incentives to young males to become teachers in the middle years of schooling be developed
- 3) That teacher training programs identify gender-based learning style preferences and that teachers apply such knowledge both in encouraging both boys and girls in to use those preferences as well as improve in their non-preferred styles.
- 4) That schools be encouraged to explore how boys can be placed into positions of meaningful leadership of other boys as well as in positions of management in the total life of the school.
- 5) That disciplinary protocols in schools place much greater emphasis on the accountability boys bear to each other, rather than to the official precepts of the institution, for the quality of the student culture.
- 6) That incentives be provided to the teaching profession to design whole school cultures which provide more opportunities for engagement by boys and that industrial awards for teachers reflect the work of teachers outside the classroom.
- 7) That more research occur into adolescent sexuality and the relationship it has to boys' perception of power brokerage
- 8) That programs be developed which demonstrate to boys that gender stereotyping or sexism are to do with the practice of ethics rather than a function of sex-based uniqueness
- 9) That teacher training improve the ability of early learning teachers to recognise development delays in boys

ⁱ From Keynote Address by Peter Ellyard: **Preparing for Manhood for the 21st Century** Conference Celebrating the Education of Boys in Catholic Schools, Melbourne, July 196

ⁱⁱ Milligan, S and Thomson, K 1992 **Listening to Girls**, a report of the consultancy undertaken for the review of the National Policy for the Education of Girls, conducted by the Australian Education Council

ⁱⁱⁱ in Keynote Address by Dr. Richard Hawley: **Celebrating Boys** Conference into the Education of Boys, Belmont Hill School, Boston, USA, June 1994.

^{iv} From Times Educational Supplement, London UK, July 1998

^v Moir, A and Jessel, D **Brainsex – the Real Difference between Men and Women**, Mandarin Press, New York, 1995

^{vi} In letter to J.M.Bednall (1998) and based upon Gurian's book "**The State of Boyhood in America**" G.P. Putnam's Son, New York 1996.

^{vii} From Keynote Address by John Bednall: **Boys at risk – or are they?** Conference into the Education of Boys, Belmont Hill School, Boston, USA, June 1994

^{viii} Riordan, Cornelius: **Girls and Boys in School: Together or Separate?** Teachers College Press, New York, 1990

^{ix} Pollack, William **Boys at Play: Sports and Transformation** University School Press, Ohio, 1997

^x Tannen, Deborah **You Just Don't Understand; Women and Men in Conversation** Morrow and Co, USA, 1990

^{xi} summary from Bednall, J.M. **Teaching Boys to be Gender bi-lingual** University School Press, Ohio 1995.

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