

30 August, 2000

## **QUT Faculty of Education Submission to the Inquiry Into The Education of Boys**

On-going research is being conducted in QUT's Faculty of Education in relation to the social and cultural factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in early and middle years of schooling. We note below our understanding of nature of the trends, and our suggested strategies for addressing concerns.

### **1(a) The importance of service sector skilling:**

The economy no longer provides opportunities for large numbers of boys to be employed as production workers – the new jobs are in the service sector. In a service-based economy, gaining and maintaining employment are dependent on much more than academic credentials or manual skills. Good self-presentation, articulateness and an ability to focus on the needs of others – the so-called 'soft' skills – are crucial in this economy. 'Soft-is-hard' when it comes to performance in the service industries, and service provision. While schools and higher education are attending to a range of new learning needs (including techno-literacy) for the globalised workplace, responses tend to overlook important non-academic skills of social interaction. There is currently widespread concern about youth unemployment, and the failure of young people – in particular boys – to present evidence of their development of these skills. This problem is exacerbated by a culture of masculinity in which self-presentation, social communication and service are low status concerns. The 'soft skills' are certainly hard for boys who have got the message that service is sissy or that the computer screen will deliver all they need. The brute message is that *boys who don't develop service skills simply won't have jobs.*

### **1 (b) Strategies to be adopted:**

1. identifying the needs of the service sector in terms of social service skilling;
2. identifying attitudes of school-age students, teachers, parents and community leaders to these skills, and to their relationship to employment opportunities;
3. exploring educational practices that are relevant to their development;
4. developing materials and strategies which can be used for training boys, either before or during school-to-work transition;
5. piloting these materials and strategies with boys across a range of age groups, and in a range of settings, to determine if, when and how a program of intervention would be most effective.

This is not simply the work of schools. Sporting organisations, particularly football clubs, understand well the skills of coaching. They also understand the importance to their industry of player self-management on and off the field. We note with great interest the recent success of the Woorabinda Rugby League team in linking their team sponsorship to the anti-domestic violence cause. Both the team and the indigenous community in

which it is located have benefited greatly from this ‘soft-skilling’ initiative. The team is winning its matches and community violence has decreased markedly.

It is for these reasons that governments, schools, universities should seek partnerships with sporting bodies (as well as with other industries) to further research into this area.

## **2 (a) The performance of boys in literacy development:**

The current picture of literacy education in Australia has girls outperforming boys in literacy based subjects, in all states and at all levels (Teese et al., 1995; Alloway & Gilbert, 1997; ACER 1997; QSCC, 1999). Based on an analysis of recent figures (ACER, 1997; QSCC, 1999), a significant number of girls and boys in Australia are experiencing problems with reading and writing. More boys, however, are represented as under-achieving in literacy based subjects than girls of comparable ages.

The most recent research into boys experiencing difficulties in learning to read (and write) is primarily centred on cognitive competencies ascertained through standardised evaluations such as the Year 2 Diagnostic Net (Queensland) and benchmarks. In other words, the focus is on evaluation results. Intervention programs/policies do not discriminate between boys and girls, or in any maturational, cognitive or affective domain differences.

Emerging from the Scandinavian and other Western European countries is a focus on maturation issues with some significant theories emerging on the physiological differences between boys and girls at 5 years of age. These differences are reported to be located in the ability to focus effectively on lateral and horizontal orthodoxy (the basis of most early teaching of reading). Various countries have mandated that until seven, children will not receive formal reading education on the assumption that eye-brain coordination must be sufficiently established to register left-to-right and top-to-bottom focus.

The literature reveals no significant work being done as yet on the affective aspects of boys and early literacy development, particularly in relation to the materials/texts used in early reading agendas.

## **2 (b) Strategies to be adopted:**

To fathom the crux of boys’ disaffection with literacy requires a better understanding of:

- their attitudes to reading (McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Kush & Watkins, 1996; Millard, 1997; Williamson, 1997; Moss 1998*a*, 1998*b*);
- their reading patterns and practices (Simpson, 1996; Millard, 1997; Barry & Meiers, 1998; Hall & Coles, 1999);
- their textual preferences, both academic and recreational (Bunbury, 1995; Ujiie & Krashen, 1996; Rutledge, 1997; Hall & Coles, 1999);
- the influences of family literacy habits (Cairney, & Munsie, 1992; Davies & Brember, 1993; Nichol, 1994; Shopen, Liddicoat with Fitzgerald, 1999);

- the allure of the contemporary digital culture for some boys (Cole, Conlon, Jackson & Welch, 1994; Alloway & Gilbert, 1996, 1998; Millard, 1997; Beavis, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Durkin & Aisbett, 1999; Durrant & Green, 2000).
- how masculinities are constructed and policed (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Skelton, 1996; Warren, 1997) in the context of the literacy classroom and the wider literacy curricula on offer in Australian schools (Buchbinder, 1994; Martino, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 1998, 1999; Connell, 1995, 1996; Nilan, 2000).

In relation to more specific issues (cognitive outcomes, physiological/maturational; affective/motivation), more research is needed on:

- Teacher perceptions of gender differences in early literacy education;
- Texts used in early reading agendas;
- Determination of reading-writing ability and intervention practices for boys;
- Socialisation affects on boys and literacy education;
- Physiological differences between genders in terms of cognitive skills at ages 5-8;
- Strategic approaches to teaching reading when boys fail to demonstrate visual focus on texts.

### **3. The unhelpfulness of polarised boys vs. girls rhetoric:**

There is a cause for concern in the ‘what about the boys?’ rhetoric in that *all boys* are seen as being disadvantaged, disempowered and underachieving. The implication of such generalising is that the converse is also true, that is, that *all girls* are advantaged, empowered and achieving at higher rates than boys. These naive claims do not stand up to rigorous research findings and cast a veil of confusion and panic over the debate. It is only through critical reassessment of masculinity and its manifestation in various literacy practices and texts that the popular ‘crisis in masculinity’ rhetoric can be calmed and boys can move into the third millennium with a sense of direction and the confidence, skills and attitudes needed for developing positive ways of being male and becoming a contributing and successful member of Australian society.

One of the most common targets for criticism in relation to the poor performance and disinterest by some groups of boys in relation to literacy and other reading-associated tasks of the curriculum is the materials (particularly narrative texts) used in English teaching programs. These criticisms often set up competing gender agendas with emotive and gender-charged phrases such as ‘the feminisation of reading’, and claims that texts selected for study and reading in English classes are often inappropriate to the interests and needs of boys. Whilst there may be some basis of truth in these generalisations, these arguments serve little to improve boys’ education and continue to polarise boys and girls by inadvertently pointing the finger of blame at the advances for girls brought about by feminist movements in both education and society. Such polarisation is not only regressive in terms of moving towards a more tolerant and just Australian society, but also works against genuine attempts to improve the education of all students, particularly

those who are disadvantaged by social and cultural factors of race, ethnicity, class, and physical/ intellectual ability, and gender.

### **3 (b) Strategies to be adopted:**

In order to fully address the needs of boys the debate must be broadened to encompass a wide range of issues which impinge on boys' education and socialisation. Whilst many of these issues centre on and around literacy, there are others which affect boys' confidence and self-esteem, motivation, behaviour and self-control, and friendships. The following points suggest possible avenues for investigation and subsequent action:

- Educational resources, pedagogical practices and programs need to acknowledge and accept a range of positive emotions and ways of being male in Australian society. In particular, negative and constricting attitudes and practices which alienate individual and groups of boys based on differences in ethnicity, race, ability (sporting and academic), subject choices (eg the Arts, LOTE, service-based career paths), sexuality, and religious affiliation need to be discussed and deconstructed. Tacit approval of such negative behaviours and attitudes is just as damaging as punishment enacted without dialogue and positive action.
- The significant contribution that literature for children and young adults can make for the imaginative exploration of other ways of being, and for resolving conflict and considering alternative courses of action to life's problems should not be diminished or ignored. Similarly, other popular cultural texts (film, magazines, video, music, computer games) could be used more widely as part of classroom texts and for exploring and understanding social and cultural values, gender representations, and masculine and feminine body images.
- Attention needs to be given to ways for encouraging teachers, students, parents and other members of the community to accept notions of masculinity which do not rely on a dominant form based on competition and rivalry. Pressures that are placed on boys to compete with one another, and to see themselves as being superior to girls need to be reassessed in terms of the damage it can have on boys' self-esteem and their relationships with girls and women.
- Examination needs to be given to the ways in which language (both every day talk and the language of texts) constitutes an identity and sense of self for boys. Furthermore, derogatory terms used to attack differences in boys (eg homophobic language, racist slurs, sexual innuendo) need to be discussed openly in terms of their purposes and effects.
- Unrealistic expectations for boys which promote a particular 'masculine ideal' (eg the sporting hero, the computer whiz kid) or privilege particular forms of emotional behaviour or physical build and ability need to be seriously reassessed in terms of the effects such expectations have on boys' sense of failure, alienation, and loss of self-esteem. Positive educational programs similar to those in recent decades which have helped to raise girls' attitudes and self-esteem need to be

developed. These should not take the form of a ‘them and us’ campaign. Rather, the emphasis needs to be on justness and equality for all, regardless of gender and other social and cultural factors.

- Universities in collaboration with schools and professional teaching associations need to build on current research in the area of boys’ education so that future directions can be debated and planned within a framework of rigorous research and practical classroom realities. The dissemination of these research projects to the wider community through the media and other forms of community-based information sessions will be a positive move towards affirmative and informed action. It will also help to present a balanced and accurate picture of the educational needs, achievements and goals for Australian education.
- Additional collaborative partnerships between education authorities, universities, schools and other professional groups (eg medical, social workers, service industries, and others employers) can be developed with a view to: (I) developing research into boys’ mental, physical and emotional health; (ii) widening students’ knowledge of employment possibilities in both traditional and non-traditional male endeavours; (iii) defusing negative attitudes towards subjects which have traditionally been perceived as ‘feminine’ options.

#### **4 (a) The problem of transition from primary to secondary school**

The change from primary to secondary education is not achieved in a single ‘educational moment’. It is a process that affects students differently and one that engenders a collection of expectations and fears about what will be encountered. Boys and girls encounter a secondary curricula that often requires of them different ways of reading and writing than they experienced in primary school. Enmeshed with the academic expectations is the anticipation of a new social regime and the consequences and opportunities that may prevail.

#### **4(b) Strategies to be adopted:**

Some recent Australian and overseas research concentrates attention in this area (Hallinan & Hallinan, 1992; Yates & McLeod, 1996, 1999; Yates, 1997; Green, 1997, 1998; McLeod & Yates, 1997; Cairney, Buchanan, Sproats and Lowe, 1998; Christie, 1998; Schiller, 1999). A main advantage to further developing the concept and framework for middle schools is the potential for a more intensive research focus on this critical social and educational interface. Specially devised transition and induction programmes which seek to address issues of comparability and continuity within literacy education could be beneficial.

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