

A Submission to the
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION
AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

The Education of Boys

From the
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN
ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL
ORGANISATIONS INC





South Australian Association of State School Organisations Inc.

Affiliated with the Australian Council of State School Organisations, the Parent Council of South Australia and the National Organisation of School Council Associations

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From Graeden Horsell
President

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace relations
Inquiry into The Education of Boys
Committee Secretariat
Suite R1 116
Parliament House
CANBERRA, ACT 2600

Please find attached a submission from my association in response to the call from the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace relations inquiry into The Education of Boys.

This association has been quite public in recent years in highlighting the lack of equity in the pursuit of the real needs of boys in our state education system, and the inability or unwillingness of those officers in the state education system charged with responsibility for issues relating to the needs of boys to genuinely and effectively address those issues.

We have been concerned that inadequate research has been undertaken, that male involvement in the issue is not seen as relevant (contrary to the prevailing force of opinion in establishing girls' education strategies which was a *cause celebre* of feminist groups), and that department's have failed miserably to redress the feminisation of the education workforce to the extent that many primary school boys will never have a male teacher, nor even see a male on the school grounds in any meaningful way.

We ask that the matter of boys education be taken seriously, that funds be allocated to demonstrate that seriousness, and that state systems be assisted to recruit more men into primary teaching, and to raise public awareness of the fundamental importance of getting fathers and other males integrally involved in education right from the early years.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Horsell', written in a cursive style.

Graeden Horsell
PRESIDENT

Introduction

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS INC (S A A S S O)

The South Australian Association of State School Organisations is the peak parent body of school councils and pre-school management committees in South Australia.

The Association was formed in April 1923. At that time the Association was known as the South Australian Public Schools Committees' Association. (The name of the Association was changed in 1970 to the SAASSO).

Nearly every state school council in this state is affiliated with our association.

We in turn are affiliated with the Australian Council of State School Organisations, and are a founding member of the National Organisation for School Council Associations.

We are predominantly a parent organisation reflecting the fact that under state legislation school councils must comprise a majority of parents on school councils.

But councils also consist of teachers, principals, members of parliament, local government councillors and other community representatives and these also make up the constituency we represent.

School Councils have existed, under the Education Act in SA since 1972 when South Australia was the first state to introduce such councils.

The broad role of councils is to provide parents and the local community the opportunity to be involved and participate in as many decisions as possible that affect the local school within the context prescribed in the Act.

This includes advice on school management, the curriculum, and raising and managing the substantive part of the school's cash budget.

The role of our Association is three fold.

First

We support public or state education as an absolute essential in the maintenance and growth of a vibrant democratic society.

Secondly

We support and advocate for the broadening of, the role and function of school councils.

The majority involvement of parents and community representatives on school councils ensures there is a "public" in public education.

We believe it is the means of ensuring “ownership” of their schools by parents and communities.

It allows ordinary people the opportunity to act - to make a difference.

The role and function of school councils, especially as has been the case since 1972 here in South Australia, is a significant restraint to the public slipping away from public education.

If the relationship between the community and what are supposedly their schools, is weak, fragile and in disrepair, then so surely will be the state of our system of public schooling.

Thirdly

We vigorously promote the role of school councils as the peak decision making bodies in schools and which act in partnership with the school principal in all areas of school governance including strategic planning, policy development , performance review and financial management.

We believe the principles upon which the process of growth will proceed are that:

- Schools must be given greater autonomy and flexibility in deciding the means by which they can best meet the required standards and expectations of their services.
- Schools must become the focal point for conveying expectations and standards, for promoting a learning culture, and for mobilising the efforts of students, teachers and parents to reach higher levels of achievement.
- The efforts of the school must be reinforced by the community at large, through involvement in school activities, promoting high performance, and acting as a social and financial resource for the school.
- Government must assume responsibility for promoting public involvement in education and for conveying the message that high achievement levels are expected.
- It is important that parents become more actively involved in their children's learning, and schools must take responsibility for promoting this involvement.

We advocate that school councils have a substantive role in decision-making at the local school level and have a key role in financial management.

Executive Summary

Following this summary of points is the text (partly updated) of a number of feature articles published in SAASSO's newspaper, *School Post* over the past few years. The issue of boys education is one the association has publicly advocated for, and only recently at a deputation with the Chief Executive of the SA Department of Education Training and Employment, the association's executive asked for a briefing on progress in implementing a government promise to do something about boys education.

The key issues which the association believes need focused attention are inherent in the following queries:

- Why hasn't an articulated boy's education strategy been developed?
- Why is there no concerted research through education department's detailing the many and complex issues resulting concern over the education of boys in our schools?
- Why has the education of girls campaign, a well funded and justified exercise, been re-badged as a gender equity framework and supposedly able to ipso facto, tackle boys educational issues?
- How many male teachers or other staff head up boys' education projects?
- How many men head up girls' education projects?
- Why don't boys elect to do English, Biology, History, Legal Studies, Society and Culture, Languages, Home Science, Visual Arts and Music in the same numbers as girls?
- Why do boys leave school at a higher rate than girls?
- Why do girls outperform boys in almost every subject apart from maths?
- Why don't boys read?
- Why are detention, suspensions, and disciplinary problems overwhelmingly boys' problems?
- Why don't boys learn cooperatively?
- What efforts are being undertaken to redress the alarming feminisation of our education systems as something like 90% of teachers in primary schools are women?

More questions could follow but it is clear that –

- By most reasonable measures, girls are faring better than boys.
- Boys get lower grades.
- More often than girls, they drop out and are held back.
- Far more boys than girls suffer from learning disabilities.
- Of all children taking Ritalin, the drug commonly prescribed for attention-deficit disorder, three-quarters are boys.

- More boys than girls are involved in crime and with alcohol and drugs.

The myth that boys in schools are always in the winner's box and girls need affirmative action programs as catch-ups is now being increasingly questioned as it becomes more and more obvious that boys, like girls, have their human and individual freedoms of choice limited by longstanding notions of gender and behaviour.

Parents could rightly condemn state department's of Education for failing to respond to the widespread call for action. The media over the years has highlighted the boy's education debate and now many people, previously unconvinced of the need for a boys' strategy, are now in favour of it. Feminist journalist Adele Horin wrote as far back as 1994 that she had changed her mind. Like all feminists, she wanted to encourage girls, but as the mother of a boy, she wanted her son to learn compassion and thoughtful masculinity, and to have a long, healthy, life. Many mothers (and fathers) with children of school age have realised that the education system is not serving boys well.

I am convinced that the problems of boys [in education] are real and they demand system-wide solutions. They are parallel to - but are not the same as - the problems of girls. They can be attributed to a similar cause. The aim is to remove artificial barriers of gender which prevent all students from having a rewarding and fulfilling experience of education according to their ability.

The major areas of concern about boys' education include

- Lower retention to Year 12 and poorer academic outcomes compared with girls
- Boys being over-represented in programs for students with learning problems, particularly problems with literacy.
- Students identified as having behaviour problems being overwhelmingly boys.
- Boys' lack of dispute resolution skills coupled with the notion among many boys that physical confrontation is an appropriate way to resolve conflict.
- The lack of appropriate male role models in the media and
- The lack of male classroom teachers in primary schools were frequently raised as important issues."

Some recommendations for the inquiry -

- Education systems should develop a Gender Education Strategy (not an equity strategy as has been the failed focus in the past).
- It should include programs for boys, programs for girls, and programs for both boys and girls.
- Programs should be developed to involve all parents, and fathers in particular, and also the wider community as active participants in children's education.
- The Gender Education Strategy should focus on learning behaviour strategies but be backed by school discipline and programs of sex-based harassment and violence
- Boys should be encouraged to study humanities, such as music, art, drama, dance, debating and languages.

- More men should be encouraged into primary school teaching. This will particularly involve the rescission of a raft of discriminatory administrative procedures which have targeted males in teaching

A Gender Education Strategy should include the study of what it is to be "male" or "female" in our society, relationships, media images of men and women, peer group pressure, self-image and self-esteem, the nature of power in relationships, conflict resolution, understanding the opposite sex, the things we value in relating to each other and from individuals around us.

The response to the Association's recent inquiry of the SA Education department, mentioned in the covering letter, was less than satisfactory.

It is unfortunately clear that in spite of overwhelming public alarm, research, student achievement data and calls from school councils and most recently the SA Primary Principal's Association for urgent action to recruit men into primary teaching, the culture of some departmental officers is dismissive and approaching petulant in its refusal to accept the obvious and ensure a meaningful response.

Accepting there can be an over-reaction to inaction, it is interesting at least, to note that those with equity and gender education issues as their responsibility, are exclusively women.

It needs to be said, just once, that advocating for boys education is not a call to reject those issues relating to girl's education. We do not suggest at all that we should rob Paula to pay Peter.

But we call unreservedly for a focused, researched, funded and male led campaign to address the very real issues of boys and their education.



Graeden R Horsell

PRESIDENT

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

Boys Education.

Is equity enough?

Reported by Graeden Horsell
in *School Post*, May 1997.

[This article also comprised the basis for SAASSO's evidence to the SA Legislative Council Select Committee on Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education in South Australia.]

For the past two or three years, newspapers in Australia and over seas, as well as academic journals have been reporting that boys are on the weak side of the gender gap.

In Adelaide we have had a series in *The Advertiser*, in one of which, Dr Murray Drummond, a University of South Australia lecturer, said that boys have become the victims of a feminised education system as something like 90% of teachers in primary schools are women.

The Times of London has reported that on national-curriculum tests 14-year-old British boys are *"on average, more than three years behind girls in English,"* and warned of the prospect of *"an underclass of permanently unemployed, unskilled men."*

According to the journal **New Scientist**, *"Girls are racing ahead in Britain's schools ... boys are being left behind."* A growing body of evidence suggests that American and Australian boys may be in similar straits.

The **National Assessment of Educational Progress** in the US is considered one of the more reliable measures of academic proficiency. It reported in 1992, that 17-year-old boys outperformed girls by 4 points in mathematics and 10 points in science, while girls outperformed boys by 12 points in reading and 17 points in writing. Girls are catching up in math and science; boys continue to lag far behind in reading and writing.

The U.S. Department of Education's **Condition of Education 1995** estimates that *"the gap in reading proficiency between males and females [favouring girls] is roughly equivalent to about one and a half years of school."*

In the July 7, 1995 issue of **Science**, University of Chicago researchers Larry V. Hedges and Amy Nowell reported that girls' deficits in maths, while small, are of concern and should be addressed. Of boys' writing skills, they said: *"The large sex differences in writing ... are alarming. The data imply that males are, on average, are at a rather profound disadvantage in the performance of this basic skill."*

So far, however, only girls are treated as a problem group. There have been calls for special math classes for girls, but the idea of special reading and writing classes for boys rarely surfaces.

By most reasonable measures, girls are faring better than boys.

Boys get lower grades.

More often than girls, they drop out and are held back.

Far more boys than girls suffer from learning disabilities.

Of all the children taking Ritalin, the drug commonly prescribed for attention-deficit disorder, three-quarters are boys.

More boys than girls are involved in crime and with alcohol and drugs.

Why do we hear so little about boys' educational deficits?

A study in recent times - "**The Influence of School Climate on Gender Differences in the Achievement and Engagement of Young Adolescents**," by University of Michigan professor Valerie E. Lee and her associates - was released without the fanfare usually lavished on such announcements. This is not surprising, since Ms. Lee's study strongly suggested that reports of a tragic demoralisation and short-changing of America's schoolgirls had been somewhat exaggerated.

Ms. Lee and her associates analysed data on the educational achievement and engagement of more than 9,000 8th-grade boys and girls and found that differences between boys and girls were "small to moderate." Moreover, they wrote, "the pattern of gender differences is inconsistent. In some cases, females are favoured; in others males are favoured."

The public discourse around issues of gender in school needs some change. ... Inequity can (and does) work in both directions.

Though schoolboys are lagging behind girls, this is not recognised as a problem and its implications are not discussed.

There are no organisations promoting the claim that boys are relatively worse off than girls; nor would yet another advocacy group, this one taking up the cudgels for boys, be necessarily desirable.

We must repudiate the partisanship and gender advocacy that have clouded the issues surrounding children and make every effort to bring balance, fairness, and objective information into an urgently needed analysis of gender differentials in education.

Australian schoolboys appear to be seriously at risk. Their plight will not be effectively addressed until educators, journalists, and politicians begin to challenge the myth that schooling advantages boys and that only girls have problems worth tackling through national education strategies.

GENDER MENDERS FLUNK

On 28th May 1996, the NSW Department of School Education released **Girls and Boys at School - Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001**.

The Strategy was the NSW government's response to the call for action to address the problems boys experience in school. It was the culmination of a process started by the

previous government who set up an inquiry into boys' education, headed by Liberal MP Stephen O'Doherty, largely at the insistence of the NSW Parents and Citizens Association.

The O'Doherty Report recommended that a boys' education strategy be developed to address the particular educational and social needs of boys. It was circulated for comment to all schools in NSW at the beginning of 1995, and the response had overwhelming support.

But then the government changed from Liberal to Labor, and the then new Minister, John Aquilina, announced that what was needed was not a boys' strategy, but a "gender equity" strategy.

After extensive consultation, most commentators, academic and otherwise, supported O'Doherty's findings and recommendations. It was very difficult to find anyone with major reservations about the report, which is not surprising as the development process was very inclusive.

The present Gender Equity Strategy has been developed with very limited consultation.

There is a lot of suspicion that the "closed shop" approach taken by the current NSW Minister was a deliberate attempt to steer the outcome in a particular direction for political reasons; motivations might include not wanting to credit the then Shadow Minister's contribution, as well as looking for a way of avoiding added expenditure.

The Minister engaged feminist academic Dr Victoria Foster to help write the Strategy.

Dr Foster was on the record as believing that a boys' education strategy was not required since it is actually girls who are disadvantaged at school.

She even claimed that boys' poor performance in the 1996 HSC was actually good news; as it gives boys *"an opportunity to see girls in a new light"* and that it will be *"good for boys' intellectual and social development."*

It is remarkable that someone with such minority beliefs should have been one of the main architects of a strategy that purports to help boys.

The then Executive Officer of the NSW P&C, Warren Johnson, was so alarmed by the limited consultation that he was planning to hold an "alternative" conference to try to avert the damage he feared the Strategy would do.

While supporting the idea of a gender equity strategy in principle, Mr Johnson said the resource kit accompanying the strategy reflected only a narrow, predominantly female, perspective of gender issues.

He indicated plans to hold a conference at which the views of those who had been excluded from the Minister's team would be given a fair hearing. "The aim would be to identify the missing components in the current kit, suggest possible additions and to offer some advice about future research on special programs for boys."

“Men, have some very real insights into what it means to be socialised as a boy and as a man in this society and such insights are not in ready evidence in the existing kit”, said Johnson.”

Part One of the Resource Kit was called "An Introduction to Gender as an Educational Issue". Unfortunately, the kit was actually a collection of writings on girls' educational issues and feminism. It offered nothing to help develop programmes for boys.

The disadvantage of girls is often defined by reference to girls' lack of choice, freedom, opportunities and their constant subjugation to and violation by various self-serving sources of male power.

But the disadvantage of boys is referred to as a consequence of their self-serving stewardship and squandering of power. In fact the notion of boys being disadvantaged in any way seems to be seriously under question. For example, one NSW project document talked of the '*apparent* educational disadvantage of boys'.

There is a tendency to see girls as victims and boys as problems. This is surely unhelpful for girls and boys alike!

“This is again symptomatic of the dismissive attitude to boys which pervades the documents in the kit,” said Johnson.

There is a tendency to see girls as victims and boys as problems. This is surely unhelpful for girls and boys alike!

Unfortunately, there is no advocate for boys in the education system. If there were, he would have to ask "what is offered and where does it lead to".

In the case of boys, what we offer is nothing. In NSW the Boys' Education Strategy the previous government was developing has been replaced by a repackaged girls' strategy. **[This is now the case in SA]**

Where it leads to is domination of girls by boys.

Domination in remedial classes, domination in behavioural difficulties, domination in juvenile jails, and most tragically domination of valuable police time.

Most thoughtless of all is the way boys grab some five times more cemetery space than girls.

Richard Fletcher, lecturer in Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle, has also been talking about raising boys to be more compassionate, more completely human.

He has been researching the connection between boys' high death rates, violence and their schooling and social conditioning.

He is concerned that the existing “non-sexist” school programs that target girls are not necessarily appropriate for boys. Fletcher believes that some of these inadvertently reinforce the idea that the traditionally "male" subjects are better than the "female" ones: *"When teachers express concern that girls are not interested in physics, while ignoring boys' lack of interest in languages for example, a clear message is conveyed that physics is valuable while languages are not"*.

CURRENT GENDER THEORY INADEQUATE FOR BOYS

He shares the belief of Peter West (senior education lecturer at the University of Western Sydney), that an understanding of boys' needs cannot be gained from the existing body of gender theory or knowledge; that serious study needs to be conducted. *"The recent push for a girl-friendly curriculum implies that the existing offerings are boy-friendly. This is not true and we can expect that addressing boy-shy subjects will be just as complex as encouraging girls into maths and physics has proved to be. Attempting to entice boys into history through The History of Warfare would be just as inappropriate as offering Kitchen Physics to girls."*

- We need a boys' education strategy to answer the following questions:
- Why don't boys elect to do English, Biology, History, Legal Studies, Society and Culture, Languages, Home Science, Visual Arts and Music in the same numbers as girls?
- Why do boys leave school at a higher rate than girls?
- Why do girls outperform boys in almost every subject apart from maths?
- Why don't boys read?
- Why are detention, suspensions, and disciplinary problems overwhelmingly boys' problems?
- Why don't boys learn cooperatively?

A common concern among proponents of a boys' strategy is the lack of male role models. In the early years, almost all teachers are female.

Traditionally men have been involved in their schools through working bees or on committees. More recently businessmen have been targeted for inclusion in school activities. For improving boys' schooling, this stereotyping of males as only useful for building, bossing, and business, needs to be challenged. Men need to be involved in the full range of human capacities inherent in males.

Respected feminist Dr Josephine Milne-Home says: "Unfortunately education has become a feminised profession. We need more compassionate and caring men in teaching; the research says that men tolerate more noise and activity from children. There's too much emphasis on sitting still and making pretty pictures".

In reframing the problem of boys' education as an equity issue, we risk encouraging the idea that it is a boys vs girls issue.

Striving for equity is fine so long as it is understood that the objective is equal outcomes, rather than equal treatment.

Rather than playing 'more disadvantaged than thou' between the genders, we can recognise that boys and girls need different kinds of help.

Schools, at present, by trying to treat all students the same, aren't being fair to either gender.

Striving for equity is fine so long as it is understood that the objective is equal outcomes, rather than equal treatment.

Given that boys are already in trouble and falling further behind each year, achieving equal outcomes will require affirmative action, where special attention is paid to boys' needs.

For boys the process has yet to begin, and there is much work to be done.

The reported comments by former SA teachers union boss, Janet Giles in response to the points made by Murray Drummond, that the gender of teachers was irrelevant, and that she didn't believe the education workforce had become feminised, is a good example of the ignorance, arrogance and entrenched belief that stand in the way of any who take on the task of ensuring all students, both girls and boys, have their real needs catered for.

We believe that a Boys Education Strategy, developed with the full inclusion of parents groups and those with educationally balanced views, must be a top priority on the education agenda in 1997.

[We said that in 1997 when the Association first mounted its campaign. It is just as much a need now in 2000]

Girl-Friendly/Boy Friendly

"We are becoming a society that fears it will never cross a bridge built by a woman but couldn't care less that its children may never be taught by a man".

Over the last decade schools have been made more "girl-friendly" as a result of lobbying by various feminist organisations; in 1989 the NSW Department of Education adopted a Girls' Education Strategy. Without an organised lobby promoting boys' interests, there has been no comparable drive for a Boys' Education Strategy. The struggle for recognition of boys' issues has been championed by a diverse group of academics, journalists, and, most importantly, concerned parents.

One influential spokesman for boys' educational needs is Peter West, Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Western Sydney. In 1992 he published his study of boys becoming men. When asked by the media how we could improve the outlook for men, his response was "We have to change the way we bring up boys." He is particularly concerned about the lack of research or academic study of masculinity: "I recall the moment when I found in the Australian National University Library catalogue the notation 'For men, see sex'. In four words, someone put into print a whole mindset about masculinity."

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Peter West believes that we will never serve boys well until we understand masculinity in the same depth as we understand femininity. Radical feminists who dispute the need for men's studies and boys' educational strategies, arguing that "men have all the power", have missed the point. Men only maintain their power on the condition they behave in very limited ways: being tough and strong, providing for the family, and being as un-feminine as possible. "You don't have all the power if you can't walk down the street arm in arm with another man without fear of attack" he says.

One area of schooling in which this conditional male status is reinforced is sport. Peter West feels that many sports and Phys. Ed. teachers perpetuate boys' damaging attitudes towards themselves and girls. He cites a Phys. Ed. master who told a student: "Son, if you can't kick that ball properly, you'd better go home and put on your mother's dress".

One school brought a champion footballer to the school at great expense, in the hope of inspiring the boys. When a boy kicked a ball rather tentatively, the champ yelled: "what a horrible kick! Pull your pants down, son, and let's see your fanny".

Richard Fletcher, lecturer in Health Sciences at the University of Newcastle, has also been talking about raising boys to be more compassionate, more completely human. He has been researching the connection between boys' high death rates, violence and their schooling and social conditioning. He is concerned that the existing non-sexist school programs which target girls are not necessarily appropriate for boys. Richard Fletcher believes that some of these inadvertently reinforce the idea that the traditionally "male" subjects are better than the "female" ones: "When teachers express concern that girls are not interested in physics, while

ignoring boys' lack of interest in languages for example, a clear message is conveyed that physics is valuable while languages are not".

Richard Fletcher made a significant submission to the Boys' Education Inquiry, offering a model policy based on the Girl's Education Strategy. There is considerable overlap between the girls' policy and his proposed boys' policy, and he emphasises that the boys' policies would also positively influence girl's educational outcomes.

Boys Need Men in Schools

Reported by Graeden Horsell
in *School Post*, June 1997.

Our society places great emphasis on gender, says Rex Stoessiger, a Special Adviser on Boys Education. The very structure of the language we use differentiates gender - we can't talk about a person (or even a dog!) until we have established their gender.

Young boys very quickly learn their gender and with it comes the realisation that they will grow up to be men. How boys construct their ideas about masculinity is complicated by one key feature of current society – a lack of fathering.

American writer, Robert Bly has emphasised the importance of father-son relationships in male development and Australian psychologist and writer, Steve Biddulph has both amplified Bly's work and added to our understanding of the issues in male development.

Basically, they suggest that the industrial revolution separated fathers from sons. In pre-industrial societies, men and boys largely worked together. Boys had access to the full range of male behaviour. Boys easily constructed their masculinity from the models they observed around them.

“With the industrial revolution things changed. Men went to factories and boys went to school. Fathers and sons were together for only small amounts of time, usually after a hard working day when both were tired. Boys saw only limited aspects of masculinity.

“Today the separation is possibly even more rigid. Men are largely confined to factories and offices while boys are at school for longer and longer periods,” says Stoessiger.

“With fathers physically and emotionally separated from their sons, it's harder to learn what it means to be male. But in our society all boys have to grow up to be men. There isn't a choice. Boys will learn their masculinity one way or another. Unfortunately the other ways do not give as comprehensive a picture of masculinity as the real, live examples provide. They give a limited and distorted picture of masculinity which perpetuate the hold that dominant social constructions of masculinity have on men overall.”

In present day society, there are three obvious ways for boys to learn masculinity. And all three are dangerous.

Stoessiger goes on, “First, boys commonly learn about masculinity from the media. Boys typically see much, much more television than they see of their fathers and learn much about male behaviour from the box source. So what sort of men are displayed on television? There are three main types: ultra-competitive sportsmen; violent men; and dopes. The sports stars and Rambos are emotionally shut down, aggressive, highly negligent of their personal well being and very competitive. The dopes, while quite common

So what sort of men are displayed on television? There are three main types: ultra-competitive sportsmen; violent men; and dopes

in the media, shouldn't be models for anyone. However, teachers suggest that there are plenty of boys who do model themselves on these TV dopes."

"The second source of models of masculinity comes from the peer group. Young men spend much more time with friends of similar ages than with adult men. They are almost always with the peer group in school, playing sport and hanging out with their friends. When it comes to learning masculinity the peer group are all in the deep end together with very little adult support. Who sets the tone? In peer groups, it's the most aggressive and violent male who calls the shots and ends up providing the example of 'successful' masculinity. The violent, emotionally shut-down, highly competitive, anti-authority males provide the strongest examples."

"The third way young men currently learn their masculinity is by reaction. Bad as the other two methods are, this is potentially worse. If boys can't learn about masculinity from men because they are largely surrounded by women at home and at school then boys simply equate being male with 'not-female'. Boys develop an anti-female culture in which anything labelled female is degraded and to be avoided at all cost – things such as showing emotions, caring for others, looking after your body, talking about feelings and – critical to boys' education – being literate and good at school work."

Stoessiger warns that the particular danger is that learning masculinity in this way can be accompanied by learning to be anti-female. This may well be the prime source of the negative attitudes female teachers often find from adolescent boys.

All three ways of learning masculinity have in common the highly stereotyped, distorted, limited and macho picture of masculinity that is conveyed to young men.

"If boys spent more time around real men. Just ordinary common-garden men, the stereotype would be much harder to maintain. Ordinary men show a much wider range of emotional behaviour, caring activity and concern for themselves and for others than the stereotypes convey. They don't pick themselves up after being thrown to the ground without blinking an eye. They don't use violence to solve all their problems. They do cooperate in work places and homes and they usually have good relationships with women. This information can be easily conveyed to growing boys – they just need to spend time with men."

While the term 'father-hunger' draws attention to the relationship of fathers and sons, the key relationship is between boys and men. In terms of learning masculinity, any common-garden man will help.

For schools, the implications are clear. More men are needed.

"Boys learn masculinity from the men they spend time with and learn the most from those they have good relationships with. Uncles, grandfathers, step-fathers, older brothers, sporting coaches, scout masters, school teachers, and neighbours are all teachers of masculinity who can help boys develop a comprehensive, three-dimensional, picture of maleness.

Primary schools need to find ways to bring men and boys together argues Stoessiger. Because about 80% - 90% of primary teachers are women, many boys go through their whole primary

school experience without a male teacher. Many of the male teachers are in senior positions and don't actually teach boys. Schools need the few male teachers available to regularly teach boys.

In addition, schools need to recruit men from home and the community to come into school to work with boys. When men do come to school they shouldn't be given sporting or construction activities. They are needed reading to boys, listening to them read and helping them write.

“Fathers also need to be informed that taking an interest in their son's education will be critical in helping him develop positive attitudes to school. Reading to children both at home and school is not women's work. Often fathers just need to be told. But given current constructions of masculinity, it simply isn't obvious to most men that what they do is important for boys.”

Finding ways to bring more men into school is not difficult.

The first step is simply to sit down together at a staff or a parent-teacher meeting and brainstorm all the possible ways to involve more men in the school. Many great suggestions will emerge and many will be simple to implement.

Fathers Play Unique Role in Schooling, Study Finds

Children do better academically when their fathers are actively involved in their schools, concludes a recent U.S. Department of Education study.

Research on the role that parents play in their children's schooling has traditionally focused on mothers or on both parents. The few studies that have concentrated on fathers have tended to dwell on the effect on children of having no father, or of having an absent one.

The US Education Department's study, published in recent years, was among the first to put a microscope on the part that fathers play in their children's schools and educational development.

HIGH INVOLVEMENT

It is based on a nationwide survey, conducted in the 1995-96 school year, of the parents of 17,000 children in kindergarten through 12th grade. The researchers gauged the level of involvement by asking parents whether they had volunteered at their children's schools, attended a parent-teacher conference, gone to a school or class event, or attended a general school meeting since the beginning of the school year. Parents who took part in three or more of the activities were considered to be highly involved. Parents with low involvement participated in none or one of the activities.

The bottom line, the researchers found, was that fathers' involvement in their children's schools was uniquely important, regardless of whether they lived with their children.

In traditional, two-parent families, having a father who was notably active in his children's schools increased the odds that the offspring earned mostly A's, that they enjoyed school, and that they participated in extracurricular activities - even after the researchers took into account mothers' level of involvement in those families. Children in those families were also less likely to have had to repeat a grade when their fathers were highly committed to their school life.

In single-parent families headed by a father, having an exceedingly active father increased the likelihood that the children got mostly A's and reduced the likelihood that the students had ever been suspended or expelled.

Even when the father lived outside the children's home, his involvement in school cut the chances that the children had been suspended, expelled, or held back.

Only 27 percent of the fathers in two-parent families were deeply involved in their children's schools, compared with 56 percent of the mothers in those families. Single fathers tended to be more active, with 46 percent of that group deemed to be highly engaged in the schools.

TARGETING FATHERS

The researchers said the low participation of fathers in two-parent families offers an opportunity for schools to better direct their parent-involvement efforts.

"By targeting fathers, schools may be able to make greater gains in parental involvement than by targeting mothers or parents in general," they write.

The researchers also found that:

- Mothers and fathers were more likely to be highly immersed in their children's schools if the schools welcomed parents and made involvement easy.
- The likelihood of fathers' participating actively in their children's schools was higher in two-parent families where mothers were also very active in their children's schools.
- Children who spent time with their non-resident fathers, but whose fathers did not share in any of their school activities, did no better academically than children who had not had contact with their fathers in more than a year or who had never had contact with their fathers.

The researchers cautioned, however, against drawing too strong a conclusion from their findings.

"Fathers," they write, "may be more likely to be highly involved because their children are doing well, or their children may be doing better because their fathers are highly involved."

Letters to the press about boys' education

"It is uncool for boys to perform or to achieve in anything other than sport. Even in their traditional academic subjects of mathematics and science, boys have given up. When awards are given out, male recipients are sniggered at by both their male and female peers, but not so for female recipients... And then we have that most drastic symptom that something is wrong in boys' culture - the growing teenage male suicide rate... while women have spent a decade or more in struggle to make their culture more relevant to their needs, men have been content to do nothing about theirs.

Who today is championing boys' cultural needs in the same way feminists have done for more than a decade for girls? Are there any feminists who care about boys' culture for its own sake and for the benefits it brings to both boys and girls?"

A father, writing to "The Gen"

A parent writes about the lack of encouragement and role models for boys in high schools, as observed when trying to choose a suitable school -

"At our allotted school... there were three performances to impress us, 30 students in all, and all of them girls.

Well, not much to inspire us here so on to the next... Our son is a good artist. The art department was fabulous, the work lifted your spirits, and there was an active display for parents - all girls of course.

Off to the technology department, well equipped, interesting work... and posters up saying Girls can do Anything. Yes, of course they can, but does it just come naturally to boys?" Posters in the computer room - Equal Bytes for Girls. In Food Technology, no posters encouraging boys into this field. The writer "cannot escape the feeling that if you want your high school child to be nurtured and encouraged, shown the possibilities of all subjects and careers and to have their leadership skills developed, it's best to have a girl.... Of the 90 primary school teachers graduating from University of Sydney's Faculty of Education this year, two are men... We are becoming a society that fears it will never cross a bridge built by a woman but couldn't care less that its children may never be taught by a man".

S.J. Bunyan in the SMH

How We Turn Boys Into Creeps

Reported by Graeden Horsell
in *School Post*, August 1997.

Is there something fundamentally wrong with male sexuality -- or have we just not learned to handle it?

Steve Biddulph (psychologist) analyses how we have failed for centuries to teach boys how to be sexually mature -- and the terrible harvest we reap as a result.

“In a suburban council office, three of the senior men - all forty and over, all married with children, crowd into the office of the telephonist, a seventeen year old girl. While one man blocks the door, another -- the oldest -- pretends to hand her a document. Grinning, he holds it just out of reach, so that she has to bend forward, and he can gaze down her cleavage. The men snigger and comment on her breast size, and inquire, in coarse language, about her sex life. She stammers and blushes, caught between obeying their authority -- and her sense of indignity and outrage. They never touch her, it is enough to humiliate her. She keeps up her composure as best she can, then when they finally leave, collapses into tears.”

“A young man is arrested by police after he has posted a story onto the Internet. It is a detailed fantasy about how he captures, sexually assaults, tortures, and then kills a young woman. The young woman is a real person, a girl in his class, who is named in the story. The police question the young man, but are unsure how to act.”

Male sexuality is in dishonour everywhere, says Biddulph. From the Serbian rape camps, to the widespread scourge of child sexual abuse, the weekly press accounts of sexual assaults and murders; men and sex seem a deeply problematic combination.

When Susan Brownmillar declared that "all men are rapists", nobody laughed. In the media and in many discussions, men see themselves portrayed as the worst kind of animals, and many of us wonder if it is true. And for growing boys - ten year-olds gazing at the prospect of their masculinity, or seventeen year-olds standing on the brink of male sexual experience - a deep ambivalence, bordering on self-loathing is not hard to acquire, says Biddulph.

This article is not about the extremes of male sexual perversion and violence, but about the mainstream from which these extremes are born - the damaged state of most men, and the process by which boys have their sexuality impaired so that it manifests in poor relationships with women.

It is also about how this could be different, if we were to understand the beauty and potential of sexual energy when it is well utilised. For male sexuality -- like female sexuality -- is not evil, but is a powerful force needing much cultural understanding and direction. There have been times and societies when this was done very well, but ours is not yet one of them, says Biddulph.

There are two ways of understanding our problems with men and sex, he says. One is to hold the belief that "men just want one thing", or phrased more absolutely, that all men would rape and harm women if they could get away with it. The alternative explanation is that men's sexual mistreatment of others is an aberration, which arises from a serious deficiency in their self-esteem and social skills. That the development of mature, loving men, requires some deliberate help and training during the first two decades of a man's life, and that this process frequently does not take place.

Biddulph has coined the term "creepification" to describe what happens to many boys as they turn into men. Creepification includes both what we do to boys, and what we don't do for them, to actively define and honour their growing sexual feelings. A creep is a person who may act with superficial charm, but has only one aim -- to physically invade and exploit. He may range from the unkempt and malodorous man who stalks, "*pervs*", sexually intrudes; to the sleek professional, who indulges his taste in much younger women or men, using the power of money and position.

Many men feel themselves, secretly, to be creeps; but only because they have been trapped in the inequality of gender relationships, says Biddulph. . Relating to others as human beings, on equal terms, entails the risk of rejection, the need for negotiation, all the incipient vulnerabilities of love. For a person who feels himself to be inferior or repulsive, this kind of intimacy is just too risky. The men who leer and wolf-whistle from building sites, for example, only ever do so from the safety of a group. (And gang rape is an extension of this pattern). One-to-one, these men lose all confidence -- especially around an attractive or capable woman.

The writer Jai Noa, (whom Biddulph quotes at length in his book "*Manhood*") became a paraplegic as a result of a traffic accident when still a young man. As a result, he felt he had little to offer in the romantic stakes, where looks, income, athleticism, and potency all stand judged. Noa writes

"The creep is a man who fails to live up to the romantic ideal and who feels crushed, bitter and resigned to this failure. The delightful joys of erotic pleasure are turned into their opposite by a guilt ridden quest for power."

Which really says it all.

Most young men, but especially those with too big a nose, too short , too fat, too thin, too freckled, and a million real and imagined defects, go through a stage of great desperation -- a woman, any woman, would be gratefully accepted. "Will anybody please have sex with me?" says Biddulph.

Young women too go through agonies of self-doubt and embarrassment at this age, but boys do not know this. From their standpoint, girls are turning into goddesses, with enormous bounty to bestow, and the boys, slower developing, verbally awkward, feel they have nothing to offer, he says.

"Although our raising of boys as emotional beings has improved somewhat, the "don't feel-act macho" culture still persists. So young men, busy acting tough from kindergarten onwards, are very deadened to their bodies. When puberty arrives with its surge of hormones, we offer

little in the way of cultural celebration or honouring. Masturbation becomes not a joyful experience in self-exploration, but rather a tense obsession. Awkwardness leads to furtiveness, and furtiveness to shame. This does not lead to good relationships between the sexes”, says Biddulph.

“Even after years of marriage, the problems for the ashamed man continue. A partner may become disinterested or positively averse to sex, for long periods, where the man may well wish to make love twice a day. She is especially likely to be "turned off" if he obsessively pursues sex for its own sake, only to grunt and turn away, full of self-loathing and rejection afterwards. The ashamed man is not given to melting tenderness, or warm good humour.”

“The antidote for shame is openness, and self acceptance. In men's groups and retreats all over the country now, sex is being widely discussed, in a new kind of honest and vulnerable language -- free from the posing, misogyny and outright lying that has been the norm. The most common reaction, and one which always delights me to hear at such gatherings is "I have NEVER discussed this with other men before!" -- spoken with amazement and relief. Men are reconstructing from the ground up a sense of what a mature, self-valuing, loving man is really like -- deciding what to keep and what to eject from their cultural baggage.”

BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN BOYS

Obviously the best place to start is with boys, while these attitudes are still being formed. A teenager today entering puberty is given some basic plumbing information at school, which he has usually already received in a patchy form from the schoolyard. If he is lucky, he receives much earlier some warmer and more meaningful input from his mum and dad -- though a surprisingly high number of parents still either dodge the issue or invest it with unbearable tension. Our sexual information comes with a distinctive cultural overload, says Biddulph.

“Our use of language is revealing. There is something chilling about a culture that uses sexual terms to convey aggression - the *F* word, and the *C* word are usually spat out, rather than carrying any warm connotations.”

“Asians use the softer, more co-operative words like "Jig-a-Jig", and young people with more egalitarian views talk about "bonking". These imply something you do together, rather than at someone, or to someone. In my school days, the talk was all about "rooting", very much a one-way process. There was much discussion of "conning" or "conning onto" a "sheila", with the implication of tricking her out of something. What girls actually felt, or wanted, was an absolute mystery,” says Biddulph.

“To raise boys who are respectful and empathic lovers, we need to start much earlier than adolescence. Large-scale cross-cultural studies such as those of anthropologist James Prescott have found a direct link between affection and warmth shown to children, and reduced levels of violence in adult society. For a safer society, we first have to give our children warm and safe environments. This means caring for families so they can

To raise boys who are respectful and empathic lovers, we need to start much earlier than adolescence

care for children, and significant investment in child welfare and early intervention programs. In Australia these services are chronically understaffed and overstretched,” says Biddulph.

Since sexual behaviour is learned, we have to make sure that it is not learned in an abusive context. Tens of thousands of Australian children this century have been sexually misused, in their own homes, as well as in boarding schools, orphanages, and other situations of "care". Some victims of this abuse struggle to escape the patterns, some heal, and some go on to become perpetrators on other children. Tracing and helping the survivors of these experiences is vital to stop what is essentially a behavioural virus of "creep" sexuality, says Biddulph. .

“The most powerful approach is always to strengthen what is good. What we want to foster in our sons is both an exuberant, and a sacred, view of sex. We must first instil not shame but a deep sense of masculine self-esteem. This is not the cockiness of rugby players on tour, for example, which is largely shame-masking, but a carefully nurtured sense of dignity, responsibility, and of honouring towards women and children.”

“Fathers, uncles, and elders, need to reinforce the message -- "This is how you relate to women with courtesy, with confidence, with care". Balanced with -- "This is how you respect yourself, so you are not "lead by the penis" in relating to women, but own your own desire, and feel your desirability". Many Australian men have never seen older men relating well to women.”

Boys have many positive impulses around sexuality. Deep down most teenage boys are deeply romantic, capable of quite spiritual feelings towards women and girls. Yet schoolyard and pub culture with its derisive dialogue about women and sex, can erode and destroy a boy's finer feelings. This yob-culture must simply be overpowered by more persuasive, more affirming messages from men who live what they speak.

“Out in the big world, we need to think hard about whether we want female, or male sexuality portrayed on our billboards, TV ads, magazines, and movies. Rock videos are particularly insidious in use of degrading porn images reducing people to objects. A men's movement/women's movement alliance is likely to develop to attack the crude sexual imagery that bombards our youngsters. We need to select and recommend to each other those videos and literature which send the right messages, and give good role modelling”, says Biddulph.

Bettina Arndt recently pointed out the importance of mothers explaining women's sensibilities to sons, and not recoiling from their son's sexuality, but affirming it in a non-seductive way, and giving good solid information from a woman's point of view. Parents can also teach daughters not to misuse their verbal skills or physical appeal to exploit or denigrate boys-- for creepiness can work both ways.

INITIATIONS

Biddulph highlights one more element that might tie together all our efforts to raise boys well - the controversial idea of initiation.

In our society, we have kept the ceremonies of christenings, marriages, and funerals, but dropped the most important and intense ceremony -- that of entering adulthood.

It's possible to conceive of simple, powerful, and deeply impactful ceremonies, says Biddulph, in which the adult men, and the women, celebrate and give significance to a boy's passage into adulthood, which makes him both proud, and at the same time deeply impressed with responsibility.

In the sixties we were told we had a sexual revolution. It was only the beginning of what needs to happen. Change has to continue, and we must begin with boys.

Reading Between The Lines: Boys' Literacy

Reported by Graeden Horsell in
School Post, May 1997.

Special Adviser on Boys' Education Rex Stoessiger examines in depth the key issues around boys' literacy. He concludes that boys' literacy needs to be viewed as an equity issue requiring specific programs that discriminate positively in favour of boys.

In today's world, being able to read and write is increasingly critical to people's ability to contribute to society and feel part of it. Putting it another way, literacy is the springboard for learning. Not only is it a pre-requisite for employment, but it also enriches individuals and the society as a whole. Yet teaching boys to read and write is currently the aspect of education where teachers and parents have the most difficulty.

THE HARD FACTS

The 1995 Inquiry into Boys' Education in New South Wales (the O'Doherty Report) revealed that:

"Boys under-perform in literacy tests at both Year 3 and Year 6 in Government schools. This result is replicated throughout the school system."

A similar picture has emerged in Tasmania where there are regular literacy tests for students at age 10 and 14. These are pen and paper tests, largely of reading and comprehension skills, and cover close to 100% of state school students.

On average boys have three more incorrect answers than girls - a highly significant statistical difference, says Stoessiger.

To give a feel for the magnitude of the difference between boys and girls Stoessiger compared the results for ten year old students in disadvantaged schools with all other state schools in Tasmania.

Disadvantaged schools are those declared under Commonwealth government programs as having major educational disadvantage, usually because of economic and social circumstances. These schools get additional funding from the Commonwealth in an attempt to compensate students for their educational disadvantage.

The interesting finding for boys' education is that the difference between boys and girls is just the same as the difference between disadvantaged school and non-disadvantaged schools. In other words, for literacy, the gender disadvantage experienced by boys is the same as the much better recognised disadvantage caused by socio-economic factors. These results alone suggest there is a major, and so far virtually unrecognised, equity issue - boys' literacy.

A Victorian study gives some feel for the magnitude of the disadvantage of boys in English. Associate-Professor Richard Teese, from Melbourne University, studied the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) English results for public and private school students from

1992 to 1994. English is a compulsory VCE subject and the VCE score determines a student's chances of entering university.

“The study showed that boys fail English at about twice the rate of girls, wherever they live. Independently of social or cultural backgrounds and across the wide diversity of the state of Victoria, boys consistently performed half as well as girls. There exists therefore, a gender disadvantage which is quite independent of socio-economic conditions,” says Stoessiger.

Regardless of whether it's a poor suburb or a much more affluent area or a more remote rural region, boys fail at twice the rate of girls. The gender disadvantage of being male clearly operates independently of social, cultural or geographical disadvantages, and the boys' disadvantage is very much the same in magnitude regardless of other influences.

LITERACY PROGRAMS

We know schools are concerned about literacy results and make considerable resources available in a variety of literacy programs which, given the results quoted above, obviously include many more boys than girls. For example, the NSW Department of School Education reported that three quarters of the students receiving special assistance in reading are boys.

There are many Australian literacy programs, remedial literacy programs, Prep-Literacy Programs, First Steps, Reading Rescue and so on. But there are no boys' literacy programs.

But no education system in Australia, and very few individual schools, have identified literacy as a gender problem which requires a specific response to the gender of the target group – boys.

No system has a program to tackle the inequity of boys' literacy development despite the variety of socio-economic and gender equity programs currently being funded at national and state levels.

“No wonder the current literacy programs produce so little on-going improvements. No wonder that despite all the resources being directed at literacy there have been so few gains in literacy levels and so much criticism of the literacy performance of students. The programs have simply not been directed at the specific needs of the predominant target group,” says Stoessiger.

He argues that if even half of the existing literacy programs were re-targeted as boys' literacy programs there would be more than enough funds to develop major programs and still plenty of resources left for programs to help girls who have literacy programs. Not one cent in new funding is needed.

THE REASONS FOR BOYS' LITERACY PROBLEMS

When Stoessiger works with teachers in workshops examining issues in boys' literacy he asks them to suggest the reasons why boys do so poorly. They put forward many suggestions but the following are most often mentioned, he says.

Current constructions of masculinity don't include literacy

While there are many literate males in our culture, boys could be excused for not seeing literacy as a male activity. The male role models simply aren't there. Most male literate activity takes place in offices and workplaces, well hidden from boys. They don't see their fathers write and, possibly only see them reading the paper and an occasional magazine. It is quite common, particularly in working class households, for mothers to do the literacy tasks. Teachers report that it is almost always mothers who write notes to school. It is more often mothers who read children stories and usually mothers who write shopping lists and leave notes. When one teenage boy was asked what his father writes he replied simply, "He writes cheques."

Literate males are largely absent from television. There are very few programs set in offices, most are set in homes, police stations or other action-oriented, rather than literate, environments. Even the medical staff rarely write reports and the cops are too busy outside fighting criminals. Programs set in homes almost always have weak or dumb male characters who are not useful models for anything.

Of course, as the statistics on boys' literacy would suggest, many men are simply not very literate. Even a middle class father is likely to be less literate than his partner so it's no wonder he leaves the literacy tasks to her.

Furthermore, about 80% of primary school teachers are female, and they, along with mothers are the prime literacy teachers. Similarly most secondary English teachers are also female and the proportion is growing.

Boys need literate male role models. Boys need to see men reading and writing. They need to see them reading the range of material relevant to schools. They need to see men writing for a variety of purposes. They need men to demonstrate to them how they use literacy in their working lives.

Because boys develop slowly they are seen to fail as literacy learners

There is evidence says Stoessiger that boys develop more slowly than girls in a number of areas; for example boys learn to speak later than girls.

"Certainly boys are slower to develop literacy skills. They come to school with less literacy and poorer pre-literacy skills. They are the bulk of students in remedial programs in the early years of school."

While girls get a head start in literacy the effect on boys may be compounded. One perceptive principal put it this way:

"Perhaps we set boys up for failure in literacy. They come to us with less skills so they obviously don't do as well as girls. Despite our best intentions not to make comparisons they soon discover that reading and writing is hard for them but easy for many girls. They develop a view that literacy is not for them. They see themselves as failures, and this view becomes self fulfilling."

Boys' preferred learning styles don't suit literacy learning

Teachers list a number of ways in which boys learning styles don't make it easy to learn to read and write. They report that:

- Boys prefer being outside
- Boys prefer and are better at physical activities
- Boys are better at practical tasks
- Boys like to move around rather than sit still
- Boys are not good at cooperative activities, they are too competitive
- Boys prefer short term activities
- Boys respond better to tasks with clear and achievable goals
- Young boys are better at gross motor tasks rather than using fine motor skills.

The ability to learn by sitting quietly, concentrating on mental activities and working cooperatively using fine motor skills would seem to be essential for learning to read and write easily. These are not boys' strengths. It is obviously hard to learn to read while walking around, playing outside or jumping from one activity to the other.

The material that schools encourage students to read doesn't suit boys

"There is a focus on reading and writing stories in early year classrooms. A quick glimpse of the books on display in any primary classroom or a peek in the library will tell you what students are expected to read: stories - narrative fiction. There may be a few encyclopedias in the corner and some non-fiction mixed with the stories but the emphasis is clearly on fiction," says Stoessiger.

"In fact there is a whole industry devoted to crafting imitations of adult fiction for children. There are book fairs, catalogues, serious journal and major prizes largely devoted to children's fiction. Even the non-fiction titles produced tend to look like story books."

"But fiction is more the diet of women than of men. Men are not great readers of literature. They read newspapers and magazines much more often. As Peter West and Bob Connell have commented separately we have to be aware that learning is seen as feminine unless it is a pathway to action. Many males aren't reading books unless the books teach them how to play games, fix cars or get bigger muscles. Yet where are the car magazines or body building magazines designed for primary school students? Why aren't school libraries full of material which boys will clearly identify as the equivalents of what men read?" asks Stoessiger.

TAKING ACTION

What can teachers, schools and parents do?

Firstly says Stoessiger, schools, teachers and parents need to recognise boys' literacy for the equity issue it is - requiring positive programs rather than remediation.

Schools, teachers and parents need to recognise boys' literacy for the equity issue it is - requiring positive programs rather than remediation

“The lesson from the successful work with girls and mathematics, girls and technology and similar programs is that positive discrimination can work. I believe that improvements in boys’ literacy will come from programs which take a positive approach to boys’ literacy, targeting it as an equity issue and developing a variety of positive discrimination approaches which boys see as valuable and empowering.”

“The challenge for us all is to develop such programs”, he concludes.

The Cotswold Experiment

Reported by Graeden Horsell in
School Post, May 1997.

Australian psychologist, Steve Biddulph, relates a very encouraging story of how a British secondary school's novel approach to education has helped solve the problem of learning, behaviour, and boys. He asks why similar models can't be established in Australia and calls for a non-ideological approach to education that benefits both girls and boys.

The two great debates, which have been racking the education world lately, may just have been solved by a creative experiment in an English secondary school, says Biddulph. The school separated girls and boys for one subject only – English – and found dramatic improvements in boys' results, and behaviour. And the girls did better, too!

All over the world, two closely linked questions have been putting education in the headlines. The first is the perennial debate about single sex schools vs. co-education. The second is the alarming decline in boys' attainment and participation at school, which has been noted in almost all industrial countries.

“Parents and educators everywhere note that boys both have trouble, and cause trouble, at school. How to help boys learn and behave better in schools has become the number one educational challenge worldwide. Parents of girls are solving the problem by flocking to enrol their daughters in girls' schools. But where can the boys run to?” he says.

While few in education would decry the progress made with girls' attainment and opportunities in the last 20 years, the fact is school is not working for boys. Boys' TER scores, literacy rates, and retention rates are falling. Teachers point out that boys are often unmotivated, lack confidence, see learning as unmasculine, and are depressed and demoralised about their future. Bart Simpson-like, the boys fill the remedial classes, and the detention lists.

THE NEW APPROACH

To meet this challenge, Biddulph says, The Cotswold School, a co-educational secondary school in Leicestershire, England, undertook an experiment of dazzling simplicity. The school assigned boys and girls in fourth year of secondary school to separate English classes. They then tinkered with the curriculum – the choice of texts, poetry, and discussion materials was tailored to boys' interests in the boys' classes, and girls' interests in the girls' classes. In addition, class sizes were reduced to about 21 per class and some intensive writing and reading support was instituted for the boys.

After two years in the new gender-segregated classes, the number of boys in the high scoring range had increased by almost 400 per cent, according to figures published in the Times on Sunday

“According to national statistics for the UK, only 9% of 14-year-old boys nationwide get grades in the range of A to C for English. English is not a subject which boys either like or do well in. The result of the Cotswold experiment was dramatic and convincing. After two years in the new gender-segregated classes, the number of boys in the high scoring range had increased by almost 400 per cent, according to figures published in the Times on Sunday.”

“Perhaps not surprisingly, the girls did significantly better too. The school recorded scores in the A-C range for 75% of girls, compared with 46% the previous year.”

The experiment was the brainchild of Marian Cox, head of the English department at the school, and is part of a wider study of student groupings for the study of English, which ended in 1998. The gender separation effects caused considerable excitement around the U.K. Cox told the London Times newspaper that the benefits went far beyond just English scores: ‘Behaviour, concentration, and reading levels all improved significantly. I believe if we can catch them even younger than 14, before they give up books for TV and computer, and the anti-heroic role models are entrenched – we would have even better chances of success.’

When Biddulph interviewed Marian Cox, she explained that boys at the school found they could relax and express themselves more without girls present, and girls reported the same. She felt that separation ‘just for English’ was a good alternative to the extreme of single sex schools, or completely separate curricula for boys and girls as practiced in some English schools.

Cox noted says Biddulph, ‘The most frequent observation from visitors to these classes was that the atmosphere was more calm and settled’. Boys were responding to more support in reading – given time to read the books in the classroom, they were learning to enjoy reading, often for the first time. “Some of these boys had never read a complete book before, apart from an adventure game or instruction manual. But they found they enjoyed it.” Several boys in the study were now planning to study English at higher levels.

THE AUSTRALIAN APPROACH

In Australian education there is considerable turmoil over gender says Biddulph. Advocates of girls' education are divided. Many are pleased with the successes of efforts to raise girls' horizons, and while they see the need for more of this, they are concerned about boys' needs too.

Those who work in schools tend to hold this view more strongly – the difficulty of boys is just so evident. Teachers point out that unless boys are helped, they will continue to be a problem to girls, too – disrupting classes, monopolising teacher time, bullying each other and girls in the playground, and so on.

However a separate, more hard-core group, based in the ideological world of the universities and training colleges, feels that boys must never be given special help, that girls' disadvantages are so entrenched that they must receive all the resource cake for the foreseeable future. This group is horrified by even the idea of boys' special programs, and have been effective in preventing them from taking place.

Dr. Victoria Foster, the author of the NSW gender strategy, and NSW Labor MP Meredith Burgman, both argued that schools MUST favour girls to make up for the inequalities that girls face in the outside world. In effect, they were saying we should handicap boys in school, to make up for the sexism 'out there'. These policies and attitudes do impinge on boys and schools – many parents, and boys themselves, have told Biddulph they feel this acutely.

The problem with much of this debate is that it is needless, says Biddulph. What the Cotswold experiment shows is that everyone can benefit if we tailor programs to each "special needs" group in schools. Boys, girls, low income groups, migrant and ethnic groups, and so on, all present different challenges. We don't need to create "bad guys" and we don't need to treat children as the soft targets for ideological "gender wars".

We don't need to create "bad guys" and we don't need to treat children as the soft targets for ideological "gender wars".

The Cotswold experiment does three important things.

- First, it acknowledges that boys generally have a slower development of language skills.
- Second, it takes account of the dynamic by which boys, feeling verbally outclassed by the girls in expressive subjects, often become hoonish and macho as a defence mechanism, spoiling the class for themselves and for the girls.
- Third, by specifically targeting English, it tackles the key life skills of self-expression, self-awareness and communication – the very things men traditionally lack. These are the skills that make boys into better fathers, partners, and workmates – which most girls and women long for. In Australia, with suicide now accounting for one in 34 male deaths, any program reducing boys' isolation would be a godsend. (In fact, there's a good case to be put for English classes qualifying for funding from the mental health budget, argues Biddulph.)

“there's a good case to be put for English classes qualifying for funding from the mental health budget”

Segregated classes and curricula are not risk free. There is always a danger of reintroducing stereotypes – Macbeth for the boys, Romeo and Juliet for the girls. As usual, this comes down to the skill and maturity of the teacher – being able to encourage a wide range of ways of being a boy, or a girl.

THE RESULTS

Bidulph reports that the Cotswold results are encouraging – when separated the girls and boys seemed able to relax and drop the old roles. This gives teachers a chance to draw out more of the real child, without the role-playing that passes for lots of school behaviour. Once experiencing this richness of being, boys are less likely to return to being the gruff, cool automatons that so exasperate their parents by the early teens!

Boys in these programs actually became more expressive, creative, linguistically skilled – in short more human, and more equipped for life. Girls continued as they have through the last decade, to become more assertive, analytical, and exuberant.

In short, everybody wins.