Presentation to St. Mary's College, Toowoomba for submission to the *Inquiry into the Education of Boys*, requested by the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon. Dr David Kemp, MP.

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Submission frames

⇒ *(i) The social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling, and*

⇒ *(ii) The strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, the strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.*

This submission seeks to:
a) highlight some issues involved with the education of boys, literacy and middle schooling, specifically: the social construction of masculinities; boys in the literacy classroom; the transition from primary to secondary school;
b) outline a current doctoral research project being undertaken in Queensland into middle school-aged boys' reading practices;
c) review a programme specifically designed for teachers of literacy at a single-sex boys' school;
d) and, provide references for current research and theoretical positions which better inform this topic.

(i.i) The social construction of masculinities

Each boy in our schools is socially and culturally unique. They bring to class a complexity of ethnic, religious, social and cultural understandings of the world, and it is through these lenses that boys encounter the education system. This understanding of the variety of masculinities encountered in schools is supported by the social construction theories of gender which propose that gender is not innate, but learned from socio-cultural practices and constructed (Davies, 1989, 1993; Buchbinder, 1994; Connell, 1995; Laskey & Beavis, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Millard, 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Nilan, 2000). The paradigm permits different constructions of masculinity and behaviours to be considered as alternatives, rather than abnormalities and deviations away from a norm.

There is a need to investigate how masculinity could be constructed and reinforced through specific practices. These practices include: the practices whereby hierarchies and patterns of masculinity are produced; the ways masculinity is policed (verbally, violently, humorously); the imbricated issues of race, gender and class and how they affect boys' concepts and ideals of masculinity; and, the effects of types of masculinity on learning and classroom behaviour.

(i.ii) Boys in the English/ literacy classroom

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.

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*);
⇒ **reading patterns and practices** (Simpson, 1996; Millard, 1997; Barry & Meiers, 1998; Hall & Coles, 1999);
⇒ **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);
⇒ **and, 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).
⇒ Also of importance is **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, 1995*a*, 1995*b*, 1997, 1998, 1999; Connell, 1995, 1996; Nilan, 2000).

(i.iii) 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. 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.

(ii) Strategies and Scope

(ii.i) Current research from a single sex boys' school, Queensland.
Further research into the critical educational continuum of the middle school years and literacy education is vital if teachers and policy makers are to more fully understand the complex social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys. One such project is presently being conducted in Queensland. A longitudinal, qualitative study is following a cohort of boys as they move through school from Year 7 to Year 9, and will record the boys' reading practices and attitudes to reading, as well as those of their parents and English teachers. The opportunity exists to map the boys' reading habits and preferences, domestically and academically and to investigate their interaction with contemporary digital and youth

culture. Evidence of the boys' family literacy practices and the expectations and literacy practices of their teachers will be gathered and analysed over the same three year period so as a rich, discursive web develops, highlighting the complexities of being a literate masculine subject.

An initial survey of Year 7 boys at the College has revealed, to a small degree, the complex dynamics of the reading practices of this cohort (55 students). Following is a brief, listed summary of some of the findings.

Time spent reading
Most of the boys read every day, or at lest weekly.
daily - 60%
weekly - 20%
monthly + rarely + never - 20%

Three-quarters of the students had more than 11 books in the previous 12 months.
10 books or less - 23%
11-20 books - 24%
20+ books - 53%

Types of books and magazines enjoyed
The students reported a wide variety of reading material preferences.

Library use
All boys used the school library weekly, and more than half of the cohort belonged to a library other than the school library. Generally, more books were borrowed from school than from other library sources. Approximately half of the cohort visited the school library outside of classtime. Whilst this is encouraging, the converse is that the other half are not using the library outside of school times.

Newspaper reading
All boys reported that they read newspapers, selecting from a list of local, state and national papers.

Computer access and use
Whilst the majority of boys had access to a computer at home (91%), a number did not (9%). The boys used their home computers in a variety of ways (gaming, using the internet, sending emails, learning and studying), and for various amounts of times for each specific activity. Those students with access to computers at home reported using them daily for a range of activities.

The boys saw computers as having a useful part to play in their lives. This use included: learning and practising new skills; gaming; using email; using the internet; making friends and future employment.

(*i.ii) Supporting boys' literacy teachers*

A professional development programme specifically framed around issues related to boys and literacy and which involves the English teachers of St. Mary's College has

been operating in 2000. This programme is unique in that it was designed in collaboration with the English department of the College, and involved teachers identifying specific issues in literacy education to be addressed during the course of the sessions. The profound benefit of this collaborative model of professional development is the generation of a heightened awareness in the teachers of the challenges and complexities of teaching the masculine literate subject in contemporary Australia. Issues and incidents which arise in the English classrooms of the College are able to be seen within the wider context of boys' literacy education in Australia. Teaching strategies and critical theories of literacy education are better able to be critiqued by teachers who have a comfortable, working knowledge of the issues surrounding them. This is the central tenet of the College's professional development package.

The programme involves teachers: engaging with some current research and literature on masculinity and literacy teaching; identifying and using aspects of this research to enrich their current literacy teaching, and developing strategies for working with boys in the literacy classroom. Further work will centre on the new Senior and Junior English syllabi presently being prepared and trialed in Queensland.

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