

## **INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

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*Teaching: it would be a great job, if I was a woman*  
- Comment by a male teacher in Burn (1999)

*They didn't encourage you to study. There were giant trophies for winning at sport and if you came top of the class you got a bit of cardboard*

-Mike McIvor in West, Fathers, Sons and Lovers (1996)

The consequences of having large numbers of young men who are under-educated, unemployable and who hold little responsibility in society are potentially explosive – and a tragedy for the individuals concerned as well as the community in which they live

- Bradford, ( 1999:1).

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Inquiry into the Education of Boys is welcomed. Clearly there are signs that the whole question of raising boys, their lives at school and in the workplace and the quality of their lives as adults concerns a wide range of people. The Committee would have had ample evidence of this concern from academics, schools, parents' and community organisations.

There is evidence that concern is increasing as evidence mounts up about boys' difficulties. The evidence ranges from a historically high suicide rate among young men (Fry et al.,1999) to declining motivation in, and performance of, boys in school leaving examinations. Despite the unfortunate lack of data from some governments, there is evidence that boys are overwhelmingly in the majority in school suspensions (Anon, 1999). We can readily agree with the assessment of John Head looking at related difficulties of young males in the United Kingdom (1999:4-9). **Looking at the evidence which confronts us of so many young men suiciding, being suspended from school, in trouble on the streets and struggling to achieve at school, any sensible person would have to conclude that young males are in considerable difficulties.** Not all young men, but sufficient young men to cause concern. The puzzle for future generations will be why it took governments so long to act.

## **WHY IS BOYS' EDUCATION SO IMPORTANT?**

Boys' education links in with many other difficulties in society.

- Boys and men's health.

The education of boys is relevant to issues of men's health, for it is in the process of becoming men that men learn many coping behaviours injurious to their health. Such coping mechanisms often stem from the injunctions given to boys: 'don't cry'; 'that's girlie stuff'; be a man', 'that's gay'. These comments are part of what is called the social education of males. They keep most men focussed on work, sport and sex rather than on intimacy or satisfying relationships with other men, or with women. They restrict males from expressing emotions, discourage them from asking for help and help explain why men are reluctant to seek help from doctors and colleagues. They keep men locked into narrow, instrumental friendships rather than wider, nurturing friendships and relationships with loved ones.

- Boys and men's bodies.

How do males feel about their bodies? This has a great deal to do with the ways in which many males grow up feeling unconfident about their bodies, unless they are in a minority

of males celebrated as top athletes (Embrey and Drummond, 1996; Watson, 2000). Boys' education is implicated in recent patterns of male body disorders and inordinate attention given by many men to their physique, West argues (2000c). (For detailed examination of what it means to be a boy in Australia and the consequences of raising a boy this way or that, see West, 1996 Chapter 2)

- Boys, Sport, School and Health. Many writers pinpoint sport as a site in which boys learn to hide their feelings and shut out pain. The NSW Men's Health Policy suggests some of the connections. Balancing the raising of happy, carefree males with males' apparent need for competition and enjoyment of outdoor activity is something many societies have difficulty with. Schools in Australia, from elite to working-class schools, have been found to be steering boys towards football and other aggressively-marketed and highly-masculinised sports. Working class boys are least able to resist the power of sport which promises its followers sexual attractiveness, popularity at school and among peers, and financial success. Unfortunately, for the small percentage of males who win this game, there are many who become also-rans or out and out failures. Working-class boys are losing out most of all at school, in part because of their inability to balance sport and schoolwork. Sport confers conditional acceptance on boys: as long as they keep winning, they are popular. Those interested may care to follow up some of the References, especially the works by Lyman, West 1996 chapters 2, 4 and 8) and Sabo (1990).

- Fathers and boys.

The difficulties boys are having in school and society are linked with men's difficulties in fathering. Men are struggling to be better fathers in a time of increasing expectations (Russell, 1999). Men struggle to express their love for their sons in a time in which even mentioning sexual matters to a son is suspected (Walsh, 1999; West, 1996: 105-6, 86ff; West, 1998b). And boys are looking to fathers to encourage and guide them through the difficulties of urban and rural Australian life. The problem of under-fathered boys is being highlighted by our reading of the current literature on boys' disaffection from school and general under-achievement.

- Boys and older men.

Boys' struggle to become balanced, achieving men is linked with the isolation of older people in our society, as discussions with the Council on the Ageing have shown. While boys suffer through lack of encouragement, older people often feel shut away from younger people, especially after their children divorce. Discussions with Aboriginal people confirm that Aborigines (as well as many other societies) take a great deal of care with the ways boys become men. Too often our young men in need of support and guidance are left for the whims of the internet and the media (West, 2000a). Certified Male magazine, March 2000 argued that there was a great shortage of men volunteering to be a Big Brother for under-fathered boys.

- Boys and Discipline

Teachers get older on average every year, according to the Baumgart report on teaching in NSW. They can find themselves weighed down by the problem of persuading boys to

stay quiet in classrooms which were never designed for large numbers of semi- and sub-literate young people. The UK literature says that it is easier to teach girls because girls behave better, keep quieter and are more biddable. Boys dislike being told continually to 'sit down, shut up, write this down' (West, 1996a: 38; West, 2000a). Many sit at a desk all day dreaming of the football game they will play that afternoon (West, 1999a). Many boys act out, are more difficult for an ageing teaching force to keep quiet, and create more problems for teachers. This appears to be linked with boys' high rates of suspension and low marks (see West, 2000a for principals' comments on boys).

It can easily be seen that boys' underachievement is linked with the preponderance of boys among school suspensions and expulsions (West 1996a, chapter 2; West, 1996b; West, 1999b, Anon, 1999) Schools are less and less able to maintain authority over pupils. Boys are less able to be 'controlled' in class by teachers who are embattled, enfeebled and disempowered. The UK research indicates that teachers may like boys less, and encourage boys less than girls.

- Changes in the Workplace.

It is no accident that boys are having difficulties in school at the same time as men are having trouble adjusting to a workplace increasingly emphasising teamwork, communication and multi-skilling. Working-class boys were once able to leave school for an apprenticeship, a job in a factory or unskilled labouring. As Daniel Goleman argues, we all need to be more emotionally literate. Working-class boys, coming from traditionally-constructed families, and with few models of actively-involved, culturally-rich men in their lives, leave school ill-prepared for the current world of work with its increasing emphasis on co-operation, teamwork and communication.

In this way, boys' difficulties are linked with many current tensions in society.

Boys' underachievement is a phenomenon seen virtually throughout the developed world. Two possible exceptions are Finland and Japan (see Anon, 1996 and West, 1996:37). The evidence can be seen in Head (1999) in Schnack and Neutzling and in many other sources coming from various parts of the world. Questions and comments about boys' difficulties come in, in the course of a working week, from many parts of the world, including Europe and the Americas. Boys' difficulties have been pinpointed in the USA by Pollack's book *Real Boys*. In many ways this was a parallel to Steve Biddulph's book *Raising Boys* which was a best-seller in Australia and sold well in the UK.

Progressive people have supported feminism, and there is fear that support for boys will turn the clock back for women and girls. Such fears have probably prevented any systematic attempt in Australia to encourage boys as boys. Research proposals on male underachievement have not generally been funded. We have not managed to solve this

problem, and boys' difficulties have remained unsolved. But in the UK in particular, schools and universities have made a great deal of progress on improvements in boys' education.

### **BOYS IN TROUBLE: THE CONSEQUENCES.**

West (1996a: 4-10; 1996b) examined being a boy in a country town from 1900 to the present. He found that boys were held in place by webs of authority. These were fathers (well-respected from all the accounts presented) police (who had a great deal of authority) older men, churches and schools. All these webs have been weakened. Boys today enjoy much more freedom, but many suffer the consequences of being let loose for so many hours, without very much structure to their lives. Some of the boys we interviewed in the Boys and Sport Project had nothing to do between the time school finished (2.20 or 3 pm) and the time when a parent might come home (6pm or 7pm). It is very different in an elite school, where boys' lives are highly structured and the boys are supervised (see West, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b). Because of lack of guidance and supervision, it is working class boys – and often, working-class girls - who are most at risk on the street and in school.

Wendy Bradford's report points out the long-term problems for society of alienated and disaffected boys:

*The consequences of having large numbers of young men who are under-educated, unemployable and who hold little responsibility in society are potentially explosive – a and a tragedy for the individuals concerned as well as the community in which they live.*  
(1999:1)

Boys' underachievement is causing concern in Scandinavia and Western Europe. Discussions in Sweden showed that governments fear that if many boys are allowed to pass through school with an overwhelmingly negative experience, they are at risk of turning away from the democratic processes which schools are meant to instil.

However, the scope of this submission must be limited. Interested Committee members may wish to follow up some of the wide-ranging links we have suggested. Most of our remaining comments will be restricted to boys' underachievement at school.

### **BEST PRACTICE IN BOYS' EDUCATION PROJECT**

This Project began this year. It arose from a partnership with the King's School. The full story of the Project is told in West (2000). In brief, the Project has surveyed developments worldwide to assess best practice in boys' education. Particular attention to date has been given to Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA.

At the time of making this submission (August, 2000) our data is incomplete. Further information may be available before the Committee makes its final assessment. What we can say is that there are a great many small-scale studies being done by teachers,

sometimes in classrooms and sometimes in other places associated with schools. Unless researchers look hard at the details of school interaction, no improvement can be made in boys' underachievement at school. We append a sample of projects going on in many parts of the world. There are small-scale projects going in parts of Australia, though many people are acting without the encouragement that would make their efforts more successful.

It must be said that nothing should be done to hold back girls from achieving. On the other hand, governments ought not be frozen with fear of offending someone by helping boys. A common finding in the UK is that measures taken to assist boys enable girls to make further advances, though this might not be universally true. A more active curriculum, more lessons which are more structured, and raising the quality of teachers would be initiatives which would benefit all pupils.

## TEACHING ABOUT BOYS IN UNIVERSITIES

- There is, generally speaking, a girl-friendly curriculum for teacher educators. Because of the profound influence of feminism on the social sciences, teachers are being greatly influenced by feminism – many good university women teachers are feminists. Unfortunately, there is almost no teaching of men's issues – unless masculinity is seen as a problem to be fought against. So teachers are having issues of girls in education explained to them. Issues of masculinity are not usually explained to them, unless it is done through a negative perspective. Males in education and the social sciences mention quietly that they often feel targeted by material or comments which appear to be anti-male. One student teacher commented on his teacher education: 'It was a war against men' (Burn, 1999:5). Male students do not know how to defend themselves against such material.

- Secondly, there is a flight of men from teaching. Figures from the Department of Education, Employment and Training show the number of men entering teaching has gone down from 1 in 3 to 1 in 4. Teaching is an attractive career for women because it is relatively well-paid. The following comment might be very widely felt:

*Teaching: it would be a great job, if I was a woman*

-comment from a male student teacher in a study by Burn (1999)

- Studies going on in this university and elsewhere suggest some of the many problems that teaching is having in attracting men (Lewis et al, 1999). First, teachers are telling their students not to enter teaching. Second, it is now compulsory for people entering teaching to sign a declaration that they are not guilty of child abuse. Men are much worse at defending themselves against such accusations because their emotional language is poorer than women's (West, 1996). Males interviewed by Lewis felt very deeply the lurking accusation that any male who wanted to teach young children was

morally suspect. One of the BA Honours students in this Research Group, David McCumstie, will make his own submission on this topic of men considering teaching.

One further point needs to be made. Today government programs make provision for evaluation as part of funding. Governments need to know that arguments regarding boys' education are evidence-based, not based on special pleading of some kind. There is too much of the following kind of argument: 'The school is very confident that policies and practices... have been very effective' [this was taken from a recent conference paper]. The Best Practice in Boys' Education project has been done by a university in partnership with a school. Evidence has been provided for all its operating assumptions and conclusions. The same should be done for any similar projects.

### **MEN GOING INTO TEACHING**

Work by Burn (1999) and McCumstie raises many issues for males going into teaching. It raises the issue emphasised by McCumstie that primary teaching in particular is culturally coded feminine. This is relevant to an inquiry on boys' education because in boys' education workshops the issue of male role-modelling comes up almost every time. Further, West has argued that in a feminised environment, boys feel pushed into the masculinised world of sport (1996a; 2000a). It is clear that expectations of beginning male teachers are different from those of beginning females. A comment from Burn is indicative. A male casual teacher is talking to a woman teacher:

*It's all right for you. You don't go for interviews and get asked 'can you do the cricket and keep the little b.....s quiet?' Or 'we need a man to lift the heavy boxes'.*

The males Burn interviewed were given a disproportionate number of troublemakers, often boys.

Men who do enter teaching tend to gravitate into administration. As one young male teacher commented to Burn

*Men need to bond with men and if there are not enough men in the profession...they are surrounded by members of the opposite sex...it's difficult*

Burn 1999:28

As *The Economist* argued in a landmark article in September, 1996, it is foolish to imagine that one can understand the problems experienced by boys without understanding the problems experienced by men. Girls' education has been very much tied up with issues of women's expectations of equality. Similarly, boys' education must be seen as very much involved with issues of masculinity and the directions in which men are headed.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS: SCHOOL LEVEL**

Wendy Bradford argues that if classrooms don't change, boys will continue to underachieve. She says that the management team must support any changes. Second, people must recognise that raising boys' achievement will improve teaching and assist

girls. And finally, she suggests that a boys' learning coordinator be appointed at school level. What works in school is this kind of whole-school attack on boys' underachievement.

Schools should target underachieving boys as well as other underachieving groups. Working-class boys are a priority group.

Schools should commission small-scale research focused on boys' needs. Sample projects could focus on

- When are boys motivated?
- What does it mean to be a man?
- How do boys prefer to learn?

Work done at school level cannot be done on a hand-to-mouth basis, with Boys' Education personnel doing this task on top of three or four others, as well as classroom teaching. Boys' education needs to be made a school-level priority. This has been done at The King's School, with clear organisational results and favourable publicity.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMONWEALTH**

- Difficulties of underachieving boys should be made one of the research priorities of Department of Education and Youth Affairs.
- Teacher educators be encouraged to do much more for boys' education . Teaching and research need to work together to educate teachers positively about boys' needs and what can be done to improve boys' learning. One of the themes emerging in the literature is that if teachers are more positive towards boys and their achievement, boys will achieve much more (Boys and English)
- Careful attention given to roles played by fathers and other men in encouraging boys to learn.
- Pilot schemes begin to find ways of nurturing men entering teaching. We have formed a group for men going into primary education. We have done a modest needs analysis. The group will be facilitated by a trained counsellor. The aim is to assist and encourage men to stay in teaching and assist them with problems hindering them. Attempts are being made to find funding; this has been rejected by the University in the past for reasons unknown.
- A pilot scheme should be created to nurture boys' education at local level. There are many similar schemes for girls' education, some, like The Gen. funded by the Commonwealth. We propose that a scheme be created in an area of need. Western Sydney has a great number of working-class families, as indicated by ABS statistics. Parramatta is suggested as the hub of such a scheme. It is close to areas of need in Western Sydney and contains a useful mix of researchers and practitioners. We could establish a consortium to exchange ideas and strategies; interest has been expressed from Catholic Education Office, Parramatta, the King's School and some State schools. The Research Group could be the base from which the scheme could operate. Full-time staff members are recommended.
- All boys' education schemes need to be thoroughly evaluated and best practice in boys' education established. Word needs to be spread so that schools and other

institutions are not making the same mistakes.

- Schools and administrators need to be told that programs for boys are permitted under Disadvantaged Schools Program and similar Programs.

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The Research Group on Men and Families is a group of researchers at the University of Western Sydney. It provides workshops for schools, parents and others. It stays in touch with research worldwide. Its research findings are disseminated through a wide network of media contacts. Its work includes better fathering, improving boys' education, and men's health (especially emotional health and body image problems). It has links with:

- the Men's Health Information and Research Centre at UWS,
- Burnside (an agency of the Uniting Church)
- The Council on the Ageing and Older Men: New Ideas
- State schools in the Parramatta region
- The King's School, Parramatta
- Catholic Education Office, Parramatta

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APPENDIX ONE  
**GETTING BOYS MORE MOTIVATED: PRIMARY SCHOOL**  
**GARY WILSON, NEWSOME HIGH SCHOOL, HUDDERSFIELD, YORKSHIRE,**  
**ENGLAND**

This study asked teachers what attitudes interfered with boys' learning. The schools surveyed were nursery to junior schools in poor to middle class areas. Further, the study asked what teachers could do to make boys learn more. After interviews with the boys, the following emerged as barriers to classroom learning:

- The desire to be outdoors
- The desire to be active
- Apparently weaker powers of concentration in boys (against girls).
- Inability to stay on task
- Lack of effort in some areas of work.
- Lack of interest in presenting work neatly
- Disenchantment with girlie things, including reading. One teacher said :

*at this age (Year 1) most of them just want to please their teacher; by Year 6 all they care about is pleasing their mates.*

**STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE**

1. Shared reading between strong boy readers and less able boy readers
2. Giving boys responsibility – running the office at lunchtime, badges, photos in hall
3. Peer tutoring including paired writing.
4. Breaking down bullying, sexual harassment, swearing.
5. Pairing boys and girls for mutual learning
6. Bringing in older males into school: fathers? Grandfathers? Brothers?
7. Monitoring interaction between teachers and girls, and teachers and boys.
8. Checking that school materials reflect boys and girls' interests and preferred learning styles.
9. Teachers stressed the need to present work as a challenge.
10. Learning must be presented in chunks manageable to all children: Not 'Discuss' but 'What are the advantages of..'
11. Using a parent conference followed by advice to parents about helping Johnny learn.
12. Building up boys' confidence in learning, all-round faith in themselves, room to ask for help at key stages.
13. Working out ways for boys to see education as girls often do – as a path towards achievement.. e.g. by listening to boys' ideas and opinions about how best to learn in a half hour interview.

Most of these strategies came after small steps were tried and then reported back to a cross-schools Working Party. Some people volunteered to do some reading, and fed suggestions back to the meetings.