

House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys

Submission to the Standing Committee

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I believe that I am well qualified to comment on the area of the education of Boys. I am the eldest of four boys and attended a single sex school – Marist College, Canberra. I have taught in coeducational Catholic schools in Canberra for almost twenty years and when studying for my Masters in Educational Administration I took particular interest in gender issues, my thesis was entitled '**Masculinities and Violence in a Coeducational High School**'.

I have worked as an Assistant Principal for the last nine years and on a daily basis I have struggled with boys' issues. I journey with young people whose needs are not met in mainstream schools and I am called to be mediator, defender, guide, policeman, mentor and arbitrator.

In looking at 'Boys' Education' it is important to make my assumptions clear:

- Boys are not one unhappy homogenous group. There are boys who are well-suited to schools and who excel in the present environment.
- Girls will benefit from an inquiry into Boys' Education. Boys and girls co-exist in a world that needs all individuals to be treated with dignity and respect.
- Boys' issues are very much the issues of their fathers. We are not necessarily dealing with new issues – the issues have been there for generations but are more obvious in our society.
- Schools are but one institution in society where these issues need to be raised. Schools are cultural sites where boys learn what it is to be male but boys experience numerous sites.

I intend keeping my submission brief but I would be happy to elaborate on the areas discussed before the Standing Committee. I will develop my thoughts on the following areas of concern:

- 1. Boys in Trouble**
- 2. Masculinities and Violence**
- 3. The Language of Violence**
- 4. What works with boys**
- 5. What doesn't work for boys**
- 6. Programs and Policies for the Education of Boys**
- 7. Implications for Further Research**

1. Boys in Trouble

We live in a society where boys are in trouble. Boys and big boys (men) are in trouble as evidenced in their over-representation in statistics on 'at risk' behaviour. Boys, young and old dominate the figures for suicide, dangerous driving, drug abuse etc. **Boys see themselves as invincible, strong and almost immortal.** They have an almost cartoon-like belief that they will survive all sorts of dangerous situations. Boys take risks and are encouraged to do so. There is a belief that for boys to grow into men they need 'character building' opportunities which involve the risking of life and limb.

Boys are in trouble in schools for a multitude of reasons. Examples include:

- The lack of male role models for boys in primary schools. Males are over-represented in positions of authority which perpetuates the view that men do the discipline and the administration.
- The decreasing number of men being attracted to the teaching profession because it is seen as a 'feminine' career and unsatisfactory remuneration.
- The view that the model student has traits such as obedience, neatness, submission and cooperation – traits which many boys find difficult.
- Teaching and learning strategies which focus on content and the acquisition of knowledge rather than the demonstration of skills and the application of knowledge.
- Student management policies which lead to exclusion and passing on problems to other schools – policies which inevitably lead to students dropping out of school and at times, out of life.
- Teachers who haven't the time, energy or passion required to work with the 'naughty boys' – teachers who believe that as professionals they shouldn't have to put up with the antics of boys who have no interest in what they are teaching.
- The lack of opportunities for some boys to experience success in schools.
- The acceptance of violence in schools as boys just 'mucking around' and the belief that some rough stuff is essential for boys in their journey to manhood.
- Student cultures which discourage 'dobbing' so that school authorities are frustrated in pursuing students who have major problems in relation to serious concerns such as violence, theft and drugs. Students who could be helped at school tend to go on to more serious 'crimes' and end up in front of the courts.

2. Masculinities and Violence

My Masters' thesis looks at these issues in depth. I did an ethnographic study of a coeducational Catholic school in Canberra. I focussed on three critical incidents involving violence. The aggressors in each instance were boys but girls witnessed two of the three incidents and gave valuable input.

Some of the issues from my thesis which are relevant to the Education of Boys include:

- A great deal of violent behaviour is accepted as part of the growing process and the rough and tumble of the school day.
- The use and understanding of violence is a 'site of struggle' for both boys and teachers at school.
- The fact that there are different 'masculinities' and the display of hegemonic masculinities.
- Marginalized and subordinated masculinities.
- Violence as a process and as a male phenomenon. In terms of the 'process of violence' often the lead-up to a fight or physical violence is not seen. The actual fight is often just the tip of the iceberg.
- Issues related to the interdependence of violence and power
- The costs of masculinity for the perpetrators and victims of violence.
- Schools as part of the problem - organization, authority patterns, curriculum and experience of failure.
- The acceptance of 'mucking around' by the boys.
- Gender differences in relation to stories written about the critical incidents.
- The need to be the 'right' sort of male at school, to meet the 'standards' of hegemonic masculinity (this applies to students and staff).
- The need for boys who display hegemonic masculinity to continually prove themselves.
- The fact that for the victims of violence the consequences continue long after the bruises have healed. Students watch their backs, stay away from 'danger areas' and remain traumatized by the fear of what might happen.
- The benefits of a coeducational school in terms of assisting boys not to resort to physical violence – girls would encourage boys not to resolve conflict through physical violence.
- Real change involves the reconstruction of masculinity.

3. The Language of Violence

One of the most interesting parts of my research was in terms of the '**language of violence**'. In speaking about how they felt immediately before resorting to violence the language used by the boys was powerful in its consistency and ability to describe their emotions. The language used also inferred a lack of control and a lack of responsible action. The language used is extremely physical as it attempts to describe the boys getting to the stage that they are almost powerless to prevent themselves from being violent. This presents a real paradox in that in being powerful they are actually showing a lack of control and an inability to consider the consequences of their actions.

Examples of the sorts of things boys would say include:

- Just something **sparks me** and I just hit them, I don't plan it, something just **sparks me off**.
- Something **snaps, explodes**.
- **All the blood and anger** just went to my head.
- You know you just get more **mind powerful**.
- I just went **ballistic**.
- Its like a **psychologic** (sic) thing ... he is like **scitz** , like if he **just explodes**.
- Then suddenly they get this **volcano, out of control feeling**.
- Just sometimes something gets on your nerves, like its usually something little, it can really **blow your top**.
- You do **the crime** you gotta **pay the time**.

The language associated with violence indicates:

- A build up to the violent action – an incremental movement
- Boys appreciating that in using violence they are out of control
- A connection between physical violence and guns ('I went ballistic!')
- Physical violence is not spontaneous – there is cognition prior to the act
- At times boys feel that there is no choice but to be violent

4. What works with boys:

Some of the following may seem trivial but for many boys (and girls) **relationships make all the difference** and relationships rely on the little things being taken seriously. The notion that boys are thick-skinned, tough and impervious needs to be thrown out with the tanning lotions. **The bronzed Aussie image of the Australian male needs to be updated, re-modelled and sensitively 'shoved' into the new millennium.**

What works with boys (and mostly for girls):

- **Breakfast (we run a program at our school)**
- **Honesty**
- **Listening to their side of the story**
- **Walking with rather than dragging up/along/down**
- **A sense of humour and fairness**

- **Steps in the discipline process**
- **Saying sorry when you (the adult) makes a mistake**
- **Staff showing their emotions**
- **Taking the time to learn about their lives and families – learning about people who are significant in their lives**
- **Assessment tasks and teaching/learning strategies which require high energy/activity from the students**
- **Assessment tasks broken into a series of smaller tasks where the teacher regularly checks how the task is progressing**
- **Acknowledging their achievements**
- **Affirmation - 4 positives for every negative for the more difficult boys**
- **Dealing with their learning difficulties**
- **Including literature which they enjoy reading in school programs**
- **Positive male models in the literature read by boys**
- **Focussing on the behaviour rather than the person when they are in trouble**

5. What doesn't work with boys:

- **The feminine exemplar of the model student**
- **Public humiliation**
- **Comparing them to their 'ratbag' brothers**
- **Shouting, ranting and raving**
- **Expecting those in authority in the school to handle all the discipline problems – teachers need to handle what happens in their classrooms**
- **Threats – 'do it or else' (boys will typically ask what the 'or else' option entails)**
- **Constant working from the overhead and/or copying notes from the board**
- **Making fun of them in relation to the girls ('put-downs' in terms of boys being less mature, less academically inclined etc)**
- **Standover tactics**
- **Expulsion (just moves the problem)**

6. Programs and Policies for the Education of Boys

In the last three years I have been involved in a number of programs and have written a number of policies to assist boys in my school. Things that have made a difference include:

6.1 The Boys Program

The Boys Program was an eight week course which I proposed for a number of our at risk boys. The sessions were run by a counsellor and social worker from outside the school.

The sessions included:

- An introductory session
- Mapping trouble around the school
- Trouble at home
- Mental strength (activating thinking processes to deal with conflict)
- An excursion to a local gymnasium
- An anger management workshop
- Visits by Police and an excursion to the local Police Station
- The presentation of certificates to the boys who successfully completed the course.

6.2 I Dream a Safe School (anti-bullying policy)

The policy included clear statements in relation to:

- The nature of bullying
- School policy on bullying and bullies
- What students, staff and parents are to do about bullying.
- Consequences for those who bully other students.

6.3 Behaviour Management Team 2000

A team of four teachers were designated as the 'Behaviour Management Team' this year. The assumptions made about behaviour management included:

- A belief in the essential goodness of students.
- An understanding that, in the first instance we have to fix our own problems in the classroom.
- Consistency in terms of individual teachers and across the College.
- A language of affirmation which balances the times when reprimand is required.
- Flexibility in approaches to conflict resolution.
- An awareness of individual needs and capabilities.
- Steps which begin with the teacher in the classroom.
- Appropriate and clear communication to parents, students and staff.
- Informing parents if there are low level concerns, not waiting until 'big stuff' occurs.
- Empowerment at every level.
- Building the self esteem of staff, parents and students.
- Ownership of behaviour by students and staff.
- An understanding that the only behaviour that we can control is our own.

The role of the behaviour management team was to provide support in terms of:

- Assisting teachers in the classroom with behaviour management issues (perhaps at times team-teaching or modelling appropriate management techniques).
- Working with students on a one-to-one basis.
- Working closely with a small group of students who are having issues in a number of subjects.
- Providing Professional Development opportunities for staff (formally and informally).
- Developing and locating resources for staff.
- Assisting relief teachers where required.
- Planning inservices for staff.
- Visiting other schools and specialist facilities and reporting back to MacKillop staff.

6.4 MacKillop Connections:

MacKillop Connections is a proposal we have submitted to the Catholic Education Office to set up a school or an off-campus centre to cater for students who are 'at risk' of surviving in our College due to a range of unsafe behaviours which cause them to be disengaged with schooling. Such behaviours include bullying, violence, truanting, continual lack of cooperation and use of drugs.

The outcomes of MacKillop Connections would be to enable the students to:

- Develop life skills and other skills to better equip them to 'face the future with faith and courage'
- Raise their awareness of their own dignity as a person and as a child of God
- Raise their self-esteem
- Develop confidence and trust in their own ability to grow and take their place as worthwhile citizens
- Become employable
- Seek out a purpose and direction in life

7. Implications for Further Research

Further research into the Education of Boys is necessary to make schools safer and happier places for boys and girls. I would suggest that the following issues need critical reflection:

- **The role of fathers** in modelling for their sons what it is to be a man in the new millennium.

In dealing with boys who are violent, fathers need to be given the opportunity to be involved and to learn. It is often the case that the boys are following in the footsteps of violent fathers and the cycle of violence can't be broken until the fathers are prepared to look at their constructions of the world.

- Ways of teaching boys strategies for conflict resolution – **strategies that don't include violence.**
- The **triggers for violence** which affect boys.
- The **role of peers** in encouraging boys to be physically violent
- Boys' attitudes to the **efficacy of physical violence.**
- The stories of the **victims of violence** in schools.

Educators and teacher training institutions need to explore:

- **Curriculum innovations** which meet the needs of boys.
- **Constructions of masculinity** which enable male teachers to be appropriate role models for the students of the new millennium.
- Ways of **keeping male teachers** in the classroom.

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I haven't referred to any of these texts in my paper but they relate to the issues discussed and have been part of my professional reading:

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