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**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND  
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

**Reference: Education of boys**

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

**Thursday, 8 March 2001**

**Members:** Mrs Elson (*Chair*), Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mr Emerson, Ms Gambaro, Ms Gillard, Mrs May, Mr Ronaldson, Mr Sawford and Mr Wilkie

**Members in attendance:** Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Elson, Ms Gambaro, Ms Gillard, Mrs May, Mr Ronaldson and Mr Sawford

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

- 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
- the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

**WITNESSES**

**PLUMMER, Mr David, Associate Professor, Community and Public School of Health,  
University of New England.....731**



**Committee met at 9.06 a.m.****PLUMMER, Mr David, Associate Professor, Community and Public School of Health, University of New England**

**CHAIR**—I welcome everyone to this inquiry by the House of Representative Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations into the education of boys. I would like to thank Professor Plummer for his attendance.

**Prof. Plummer**—My research area of interest is in marginalisation and health. An aspect of that is what I want to talk about today, particularly its relevance for education and employment.

**CHAIR**—Professor Plummer, I am obliged to remind you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the as proceedings in the House. A deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but if at any stage you wish to give evidence in private please ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. I would like to invite you to make some introductory remarks before we proceed to questions and discussion.

**Prof. Plummer**—I would like to talk about a taboo subject—homophobia. For the purposes of this meeting I would request that people suspend their traditional idea that homophobia is a narrow prejudice against homosexuals and ask whether it has a wider significance for society. My research leads me to believe that it definitely has and is of great importance, particularly for the schooling of boys in Australia and many of the problems that boys are experiencing. So I ask that people suspend their narrow views about homophobia and ask broader questions as to its significance.

To summarise what I am going to discuss, a working definition of ‘homophobia’ for me is that it is a set of taboos which governs loss of face amongst men and boys. One of the problems associated with this is that because it is so taboo it has the capacity to divert our attention from the real functions that it is carrying out in society and the real impact it has on society to a group of scapegoats. That is why we tend think of it narrowly as an anti-gay prejudice.

It also, because of its taboo nature, has the ability to inactivate circuit-breakers available to moderate anti-social behaviours. An example of that is the way that homophobia can interfere in the outcomes of court trials. As many of the members of this committee may well be aware, work in the New South Wales Attorney-General’s Department and in universities in this country has shown that one in every four stranger murders in New South Wales over the last 20 years has had a homophobic basis. That is a greatly underestimated aspect of murders in this country. The reason we underestimate it—and again, tend to divert our attention from this important aspect of crime in this country—probably is because of the taboo nature of what we are talking about.

Also, because it is taboo it has been extremely difficult to research. It is difficult to attract grant money for an area such as this. If you judge narrowly about national significance and it looks like it affects less than 10 per cent of the population, then clearly grant money will be seen as not being of particular national significance when compared with other programs on a

competitive basis. On the other hand, if you look at homophobia more broadly and look at the dynamics it plays in the schoolground, then it is of incredible national significance. I think it is time for Australia to lead the way in this area and to look more carefully into this.

Although I have said that I would like to suspend the anti-gay prejudices, I would like to read a letter which was sent to me when a person in Sydney heard that I was doing research in this area. It summaries many of the difficult problems that I hope you will have a chance to think about:

I read your comments about the treatment of homosexual youth at schools.

In fact, it was not about homosexual youth. It was about homophobia. That is the common slippage that occurs. I was talking about homophobia, which can be equally directed very viciously at non-gay boys in the schoolground. Any boy can become a victim of this. Some boys suffer greatly. Some are pushed to suicide. So we need to bear in mind that it is not just an anti-gay prejudice. If you remember, the word 'poofster' is often used against people, with absolutely no knowledge of their sexual practice. It is usually directed against aspects of the way a person acts or the way they use their wrists or their eyes or the way they dress or the way they comb their hair or, at school, the fact that their shoes are too shiny, or that they use too much Bryl Cream. I have heard cases of savage homophobia that started because a boy in a boarding house used the wrong brand of soap. To paraphrase, the boy used Cleopatra soap because he thought the ads were very impressive when everybody else, according to him, used Sard Wonder Soap. That was the epitome of masculinity. The letter continues:

I concur with what your research has discovered. Often no-one will defend a kid who is being harassed for fear of being identified as a gay sympathiser. Similarly, it is true from my own experience, teachers condone by inaction or actively participate in a homophobic abuse. This week I listened to an American lawyer who represented a schoolboy harassed for being homosexual. The most salient remark he made was that, unlike other victims of discrimination, gay youth--

I add that there boys who suffer from homophobia who are not necessarily gay—

often find no sympathy or support at home. This happened to me. I have been reading about a recent case in New South Wales with interest. Twenty years ago I was in a similar situation. However, as often happens, the complainant was seen as the problem, not what I complained about. I was turned on by other students and other teachers for being perceived to be homosexual, which I was and am. In the 1980s I attended a university law school and studied the law of torts. At that time while learning about concepts of liability and the parameters of duties of care I reflected on the behaviour of the employees of the Department of Education and my own school experience. The areas of trespass, assault and battery seem relevant here too. However, 20 years ago the political climate regarding homosexuality was different and I had no ability or support to take any action. The torment and abuse I suffered daily at school was horrendous. The toll it takes is enormous. The effects are long lasting and psychologically scarifying. I first suffered homophobic abuse at primary school.

That is an important observation which we might come back to. The letter goes on:

It persisted and became more virulent at high school. During this time I would dry retch and vomit daily in the mornings and be fatigued and anxious all day at school. This hindered my ability to learn. School was like a prison. This was a state selective school in Sydney suburbs. It had a prevailing macho ethos, where rugby playing was seen as the pinnacle of achievement. Home was not much better. The only respite was the walk between the two. Bus rides had become too full of abuse to countenance. At school, I was verbally abused constantly, spat upon, poked, pushed, shoved, had objects, food, stones, sticks and animal manure thrown at me, threatened with physical violence, ostracised and made to exist in constant fear. I was unable to cope with the constant hostility and was absent often and with constant vomiting. I was often late in the mornings, having had to walk two kilometres, as bus trips were too abusive. As a result, I was put on detention often, made to clean desk tops with Ajax after school, even though I was the most obedient student otherwise. School counselling was non-existent or poor in both quality and time made available. A visiting counsellor was more

concerned that I wasn't homosexual. Another was impressed at how I verbalised the constant fear and anxiety felt by me attending school as 'an unremitting electrified level of anticipation'.

whatever that means—

Having emerged from school, not having attempted but considered suicide and being referred to a psychiatrist, I was one year out of school when told to leave home and give up university study by my parents for 'choosing' to be a homosexual. I am not surprised that gay youth constitute a large chunk of suicide statistics. I have been suicidal and continue to have suicidal thoughts due to the trajectory that my life has taken due to discrimination. 'You are a homosexual so you deserve to be treated as less than equal, even less than human' was the message I received from my school, family and society. What are the end results? Twenty years on I have underachieved, despite a high IQ and accumulating two degrees from prestigious universities. My self-esteem has been so crushed I have been afraid to ask for anything and have been bullied constantly by others in the workplace. In the Public Service it is just another schoolyard.

Apologies to the public servants present. The letter continues:

I am chronically anxious and depressed, surviving on a part disability pension and part-time clerical work. This is the terrible cost and waste to individuals and our society as a whole from the homophobic treatment of gay youth, of which I was once one.

The name and address were supplied to me. What I am trying to indicate here is that, although this story comes from a young gay man who finally had the togetherness to articulate what went on, in my research there are many young men who go through similar experiences who are not, and probably never will be, gay. Homophobia has a profound impact in the schoolyard, much less so in the classroom. It tends to go on very widely at places remote from adult intervention. That makes it even more difficult to intervene in.

Many research projects have shown that bullying in general is underestimated by teachers. My research shows that one reason why that might be is that it tends to take place behind a thicket of trees on the edge of the school ground, behind the shelter sheds, on the school bus going to and from school, in the lanes going to and from school, in the toilets. Some boys who are harassed described not going to the toilet during the entire school day, holding off. Some end up wetting their pants in younger years because they are too scared to go to the toilets.

It is commonplace, is the other important message. Even though much of the dynamics takes place in those short periods of recess and lunch breaks and going to and from school, at its peak, in about year 8, all boys describe hearing words like 'poofter' and 'faggot' many times a day at school. Even if they are not targeted, they know the power behind those words and they modify their subject choice, their career choice, their appearance, the way they speak, the way they relate to people, even the way they use their eyes, in the dramatic ways that I have shown up in my research.

To give you an example of how deeply this infiltrates their education, we can have a look at the sports change rooms. What I found in the sports change rooms is that because boys are unsupervised in a fairly concentrated area, often in a state of undress, those tensions rise. They are governed by homophobic codes. Boys tend to go into the change room, find a bench in front of their locker, put their bag there and almost have blinkers on in the way they use their eyes. They are, at that age, curious to know how they compare and how they measure up with other boys in the class, but they cannot be caught looking. What they will do is develop all sorts of ways of looking around the room out of the corner of their eye—scanning, without their vision

alighting in any particular place—so that they can gauge themselves and their development against others.

So you can see that homophobia and being underdeveloped play a role there, that the stigma associated with boys who are lagging behind is a homophobic stigma. Also, if accidentally their eyes do alight on another boy or they get caught looking absentmindedly, there is another set of rituals that comes into play. Boys that see another boy looking are obliged to point it out, because otherwise they are seen as a collaborator if they are found out to have overlooked it. So there is immediately a set of rituals about declaring a boy to be a poofter. The other boy then has a set of rituals of dissociation. If they protest too much, they are guilty. If they look sheepish and back off, they are guilty. There is a medium line down which they must go to disentangle themselves from this accusation.

On the other hand, in the proximity of girls change rooms, the rules change radically: of course, there, boys are meant to look; they are meant to drill holes through the wall; they are meant to look across the top of the door; they are meant to grab a look as the door opens and closes; and, above all, they are meant to boast about it—they are meant to tell other boys—because it is not the act of looking but the act of proving yourself in front of other boys that is quite important. There again, the homophobic dynamics underwrite this process, in the sense that they must tell, they must be demonstrably heterosexual; but, more than that, they must be demonstrably masculine. The most important thing is to tell boys, rather than actually what your sexual practice is. You can start to see some of the difficulties growing out of this: for some of our health promotion programs, such as teenage pregnancy programs and safe sex programs for sexually transmitted diseases, the dynamics are creeping in here. The loss of face for not being demonstrably heterosexual or demonstrably and aggressively masculine lies in the penalties that boys pay if they are seen to back out and lose face.

So we put a lot of emphasis in our society on the positive values of masculinity. What we overlook, because of the homophobic taboos, is what is in loss of face. Of course, for a boy who is not tough, what is he if he does not fight? He is a poofter. A boy who is not sexually aggressive is a poofter. A boy who chooses the wrong school subjects, particularly subjects that girls are good at—or even subjects that boys and girls are good at—is suspect. A boy who chooses subjects that only boys are good at is proving himself. Unfortunately for modern education, with the increasing equalisation of academic pursuits by girls, that leaves some boys in a difficult position. The only thing they can prove their masculinity by is in areas where girls are not showing equal if not better ability, and that is in team sports—and bullying.

What we find is that everybody in the schoolground loses. Clearly, many of the boys who get targeted, whether they turn out to be gay or not, become severely traumatised and some of them probably commit suicide. Some of them show incredible resilience, however; and that is something else that is quite an interesting aspect of this work. The boys who see themselves as holding the standard of masculinity and of being the bullies and enforcing those standards also lose. A classic and rather gloating description from some of the boys who were victims is that the boys who bullied them at school—if I may use rather blunt language—all ended up ‘tattooed and drug fucked’, as they said. In other words, the boys who were the bullies enjoyed considerable power in the schoolground at the top of the pecking order but they ended up without education, excelling at physical abilities. Also tied into that ethic was the idea that only girls or poofters read books.



Those boys ended up physically being encouraged to be bullies; they ended up encouraged to be good at sports and to excel in team sports, at least in the physical sense, but maybe not in a team sense. At the end of school, their peer group disintegrated, their source of power and prestige came to an end and they ended up with no education. The boys caught in the middle had their options narrowed down because there were certain subjects, certain behaviours and certain creative areas, particularly, they could not engage in. The teachers' authority was undermined. So this dynamic undermines teachers' authority, it leaves the boys who are the bullies disadvantaged, it leaves the victims disadvantaged and it narrows boys' options at schools and limits their educational opportunities quite severely. It encourages truancy and early school drop-out for boys and there are a whole lot of other implications.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Professor. At this stage we will go to questions. I am quite sure there are a number of questions to be asked.

**Ms GAMBARO**—I am currently going through a stage with a 12-year-old boy and a lot of what you said here today, I have to say, really rings true. I notice in his language—he has just started at a private boys school—that everything is gay. I asked a principal recently, 'Does the fact that he is talking about that's gay mean that there is some sort of homophobic criteria?' She said, 'No, that's how kids talk these days.' Also in the choice of the sports subjects—he is only a small boy; he hasn't developed yet—I suggested that he do gymnastics and his sister said, 'No, don't do that. That's gay.' You talk about peer group pressure of other boys in their peer group, but how much is peer group pressure from females? I know we are looking at the boys inquiry here, but a lot of these homophobic things that you have spoken about today I feel have a lot to do with the boy's development. In year 8, for example, you have very tiny boys who have not developed, then you have a full spectrum. As boys develop on a less even keel than girls physically, how much of it is related to personal appearance and development?

**Prof. Plummer**—You have brought up a number of issues, including the classic one which mothers often mention to me: it rings true and my son is witness to some of this right at the moment. Even if he is not subject himself, he actually participates in some way or other. Yes, it is related to a boy's development, specifically to immaturity. Boys crying or showing behaviours that we consider immature or that, particularly, their peer group considers immature and should not be done in public in front of peers is a powerful trigger for homophobic attack, especially boys that are physically immature, and this underlies some of the tensions I described in the sports change room.

The other thing you brought up which is very important is peer group dynamics. This explains how, no matter how civilised our adult world can become, these dynamics are still present in the schoolground and boys can still describe, even now, the schoolground as worse than a prison. These labels stick and if a boy is targeted and there are bullies who are gunning for him whenever he comes into their field of vision and they cannot escape from those walls of the school all day, then 12 years of schooling or six years of schooling at least, may well be worse than being sentenced to six years in prison. Peer group dynamics are absolutely vital.

Many people when they think of homophobia want to blame parents, they want to blame teachers and they want to blame the church. I do not blame any of those. I think that, unwittingly, adults and our institutions play a role in that we pretend that we are staying neutral. This is an area of power; there is no neutral position: you are either affirming or you are

homophobic. The worst thing about churches, adults, teachers and parents is that we do not speak up, we remain silent; we think that staying neutral gives kids a better chance to get a view of the world. What it fails to do is address the virulent homophobia that is concentrated in peer groups, so your focus on peer groups is very appropriate. It also explains why it can be passed from boys to boys even though the outside world changes. It is what I call rolling peer pressure. It is like nursery rhymes, which have been passed down in school grounds, virtually unchanged, ever since Oliver Cromwell's day. These rather antisocial codes are also passed down very efficiently.

My research shows that boys almost always become aware of homophobic words before puberty—in reference to your physical observations, there is probably a good reason for that—before they develop their own sexual identity, before they really know what homosexuality is, so therefore it must be playing other dynamics. My research also shows that it is not a random insult on a par with all other insults. I asked boys to rank insults. They gave me words such as wanker, dickhead and a whole lot of other abusive terms, including terms against girls. Boys classified poofter and faggot at the top of the list—those stood head and shoulders above the rest because they were undermining their masculinity. Also, homophobic terms like poofter are not about boys acting like girls. Many boys are quite masculine, but they are not masculine according to peer standards—they are not hypermasculine. Homophobia has a role in promoting antisocial, hypermasculine activities, including crime and including failing to achieve educationally, if that is where that boy's source of prestige comes from and if the risk to that boy's reputation is too great if he backs out.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Professor Plummer, you have taken a very qualitative approach this morning. You have not presented much quantitative evidence, other than the crime statistic that 25 per cent are homophobic based. I tried to look that up and I could not find it at all.

**Prof. Plummer**—I can give you many references for it.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Perhaps you can give us a reference—just one will do.

**Prof. Plummer**—The researcher who has done most of this work is Steve Tomsen from the University of Newcastle. He has done a number of publications, including through the Australian Institute of Criminology, which has been tabulating that. So that institute will be able to help you with that. They recently put out a monograph on this issue, which they are starting to address, but it does not seem to have filtered too widely.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Have your research papers been published?

**Prof. Plummer**—They have indeed.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Where have they been published? Have they been subjected to peer review?

**Prof. Plummer**—Yes they have. This book I have here was published in New York. It details all of my research, which is qualitative. We have many quantitative studies around the world on bullying and, because of the emerging literature coming from the Australian Institute of Criminology and related literature in the United States and Britain, there is enough quantitative

data out there. I decided to do this research because my question was: what is going on? And you do not find that out by doing more quantitative research.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Why not?

**Prof. Plummer**—I will put it this way. A committee like this holds an inquiry to investigate an issue and feels confident in the end that its report is meaningful for society. That is a qualitative research initiative. I fully support the work of this committee. It is exactly the same methodology I am using, which is to inquire into the underlying dynamics.

**Mr SAWFORD**—No, that is not correct. I have been on this committee for 13 years, and I think that this committee has deliberately tried to have a balance—if you read all through our reports—of quantitative and qualitative research, and it is an examination of both. In other words, I am not denying the fact that qualitative research has some value; I am not denying that at all. But what I find difficult in any research project—whether it be Professor Gloria Gilligan, Gloria Steinem or anyone else—is reliance on qualitative research and no reference at all to quantitative research. I then find the suppositions that are reached a little hard to take.

**Prof. Plummer**—Mr Sawford, I pointed out that there has been research done by the Australian Institution of Criminology which has been published—

**Mr SAWFORD**—Yes, I referred to that in the last couple of days.

**Prof. Plummer**—You just said that you were not aware of such research.

**Mr SAWFORD**—No, I read it. I could not find what you were saying.

**Prof. Plummer**—I premised my research, including the introductory chapters of this book, on enumerating quantitative studies from all around the world. There are many quantitative studies into this issue. My specific research question was to build on those quantitative studies and ask what is going on. I totally agree with you. I do not think you should try and make this out to be a difference of opinion between us, because I agree with you. Quantitative research is very important. I have a quantitative research background. This research has a quantitative research background. It is firmly grounded in the traditions of quantitative research, and neither exists alone. I am trying to produce some qualitative detail and explore some developmental findings on top of that very important quantitative research. So, yes, I agree with you.

**Mr SAWFORD**—David, we can only go on the information that is presented to us. What was presented to us was two short papers and a letter. In that, the reference to it is all qualitative. There is no reference to quantitative other than a study of 30 young men. That is all that is there. Two-thirds of the 30 young men, on your scale, are bisexual to homosexual in that area. Is that correct?

**Prof. Plummer**—Two-thirds of them are—

**Mr SAWFORD**—I would not have thought that was a random sample.

**Prof. Plummer**—It is not a random sample. It is a qualitative study. It does not rely on random samples—

**Mr SAWFORD**—That is what I am saying.

**Prof. Plummer**—With respect, it seems to me that, whilst I totally agree with you, you do not have a full understanding of the function that I am hoping qualitative research will play here. In fact, the sorts of questions that I hope to answer cannot be answered by quantitative studies. They lay the ground for future quantitative studies, and that is what I want to do. If you want a summary of the quantitative studies, you are welcome to purchase my book and have a look through it.

**Mr SAWFORD**—I might have a read of it through the library first and see if it is worth it! I have a couple more quick questions. You seem to equate masculinity with bullying. You said, ‘Bullying is the top of the pecking order.’ My experience of working with boys—I was a teacher or principal for 25 years—is that bullies are at the bottom of the pecking order. They are loathed in schools; they are absolutely hated. So I do not know why you said that. But you did not differentiate between hypermasculinity, which is the dysfunctional behaviour of boys, in a minimum number of boys, which often leads to criminal assaults, et cetera. But surely, in terms of normal masculinity, they are positive behaviours, just as femininity is positive.

**Prof. Plummer**—There are many aspects of masculinity—

**Mr SAWFORD**—But hypermasculinity does not apply—it only applies to a small group of boys.

**Prof. Plummer**—Yes. Homophobia does not cause hypermasculinity, but it creates difficulty—

**Mr SAWFORD**—I am not suggesting that. I am just asking about your definition of hypermasculinity.

**Prof. Plummer**—It does stop boys from backing out. In fact, I gave a few examples, but I did not give a definition of hypermasculinity. The point is that there are many aspects of positive masculinity, which I strongly support. What I want society and committees like this to do is to clearly differentiate antisocial masculinity—maybe that is a better term—

**Mr SAWFORD**—Yes, it probably is.

**Prof. Plummer**—and understand some of the driving forces behind it. If there is everything to lose in some of those antisocial masculinity and very little to gain, we have got to ask what is behind it. That is the fundamental question: what stops boys disengaging from it.

**Mr SAWFORD**—Discipline.

**Prof. Plummer**—Yes, I agree, that is part of it.

**Mr BARTLETT**—Is it your view that this homophobic harassment is greater in boys schools or in co-ed schools—or is there no clear difference?

**Prof. Plummer**—Although I did not do a random sample, I did try and collect a mosaic of different situations. In view of the quantitative studies that have been done, that mosaic was able to show that similar dynamics occur across the school system in all states and in New Zealand. Independently these boys describe similar dynamics. It did not vary according to rural or urban location; it did not vary according to boys only schools or co-ed schools; and it did not vary whether it was a Catholic, an Anglican or a government school. I think the reason for that is that it does vary in the sort of superficial clothing that it wears, in the sense that in some schools—particularly schools with a strong southern European population—soccer was considered a very masculine pursuit, whereas in Anglo schools it was seen as a girls sport.

**Mr BARTLETT**—To what extent do you think this homophobic oppression might explain the growing anti-achievement mentality of boys? Do you think there is much of a link or is that a fairly tenuous view?

**Prof. Plummer**—What I have highlighted is that these dynamics have not been thought about before. But it is not a quantitative study and therefore these studies need to be done. It is clear from many of the accounts that I got that there is a homophobic penalty for doing well in certain subjects. Certain subjects should not even be chosen for boys unless they want to be called poofers, like drama and music. There are other subjects where, yes, you can do them but if you do well at them and stand apart from the peer group by achievement, homophobia is the sort of tall poppy syndrome that can occur there.

**Mr BARTLETT**—Has any work been done or is it your intention to do any work on solutions to this problem? How do we address this negative anti-achievement mentality?

**Prof. Plummer**—I have produced some recommendations. From the descriptions, you can construct a social geography of the school ground, and there are safety zones and danger zones. Safety zones are places like the library, close to the school buildings—particularly close to the staff room entrance—often in the hallways and in front of the computer screens in a computer lab. Those places tend to be safe. Places a distance from the school buildings and private spots tend to be dangerous. So if we know that, we can implement some interventions. I have produced a range of other recommendations based on those findings.

**Mr BARTLETT**—They are strategies of survival. I am thinking more of strategies to change the anti-achievement mentality and its link with homophobia.

**Prof. Plummer**—I think it needs more research and I would like to do that. Unfortunately, whenever you mention homophobia in a research application, you get the hackles on the backs of people's necks rising before you have even had a chance to articulate your viewpoint. That disadvantages research into marginalised issues in this country.

**Ms GILLARD**—This inquiry started in part by comparing data about boys' educational achievement vis a vis that of girls today, with data from 20 years ago which showed that boys and girls were basically on a par 20 years ago—or the boys were in front. Today boys are behind on a whole series of key indicators; retention rates and all of that kind of thing. There is

a whole argument about whether we are comparing apples with apples across that 20-year period. We will have to have that debate at some point. It does seem that there has been a deterioration in boys' performance. I have asked each person who has come and presented to the committee whether we are able to disaggregate what has always been true from what has changed in that 20-year period because we need to focus on the things that have changed to explain that result. I accept what you say but wouldn't it have been as true 20 or 30 years ago as it is today? Does any of your research indicate that there has been an intensification of these behaviours in, say, the last 20 years which might explain some of the educational data?

**Prof. Plummer**—I described some of my findings to a fellow in his eighties who went to school in a rural New South Wales town, and he could recognise some of those dynamics. He was not gay, but he could recognise some of those dynamics quite clearly and quite strongly from his school experience. So, clearly, there is a long-term aspect to this. The only light I can shed on your question is that it is a very powerful dynamic in the late 20th century-early 21st century for boys. They experience it in many excruciating ways, according to their descriptions.

**Ms GILLARD**—But you are not able to say that it is more powerful now?

**Prof. Plummer**—It would require quantification. My hunch is that it is, but it would require quantification and I am not sure how you would do that.

**Ms GILLARD**—Thank you.

**Mr BARTLETT**—Just to take up Ms Gillard's point and Mr Sawford's point, you would have to accept that the schoolyard has become more homophobic to give some credence to what you are telling the committee. I find that intriguing, given that the taboos of 20 years ago, I would have thought, are not the taboos of today. You really would have to take out of that that all this openness has actually led to an increase in homophobia, which I find a bit hard to accept.

**Prof. Plummer**—I think, in fact, that is what has happened; that is my impression. The reason I say that is that schoolyards have become less easy to police, discipline and patrol, and peer groups have now become more powerful in society than they were. Things like sport were more codified and were considered in a more gentlemanly way 30 or so years ago, whereas now it is commonplace to see media descriptions of respected league teams trashing motels, behaving badly, being racist on the sports field and so forth. I think maybe, even though the outside world has become much more concerned about human rights and so forth, that may not be reflected within the school ground culture, in peer culture at distance from adult intervention.

**Mr RONALDSON**—Yes, but take my own family situation: I have an 11-year-old son who is happily playing netball. If it had been suggested to me 20 or 30 years ago that I play netball, I would have jumped a million miles backwards, I can assure you. I would have thought there is actually less of a homophobic attitude within the schools. Where were these 30 young men drawn from and what age were they?

**Prof. Plummer**—They spent their school years in South Australia, Victoria, the ACT, New South Wales, Queensland and New Zealand.

**Mr RONALDSON**—But how did you find them?

**Prof. Plummer**—I recruited them through a variety of methods, including through newspaper advertising, through clinics—because I am a medical doctor, I was able to get some clinics to do some recruiting for me—through putting notices on clubroom notices boards and so forth. I used a variety of mechanisms.

**Mr RONALDSON**—But you were not specifically targeting a group of people that you assumed were going to have some issues?

**Prof. Plummer**—Not at all. Homophobia was not mentioned in the recruitment. Sexual identity was not mentioned in the recruitment at all. What I was doing, which is a well-accepted qualitative strategy, was to examine a sample and ensure that it had a broad spectrum of people in it.

**Mr SAWFORD**—But yours did not.

**Mr RONALDSON**—Could you give me an example of the notice that you put up?

**Prof. Plummer**—The one thing I can say that I deliberately excluded was kids from juvenile justice centres who had engaged in homophobic attacks, because I wanted to examine it in everyday life. I did not want to examine it—

**Mr SAWFORD**—I do not want to pursue the issue. I am just saying straight out that your group is not a broad group. That is the end of the story. Let us not debate the issue.

**Prof. Plummer**—As I tried to point out, it is a broad group and it is a broad mosaic. It is not a random sample. It is a quantitative research technique and we are trying to answer different questions. It is not a random sample and it was never intended to be. A question was asked earlier about whether or not this is peer reviewed. The research in this book was done as a PhD at the Australian National University. It was sent out to international academics to mark the PhD and it was passed with flying colours. It has been peer reviewed. So you may have problems with the methodologies, but the Australian National University and examiners at universities overseas, including the University of Texas and the University of Chicago, did not have problems with it.

**Mr RONALDSON**—I am fascinated by the language. It is language that was used in my generation and not, I would have thought, language used by the current generation. The word ‘poofter’, I think, was used in my generation. I do not hear my children—the girls or the boys—using that sort of language. What age groups were these 30 young men?

**Prof. Plummer**—Less than 30 years old. They were aged between 18 and 30. I tried to get men between the ages of 18 and 25 because I did not want to encounter parental consent problems if I went below the age of 18 and I did not want to get out-of-date data. I wanted to ask kids who had recently completed their school years. So all these interviews were conducted with young men who had recently completed their school years. All the evidence I have indicates that those words are current. As I said earlier, their language is often moderated in the presence of adults. This occurs at some distance from adults—in peer groups and at remote locations in the school ground. That might explain it.

According to many of the research papers that I have looked at, teachers underestimate bullying. I think that is the reason why it might occur. I do not wish to blame teachers or parents; I just want to say that there are spaces within which peer groups operate to which we are not privileged.

**Mr BARRESI**—My question, which follows the questions asked by Ms Gillard and Mr Ronaldson, relates to a comment you made earlier. You said that this language was prevalent throughout co-ed, boys, Catholic, private and public schools. On the few field trips that I have done with this committee we went to a couple of boys schools. It was evident at those schools that the non-traditional boys' curriculum was actually welcomed by those boys. Because they were with their mates there was a comfort level in doing things such as poetry and cooking. They might not like doing those things in a co-educational context, but they are comfortable when they are doing them with other boys. I am curious about this issue. I thought that there would have been a difference—not only a generational difference between my generation and Michael's generation but also a difference between the structure of classrooms. There is a greater acceptance by this current batch of boys to units which we might have frowned on many years ago.

**Prof. Plummer**—I agree. Perhaps there are some strategies that you can recommend. Rather than staying neutral or saying nothing about these subjects, we need to encourage boys, without loss of face, to go into subjects like cooking. If they get peer group support from it we will be able to broaden their educational opportunities. But as long as a peer group says that it is unacceptable for a lone boy to go into a specific area, a variety of classes will not be successful. To me, setting school cultures and soliciting peer support are some of the strategies that you can recommend.

**Mr BARRESI**—You made the claim that your qualitative research is evident, no matter what type of school.

**Prof. Plummer**—No, I did not say it was uniform. I said that I could detect them and, depending on the cultural background of the schools, it changed the complexion of those schools. I do not have any way of comparing the level of homophobic dynamics in different schools. However, I did gain the impression that the boys who seemed the least trouble were boys from certain types of schools. Let me give you a classic example. A couple of boys who were interviewed were in leading classes at the schools that they moved through. They had a much easier time. I think that is because there was not the peer group in front of them passing down the culture.

So there are some hints, from the research that I have done, as to the ways forward. I am not claiming that it is even and I am not claiming that it is unchangeable. It is quite clear from other evidence that I have got that it is not inevitable; it is definitely not character building; and it is something about which you can generate recommendations and intervene.

**Mr BARRESI**—In Victoria a schoolyard bullying program is in place. In fact, I think that program is in place right around the country. In your view are those programs targeting homophobic behaviour, or could some enhancements be made to them?



**Prof. Plummer**—We need to view homophobia as a failure to meet peer-based masculinity standards. Homophobia or homophobic abuse is used as a tool in almost all boys' bullying; therefore, it should be taken into account. I am not saying that it is a central feature, but it is a useful tool in the pecking order. This is how you can explain its involvement in boys who do not turn out to be gay.

**Mr BARTLETT**—I have just one other question. In the sample of boys that you questioned, did the family environment have any noticeable impact? I am thinking in particular of boys from families where there was a strong father figure, or a positive male role model. Did that give them greater confidence, when dealing with homophobic activities at school? Were they able to resist it better?

**Prof. Plummer**—I found examples of where the family intensified the isolation of boys by remaining neutral or being overtly homophobic.

**Mr BARTLETT**—You referred to that earlier, but I am asking you whether it has had a positive impact.

**Prof. Plummer**—Some of the evidence led me to the conclusion that the worst thing that we, as adults do, is say nothing. When a boy is in trouble, when a son is in trouble, we do not inquire deeply enough and provide enough support. We are not affirming enough. I think that being affirming of kids is a good way of rescuing them. Just to answer your question on sport, I did find that the boys referred to different classes of sport. The most prestigious were the aggressive team sports. In Victoria that was AFL and here it is league.

The boys who had trouble measuring up in those aggressive team sports and felt a sense of vulnerability, even if they could not articulate it, often found that they would opt for less aggressive team sports. Some would opt for solo sports, like swimming, as a safer place. Often they could recover their identity by doing well in those areas. Other kids would do anything possible to get out of sport. They rightly feared that this bullying group in the schoolyard that they were able to avoid they could not avoid in sports because they were on the opposing team, or even on the same team, and they felt like the odd one out. So we still have to put a lot of thought into those archetypal male team sports.

**Mr RONALDSON**—I have no doubt that some of the anecdotal evidence you have given today is correct. I am just trying to determine the extent of it. When you refer to expressions such as 'poofter' and 'you big girl' or 'you big sheila,' or whatever those terms might be, are they used in a general derogatory sense as opposed to being sexually based expressions?

**Prof. Plummer**—Yes, they are not sexually based. That is absolutely correct. That is the point I tried to make from the outset. But they are also not general derogatory. They are about failed masculinity, a failure to measure up to peer expectations. If you are the odd boy out, you are obviously a poofter. It is not about sex, and I have tried right from the outset to say that it is not about sex. It gains its power from its relationship with masculinity and stereotypical masculinity, not necessarily the masculine ideals that we around this table would aspire to.

**Mr RONALDSON**—But 20 or your 30 were gay young men—

**Prof. Plummer**—No, they were not. One-third of the sample was gay, one-third of the sample was heterosexual and one-third was bisexual. I deliberately chose it in thirds to try and get a spectrum of views. I did not want to get 10 per cent who were gay; I did not want to minimise a particular viewpoint. I did not want to delete bisexual males. I wanted to gather up a number of their experiences from each of those different subcategories to try and get a mosaic of viewpoints. I gathered them from different states and from different schooling systems and rural and urban, so that I could see. The way you can generalise from that small sample is that you can relate it back to pre-existing quantitative literature, which I introduced my work with, which shows similar dynamics were identified elsewhere around the world. Secondly, that if you were able to demonstrate similar sorts of dynamics in all of those different school situations independently, then there is some shared process going on. But you cannot draw conclusions about whether or not it has changed in the last 20 years, or how severe it is in this country, from that sort of research. What I was looking at was the underlying developmental dynamics.

**CHAIR**—As there are no further questions, Professor, we would like to thank you very much for the valuable contribution you have made today and thank you for your time here. Before you leave, could you just have a talk to Hansard in case there are some further details they would like. Thank you again for appearing before us.

**Prof. Plummer**—A pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

**CHAIR**—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Sawford**):

That this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day, including publication of the proof transcript on the electronic parliamentary database.

**Committee adjourned at 10.02 a.m.**