Submission: Inquiry into Boys' Education

Reconceptualising Masculinity: Addressing the Educational and Social Needs
of Boys

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Introduction

This group submission is from researchers who are working collaboratively across
institutions on boys' education. We welcome the Inquiry and we are pleased to make a
contribution. We are sensitive to the issues surrounding boys' education, and would like
to draw the Committee's attention to research and publications that should be used in the
Committee's deliberations. This includes some of our own work. The reason for this is
because we want to present a balanced view about boys education, not one dominated by
men's rights' lobby groups and some advocates of boys' education. We wish to make a
contribution to the committee's report that reflects scholarly work informed by
sophisticated theorisations and which contributes to the advancement of knowledge and
its applications in schools.

We draw the Committee's attention to a number of points about boys' education, which:
- take seriously gender equity and dominant constructions of masculinity;
- are aware of the interactions between gender and other social variables like
  sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, poverty, disablity etc;
- recognise that boys are not a homogenous group, and that boys, individually or in
  social groups, are different and diverse;
- conjoin boys, different and diverse masculinities and the problems boys face;
- draws on boys' experiences and weaves them into responsive programs like personal
  and social development across the key learning areas;

- acknowledges the role dominant masculinity plays in some boys' rejection of literacy as a social practice;
- encourages strategies that help boys problematise their sense of self and adolescent society, so that they promote social values like gender equity but also racial equity, which is so critical to Australia in the C21st.

Social and Cultural Factors Impacting on Boys at School

Certain men's rights' lobby groups argue the need to address the problems boys are experiencing (see Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998 for a critique of these debates in Australia). This has generated considerable debate in the media. We too are concerned about the problems boys are facing, however, we believe that it is not productive to cast boys as competing victims who have somehow suffered at the hands of a feminist educational agenda driven apparently to promote the interests of girls at the expense of boys (see Cox, 1997; Kenway, 1995; Yates, 1997; Epstein et al, 1998). The position taken by many men's right lobby groups argues for a biologically determined explanation that sees boys as predisposed biologically to behave in particular ways for understanding the problems that boys are experiencing at school, the view that boys are predisposed to particular behaviours and orientations to learning, which is considered to be a consequence of their nature, is promoted. There is also the view that boys' problems are a result of father hunger brought about by the absent father (Biddulph, 1994). This has often led to the call for more male role models in schools to address the problems of boys. We would argue that this is problematic and leaves unquestioned a normalised model of masculinity in terms of a failure to address what kinds of behaviours should men model for boys. We argue for a much broader perspective and indeed conceptualisation of boys and masculinity. The danger with the men's rights' position - and those who advocate simplistic biological explanations to account for the way boys behave - is that dominant masculinity is taken as normal and is not questioned. We want to avoid binary oppositions based on gender being the basis for adopting particular teaching strategies for addressing boys' educational issues.

Much of the rhetoric which informs the populist Men's Movement is often based on adults talking about boys or on behalf of boys. Many of the adults supporting this movement, however, tend to belong to a more specific

'privileged' group, namely middle class, mainly white, heterosexual, males and other issues such as those related to homophobia, race, poverty, disability etc. are not taken into consideration (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994). The point we want to make is that such positions are much too simplistic and often lead to homogenising boys as a group. The effect is to gloss over the complex ways in which factors such as socio-economic class, race, sexuality, disability, geographical location impact on boys' lives (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997). Put simply not all boys are the same! There are particular social and cultural influences which impact on the way boys learn to relate which in turn impact on their engagement and involvement in schooling (see Martino, 1999; 1994). Other research conducted by Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (in press) deliberately set about exploring the perceptions, experiences and beliefs of a wide range of boys and thus the picture that develops is far more complex than has otherwise been presented. What we are advocating is a broader conceptualisation of the issues facing boys in their schooling.

The question for us is one related to the ways in which boys, masculinity and the problems that they face in schools and the wider society are conceptualised. We believe that this continues to be a major issue that must be addressed if the problems facing boys are to be ameliorated. There also needs to be a shift away from the imperative to provide solutions-a position which is driven, to a large degree, by moral panic-to a position committed to a particular reconceptualising of masculinity in an attempt to create a greater awareness of how dominant masculinities impact on the lives of both boys and girls. The effect of defining masculinity against devalued femininity impacts significant on the experiences of both boys and girls at school (see Epstein, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Frank, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). What needs to be addressed in developing and implementing programs for boys in schools is to help students interrogate the effects of this gender system in terms of how they feel constrained and limited in terms of their social and educational experiences (see Martino & Meyenn, in press; Beckett, 2000).

Current research conducted by Martino & Pallottta-Chiarolli (in press) with over 200 boys across Australia has continued to highlight the complex ways in which dominant forms of masculinity impact on boys' lives at school. The role that factors such as sexuality play, for example in these boys' lives, needs to be foregrounded in any program designed to address the eduction

and social well-being of boys at school. Homophobia impacted in significant ways on these boys' lives. Furthermore, the role that dominant masculinity plays in moving to a more nuanced understanding of the bullying practices of boys at schools requires further attention by those working in schools. Many boys also claimed that issues of masculinity had never been explicitly addressed in schools and were willing to engage in an active exploration of the impact of stereotypes about what it meant to be a man/boy in our interviews. They also made some very insightful comments about power in schools and what they considered to be an effective teacher/school. This has major implications for thinking about how educational and social issues for boys at school might be addressed. On the basis of this research and that conducted by others (see Collins, 1996; Epstein, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Redman, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995; Frank, 1993; Letts & Sears, 1999; Martino, 2000), we believe that unless attempts are made to explicitly address the role that sexuality and homophobia play in boys' lives, many of the social and educational problems they face will persist (see Beckett, 1998; Davis, in press). There needs to be a definite focus on understanding how hierarchies of masculinity get played out in boys and girls' lives and school. In this sense, attention also needs to be directed to a focus on how boys learn to police and regulate their masculinities with the view to exploring how such social practices impact on their learning, engagement with the curriculum and social behaviour at school.

Boys and Literacy

The research has shown that dominant masculinity impacts in significant ways on boys engagement and involvement in literacy (see Martino, 1994; in press; Millard, 1997; Hall & Coles, 1997; in press; Gilbert, 1998). However, Alloway & Gilbert (1998), argue that the crisis rhetoric surrounding the concerns about performance on national literacy testing fails to address some very important questions such as why is it that " some groups of children repeatedly do less well than others on standardised measures of literacy" (p 250). For example, while girls consistently outperform boys in school based literacy achievement, Alloway & Gilbert stress that factors such as socio-economic background had a significant impact on student performance. They highlight that boys with the highest socio-economic rankings do much better than girls with the lowest socio-economic rankings and that boys in the lowest socio-economic groupings performed worse than any other group (p 253). Moreover,

Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students generally achieve lower scores that all other social groups in Australia with boys performing worse than girls. What remains significant is that boys at each level scored less well than girls of the same social and economic standing. This highlights the need to move away from remediation at the level of focussing on the individual child, as Alloway and Gilbert rightly point out. The focus needs to be on an exploration of the ways in which literacy, as a social practice, is inscribed in schools and the role that a particular from of masculinity plays in many boys' rejection of literacy as a sex-inappropriate. For instance, Martino's (1994) research has highlighted that many boys see English as a subject more suited to girls and claimed that they would rather be out playing sport than reading etc. However, this does not mean advocating a simplistic solution of offering more boy friendly texts or separating boys from girls in English so that their interests can be catered for more explicitly. This has the capacity of merely reinforcing the very dominant masculinity that is detrimental to boys developing a wider repertoire of acting, behaving and relating as boys. However, as Hall & Coles (in press) have argued schools need to examine the kinds of literacy practices that are sanctioned and to incorporate texts which are cultural to the worlds inhabited by students outside of the classroom. They argue for the need to incorporate popular cultural texts into the classroom and to investigate the range of literacy practices that boys are already engaging in outside of school. Martino (in press) has also argued that it is important to select texts which are culturally relevant to students in the teaching of reading. Some boys in his research indicated that the books set for class reading were boring and somehow removed from their everyday life experiences. They asked for reading material which focused on a more realistic portrayal of relationships and which addressed some of the problems and issues faced by young people in a post-industrial, postmodern world.

Strategies and issues in teaching boys

It is important for schools to implement programs for assisting boys to examine and critically reflect on the ways in which masculinity impacts on their lives. Existing programs have tended to rely on a biologically simplistic understanding of gender. This often results in the binary nature of gender being accepted as 'natural', with a dominant form of masculinity considered 'normal' for boys. What needs to be

understood is that there are many forms of masculinity which may not become available to boys. Strategies for teaching boys, therefore, need to take certain questions into account. These questions need to include how students can become critical thinkers, and more specifically how boys can be encouraged to think critically about dominant masculinities. The issue of dominant masculinities is further complicated by the way boys come to understand themselves as certain kinds of boys in relation to what it also means to be white or not white within a school system which is based on a white Eurocentric middle class model. We need to develop strategies to make it more acceptable for teachers boys and girls to be able to explore the many forns of masculinity rather then merely accepting and adopting the dominant form. In this way 'race' can play a large but contradictory role in schools by placing students within the binary categories of 'white'/'black' where white is seen as normal. This 'whiteness' is frequently associated with colourlessness and dominant discourses often place this whiteness as the norm, so that for white students, their whiteness can be ignored; whereas for students of colour, their 'race' and ethnicity are part of their daily experiences (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). This can become problematic for boys who do not fit into a particular normalised masculine and a normalised white model. This transparency of 'whiteness' as a racial identity further provides 'white' people with a dominant position within society (see McCarthy & Critchlow, 1993) and this is then reflected within the classroom. This dominant positioning is often at the expense of 'non-white' students, whereby the options available to 'non-white' students become restricted to either assimilation and thus become part of the 'norm', or to retain at least part of their own culture and be positioned as 'other'. It is crucial therefore for whiteness as well as masculinity to be problematised, and for teachers to transfer skills to boys to assist them to critically reflect and understand how discourses available to them affect their own as well as other boys' and girls' lives.

These issues relating to masculinities and whiteness are highlighted by research being conducted by Hatchell (presentation paper, 2000). Some particularly important issues became evident during the research. For example, during this research it was possible to observe that although one particular English teacher attempted to keep categories such as 'males' or 'homosexual' or 'whiteness' fluid and open, this was not always possible. The constraints of school directives and lack of professional guidance to

challenge dominant discourses still existed, and the challenge to
stereotypes was therefore also constrained by school policies. Issues that
did surface, such as homosexuality, dominant masculinity, and whiteness,
were considered either not specifically relevant within the classroom lives
of these male students or considered less important than, for example,
authors' meaning of specific texts.

When considering strategies to adopt within the classroom it is therefore important to
consider not only whosevoice is being heard, but also how other voices are silenced and
what positions are being made available to boys. When looking at the education
of boys this also means, pedagogically, to not educate boys at the expense
of girls, nor to educate at the expense of boys who do not easily fit the
dominant masculine and/or white mould. Even when teaching boys in a single
sex environment it is crucial to recognise that relationships within
schools affect relationships with both boys and girls outside of the school
environment. The teachers' roles become central in how these strategies are
accepted and transferred to these students. But, importantly, for the
strategies to be more effectively implemented, it is crucial that support is
also provided for teachers.

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