'Inquiry into the Education of Boys'

An Inquiry Commissioned by the House of Representatives Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations

Submission from the Faculty of Education, Deakin University
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Introduction

There is a strong tradition of Australian policy and research on gender equity and schooling that dates back to 1975 and the publication of the Commonwealth Schools Commission's landmark report *Girls, School and Society* . Current research on gender and schooling indicates that the educational experiences and achievement of boys and girls remain an important focus for policy intervention

It is clear that policies and strategies directed at improving the education of boys must also be linked to larger processes of social cohesion and exclusion. It is necessary to assess which 'differences' among young people matter most, and to ask when and how differences become disadvantages that threaten to undermine opportunities for all individuals to enjoy full, meaningful and equitable participation in social and civic life.

Both in Australia and internationally there is a strong policy focus on understanding gender differences in educational performance. In Australia, there is a particular concern with the educational performance of boys, and this is also evident in many comparable countries and regions—New Zealand, England, Scotland, Scandinavia, Europe, Canada, the USA—where the education of boys is similarly commanding attention from policy makers and researchers (Epstein et al 1998; MacKinnon, Elgvist-Saltzman et al 1998; Powney 1996; Arnot, Gray et al 1998; Arnot, David et al 1999; Erskine 1999).

In much of this work, attention to the education of boys is linked to evidence of girls' improved and in some instances better educational performance. Girls, it is asserted, have better literacy and interpersonal skills, have attained improved

results in end-of -school examination results, are staying on longer at school, are increasing their rates of enrolment in higher education, and overall are becoming more successful in education. This, in turn, has given rise to a perception that boys are 'underperforming' and are at risk of becoming disadvantaged.

A recent report commissioned by DETYA on 'Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females at School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School' (Collins, Kenway & McLeod 2000) provides important data and research for assessing these claims. This research makes clear that data on gender and educational performance need to be read carefully to ascertain **which groups of girls and which groups of boys** are performing highly or falling behind or remaining in much the same position.

In response to such questions, this submission addresses the following topics:

- Gender Equity—Not A Case of Winners and Losers
- What we Know: The Research Evidence
  - Literacy—What exactly is happening?
  - Information and communication technology as a crucial form of literacy
  - Gender and Year 12 performance
  - Gender and retention
  - Which boys, Which girls?
- Social context
  - The culture of masculinity in schools
  - Gender, masculinity and 'at risk' behaviour
- Policies and Professional Development
- Summary of Key Issues

Gender Equity—Not A Case of Winners and Losers

Gender equity in education is not appropriately represented as a simple 'winners' versus 'losers' competition. This notion suggests a model of equity as a see-saw or a pendulum, in which achieving 'equity' is a delicate balancing act: some success is good so long as it does not put at risk other people's entitlement to success, and too much success for one group is seen necessarily to produce

disadvantage for the other. Such an either/or formulation is based on contrasting the experiences of 'all boys' with 'all girls' at one point in their schooling (often end-of-school results) and consequently is not able adequately to register the effects of significant differences within (i.e. not only between) each gender group.

It is necessary, then, to identify which differences between which groups of girls and boys matter at school and in post-school life, and to assess which gender differences result in gender inequalities.

WHAT WE KNOW: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Literacy—What exactly is happening?

- A greater percentage of boys than girls are late starters at literacy but, once they start, the great majority of boys progress well, at least until Year 7.

- There is some evidence from WA, awaiting further research, that boys have in fact caught up with girls in reading and writing in Year 7, the final year of primary school in that State.

- Something happens in the junior secondary school years which prevents boys from keeping up with girls past Year 7, so that the average boy is behind the average girl in literacy by the end of compulsory schooling.

An important area for further research and professional development is the junior and middle years of schooling. The school culture of these years is important in shaping boys' attitudes and performance to English and literacy.

- In addressing boys' performance in literacy, schools also need to work against the perception that 'English', and reading in particular, are predominantly 'feminine' activities. The cultural construction of English as a feminine subject can be alienating for boys and at odds with their adolescent and developing sense of masculine identity (Martino 1994).

- There is considerable evidence that to be good at English can make a male student a target for homophobic bullying by 'macho' males in schools (Gilbert 1997; Martino 1999)

(For further data on literacy and performance see Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000, Chapter 2; For further discussion on boys and literacy see also Martino 1999; Alloway & Gilbert 1997; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Davies 1997; Lingard and Douglas 1999)

Information and communications technology—a crucial form of literacy

Literacy is not simply being able to read and write in print media. Young people are required today to be 'multi-literate', to be competent in the manipulation of a range of media. The capacity to use information and communication technologies is a form of literacy in itself. It requires learning sign systems, often arbitrary, at levels of increasing sophistication according to the uses for which it is deployed. This is a crucial literacy for the 21st century.

- There is considerable evidence that boys are fascinated by this form of literacy and they are certainly enrolling in ICT subjects in the senior school in greater numbers each year. However girls, having embraced this form of literacy alongside boys in the early 90s, are now dwindling in this field, enrolling in much smaller numbers than boys. More girls than boys are in trouble in relation to ICT literacy.

(For further discussion and data see Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000, Chapter 2)

Gender and Year 12 Performance

- In Year 12 assessment, there are boys and girls performing at all levels from top to bottom in all subjects.

- However, the average girl is outperforming the average boy in more subjects.

- The margin is small in favour of the average girl or the average boy in the vast majority of subjects in all States and Territories.

- In New South Wales both the number of subjects in which the average girl outperforms the average boy and the margin by which this is true is considerably more than elsewhere.

- The margins can often be accounted for by the 'type' of boys and girls attracted to particular subjects. For example, more boys than girls by a considerable margin in all States take top level mathematics while only very competent girl mathematicians tend to take that subject Thus the average girl choosing to take that subject will be better than the average boy.   As boys tend to cluster in fewer and more prestigious subjects their ability range tends to be broader than girls taking such subjects. This affects the comparative average mark.

- There is a pattern in boys and girls comparative performance in Year 12 general aptitude tests (eg the Australian Scholastic Aptitude Test (ASAT), the Queensland Core Skills Test (QCS)) which has been noted in the literature for some years. While it is true that boys and girls perform at all levels from top to bottom, there are:

    (1) a slightly greater percentage of boys than girls at the very top;
    (2) a tendency for girls to clump around and a little above the overall average;
    (3) a tendency for boys to spread rather more evenly through the full range;
    (4) a noticeable, if small, clump of boys at the very bottom where there is a tailing off of girls.

(For further discussion and data see Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000, Chapter 2)

Gender and retention

- More girls than boys leave school at the end of Year 8.

- More boys than girls leave school at the end of Year 9.

- More girls than boys stay at school beyond Year 10 which is usually taken as the end of the compulsory years.

- The retention rates from the start of Secondary school to Year 12 (1998 figures) are 77.7% for females and 65.9% for males. These have been fairly stable since 1994.

- However, in spite of the above statistical facts, slightly more males than females proceed to tertiary education. Universities have more female than male enrolments but VET has more male than female enrolments and just tips the overall balance of tertiary students towards males. It is worth noting that apprenticeships have been and remain heavily male dominated and importantly, alongside some other VET courses, do not have Year 12 completion as an entry requirement.

- Further, males are still favoured by employers in the full-time labour market. A boy's failure to complete Year 12 does not seem to hamper unduly his employment prospects. Statistics looking seven years post-school suggest that staying at school to Year 12 (and ending one's education there) rather than walking out of education even earlier, increases a boy's chances of full time employment by only 4% (83% of school completers in full time employment after 7 years cf 79% of non-completers). In contrast, staying at school to Year 12 rather than leaving earlier in and of itself increases a girls' chances of full time employment by 21% (72% of school completers in full time employment after 7 years cf 51% of non-completers).

- Overall, research suggests that there is a largely gender-segregated labour market for school leavers and that differences in retention relate strongly to better full-time employment prospects (through VET or directly) for early-leaving boys than for girls.

(For further discussion and data see Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000, Chapter 2)

Which boys, which girls?

While it is important to understand the overall differences between boys and girls, data should not only be interpreted according to undifferentiated gender categories (i.e. all girls compared to all boys). It is also necessary to investigate the effects of other significant factors, such as socio-economic status, location, (dis)ability, sexuality, race and ethnicity and how they intersect with gender (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000; Epstein et al 1998).

There is already much important data available that can tell us a great deal about the educational experiences and outcomes of particular groups of boys and girls: such data needs to be supplemented and taken on board by policy makers and educators.

Many boys and many girls are participating to the end of year 12 and performing well. But with regard to gender and other variables, recent research has pointed to the overarching significance of socio-economic status (SES) for school participation and performance (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000). For example:

- **Socio-economic status** makes a larger difference than gender to year 12 performance, even in subject English where girls generally do better than boys.

- **Socio-economic status** makes the largest difference to educational participation, particularly for boys—about a 30 per cent difference between males from professional/managerial backgrounds and those from unskilled backgrounds. SES makes somewhat less difference for females. Poverty is a major indicator of low participation and performance for both gender

- **Rural, remote and urban localities** have high concentrations of poverty and disadvantage for both sexes, (with regard to school participation and subject performance), with rural males more negatively affected than rural females. However, seven years after leaving school, boys who graduate from rural

schools are much more likely to be employed full-time than their female counterparts.

- **Differences in subject choice** clusters between males and females intersect with socio-economic differences in participation and performance. The lower middle (skilled) and highest SES (professional/managerial) groups have the greatest differences between male and female patterns and male students in these groups show the most traditional patterns for their SES backgrounds. Well over a third of highest SES males take the traditional maths and physical sciences subject group. Lower SES males tend to divide up (probably on the basis of academic success) between this subject group and one of the subject groups in the Vocational Education and Technology 'Field of Study'. Upper middle SES students show the least gendered pattern because the males of this group show the greatest spread across Fields of Study. Within Fields of Study, however, these males, like their counterparts from the other SES backgrounds, tend to choose a tight group of subjects rather than the broader options which females tend to take.

- **Indigeneity** intersects with poverty, locality and socio-economic disadvantage to make the chances of poor schooling participation and performance extremely high for indigenous students.

(For further data and discussion see Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000 Chapters 3 and 4)

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Culture of Masculinity in Schools

Schools need to foster a wider range of positive masculine behaviours and roles than are currently available. Much research has documented the negative effects on boys of the dominant culture of masculinity (Hickey & Fitzclarence & Matthews; Lingard & Douglas 1999; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998). In schools, this culture can include aggressive and dangerous behaviour, an anti-academic success attitude, a focus on a narrow range of curriculum options (traditional 'male' subjects), and poor emotional and inter- and intra-personal skills. Young

men need to feel safe and supported in schools to develop alternative ways of being male.

In many parts of the world there is a form of masculinity that idealises physical prowess; requires that males have power over women; is homophobic, linking homosexuality with femininity; and insists on drawing a clear line between masculine culture and what women do.

But, this is only one way of being male. There have been many other socially-valued forms of masculinity. Some of these traditionally have included the idea of honour and the desire to serve the public and to be respected in public life; an interest in wrestling with intellectual issues and academic scholarship; an appreciation of beauty and of craftmanship and the desire to produce arts and artefacts; a striving for independence and determination to be self sufficient. All these, and many other ways of life for men, have been lived and admired as forms of masculinity.

- There is considerable evidence in Australia, where sport and physical prowess are so dominant, that a narrow form of masculinity has swamped male adolescent peer culture in many schools. Dominant males, in junior high school especially, can use bullying, scape-goating and name calling (especially homophobic name calling) to police normative masculinity. Adolescence is a crucial moment in the development of a sense of identity and of the skills and knowledges to carry that identity satisfactorily into adult life. In many Australian secondary schools male students are forced, at this crucial moment, to adopt an undesirable and narrow form or masculinity or else to pay an enormous price as scapegoats.

- The increasing pressure on boys to conform to an undesirable, anti-academic, homophobic, anti-female culture of masculinity could account for the decreasing levels of average Year 12 results for boys and for the plateauing of male literacy levels after Year 7. The labelling of English and literacy studies as feminine and gay territory is well documented (see above and Martino 1994, 1999; Gilbert 1997).

- Curriculum areas, such as English, need to provide opportunities for boys to understand that academic success is not at odds with masculine identity, and to see how certain ways of being male are socially constructed as 'normal'.

- Schools need to directly address homophobia and the impact this can have on young people's sense of self and on their educational experience and performance (Hillier, Dempsey, Harrison et al 1996).

- Recent research suggests that the 'peer group' is influential in maintaining dominant forms of masculinity . Schools should address the compelling effects of peer group dynamics—how young men forge their identities in interaction with other young men (Hickey and Fitzclarence, 2000).

- Directly addressing relationship between males and females will also be necessary. Schools should encourage young men to treat women as fully human like themselves, and to feel confident to pursue subject areas and interests traditionally designated as 'feminine' (Collins, Batten et al 1996; McLeod 1998).

- Schools need to encourage all young people to develop social relations that are respectful of gender difference and which allow the expression of a wide range of ways of being male and female (Collins, Batten et al. 1996 Kenway & Willis et al 1997)

Gender, Masculinity and 'at risk' behaviour

There is widespread government and community concern over the growing costs associated with the consequences of the anti-social and risky behaviours of a significant number of young males. There is much empirical evidence to justify young men being singled out as an 'at risk' group. For example: external causes (particularly accidents) are the leading causes of death for young males in the 1-24 year age group; in 1997 almost half (48%) deaths of young males aged 1-17 were attributable to accidents or violence; 1995 data revealed that males are four times as likely to experience injury as a result of violent attacks than are their female counterparts (ABS Reports 1996-99) .

Schools, then, have a responsibility to address the kinds of aggressive masculinity and practices that give rise to such risk-taking behaviours.

- It is important not only to focus on individual problems and solutions but to also look atthe role and influence of the peer group. Instead of blaming young men for making the wrong decisions, or for engaging in irresponsible behaviour, educators and policy makers need to address the inter-personal relations among young men and the possibilities for developing a wider range of masculine identities.

- Attention to the risk-taking behaviour of young men should not obscure the fact that *young women* also engage in dangerous and harmful behaviour: risk, danger and self-harm are not only the province of young men.

- There are differences, however, between the kind of risky behaviours in which young men and women engage and these need to be recognised: for example, young women engage in body abuse through dieting and eating disorders, have high rates of attempted suicide and high levels of anxiety.

- Whereas some boys might adopt a casual and indifferent attitude to schooling (which can have serious and negative consequence), some girls might become overly anxious about their performance, with serious negative effects on their well being.

Policy and professional development

- For there to be any substantial and sustainable changes to gender equity in schools or to the education of boys, schools need to adopt 'whole school policies'.

- The focus for gender equity work should be at the level of formal structures and support rather than at the level of teachers' individual responsibilities or interests.

- Research demonstrates that any shift in the culture of schools requires strong 'top down' support from formal leadership and policies to support 'bottom up' activities (Blackmore 1998; Kenway, Willis et al 1997

- Schools require strong support form their local communities if they are to successfully implement gender equity programs that benefit both boys and girls (Kenway, Willis et al 1997). There are useful models of schools and communities working together, particularly in rural areas, for example in joining forces to deal with youth suicide.

- Strong policy frameworks in schools must be supported by sustained and properly funded professional development for teachers.

Summary of key issues

- The focus of policy and school-based change should not simply be 'all boys' or 'all girls'. Rather the fundamental question of 'Which boys and which girls?' must be addressed —which particular groups of boys and girls are doing well and which are in trouble?

- The impact of experiences in the junior and middle years of schooling need to be further investigated, especially in relation to how they might influence boys' attitudes to English and literacy

- Dominant ideals of masculinity can have a negative effect on some boys' schooling performance, especially in the conventionally feminine subject areas, such as English.

- Schools need to directly address the culture and construction of masculinity. This will also require them to address the serious and damaging effects of homophobic behaviours.

- Schools and educators need to address the effects of peer group dynamics on the development of male identity.

- Schools need further resources, through teacher professional development, to foster a wider range of positive masculine behaviours and roles than are currently available.

- There needs to be further investigation of the kinds of masculinity and practices that give rise to risk-taking behaviour. This should also encompass recognition of the differences between the kind of risk taking behaviours in which young men and women engage.

- Schools need to encourage all young people to develop social relations that are respectful of gender difference and which allow for the expression of a wide range of ways of being male and female.

- Schools should be encouraged to develop strong 'top down' support from formal leadership and policies to support 'bottom up' activities.

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