

SUBMISSION TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORK PLACE RELATIONS: INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

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In our view the issue of boys and schooling which has come to the fore over the last decade or so has to be dealt with thoughtfully, carefully and sensitively. We would reject an approach which treats all boys as victims and all girls as successes. This inappropriate representation is often dominant in the media and is one which often has negative effects both in terms of educational system responses and in terms of school and classroom practices. In contrast, as with the recommendations of the O'Doherty Report (1994) and as suggested by a range of academic literature (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1997; Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie, 1997; Lingard and Douglas, 1999; Mills, forthcoming), what is required is sensible, systemic and school level gender equity policies which deal knowledgeably with girls' and boys' issues in schooling.

Such gender equity policies would reject the notion that all boys or all girls are the same, and would instead recognise a multiplicity of ways of being a boy and ways of being a girl. In academic terms, this would entail a recognition of the social construction of gender – thus acknowledging the existence of varying masculinities and femininities.

In relation to academic performance generally, and literacy more specifically, questions need to be asked about 'which girls?' and 'which boys?' are performing well, and which are performing badly. This would give recognition to the complex interweaving of a range of social characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, disability and sexuality with masculinities and femininities and their impact upon educational performance, including in relation to literacy. Thus, the issues of boys must be dealt with in relation to girls and needs to be based on complex research data about boys' and girls' performances in schooling. We believe the DETYA commissioned research paper, 'Factors Influencing Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School' by Dr. Cherry Collins, Professor Jane Kenway and Dr. Julie McLeod provides an excellent account of these complexities and the Inquiry into the Education of Boys Report should certainly be cognisant of the data contained therein. We would also be hopeful that DETYA would release this document publicly in the near future.

The types of gender policies we are supporting would recognise that schools have broad social as well as academic purposes. The goals of schooling for both boys and girls should be about preparation for further education, employment, participation in the social, cultural and political life of the society and equitable participation in the domestic sphere (housework and childcare). Traditionally schooling has prepared boys and girls differently for their futures. In the context of the demands of a globalised knowledge economy and of principles of equity, all girls and all boys should be adequately prepared for full participation in all these spheres of the society. This is currently not the case and is reflected in some ways in boys' narrow subject

choices in comparison with girls' broad selection of subjects in the post-compulsory phase of schooling. Policy interventions for girls have seen more girls moving into the maths and sciences. At the same time there has been little change in the pattern of boys' subject choice. This is partly due to the devaluing of those subjects which are traditionally perceived as 'girls' subjects'. This issue needs to be addressed. (See Collins et al., 1997).

Since the engagement of state policy with girls' education, beginning with the report, *Girls, School and Society* (1975), schools and teachers have given the emphasis to opportunities for girls. However, it should be noted that from the beginning of state policies on gender there was also a focus on the need to change boys. After almost thirty years of state and national gender equity policies the result appears to be that some girls, particularly middle class girls, have remade their femininities and are pursuing full schooling and tertiary education in a manner somewhat comparable to the past and present patterns of educational behaviour of middle class boys. This is not to say middle class girls are not sometimes harassed and the targets of inappropriate male behaviours in schools, but it is to acknowledge that there has been, to some extent, a gender convergence in the patterns of academic achievement between middle class girls and boys. The higher one goes up the socioeconomic scale, the less difference there is in patterns in educational performance between girls and boys

As well as a concern with the poor academic performance of particular groups of boys (low socioeconomic, Indigenous and remote), the research has also documented the ways in which boys are behaviour problems in schools. Bullying and harassment are often the product of boys performing particular forms of masculinity. Implicit within these behaviours are often misogyny and homophobia, both of which have negative impacts upon girls and particular groups of boys. They are also implicated in the ways in which boys participate in dangerous and at risk behaviours. There is also extensive data documenting the predominance of boys in those suspended and expelled from school. Further, there is the horrendous data on youth suicide (both male and female) caused by the inability to live up to ideals or out of distress from misogynist and homophobic harassment by others who police normalised constructions of gender.

There is no magic, or quick fix, solution for improving boys' behaviours, including those which cause some boys to disengage from the academic curriculum. However, there are a number of principles which should shape system and school responses to this issue. These are that education systems and schools need to:

- Reject 'competing victim syndrome'
- Consider 'which boys' and 'which girls?'
- Reject blaming female teachers and single mothers for boys' literacy problems
- Select broad range of reading sources for boys, and reject those reading sources which value traditional masculinities
- Encourage boys to value reading, social skills, communicative skills and emotional literacy (skills often associated with femininity)
- Acknowledge the role of homophobia and misogyny in constructing reading as 'feminine' and therefore not for boys
- Acknowledge the role of homophobia and misogyny in policing dominant forms of masculinity

- Reject a simplistic ‘more male teachers required’ response to perceived literacy problems amongst boys
- Need to consider which males are appropriate to boys
- Recognise boys’ literacy problems as a gender issue to do with dominant constrictions of masculinity
- Acknowledge behavioural issues as gender issues
- Accept a whole school approach to change situated within a gender equity framework
- Develop an appropriate gender equity policy framework and professional development for all teachers
- Target any policies for boys on those at most disadvantage, that is low socioeconomic, Indigenous and remote area boys. In any situation where boys’ policies are created, there needs to be comparable policies provided for girls.
- Ensure pedagogical practices which simultaneously intellectually demanding, connected into students’ real world experiences, are fully supported of all students and their differences.
- Acknowledge that teachers, as well as students, demonstrate behaviours which reinforce and valorise harmful constructions of masculinity.

We concur with Cherry Collins et al. (1996:176) that:

The big challenge for schools in relation to boys is to support them to dismantle the walls they construct around themselves and others in order to feel safely ‘masculine’. This includes supporting them to accept and enjoy a variety of masculinities (and femininities) in others; helping them to be happily challenged rather than threatened by a less straightforward world; and expecting, pushing and supporting them to extend themselves across the whole range of human activities and learnings, including those girls do (McLean, 1996). The alternative may be that many boys continue to redraw the boundaries in ways that are constricting of their own development as well as restricting, hurtful and dangerous for other boys and girls.

Schools have broad academic and social goals. Considerations of boys’ education must be located against these broader concerns. Schools must also be safe and supportive environments for all students, allowing and encouraging multiple ways of being a boy and multiple ways of being a girl. Schools must also, as educational institutions, deal with the social construction of gender. *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997* (1993), which grew out of the *National Policy for the Education of Girls* (1987), provides some excellent suggestions for schools to work on this issue, as do the papers included in Part B of the *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1996). Often the attempt to deal with boys and literacy does not take account of these broader philosophical and contextual issues and often as a result, while being well intentioned, can reinforce some of the dominant practices of masculinity. This is most evident in the selection of hypermasculine reading materials for boys which, implicitly at least, reinforces the notion that emotional expression, care and concern are associated with femininity rather than with valued masculinities.

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