

Submission
to the
Standing Committee on Employment,
Education
and Workplace Relations

Inquiry into the education of boys

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Summary:

1. Broad equality of opportunity is desirable. This has broadly been achieved. In some areas women still have some way to go; but in others it is boys or men who now fall behind in performance or achievement. I am extremely concerned at the decline in boys performance at school, and believe that this is the consequence of neglect over the past 2 decades, when it was assumed that boys would do OK for themselves and the fact they might have male-specific needs was ignored.
2. At work when interviewing job candidates, male candidates usually lose out. The men have fewer achievements, less self confidence, and are reluctant to speak about their achievements. Thus, we can only be less enthusiastic about offering the job to them.
3. Improving boys education will help, but the problem is wider. We live in a society which delivers many negative messages about men and boys.
4. We need recognize that some activities, which I call “traditionally male”, have usually been done by men, and it is mainly men who continue to do them. For perhaps 20 years it has been well understood that women would be equally capable of doing them – a few do, but most choose not to. These activities should be used in schools to illustrate what males have specifically contributed to our society. These specifically male contributions are often ignored, belittled, or trivialised as merely enjoyable hobbies. None of the latter will help boys feel good about themselves, or about the men they know. Traditional male activities might include:
 - necessary employment that is unpleasant, or has a high risk of injury or death on the job, such as fishing, mining, active military service
 - vehicle maintenance (all families need a car),
 - environmental maintenance and structural repairs around the home
 - home renovation/home building.
5. As role models, schools could use the owner-builders of the 1950’s and 1960’s, whose unpaid efforts after work to learn high levels of technical skills, and to put them to use, provided their families with improved living. Many did work as good as the professionals. Much of their work still survives, attesting to its quality.
6. Male-only activities should be seen as legitimate, and encouraged. There may be some activities boys may prefer to do in such company, and as a way of allowing older males to encourage younger ones. Boys have lost out in this area, as most of the former male-only activities became mixed; while women tended to retain their female-only activities, or start new ones aimed at professional enhancement.
7. Schools need to do much more to encourage non-custodial parents. The current systems of communication between school and parent exclude non-custodial parents who are usually men. Seeing men taking interest in their school might help boys to take education more seriously. Two simple actions: (a) mail a copy of reports to the non-custodial parent; (b) special nights for these parents to meet teachers.

8. Action for equal numbers of male teachers and female teachers
9. Teaching boys techniques to communicate assertively, and to resolve conflict by negotiation (bargaining skills!)
10. That boys are showing low results is a sign of trouble, and action needs to be taken now to avoid more problems in future. Sadly, many boys already in education will be too old to benefit from the new measures, and will still suffer from lowered aspirations and opportunities.

Personal perspective:

I am a 40 year old man, married once for about 5 years, now divorced, no children, although I did look after a stepson from when he was 10 to when he was 17. During much of that time my ex wife was studying full time, and I worked full time to support her and her son. I now work as a senior lecturer and researcher in a teaching hospital. I have a number of friends, with children aged from 2-18. I am a god-parent to one boy, one girl. Three of the boys have special needs. I migrated to Australia in 1989, and was granted citizenship in the mid 1990's. I have no close relatives in Australia. The views are my own, expressed as a private citizen, derived mostly from my own experience in private life.

Introduction.

Broad equality of opportunity is desirable, so that men and women have an equally fair go at things during their lives. During the 1980s and 1990s I remember policies being put in place to redress alleged bias against women, usually providing women or girls with extra help, either actively, or through the benefit of the doubt. The rationale was that society was thought to be so biased in favour of men, that men would do OK if just left to themselves.

This era has run its course, and achieved what it set out to. In many areas there is broad equality. In some areas work remains to be done: for example women still make up less than half the senior positions. By the same token, in other areas things have gone too far, and I believe that boys poorer performance in school is one such area. Boys' poorer academic results, and higher suicide rates, are telling us that things have changed, and that boys are hurting. We need to act now to prevent a greater catastrophe in years to come.

I occasionally interview new graduates, or graduates with 2-3 years experience, for research employment. We select on ability, judged against job criteria, and nearly always end up recruiting women. Indeed, men are a minority in the department these days. Often at interviews, there are men who are just as well qualified formally. But we can't choose them, because they have fewer extra-curricular activities on their CV's, they lack self-confidence, and they hesitate to tell us about themselves. They also often have an air of not wanting to try too hard for the job, perhaps fearing yet another disappointment, or perhaps because they have been told that being competitive is a male trait, and unwanted. These people would have been in lower-middle school between 1980-1995. It would be a fair guess that the differences started then, and the men were unable to catch up in years 10-12 or at University.

Boys get many messages that men aren't valuable as humans.

The problem goes far beyond school, as we do not value boys and men as human beings, and we are constantly criticizing their behaviour. We emphasize their less attractive aspects, and do not acknowledge their contributions. Four examples:

- The hospital bookstall has a book "Australian women", but no companion volume "Australian men". I wonder if the boys, who look at the puzzle books there, perhaps think that there weren't any Australian men worth writing about.
- A few months ago we had a show of works by Australian women artists, all unrecognized, many excellent. I'm still waiting for the show of works by Australian men artists who are unrecognized. There must be lots of them out there, but they didn't get a special show of their own. Presumably, unlike the women, they can only exhibit at mixed gender shows.
- On the way to work I see posters advertising a mobile phone, with a picture of a woman pursuing a scantily clad male, and the words "joystick envy". I wonder what teenage boys, who in a few years will be as old as the man in the picture, make of the

woman's very limited interest in them. Perhaps they question the value of acquiring any education at all.

- At another bus shelter there is an ad for brassieres saying something like: "We spend more time studying breasts than the average teenage male" (Berlei). Most teenage boys have plenty of other interests in life, and it is curious that these are not listed anywhere. Besides, people would find teenage boys staring at them offensive, and the boys probably get the message. But this ad pays attention to the behaviour without criticising it, and contributes to a rather negative image of boys who are not yet men, but who are learning how to become men.

I could go on. Some people question taking advertising so seriously, but advertisers are most skilled at getting a message across. Unfortunately too often in getting across 'this product is good' they also get across other negative messages about boys and young men. The main problem seems to be that males are demeaned, not featured, or are maligned, and this sort of stuff probably contributes to the low self esteem that we see at interview.

What schools could try to improve boys' self esteem: valuing men's contributions.

Men perform many services to society through their 'traditional' activities, but these are seldom acknowledged. Giving these a higher profile might help boys realise the valuable things that they, as men, will one day be able to do, contributing to their families and their communities.

- Men have borne most of the risk of occupational injury, because the traditional male employment areas - underground work in mining; active military service; waste disposal; heavy industry; fishing - are often much more dangerous than the traditional female areas. These occupations are necessary for society, and yet it is mostly men who do them, and it is mostly men, therefore, who risk mutilation and disability and death. For instance, my own grandfather was severely disabled in an occupational accident in the mining industry, at a time when women didn't work 'down the pit'. At University, my best friend's father, a fisherman, had been lost at sea; his mother, a nurse, worked onshore. Every town in Australia would have memorials to the dead from the world wars: the vast majority of those names would be men. Working in these occupations is not compulsory, and men choose to do it. If someone is injured or killed at work it is usually a man. I would not wish to start a gender battle over the war dead, but again the fact remains that most of them were men; and it could perhaps be pointed out to boys that years ago, that most of the people who contributed their lives and limbs to defend Australia were in fact men. This simple fact is too often forgotten
- Vehicle maintenance is traditionally a male activity. These days a reliable car is essential, and many men volunteer time to keep the family vehicles in good working order, saving the family money, making sure transport is available whenever needed, and making sure that any faults are promptly repaired, not left until Monday when the garage will be open. This work is often demeaned as 'tinkering' or 'fiddling with cars' or seen as a hobby (ie recreational activity) rather than as a service. The going

rate for a mechanic is around \$38 per hour. Men, by their work on cars, and by being always on-call to fix faults in the family vehicle, contribute greatly, and provide a valuable service to women and children. The skills men need to do this work should not be taken for granted, either.

- Home maintenance and environmental maintenance are other traditional male areas. Many men become skilled in painting, gardening, lawn maintenance, clearing rubbish, maintaining drainage systems, constructing paths and sheds, structural repairs, other forms of environmental maintenance etc. This work is seldom mentioned, and yet a good living environment, and a dwelling in good repair, contribute greatly to everyone's health and enjoyment. Most families could not afford to employ others to do these jobs.
- Renovations and Home improvements are other traditional male areas. Many men teach themselves how to install shelves, puts in kitchens, builds bunk beds, plumbs in a new wash-hand basin, use power tools, etc. This work involves some skill, tenacity, and is usually on top of a weeks work. Sometimes men's real skill is in these other areas rather than paid employment – I think in particular of a number of retired men who attend woodcarving classes and create furniture for their homes. Yet this work is seldom recognized. Power tools need skill and strength and experience for correct operation, but they are often demeaned as “boys’ toys”. Because men receive no pay for this, their work is sometimes demeaned as ‘amateur work’, as opposed to ‘professional’ jobs done by qualified tradesmen. Yet many men were skilled craftsmen in many of these areas. Their work provided families with a standard of living the family otherwise could not afford. Many boys - and girls - would remember with great affection bunks their father built, or a swing their father put up. Activities like these need to be acknowledged openly, and talked about at school, to recognise men's special contribution.
- Some household money-matters are more usually male, including planing finances, building up good business relationships which provide the family with reliable plumbers, insurance companies, banks, electricians, car mechanics, washing machine repairers, etc. Women too had their business networks in terms of shops, nurseries etc. Both should be recognized and valued. . The stereotypical view of men's financial management too often is of a man who keeps his partner short of cash. The reality – of men who work hard to provide and to build networks of good contacts in a world whose rule is ‘let the buyer beware’ - is mentioned too seldom.
- The owner-builders of the 1950's and 1960's might be studied as male role models. These men often worked the ‘double shift’, outside the home during the day, and then in the home at week-ends and evenings. They would have acquired skills in many areas of construction. They provided their families with much better accommodation than they could otherwise hope to afford. These benefits are lasting, as many of their houses are still inhabited today, and sell for substantial sums.

Teaching the above might offset the very negative view of men outside schools. It might help boys to feel better about being male, by seeing some of the valuable things that males do, that are currently under-recognized. Schools would probably have to work hard to make sure these male stories are told and everyone gets to hear them. These are in addition to the paid employment that men often do. Such a strategy was I believe used to

get people to appreciate the value of work that women perform in the home. It is therefore a tested strategy, and mens work in the home should be acknowledged in the same way. School would be the ideal place to do this.

The need to improve boys assertiveness skills and communication skills

We are increasingly compelled to be competitive, and the official view seems to be that there can never be enough competition, regardless of the effects on the losers, or the cost. More competition means unfortunately more conflict between people, and children need to be taught techniques for resolving these situations. In particular, boys will need to learn skills of assertiveness and self-awareness, so that they know their own minds, can put their view across, and can get a fair share in whatever deal is struck. Traditional male culture is often to defer to women simply because they are women, and we perhaps need to reconsider this, if our goal is equality. Also, in my experience, there are many opportunities for girls/women to receive training in assertive communication techniques. These skills have proved their value, and there now needs to be an effort to provide similar courses for boys –especially in the teenage years.

Strict gender equality in schools.

There should be an equal number of male and female teachers, and this should be done without hesitation. Otherwise, children will get the message that the people in authority over them will be mainly women, and boys will wonder why there aren't more men. Boys may get the message unconsciously, but after 12 years of training they'll be pretty convinced.

Acknowledging that male-only activities are legitimate, desirable, and needed.

Male only activities are legitimate, just as female-only activities are legitimate. There may be some things that boys would prefer to do, or perhaps need to do, in male-only company, with other boys, or with other boys and other men. Boys should have the opportunity to do those things. Boys have really lost out in this area in the last 20 years. Most male-only areas have become mixed, often no bad thing in itself. One thinks of all-male political clubs, and soccer, cricket, and rugby. But at the same time female-only areas have expanded, often in the guise of older women helping girls. I think in particular of things like public speaking clubs run by the Business & Professional Womens Association; or networking groups; or mentoring schemes. And while girls/women have had these new single-sex activities, there have been very few if any single-sex activities for men/boys. This is one area where the men's movement is active, and schools need to follow this lead rapidly, by setting in place parallel schemes – and possibly new ones – specifically designed to help boys. These activities might include spending time on practical tasks e.g building things, or boistrous, energetic activities provided no-one gets hurt; or some form of mentoring in which successful men are able to pass on their skills to boys, perhaps through mentoring, or perhaps through clubs. The key thing is that they are male only.

Some examples of this come to mind. One of my friends schools organised a fathers-and-sons week-end at a hills retreat, including camping and an assault course in the grounds. In the holidays a few years ago I spent a lot of time with two boys on treatment for ADD, building a set of bookshelves. The boys helped a lot with sanding and nailing, and the following year wanted to try construction projects on their own. They seemed to enjoy these practical tasks.

The need for affirmative action to involve non-custodial parents in their childrens' education.

This is one area where the current systems really discriminate against men. Non-custodial parents are usually fathers. Custodial parents are often mothers. They have daily contact with the school in many ways, and opportunity to hear about and become involved with the child's education, without much extra effort. By contrast the non-custodial parent usually has to make effort to contact the school, and is usually excluded from the daily communication between school and parent, which usually takes place through the child, via newsletters, homework marks, notes in diaries, etc. I think it would be good to see fathers (males) brought back into contact with schools. Schools need to recognise that non-custodial parents have special needs, and they need to make an effort to redress the balance. The fathers, knowing more about their sons education, would be more interested and perhaps encourage the boys more, showing the boys that education is important. It is also important that schools make the effort to contact non-custodial fathers, to invite them to take part in school activities, and drag them in if needbe. That way, the boys get to see each others fathers taking an interest, and taking a role in their up-bringing and education. Seeing this community of men engaged in these tasks may be important. There is also an issue that the former partners may not want to be in the same meeting.

Two simple actions could include (a) mailing a copy of reports to the father, rather than relying on the child to deliver it at next access visit. That way, both parents get a copy of the report on the same day; and (b) specific activities such as a 'non-custodial fathers only' night for the father and son to meet teachers together. No doubt this could be balanced by a 'non-custodial mothers only' night on some other occasion.

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