



NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION COMMISSION

**Submission
to
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Employment, Education and Workplace Relations**

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

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Terms of Reference 1: Factors affecting educational outcomes of boys

It is difficult to generalise about any perceived educational 'disadvantage' experienced by boys vis-à-vis girls. Gender differences in schooling outcomes are a subset of socio-economic status factors (however defined). Boys from high socio-economic backgrounds will achieve better results than both boys and girls from low socio-economic backgrounds.

There are interesting paradoxes, as well as differences and 'disadvantages', real or perceived, in gender-based schooling outcomes.

The 'fact' that boys are not performing as well as girls (for example, in Tertiary Entrance scores; reading age/chronological age comparisons; in school participation and completion rates) is not a function of the increased focus on the education of girls (the Gender Equity issues) of recent decades. The implied criticism that girls do better than boys at the expense of boys (as so often portrayed in the popular media) ignores the fact that educational outcomes are not a limited good to be shared out in some formulaic manner.

The statistics about boys being a higher proportion of truants, classroom behaviour management problems, bullies, remedial classes, 'illness' categories (such as ADD) would need to be carefully checked. Do the current statistics reveal a substantial change in historic patterns? It is likely that boys have always figured more prominently in these statistics than girls have. However, even if no substantial change in historic patterns were discerned, this would not be a reason for doing nothing to reduce these statistics. The remedial strategies adopted, however, will flow from the identification of the causes of these problems.

The causes are social and cultural in nature. The outcomes of education for any individual are heavily dependent on their motivation to learn, and motivation will depend on whether schooling offers opportunities to learn and to excel in areas that those individuals themselves believe are valuable and worthwhile excelling in. If schooling is less valued by boys than girls, then it is understandable that motivation to excel and consequently outcomes will be lower.

If schooling is seen by boys to offer a way of enhancing their self-image as males and young men, then motivation will improve. Boys' educational outcomes are linked to how our culture constructs and presents masculinity. Boys' education, particularly the acquisition of literacy skills, is inextricably tied to their understanding of what is legitimate for boys and men to do and feel and be.

Masculinity has changed little since the early days of the western tradition. In particular, Australian models of masculinity overwhelmingly emphasise the ideal of the physical male. By this is meant that national images of heroes are largely sporting men and men who have earned fame through physical endurance feats such as mountain climbing, exploration, war or navigating the globe alone in yachts. The dominant understanding of masculinity is rooted in an image of the male that sees men as being physically courageous and brave and in being willing to take risks and pit themselves against nature or other forms of adversity. There is nothing wrong with these attributes. Indeed they are to be highly valued. But they do not exhaust manhood.

In young boys, it is clearly evident that they are encouraged to empathise with sporting heroes. The problem with this form of hero worship is that the culture, through the media, fragments and distorts masculinity and robs it of qualities that might make it relevant to contemporary society. The male sportsmen are presented as modern day gladiators – tough men. This understanding of masculinity is more influential in lower socio-economic groups than in higher socio-economic groups, where success tends to be measured more in financial terms or in terms of social or political influence.

The involvement of students in various educational endeavours can be influenced by their perceptions of maleness and femaleness associated with that activity – “girl things” and “boy things” ideas can get in the way of learning, eg boys are sporty and girls are bookworms. The impact of family, teachers and society in this regard is undeniable. If narrow options are promoted/available, and if the explicit or implicit promotion of these options is gender biased, then students may not be free to choose options that suit their individual needs.

This is why the role models available to young boys are so influential. Boys learn how to behave as males from other, particularly older males. The examples offered by other boys, school staff, relatives and media all impact on an individual boy’s idea of what is acceptable in terms of what it means to be male.

How to improve the situation for boys so that they are more willing to learn and to become literate is a complex issue. If it is accepted that boys’ understanding of their masculinity is an important factor, and that aligning masculinity with educational achievement is important, there are two broad scenarios possible.

Scenario 1

Under this scenario, the ideal is to create a world where equality is truly valued. This means a fundamental shift in society where men actively seek to change their attitude towards the role that men should play in the culture and the qualities that should be admired in men. This would mean that schools would participate in the re-education of all members of the culture. Ideals of egalitarianism between the two sexes would mean that males would want to live an openly fuller emotional life and the competition and covert antagonism between males and females would be discouraged. In schools this would be reflected by curriculum changes where the work of women would gain status. In terms of school organizations, men would be willing to become equally responsible for the nurturing of students. Promotions would more likely reflect the overall percentage of males and females on staff, etc. Schools would accept that the values you promote are not so much the ones you tell children they ought to value, but the ones you model as a school. There would be massive re-education campaigns by the media and, in time, the culture would change, although there would be wholesale claims of social engineering – a claim which is always used to criticize attempts to create change never to support change.

Scenario two

This is where the culture leaves in place the values it finds useful and comfortable. The culture does not really want fundamental change, rather it identifies problems only at the point where it

wants change and it orders an institution to bring about change only in so far as it feels this will be useful while leaving the status quo intact. Thus schools will be asked to fix the 'trouble with boys' ie learning and literacy but not to tamper with the models of masculinity that govern the wider relations of the culture. Under this scenario, schools will struggle to entice boys to learn by trying to appeal to things that boys typically like eg. Learn through activity rather than through a focus on learning. Novels will be chosen that focus on what boys want to read about, such as action stories that do not question stereotypical models of masculinity.

At the extreme end of each scenario we oppose a model where men rethink their image and participation in the culture and at the other we create a model where we collude with current models of masculinity and try to entice boys to learn and be more literate by hooking into aspects of their stereotyped preferences. Neither scenario has much future. There is not going to be a wholesale rethink about masculinity. The second scenario is also not sustainable because we are asking boys to value qualities and skills that are not valued by dominant models of masculinity.

Strategies which seek to improve boys learning and their levels of literacy are not innocent of wider ideological implications even though the political implications of these curriculum decisions and pedagogical choices are presented as pragmatic and effective. The problem with explaining strategies schools use to deal with the issue, whether these have had success or not, is that a set of assumptions is created, These are:

- That boys learning and literacy learning immediately is located within the school as an isolated problem that can be resolved through curriculum and pedagogy
- That schools are able to change attitudes of boys towards learning through curriculum and pedagogy
- That the dominant models of masculinity that boys take on board does not affect their learning, or that learning occurs separate from our self-image or our image of what we want to be like as men and women
- That the attitudes of adult males in the culture towards reading and schooling is irrelevant to boys and their willingness and capacity to learn

The issue is not so much what individual strategies work for boys. This search for classroom strategies assumes that the issue of boys learning will be solved in a mechanistic way. Clearly some strategies work with tremendously good results for some teachers. The reason for this is not the universal applicability of the strategy but the fact that good teachers find ways of dealing with classroom issues that are successful because they make that strategy work. In seeking solutions to the boys question we should avoid creating a handbook of 'must do's'.

Terms of Reference 2: Strategies to address these factors

Notwithstanding the above, observation of boys at school does tell us that there are certain conditions that boys need to have met if they are to thrive whether at school at home or in the wider society. These include:

- Positive relationships with peers
- Positive relationships with teachers
- Male mentors that meet their needs in the different areas of their lives
- Goals and goal setting skills

- General support
- Positive self image
- Recreational pursuits of physical and intellectual kinds to create balance in their lives
- Access to a positively viewed range of models of masculinity from which to create their identity as adult males
- Positive and non prejudiced images of women
- An acceptance that males and females are equal in status and worth and an appreciation of difference
- Access to a language that enables them to describe and experience emotion without necessarily sharing completely the language that is preferred by females
- An understanding of gender as not necessarily a dichotomy but a set of continua covering the various experiential areas of life.

School programs that have attempted to counter stereotypical behaviour by boys and attempted to improve their educational outcomes include

- Contextual high interest reading programs for boys
- Active classroom and co-curricular program teaching
- Single sex schools
- Primary and Secondary Literacy Initiatives.
- Dance and drama initiatives.
- Sustained reading programs that all students participate in.
- Anti-bullying initiatives
- Religious Education, especially its ethics and morality components (in Catholic Schools)
- Values across the curriculum
- Peer mentoring programs and informal structures associated with peer mentoring.
- Gender inclusive language.
- Cross-gender sporting teams.
- Opportunities for involvement in a variety of learning tasks for individual needs.
- Behaviour standards and requirements – how we treat each other
- A school spirituality where all are considered important, regardless of differences, and that aims to promote the development of the full potential of the individual.
- Respect for and promotion of individual learning styles, with opportunities for each to participate in activities that meet their needs.
- A varied curriculum base, encompassing core learning areas and extended interest areas.

Catholic schools have a particular challenge to reclaim the middle ground to help boys develop a positive self-image and thus become better learners. They should be places where a wider range of acceptable 'masculine' behaviour is encouraged.

There is a particularly urgent need to address these issues for Aboriginal boys at school, where it would appear that retention rates are very low. It may be necessary, in some remote Indigenous communities, to abandon some western liberal-progressive ideals (such as co-education) in favour of approaches to schooling that are more culturally viable, and less inimical to boys' chances of success.