

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL INQUIRY ON THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

Introduction

I would like to give my thoughts on the education of boys. I have spent over 25 years in education from Kindergarten teaching to all levels at school and into adult education and training, and have nearly 50 years of life experience. After reading some of the submissions posted on your website, (a terrific idea, by the way, even if some of the content made me furious!!!!), I decided not to try and argue you down, but simply to present my perspective.

My perspective

Overlooking the hysteria and tub-thumping of self-serving 'personalities', media reporters and academics with careers to further or other vested interests, I reckon there are some real concerns about how our society rears and nurtures our boys and young men.

It seems to me that problems with the education of boys are not new, but have been with our society for a long time. I don't believe things are worse. I believe that schools are giving our kids more, but we keep moving the goal posts and demanding more from our schools - much more than previous generations. I reckon that social changes have exposed major limitations in the ways we traditionally bring up our boys.

The world has changed guys

Sex should not be the determiner of our life opportunities. The world has changed but lots of men just don't want to admit it. They seem to want all the advantages of modern relationships but only the limited responsibilities of former times. Times when men were the ones who went to work and made the money that supported the family, and having provided for the family in this way men had fulfilled their part and women were expected to do the rest. Men were free to indulge our own interests. In this environment men had the luxury of primary access to employment, education and loads of other personal and social freedoms that were denied women.

My father was a bloke. He said many times that he fulfilled his responsibilities to the family by giving my mother his wage packet, (after he had taken out the money he needed for cigarettes, beer, petrol and other necessities of his life.) Dad couldn't spell or write to save himself, nor could many of his mates at work or the club. Dad went to intermediate high school and left to start work on the family milk run when he was 14. That was the end of his schooling.

The reason for this story is to establish that things were not better for everyone in the past. Standards have not plummeted. I am 48, my father was only the generation before me. Few kids leave at 14 these days. Even those that do, will have achieved literacy standards far beyond my dad and his friends.

No, the current hyperventilation about boys' test results, in my opinion, reflects the fact that life is different in the twenty-first century. The expectations we teach our boys about

how boys and men should behave just haven't kept pace with reality. We sustain ideas that tell boys they should be physically strong, short-fused, competitive, tough, aggressive and reserved, never displaying or admitting to any weakness or vulnerability. These same ideas allow boys to 'escape' household duties, to avoid developing language skills, reading and their studies by disappear into the company of other males without explanation.

Those ideas may have suited times when survival and labour market demanded physical prowess and when employment opportunities were more abundant, but boys need other skills today if they are to find and keep employment. They certainly need broader skills if they are to sustain quality relationships with others and maintain their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

To my mind, the issues at the heart of current concerns about the education of boys are not really about what happens in schools but about two areas of social change that affect what happens after school:

- changes to the structure and nature of work that demand higher levels of literacy, inter-personal communication skills and co-operative, self-regulating behaviours from workers by employers; and
- changes in the social fabric of Australia, particularly equal employment opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation, that no longer prevent women from working and obtaining adequate income to support themselves and their children without a partner.

I think that the problems some boys, and I stress *some* boys, experience in their lives come as a result of their limited range and often inadequate responses to these critical external influences. Unfortunately, many men and women in our society promote maintenance of the outdated responses that are the source of current problems for boys.

Changes to the workplace mean that boys who have been fooled or intimidated into not acquiring higher order literacy skills and co-operative behaviours find themselves under-equipped for work in contemporary Australia. They may not ever get a job.

Social changes mean that unlike in previous generations, women today can provide for themselves and their children. They are not forced to remain in unsatisfactory, sometimes violent and oppressive relationships with men for the sake of their children. Men must compete with women for available jobs. Many men today find they have very under-developed interpersonal skills. They find it hard to maintain relationships with partners who demand equal amounts of emotional support from their partners as they give. Many men never find a partner willing to enter into the one-sided relationship they offer.

It is in the context of these changed realities that the national inquiry into the education of boys needs to make its recommendations and assist contemporary males to leave behind the unhelpful myths about how to be a man that are causing boys and men such grief today.

The distressing thing, in my opinion, is that rather than come to terms with the impact of these contemporary realities, some men want to 'hold their breath and go blue in the

face' until things go back to the way they were. That is, to a time when men were the privileged sex, when men, even those with limited skills, could find employment easily because they were given preference to full-time employment, when women were totally dependent on men because they were prevented from earning a decent living, and when men could ignore the impacts of their behaviours on their families with little fear of losing them.

Gender reform - the desperate need for boys

I reckon that many of the problems experienced by boys would be a lot less dramatic if many of the myths of macho masculinity could be exposed and left behind. Myths that suggest that formal learning is irrelevant to the lives of men, that boys are not good at sitting still, that reading and writing is for girls, that expressing your feelings is not masculine behaviour. There are lots of boys and men who do these things every day of their lives. They are not feminine behaviours, they are human behaviours.

I do not really think it matters whether the outdated myths about masculinity are founded on genetics or are socialised into boys. We need to do something about changing boys' responses to the myths. I know that the myths make boys come to school with very firmly established ideas about what boys should do and should not do. I know that the myths set lots of boys up for failure in formal learning. It's not that boys are incapable of sustained attention at school but that they only give that attention to things other than formal learning.

For example, I have seen boys who are said to suffer Attention Deficit Disorder to a level that disrupts their learning at school, spend extended periods of time playing computer games and practicing soccer skills. That seems contradictory to me. I don't blame the boys either. They are only responding to the messages that we adults give them.

We as a society need to get behind our boys and support them into exposing the limitations of outdated macho myths once and forever. We helped many of our girls to cross gender boundaries and to follow their talents and interests. We need to continue that support and to do the same for boys.

I think we in Australia can lead the world in improving the lives of boys and young men. We can take a cold hard look at the reality of the need for gender reform that focuses on masculinity. Australians are a great people who are not afraid to have realities shown to us. Most of us respond sensibly to the information. Even in a country that is famous for its deep-seated homophobia, we bit the bullet with HIV/AIDS education, and we still lead the world in that area. We can do the same for gender reform and improving the education of boys.

The education of boys is not simply about better reading and beating girls. It is about helping boys to develop appropriate understandings and realistic expectations of themselves. It must include us making our expectations of men and boys explicit. It must clear up the contradictions we currently expect men to clear up for themselves.

I don't think it is fair to teach boys that males are better than females. I think it is fairer and better for everyone to learn that success comes from effort. These days there is no reason why things men do should gain any greater acclaim or financial rewards than

things women do. As many members of the Men's Movement keep pointing out, there are an increasing number of families out there with only mothers as the sole provider. They and their children deserve equal pay and acclaim for equal effort.

However, I am not in favour of attempts to create a genderless society. What we need is child rearing that produces adults males and females who do not restrict the lives of others, who can care for themselves, their partners, families, friends and communities. For me, this is the gender reform I want to see. I would be delighted to see an Australian society where someone saying 'boys will be boys' meant that a boy generously gave help to a less-able soul not that he thumped someone in a sporting match or committed some selfish prank a la Shane Warne.

Differences in the educational performance of boys and girls do concern me. But I am more concerned for the students, boys or girls, who are not achieving minimal standards rather than boys who are beaten to high status university courses by girls who put in more study hours. For example, I am concerned that lots of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) kids are not doing as well as most other kids at school. And the gap between low achieving ATSI kids and average performances is much wider than the gap between the sexes.

Education of boys is complex

Discussion of concerns about the education of boys must move out of the simple and into the complex. We must be fearless in the way we look at data, not partisan. For example, I have more than a sneaking suspicion that the literacy and matriculation statistics are telling us that lots of boys have been fooled by myths from previous generations that persuade them to only devote minimal effort to study and to give sport and other physical activities their main attention. Girls, on the other hand, are putting more time into their study efforts. In other words, boys are not doing worse, they are doing the same, and like a car travelling 60 kilometres in comparison to a car travelling 90 kilometres, they seem to be going backwards. Girls are working harder, doing better and reaping the benefits. We need to help boys to see that doing the same is just as masculine as kicking a football.

The impressive report *Gender in School Education* (ACER, 1996) provides lots of helpful data. It reveals that many boys are influenced by unhelpful myths of macho masculinity that suggest that some behaviours are things only boys should do (masculine) and other behaviours are things that only girls should do (feminine). The report gives alarming evidence that boys who reject the myths, face intimidation, ridicule, harassment and often violence from other boys who consider their behaviour too girly or poofy.

I do not believe that other than the sex roles in procreation and child birth, that behaviours are exclusively male or female. History gives ample support for this claim - women taking on male roles in times of war or when men were absent, men taking on female roles in a family when their spouse had died or left.

Most of the world's famous and wealthy authors, actors, academics and artists are male. Surely that demonstrates that males are not incapable of becoming competent readers and producers of English literature and works of art.

No feminist conspiracy in education

I do not believe there is a feminist conspiracy in education systems. Those blokes in the men's movement want it every way. They promote the idea that more men are needed in teaching and yet the upper levels of educational bureaucracies are already filled with men. Have all those senior blokes not got what it takes to fly the flag for men? Why don't we have a female Director-General? No, I think the idea of an omnipotent feminist Gestapo is preposterous and demeans the professionalism of committed teachers and administrators.

Thankfully, feminist critique brought important changes to education and society. Changes that I believe benefit boys and girls.

I am a product of the Wyndham Scheme in NSW. It over-turned a really unfair system that streamed boys and girls into different types of schools according to the results of now-discredited IQ testing. Boys and girls were effectively prevented from proceeding beyond the limits set by their school.

Refinements to the assessment strategies of the scheme resulted from critique that demonstrated the unfairness of external examinations as the only assessment tool. Exams were shown to disadvantage lots of boys and girls who worked consistently throughout the years of study but for many reasons did not perform their best in the anxiety of exams. The resulting system which values both consistent work and exam skills is fairer for all students.

Improving the education of boys should also help the education of girls

I do not think you can separate improvements in the education and lives of males from similar improvements in the lives of females. Nor do I see that just because a number of girls outperform boys that things are necessarily wrong with the education system. Lots of girls may be reaping the rewards of paying attention, behaving and working at school, but that success still doesn't get them equal pay at work nor access to the most senior jobs in the workplace. We need to do more to give girls these freedoms. But setting up a competition between girls and boys as to who is most 'disadvantaged' and deserving of resources is futile. Both need support for their differing needs.

Learning to accept responsibility for our own behaviour and its consequences.

I would like schools to prepare kids for their future as adults, particularly as adults away from work. I think that to do this there are a number of things that need to be changed to improve the education of boys. I do not think that a narrow focus on equalizing basic skills test scores or HSC results between the sexes will make the difference.

At the heart of girls' success at schools, in my opinion, is a sense of personal responsibility for their own lives and acceptance that they contribute to the good and the bad of what happens to them as individuals and what happens in their local community and wider society. Boys need to learn this too. For example, research on single sex classes shows that many boys prefer co-ed classes because the girls keep them in line and help them to do their work! Now that is alarming.

External, authoritarian discipline systems lead many boys to thinking that they can keep doing something they know is wrong until someone more powerful can force them to stop. In its most extreme forms it can lead to claims that 'I just couldn't control myself'. Boys and men have learned that that claim can get them out of trouble in all sorts of circumstances, even in court such as the claim, 'I got all charged up and I couldn't stop myself, so I raped her. It was her fault for not stopping me sooner.'

If threat and intimidation works so well, how is it that schools with authoritarian discipline regimes still have disrupted classrooms and large detention groups? How is it that our prisons are full? Why do some states with punitive laws already, require mandatory sentencing? No, I don't think that sustaining discipline systems based on prohibitions and intimidation work. That style of discipline promotes the idea that you keep misbehaving or doing something you know isn't morally right, until someone catches and stops you.

I think that changing the current externally enforced discipline to an internal one should start at home with parents rethinking how they discipline their children. Schools can take up the challenge and get boys and girls more involved in changing the discipline system and operations of their school. School communities will need help and resources to make the changes needed. Some schools have already made these changes.

Understanding of the need to be a learner for life

Beyond a foundation of personal responsibility, adults of the future need to know how to continue learning for their lifetime, so I'd like schools to show kids how to do this. It is essentially guidance on how and when to follow personal interests and talents. It would show kids that learning is something we do for enjoyment, not just because we want some material or personal advantage.

Concerning boys, the often misrepresented statistics on boys' educational performance, mental health, death rates and their ability to get themselves into trouble certainly indicate to me that something isn't working any more, if it ever did. In my view that something is our traditional ideas masculine behaviours and characteristics. Traditional masculinity in fact promotes the idea that someone else is in charge of keeping larrikin males in line, it uses threat and intimidation to get what it wants, and it ridicules learning as irrelevant and time wasted that could be better spent enjoying your freedom.

We hear these themes over and over at all levels of society. Boys saying they prefer co-ed classes because the girls keep them in line and help them to do their work. The same boys say that in single sex classes the other boys stir them on to misbehave, are competitive and don't help. Research in schools indicate that bullying, harassment and violence from boys are consistent factors in the lives of girls and boys. Boys can be extremely motivated when learning and practicing football, but do not apply these same skills to learning at school.

I think we are letting our boys down. Not because we are advantaging girls over boys, but because perpetuate the myth that males can get by in life simply because they are male. Those days are long gone and boys need help to realise that anyone who tells them otherwise is deluded.

Conclusion

I ask committee members not to seek simplistic solutions to the complex concerns of our community about the education of boys.

Improving the educational outcomes of boys and their social adjustment requires long term commitment from governments and education systems. It took a lot of work over 30 years or more to achieve the gains that have been made for girls. Loosening the restrictive bonds that macho masculinity has around boys and men will also take time. We need to get awareness in the community about how the outdated ideas we teach our boys are setting them up for failure and distress. Hopefully that will add impetus and understanding for the need to make reforms.

Making real gender reform is not the sole responsibility of schools, nor is it a problem of their own making. After all, boys and girls arrive at school with established ideas about masculine and feminine behaviours. Their homes often work to counter strategies at school that promoting greater tolerance and acceptance of differences. Nevertheless, schools can make a big contribution to efforts for change if they are supported by community and social acceptance.

Teachers need help to understand that gender reform is not about political correctness, but about freedom of choice for boys and girls. Improving the education of boys is not about more physical activity in learning - when do adult males jig about in the factory, office or boardroom? No, we need to help male and female teachers to recognise the limitations that outdated ideas about masculinity are placing on boys and that many of the problems of boys come from them trying to live up to those outdated ideas.

Give schools the resources to change their discipline systems and the climate of their schools to a more positive and co-operative one. Schools also need support to consider how they contribute to maintaining gender rules through practices in at school, the ways they implement the curriculum, the ways they interact with boys and girls, the ways they give acclaim for successes, the ways that staff interact with each other. All these things are keenly observed by boys and girls and need to be consistent with the messages being promoted about gender reform. Role models like this are more important and meaningful than glamour personalities breezing in, giving a talk, shaking a few hands and having a few photos taken.

Comprehensive gender reform is a complex undertaking, one that needs long-term commitment from us all. The benefits to boys, girls and our society at large that can be achieved if we are successful, are worth the hard work.

RESPONSES TO COMMENTS ABOUT THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

Comments heard	My response
The education system is feminised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't think this is right at all. Lots of boys still do very well at school. Sure there are lots of female teachers in schools but the majority of principals, District Superintendents and senior bureaucrats are male. Females are good teachers, (they do it all the time at home), I can't see why it's bad for boys. • Classroom instruction hasn't been subverted by a feminist mafia, (what rubbish and how demeaning of the professionalism of teachers). It has been made fairer so that all kids who work consistently can succeed, not just those who happen to be good at cramming and sitting exams. • The fact that most boys get through school tells me that being male does not render study impossible. That some boys succeed adds fuel to the fire that it's not the curriculum and assessment practices of school that disadvantages boys, but something about boys themselves that limits their success.
There aren't enough male teachers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being male does not mean teachers will be good. Most of my teachers were male but few of them were good teachers. My worst experiences at school came from male teachers who were only interested in the best students in my class and the sport stars. It is testament to the fallacy of the suggestion that being male means a teacher knows how to teach boys that in an all boys selective high school, where entrance was very competitive, that boys in the lower streams were treated like idiots. These same boys, had they gone to the local comprehensive high school would have been in the A-stream. So much for male teachers having the special intuitions to teach boys. • I am concerned that a push for more men in the teaching profession may lead to more duds being forced upon boys. Boys need men who understand themselves and can teach them how to succeed in the twenty-first century. Learning to survive in the wilderness can be a fun and worthwhile activity, but it does not help boys to talk to their partners, to value formal education or to give quality time to study as well as recreation.
Boys need to get in touch with the 'warrior' within.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survival in the wild is a romantic myth about men. It is a fun activity to go away camping, but few of us need to find water, food or cross raging white water rapids in our daily lives. Few wilderness skills transfer into being more attentive at school, to being more co-operative rather than competitive, to supporting others rather than ridiculing their limited skill in a particular activity. • I am concerned that a focus on these sort of activities promotes the same old ideas about being a bloke that have got boys into trouble already. Boys need help in developing things that have traditionally been 'female' activities, not more attention to the physical. Boys need a men's movement to show them how to incorporate expressing feelings and vulnerabilities, telling your partner how much you love them, and how to spend quality time with your kids in ways that nurture their special talents not restricting them because of their sex.