A Submission from the Northern Territory Aboriginal Male Health Reference Committee to the Parliament of Australia House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations: Inquiry into the Education of Boys

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Introduction

It is widely recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys in the Northern Territory are seriously disadvantaged in their schooling. It is believed that they experience worse rates of attendance and achievement than both their non-Indigenous peers and Indigenous girls. Hard evidence which would support these beliefs is not extensive. Sufficient relevant or reliable data which distinguish between the experiences of Indigenous boys and girls in schools have not been collected. Other problems with data collection have been identified and recommendations made to address them in the 1999 report of a review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory: *Learning Lessons*. (Collins, p. 155-162)

An exception is a study of Jabiru Area School by Dr. John Tailor, a specialist demographer from the Australian National University; which "indicates that only 45.4% of males and 61.9% of females were enrolled at the school out of the total possible." (ibid, p. 159)

An indirect indication of differences between the schooling of Indigenous boys and girls is evident in large discrepancies between enrolments of males and females in higher education courses at Batchelor Institute and Northern Territory University. They are also indicated by large difference between male and female completions of the SACE (NT) - South Australian Certificate of Education (Northern Territory). For example, in 1998, 26 females completed the certificate and only 11 boys. (ibid, p. 31)

Summary

The main issues raised in the submission can be summarised as follows.

- Indigenous boys' experience of education can only be understood as part of their whole life cycle as males, from birth to death. Schooling is also only one aspect, or strand, of the whole of their life experience and education during that time.

- Indigenous boys share many of the extreme disadvantages of girls in their participation in schooling and the poor outcomes in rates of retention and achievement. Many of the factors in these outcomes are also the same: most notably including poverty; poor physical living conditions, community infrastructure and services; pervasive ill health; frequency of deaths of relatives and other community members; high rates of imprisonment; and lack of education opportunity because of inadequate school facilities and lack of access to secondary education.

- However it is believed that boys *experience* these common disadvantages *differently* from girls in some ways; and therefore respond to them differently.

- In addition to these disadvantages, some experiences of boys in schooling are gender specific: arising at least to some extent from historical, cultural and economic conditions which have particular effects, many of them adverse, on Indigenous males; and their functioning in culturally defined and determined roles in their families and communities throughout their lives.

- The many factors which influence boys' school experience and outcomes, many of them adversely, are inter-related. They therefore require integrated – holistic – responses to address them. However at present they are fragmented: in part because of bureaucratic structural/organisational divisions between domains of responsibility and authority (education, health, employment; policing, criminal justice and 'corrections' etc.); and different levels and forms of governance.

- Most importantly, Indigenous males themselves are not sufficiently engaged in determining/identifying/defining the issues themselves; and carrying out initiatives to address them. Yet again, in these aspects of their lives, they are disempowered by the controlling operations of others ('outsiders') and external institutions and organisations.

- Increasing the engagement and control of Indigenous men in defining and addressing the issues of boys' education, including schooling, is fundamental in achieving sustainable improvements in the present disastrous situation. Increasing the employment of Indigenous males, as teachers and at all other levels in the education sector, will be one way of achieving this.

- Increasing the participation of males in professional education and training in the field of education will be necessary to address the latter issue.
- A further fundamental change that will be necessary is the *integration* of roles, responsibilities and operations of departments, organisations, agencies and levels of government in responding to these issues: to achieve a *holistic* response.

- At local levels, families and communities must be engaged as *full partners* in defining the issues; and devising, carrying out, managing and evaluating responses to them. Men must be included and represented strongly in this engagement.

- Information is needed to identify particular issues of Indigenous boys' education and evaluate any responses to them. Relevant research should be initiated and supported. Relevant data should also be collected *and disseminated effectively* ie made readily available to inform these processes; particularly at local level to the boys themselves and their families and communities, to enable them to participate fully in them.

A Suggestion

The recent movie *Yolngu Boy* dramatically portrays many aspects of the lives of Aboriginal boys in the Northern Territory. It is suggested that members of the Committee see this film, if they have not yet done so!

Discussion

We hope Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and boys have been widely canvassed and consulted to obtain their experiences and views about the issues being addressed by the Committee.

Education and health issues are inter-related. Health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be improved unless their education is also improved. Conversely, their education cannot be improved without addressing their poor health.

In a recent report on Indigenous education in the Northern Territory by Bob Collins, he goes so far as to assert:

'A central recommendation of this review and the PAC [Public Accounts Committee] is that there must be high level support by Government departments and Government itself to inextricably link education and health in Indigenous communities. *The two are synonymous. Failure to recognise and respond effectively to this reality results in an endless loop of poor outcomes in both*'.

(Collins, Bob. 1999. *Learning Lessons: an Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*. Northern Territory Department of Education, Darwin. p. 27, our emphases. See also p.149-154)

Increasing participation in tertiary education and training, employment and strengthening leadership by Indigenous males requires enormous improvement in primary and secondary schooling for both boys and girls

Schools are also places where there are opportunities to learn information and life skills which can improve both immediate and longer term male health.

"In a recent report, the National Health and Medical Research Council (MHMRC) concluded "the available evidence indicates that school health programs which are comprehensive and integrated, and include the curriculum, the environment and the community, are more likely to lead to advancements in the health of school children and adolescents".

The report then commends a 'Health Promoting School Framework' which could guide curriculum development and teaching practice; as well as relationships and partnerships with other stakeholders in education and promotion of good health.

(Men's Health Promotion Strategic Framework, North East Health Promotion Centre. 1999, Melbourne. p. 29)

Territory Health Services and the NT Department of Education currently collaborate in a Health Promoting Schools program.

They have also established a Memorandum of Agreement and a framework for inter-agency cooperation: Healthy, Educated Territorians (the HET Framework).

The framework can provide an avenue for Aboriginal male health policy to frame and guide initiatives that are aimed at:

a)   initially and primarily: health screening & health education in school aged populations; and collecting data & evidence for planning for boys/young men;

b)   building or strengthening family-community-school-health service relationships; and involving parents in determining, planning, coordinating and implementing local on site policies, programs or projects. (In this connection, it must be kept in mind that in Aboriginal families parenting of boys is a responsibility of grandfathers, uncles and older brothers, as well as fathers);

c)   creating interest for ongoing community governance /control or guidance in identifying priorities and ways to implement programs, projects or services; and

d)   generating role models, supporting and showcasing local talent, leadership and successful initiatives and projects, etc.

Such cooperative cross department and agency initiatives can go some way to addressing the problems of fragmented responses to Indigenous education. They should be encouraged and extended. They should also be taken up as models for further integration of responses with other departments and agencies which have responsibilities for conditions which impact on Indigenous health and education. (See also discussion of the problem of fragmentation of Government and departmental responses to Indigenous issues in Pearson, p. 40-43.)

The principal issue in this respect has been raised and defined by Aboriginal males

themselves in their strong movement to define and advocate their own health issues and agenda, eg. at the 1st National Indigenous Male Health Convention at Ross River in the Northern Territory in October 1999; and at the Indigenous Male Health Conference in Tennant Creek in 2000.

It can be summarised in one word: *control*.

Aboriginal men are saying that the foundation of improvements in Indigenous male health will be increasing their control over processes of defining the issues and agenda to address them; and its implementation in both delivery and management of services.

Their insight is congruent with the most recent Western research which shows that a person's sense of control over the circumstances of their lives is a principal factor in their health and well-being. (Wilkinson & Marmot, 1998)

This will require great advances in the education and training of Indigenous males.

At present they are greatly under-represented in both employment and education and training in the health sector, and other related occupations.

Aboriginal males have suffered special disadvantages from the history of invasion, colonisation, and the policies and practices of assimilation, institutionalisation and removal. In particular their social and cultural roles as fathers, grandfathers and uncles have seen suppressed and usurped. They have been disinherited and disempowered.

They continue to suffer disproportionate rates of injury, disease and death (Condon, Warman & Arnold, 2001). They also suffer disproportionate rates of detention and imprisonment (ABS, 2001).

These conditions continue to separate Indigenous men from their sons, grandsons and nephews: and interrupt or impair their growing up as males.

Therefore Aboriginal boys and youths often grow up in this social environment without good modelling and guidance from their fathers, grandfathers and uncles.

It should be understood by non-Indigenous people that the Uncle-Nephew relationship, as it is conceived in Indigenous cultures, is pre-eminent in growing up as a male. Uncles are the brothers of mothers only: they are only on the maternal side, unlike Western culture, in which uncles are both mothers' and fathers' brothers; and their roles are nowadays usually merely conventional. They have major parenting responsibilities in their relationships with boys. Damage to this special relationship within Aboriginal families is a disaster in growing up as an Indigenous male.

More generally, the roles of males in Aboriginal society have been significantly diminished as a result of the process of colonisation. This has contributed to the

breakdown and collapse of Aboriginal society and community life. The impact on Aboriginal males has been devastating.

Aboriginal males recognise the significance of the loss of their authority, self-esteem and self -respect through alienation, loss of culture and country, and spiritual well being. They have also recognised the importance of returning to, and reviving the cultural and spiritual values which ground a sense of identity and strength.

Indigenous boys also often live in conditions of poverty: low family income, poor infrastructure and facilities, overcrowding in their homes, and poor nutrition.

This is some of the historical, economic and cultural context of the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal boys in education.

Other conditions include the usual extreme poverty of their families; poor education facilities; and the lack of education opportunity of their relatives.

Many Aboriginal boys and youths engage in self-destructive behaviour, such as petrol sniffing and early uptake of hazardous alcohol and other drug use; and are more frequently detained in custody than non-Indigenous youths. Rates of suicide are tragic.

Indigenous boys' experience in schooling will only be understood as part of the whole life cycle as a male, and in the context of history, culture and relationships. Furthermore, it cannot be understood separately from their education by older males in their families and communities.

Culturally defined ways of growing up and reaching adulthood are parts of this broader social and cultural education.

Characteristics of schooling, such as environments, practices, relationships with female students and teachers (many of whom are female), exercise of authority and direction, and the staging of progression can all conflict and even compete with the requirements and characteristics of the broader social and cultural education processes of family and community.

One of the conflicts arises for boys from their obligations to participate in ceremonies and specialised cultural education activities outside the school.

In addition to these conflicts, pressures are also created in exposure to images of masculinity; including desirable, if unrealistic, lives of other boys, as they are imagined, promoted and marketed in the media. Few of these experiences, perceptions, desires and expectations are congruent with life at school! Especially after their communities and families recognise their attainment of manhood; perhaps at earlier age than is usual in non-Indigenous Australian society.

The following is a passage from a Discussion Paper by the Male Health Policy Unit of

Territory Health Services – *Living Male: Journeys of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Males Towards Better Health and Well-Being* (currently in press). It expands on these points and explores further some of the context of the experiences.

Many Indigenous males are constructing a variety of new identities in these personal journeys: while keeping themselves deeply rooted in their ancient sources of Indigenous identity: in country, indigenous law, relationships, language, history and culture.

Others are floundering: feeling lost in the confusion of competing and conflicting pressures; cut loose from their cultural and historical bearings. Alienated, and without connections to any past, or possible future. No stable identity or sense of relationship. No prospects of realising the illusions of 'success' promoted in the media. Nor wanting to constrain their futures by the prescriptions of the past.

This is a recipe for despair.

And there is at least one more, mysterious factor: an individual's choices and efforts: which are valued, probably in all cultures, by all human beings, as individual, personal autonomy: perhaps the source of all invention and creativity.

Aboriginal males are undertaking a process of reconstructing, redefining and re-inventing their male identities in contemporary social, political and economic conditions. In doing so they are taking up positions and roles in a wide range of institutional and social domains which often include a great majority of other, non-indigenous, men or youths. There is not only one, uniform way of defining and becoming an Aboriginal man. There are many possibilities, depending on a multitude of factors and preferences: including, personal, family and community history; upbringing, living environment, opportunity; and, no doubt, genes, according to modern biological science.

There is a variety of ways in which Aboriginal males might express their masculinity: through, for example, education, training and employment; participation and achievement in sport, music, art, fashion design, writing, dance and theatre; creating and managing commercial businesses; participation and leadership in political action and governance or management of organisations; and as fathers, grandfathers, uncles, sons, grandsons, nephews, husbands and friends; and countrymen; as well as living and carrying out more specialised Aboriginal cultural roles and responsibilities.

There is also a variety of ways which mark, and celebrate, the journey of growing up as an Indigenous male.

An example of inventing and performing a way of marking such significant points in growing up was created recently in Alice Springs.

"To provide a meaningful rite of passage event for young Aboriginal males currently undertaking education, members of the ICAIMCH arranged and conducted a Young Males Rites of Passage BBQ at Yirara College ...

"With the help of some students, the men's group prepared the food prior to the official program. Ken Lechleitner and Frank Curtis made short presentations and after the meal the older students were invited into a recreation room for further presentations and discussions with the committee members.

"The ICAIMHC believes that it is essential to celebrate steps along the way in each students educational career with a rite of passage event to encourage longer and better participation in education. If appropriate role models use the occasion as an opportunity to share their thoughts, beliefs, experience and wisdom the event has the potential to influence educational, employment and health outcomes in the long term." (Report on a young Males Rites of Passage BBQ, Yirara College 18th Nov 2000)

There are many other ways which mark achievements along the way in growing up male: the sports arena, especially football, and music, are also favoured opportunities.

But these are not the realities of the lives of many Indigenous males.

Many young Indigenous males experience interruptions and disruptions in their experience of parenting and education which effectively prevent them from growing up well. They may have few if any experiences of such achievements and their validation by Indigenous elders: few experiences of positive rites of passage, if any. For many male youths, negative experiences, such as introduction to using alcohol or other drugs, including injecting them, or inhaling intoxicants such as the fumes from petrol or glue; or engagements with the criminal justice (sic) system, such as convictions in courts for offences, and detention or imprisonment; constitute their principal experiences of rites of passage to adulthood. They are unprepared for a healthy life as an adult Aboriginal male by the ways they grow up.

Many adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males have also experienced separation from their communities and families in early life: because of sickness, imprisonment or removal under government policies. As well as the suffering from such separations, these experiences have interrupted and impaired their cultural processes of growing up as Indigenous males: resulting, for many, in uncertainty

and lack of confidence in their cultural roles of parenting; as fathers, grandfathers and uncles.

Detailed information, stories, interpretations and theories about such problems in growing up as an Indigenous male, and their consequences, have been written in many publications.

(For example: Beresford & Omaji, 1996; Brady M, 1992; d'Abbs & Maclean, 2000; d'Espaignet et al., 1998; Langton M, 1990; Wilson R, 1997; Trudgen R, 2000)

There can be no doubt that growing up as an Indigenous male is usually hazardous, and frequently disastrous.

For example, a recent report has stated:

"In general terms petrol sniffing is marked by a majority of male participants …

"Aboriginal petrol sniffers are more commonly male than female.…

"Most petrol sniffers are between 8 and 30 years of age."

(d'Abbs & MacLean, 2000, p.6)

Early uptake of drinking alcohol is a widespread concern in Indigenous families and communities. (See, eg., Langton, 1990; Mitcalfe, 1994)

Use of other drugs, including cannabis and intravenous use of amphetamines by Indigenous youth, especially in urban centres, is also a major concern of families, communities and health workers. Some Indigenous parents and other relatives perceive an association between such drug use and mental and behavioural problems. It is also believed that it has been associated with child and youth suicides.

The incarceration and detention rates of Indigenous male youths in the Northern Territory is high relative to Indigenous females and others.

At least four interpretations of these disproportions between males and females in such self-destructive behaviours have been suggested. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive or ordered in priority.

1. They are ways in which Indigenous youths express and relieve their despair for their life prospects: their disempowerment and confusion in constructing their male identities; and their experience of alienation/exclusion from both their Indigenous heritage and the new cultural imperatives of the wider society with

which they also engage (media, personal contact etc.): consumerist, marketed, competitive, individualistic, materialistic etc.

2. They are ways which enact revolt against authority which they experience as oppressive and negating their masculinity.

3. They have been constructed as new 'rites of passage' to manhood.

4. Doing these things feels better than the available alternatives. For example some informants in a research project made the following comments about their experience in a juvenile detention centre:

"I like it better here".

"It is more fun here".

"There is more to do".

(Mitcalfe, 1994, p. 199)

Whatever the interpretations of such destructive behaviours of male youths might be, it is certain that they interrupt, impede and damage the journey of growing up as an Indigenous male: with disastrous effects on their education and health.

Many such aspects of the lives of Aboriginal males are portrayed dramatically in the recent and much discussed movie: *Yolngu Boy*.

Indigenous males will be unable to construct and carry out their family and leadership roles required to maintain their cultural and social identities unless their education disadvantage is addressed.

We note that the submission from the Northern Territory Education Department does not provide specific information; nor raise or address specific issues of Indigenous boys in schooling.

We also note that the Report by the Hon. Bob Collins: *Learning Lessons: an Independent Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*, does not raise or address gender specific issues with any prominence.

It is known that Indigenous males are greatly under-represented in tertiary education, and employment in health and education fields in the Northern Territory, relative to females: both at Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education (BIITE) and the Northern Territory University (NTU).

For example, it has been reported that only about thirty percent of students in higher education courses at Batchelor Institute, which has only Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander enrolments, are male.

At NTU, in 1995 there were 125 enrolments of Indigenous women in higher education courses and 87 men; in 2000 there were 146 women and only 72 men.

Thus Northern Territory rates are consistent with an observation that, nationally:

"Indigenous women are significantly more likely to participate in higher education than Indigenous men." (Encel, p. 4)

Whilst interpretation of these data and their relevance to Indigenous boys' education must be cautious, these disproportions, relative to both Indigenous females and to others, suggest issues about Indigenous boys' access, retention, achievements and experiences in schooling.

However one reason is evident: the low rates of completion of secondary education by Indigenous students; and even lower rates of completion by males than females. In 1995 eleven (11) females and one (1) male completed the South Australian Certificate in Education (Northern Territory). In 1998, there were eleven (11) completions by males and 26 by females. (Collins, p. 31)

One reason for this, in turn, is that no secondary schooling is provided in the vast majority of non-urban Aboriginal communities, even in those with large populations.

The disadvantages experienced by both Indigenous boys and girls in education must obviously be addressed. The Learning Lessons report makes many recommendations to do so.

However particular additional disadvantages are experienced by Indigenous boys which will require specific action to address them.

Information Resources – Data and Research

Good information is one of the principal kinds of resource which is necessary for effective engagement in real partnerships to define issues, set agendas to respond to them and engage in resulting actions. At present there appears to be little if any published research information about particular issues which arise about, and for, Indigenous boys in their education in the Northern Territory.

A concerted and well resourced research effort is required to inform decisions and action to address issues which it reveals. Action need not wait until research has been completed, if action-research models are adopted which engage local teachers and community workers, with local steering committees, perhaps with support from outside professional researchers. (Cp. recommendations 12-14 and discussion in the recent national report by Professor Bob Connell and others: *Men's Health: a research agenda*

and background report pp. 5 & 11.)

Data collection should differentiate between the experience of Indigenous boys and girls in all relevant respects: enrolments, attendance, achievement, qualitative data etc.

Research should be conducted to find out why so few progress to secondary and tertiary education; and ways to address these problems.

The relationships between education disadvantages of boys and their health should also be investigated, with particular attention to the impact on their health as adult males. In regard to Indigenous males in the Northern Territory, such research might for example be designed and conducted by the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, Darwin.

Research should also be carried out to identify characteristics of curriculum which will be acceptable to boys and their families and communities; and conducive to good learning. C*urriculum* is meant here in its broader sense: including content, ways of teaching and learning, and forms of assessment.

Batchelor Institute already has a tradition of conversation and writing, including vigorous debate, and research about Indigenous curriculum. It is manifested in curriculum documents, especially those for higher education courses in teacher education, health and social science. (See also, eg., Baumgart et al.; *Ngoonjuk: Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*.)

This unique institution of Indigenous education is well placed and mandated to undertake research focussing on particular boys' education issues.

For example, it is timely to undertake research similar to the study by Malcolm Slade and Faith Trent of Flinders University; funded through the Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs' Higher Education Division, Evaluation and Investigation Program. The study investigated and presented "the views of the boys in a way that highlights the issues and problems that they've raised and that they believe should form the focus of discussion about declining rates of retention and achievement." (Slade & Trent p. 201)

Such a study about the issues of Indigenous boys' schooling in the Northern Territory should probably differ in both methodology and scope from this South Australian research. For example, Indigenous boys who are not attending school and adult members of their families should also be included in interviews to obtain a wider spectrum of experiences and views.

The allocation of resources to data collection and research about Indigenous boys' education should be equitable.

Conclusion

As long ago as 1978, H. C. Coombs wrote this:

"… if the assimilationist objective [in Indigenous education] is superseded a different approach will be necessary. Thus an education designed to enable Aboriginal children to live effectively in their own society would clearly call for a different educational content, a different pedagogy, different schools, and would have different measures of success. Even more, an education designed not merely to enable them to live effectively in their own society but also to deal effectively with those aspects of white society which they must encounter and to give them genuinely effective choice whether or not to become part of white society in preference to their own, would obviously present even greater problems in educational policy, content and organisation. These presumably should be the objectives of education in a society committed to self-determination and self-management." (Coombs, 232-233)

Some of these issues might be defined or framed differently nowadays.

Few, if any, would agree that they faced with the stark choice Coombs suggested.

However the broad direction for Indigenous education remains the same: building capacities for self-determination, self-management and responsibility – ie *control*.

The empowerment of Indigenous men is crucial to the raising of self-esteem, quality of life, health status, education and spiritual well-being throughout their families and communities. They must lead in improving their own education and health; and that of their families and communities. Community involvement, consultation and the engagement of Aboriginal males to define and take control of responses to issues that affect them is paramount in achieving good sustainable outcomes.

However increasing and improving resources and other forms of support which are necessary to encourage and enable them to do so must be provided to achieve equity in both education and health.

In the closing session of the 1st National Indigenous Male Health Convention at Ross River in October 1999, Mick Adams made the following statement:

"The clear message from the Convention was that Indigenous men should take greater responsibility themselves to improve the status of men's health and play their rightful role as leaders, fathers, uncles, husbands and grandfathers".

Improvements in education outcomes of Indigenous boys will require similar engagement and commitments by Indigenous men, and the necessary support from governments, departments and agencies.

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