

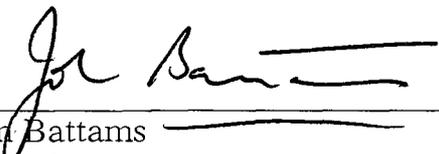


QUEENSLAND
TEACHERS' UNION
OF EMPLOYEES

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE:

SUBMISSION TO THE
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT,
EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS
INQUIRY INTO THE
EDUCATION OF BOYS

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A significant body of research asserts that the treatment of girls in schools is substantially different from the treatment of boys. Evidence suggests that boys are offered a distinct advantage in relation to specific school activities and general experience of schooling and that the results are educational, social and occupational outcomes which are generally weighted heavily in favour of boys and men. There is also evidence to support the belief that limited versions of masculinity, often implicitly supported by schools, can have negative effects on boys both personally and in relation to girls, women and other boys who do not conform to this dominant masculinity. While many boys continue to succeed in such a system, for others, notably those from low socio-economic backgrounds, indigenous boys, boys from non-English speaking background, those with a disability, homosexual boys, and boys who don't conform to a narrow view of masculinity, there can be a restriction in their educational opportunities, life chances, and quality of life.

As well as creating many problems for some boys, the dominant form of masculinity powerfully impacts on the school experiences of girls and perpetuates imbalances of cultural and economic power between the sexes resulting in abuse of women.

The QTU supports the continuing process of research and analysis of gender differences and their effects in schools, and the development of strategies and programs which are designed to prevent sexism and to compensate for disadvantage experienced because of a lack of gender equity. A great deal more research must also be undertaken into the intersection of gender with factors which are associated with education disadvantage such as poverty, disability, ethnicity, culture and geographical isolation.

The QTU would not endorse the introduction of a separate initiative to address boys' education. We reject any approach which treats all boys as victims and all girls as successes. Achievements by some girls (viz. some white, middle class girls) in recent times is a positive outcome for schools and to be celebrated. Any initiative to improve outcomes for both boys and girls needs to give recognition to the complex interweaving of a range of social characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability and sexuality as well as gender. Policies should be targeted at those at most disadvantage.

The DEETYA publication, *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools*, (1997) is an appropriate policy framework for addressing the educational needs of boys. The QTU urges that the current Inquiry recommend the full implementation of this policy for both boys and girls. The QTU would recommend that Gender Education be included in the priority areas for the DETYA Quality Teaching Program and in any other Commonwealth funded professional development for teachers. A further recommendation of the Inquiry should address the inclusion in preservice teacher education courses of gender equity education.

CURRICULUM

The QTU believes that the curriculum promotes narrow portrayals of masculinities and that a narrow subject selection by boys is not effectively addressed by secondary schools. While much of the curriculum continues to be dominated by stories of masculine achievement, many boys are observers only and some boys, most notably

indigenous boys, boys from non-English speaking backgrounds, working-class and homosexual boys see little representation of their experiences in the curriculum. Dominant images of masculinity and a narrow focus on employment opportunities predispose many boys to choose maths and science whether they have an interest or aptitude in these areas or not. The anecdotal accounts of girls outperforming boys is largely accounted for by subject choice. Boys tend to choose a narrow band of high status or traditional Year 11 and 12 subjects, even though they may not do well in these subjects; this lowers the males' average results. Girls tend to study a broader band of subjects, choosing those subjects in which they are confident and do well; this supports better average performance rates for girls. Many boys whose talents lie in the arts, literature or humanities can lose out by choosing subjects from a limited range. Changing employment patterns, such as the rise in the service and financial sectors, mean that career options may be better served by other subject choices.

- **Literature and the arts**

The QTU believes that English, and the performing and visual arts are valuable subjects in the area of boys' education in that they give opportunities to study and critique issues of masculinity and power. They also can expose boys to a wider range of material than that made available through male youth cultures, electronic game culture, violent film genres and sport journalism. Studies in these areas also allow boys to critically examine the influence of popular culture on gender.

- **Language other than English**

The study of languages other than English (LOTE) is seen by many boys as feminine and marginal to the education process. The QTU affirms its support for LOTE as central to the curriculum process and as a way, through the promotion of cultural diversity, to promote a positive range of alternative masculinities.

- **The humanities**

The QTU believes that the humanities subjects provide boys with an opportunity to study the construction of gender within different historical, cultural and socio-economic contexts.

- **Human relationships education**

The QTU supports the continuation of Human Relationships Education in that it can provide opportunities to examine and challenge gender-based relationships which limit options for different groups of boys and girls. Teachers should aim to develop skills, behaviours, attitudes and understandings that will enable students to construct equal and respectful relationships.

- **School sport**

A 1991 Australian Sports Commission study into ways of increasing sport among young people found that to many of them it offered fitness, fun, friends, a chance to develop self-reliance and social networks, a sense of belonging, recognition and approval from others. In order to achieve these benefits they also found a need to change the 'win at all costs' approach.

Though there is much to commend sport in schools, pressure and demands on boys often reduce the enjoyment of it, and faced with this and the belief that they are powerless to change the situation, many simply drop out.

Another potential disadvantage of the very competitive approach is that boys are often taught to be oblivious to pain leading to a distinct possibility that they will neglect or ridicule pain in others.

Schools need to ensure that activities are available to all without risk of physical, social or psychological harm, and that sporting programs are positive in their effects on both boys and girls and the relationships between them.

VIOLENCE

The issues of violence, sex-based harassment and bullying in all Australian schools (State and private) are of major concern. Sex-based and homophobic harassment is the most common form of harassment with the victims just as likely to be boys as girls. In order to understand why boys (and men) are the overwhelming perpetrators of violence and harassment, an understanding of their relationship to narrow constructions of masculinity is necessary. Contrary to popular myths, those who bully are not lacking in self-esteem or are failures at schoolwork, but are those who have a positive attitude to violence with a strong need for power and dominance over others.

The QTU acknowledge the work of the Men Against Sexual Assault organisation which lists key dominant messages which must be adopted if the connection with violence is to be broken viz.

- men believing that dominance and control are not indicators of a successful man;
- violence is never justified to achieve control over another person;
- the unacceptability of attributing the cause of violence to other sources such as women or alcohol;
- the acceptance of the feminine both in terms of women and feminine qualities within men;
- the freedom to engage in homosexual expression.

Victims too must be able to name these injustices if they are to respond appropriately by demanding their rights to be left unharmed. Programs focussing on the empowerment of victims should be implemented.

The role of the teacher

Teachers have a vital role to play in showing boys how dominant masculinities constrain as much as advantage them. They need to be shown how these images are established and maintained, at what cost this happens and how widening their understanding of what it means to be male can lead to more diverse experiences and positive relationships with others.

As masculinities are not uniform no single approach will address all issues for all boys. However a combination of the following strategies should be used:

- reflection on boys' own personal experience to allow them to think through beliefs and practices;
- training in alternative skills e.g. rehearsal of effective tactics to use in violent confrontations other than retaliatory violence;
- exploration of how boys feel about their relationships with others, self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence. The emphasis should be on feeling good about

themselves and seeing why certain ways of being male are desirable, why anxiety may lead them to conform to more rigid models and how this rigidity can be ultimately harmful.

- encouragement of activities which are co-operative rather than competitive, e.g. community projects.
- recognition of the symptoms of abuse, harassment and bullying, e.g:
 - .depression,
 - .low self-esteem,
 - .withdrawn behaviour,
 - .inability to make friends,
 - .school absences,
 - .non-assertive defensive behaviour,
 - .reluctance to challenge the statements or authority of others,
 - .eating disorders.

Teachers must also reflect on their disciplinary methods and consider whether they are modelling the behaviours about which they are critical, e.g. domination and harassment. For this reason sarcasm, shouting, physical punishment and bullying need to be avoided.

Inservice Education for Teachers

Some excellent education kits on creating non-violent school communities have been produced. These include:

- The "No Fear" kits (one for primary, and one for secondary schools), published in 1995 by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training; and
- "Enough's Enough" for primary schools, published in 1994 by the Department of Education, Queensland.

However, the production of such kits, without a sustained program of facilitated inservice has not had wide-spread effect. The QTU would recommend that such a sustained program be put in place as a matter of priority and that it be targeted at whole school communities (not individual teachers). Such an inservice program would complement the Commonwealth Government's focus on the prevention of domestic violence.

Male teachers

Although there is a greatly disproportionate number of men in positions of authority in schools, concern has been expressed about the declining number of men teaching in classrooms, especially in the early childhood years. This concern is based on a simplistic notion of the effectiveness of role modelling. Research has found that the sex of the role model is less important than the modelled behaviour. For male teachers to be effective in promoting appropriate behaviour in boys:

- they need to understand the construction of gender and motivations for violence, and
- be trained in explicit ways to intervene to deal with inappropriate behaviour.

The QTU believes that active involvement in challenging sex-role stereotyping is essential for both male and female teachers and that a diversity of skilled staff including those in authority positions in schools is the key to legitimising a range of gender identities.

The QTU recognises that there is a number of factors influencing the decline in the number of male teachers particularly in primary schools. These include the perception that teaching particularly early childhood/primary is a feminine occupation, limited opportunities for promotion and career advancement in this sector, inadequate salaries when compared with other career options, and concerns regarding allegations of criminal conduct against teachers.

LITERACY

Standardised state-wide literacy tests consistently show that boys (as a whole group) perform more poorly than girls. However, not all boys have poor performances; some groups of boys and some groups of girls can be identified as experiencing significant difficulty. Rural Aboriginal girls, and working class girls from non-English speaking backgrounds do less well than some groups of boys. It is also well known through other assessment programs that poor students have significant difficulty with literacy acquisition. The results of the national standardised tests currently sponsored by MCEETYA need to be disaggregated by economic status to complete the picture of which groups of boys and girls need assistance with literacy. While gender is certainly a factor affecting literacy results, so too is ethnicity, aboriginality, rurality and socio-economic status. Nicholls (1995) notes that a disproportionate number of boys who are identified for special help are boys who come from low socio-economic status backgrounds. She suggests that (referring to US data) "the problems of black and working class boys are being used as evidence that boys as a whole suffer from learning difficulties which are not being sufficiently well addressed by the current school system".

- **Testing**

A factor which needs to be borne in mind in the interpretation of literacy tests is the limitation of the test technologies. Only some forms of literate knowledge are assessed in such tests. Many forms of literacy cannot be easily assessed by standardised, computer-marked, national tests; for example the many different media forms of literacy used in a range of sites cannot be assessed by tests. For boys in particular this is probably significant. There are other literacy sites and forms of literacy that are not easily tested e.g. functional social literacy in its popular and contemporary genres.

- **Literacy and economic advantage**

What also needs to be reflected upon is the social and cultural value of the knowledge and skills being tested at school. Are boys disadvantaged in their post-school options if they do not do well on the types of literacy valued and tested at school? Given the emergent technologies of the future, print-based literacy skills are becoming less valuable than multi-media literacy skills. It needs to be borne in mind too, in the current focus on boys and their school literacy achievements, that literacy achievement does not automatically translate into economic advantage in the world of work. The ACER report (1997) on reading in the junior secondary school suggests that, while good literacy skills provided a clear earnings advantage for nineteen year olds in employment, the earning advantage is predominantly experienced by men rather than

women. Nineteen year old women with Very High literacy skill (measured at age fourteen) could expect to earn \$335 per week - a wage that was \$60 less per week than the wage of nineteen year old men with the same skills could expect. In fact, young men designated as having low and very low literacy levels were still able to earn more than young women who had very high levels of literacy achievement. Thus it would seem that school success in literacy does *not* automatically translate into economic advantage for girls and disadvantage for boys. In other words, how significant is the "boys and literacy" crisis for boys' future?

- School literacy programs

For a long time schools have tried to address the literacy and literature needs of boys. Considerable school resources have been allocated nationally to early intervention programs (e.g. Reading Recovery) and literacy support programs throughout the years of schooling in which boys dominate; many text selections for such programs and for general classroom programs are often focussed on males as the chief story protagonists and on narrative content seen to be of interest to boys.

It could be argued that the ways in which boys literacy needs have been addressed have often been ineffectual because they have not taken sufficient account of gender construction - that is, these strategies have not often attempted to engage with the experiences of masculinity such readers bring with them, or to critically reflect on how the literacy classroom might conflict with social constructions of masculinity. Ways to "do" masculinity are much more likely to be found in sport, electronic and gaming magazines than in novels.

- Fathers and literacy

In many families child rearing practices are gendered i.e. mothers and fathers often share their parenting responsibilities by performing distinctly different tasks determined by their gender. Fathers are often not observed by their young children as literate role models, and further if they do, it is often that fathers are observed as functional readers rather than readers of literature. Australian research (Nichols, 1994, 1995) demonstrates that literacy is clearly linked with mothers and with women, that fathers often identify themselves as non-readers, and that a "negative identification with reading was associated with a positive identification with perceived masculine activities and qualities".

The implications of this for boys learning to read are clear. Boys earliest experiences of reading, of literacy and of the home-school nexus are likely to be associated with their mothers, rather than with their fathers - with femininity and the female, rather than with masculinity and the male. Thus the construction of gender for many boys includes the belief that to be male does not include an enjoyment of reading, of literature in particular. In their schooling this is demonstrated by a reluctance to engage with school literacy tasks, a lack of interest in reading and frequent disruptive behaviour in literacy classes.

Some schools have attempted to redress the lack of involvement of fathers with their sons (and daughters) by the introduction of programs, e.g. *Real Men Read* (Mulligan 2000) which invite fathers into the classroom to read to students.

The QTU recommends that any renewed focus on literacy and boys be one that dissects discourse on gender, literacy and schooling and considers how constructions of English literacy sit beside boys' lived experiences of masculinity, and how the ways in which boys "do" and "perform" gender could be in conflict with literacy practices and pedagogy. Professor Pam Gilbert (1988) argues that "we are unlikely to make any difference to the boys and literacy issue, unless a close and careful examination of the social and embodied practices of masculinities, and of the social construction of literacy and literacy testing become part of classroom learning" .

In addition she emphasises that boys "deserve access to knowledges about their social construction as gendered subjects, about the curricular processes they are inserted into, and about the ways in which they might position themselves differently in a range of social contexts". In other words boys need to be let into the secret of how society constructs them as masculine and how this affects their life.

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