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Teaching: it would be a great job, if I was a woman

- Comment by a male teacher in Burn (1999)

Martin Spafford, a high school teacher in London, ..observes that boys are under siege. “Boys feel continually attacked for who they are. We have created a sense in school that masculinity is something bad”.(Hoff Sommers 2000:57).

INTRODUCTION

The Senate Inquiry into men in teaching is welcomed. *Why aren't more men in teaching* ? is a question persistently asked in the media and in popular debate (West and Arnold, 2001). It is a question being asked in public and private schools in most of the western world. The question relates to a great many other issues: a decline in school discipline, the difficulties of under-fathered boys, and the disengagement of boys from schools.

LACK OF AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING

Patterns of communication between parents and children may be an important factor in educational success (OECD,2001:157) It has often been said that under-fathered boys are at greater risk of educational failure. OECD evidence makes it clear that children from single-parent families achieve significantly less than those from two-parent families (OECD,2001:194) Boys are more at risk than girls from lack of a male authority figure, writes Kraemer in the *British Medical Journal*:

In boys the formation of secure attachment to a caregiver is more subject than in girls to parental unavailability, insensitivity, or depression (2001:4)

It is safe to assume that, in most cases, children from single-parent families have less contact with their fathers than other children About eighty five percent of single-parent families in Australia are mother-headed. Evidence from many sources shows that children, especially boys, coming from single-parent families are thus already more at risk in school than those from dual-parent families (OECD 2001).

The difficulties boys are having in school and society are linked with men's difficulties in fathering. Men are struggling to be better fathers in a time of increasing expectations (Russell, 1999). Men struggle to express

their love for their sons in a time in which even mentioning sexual matters to a son is suspected (Walsh, 1999; West, 1996: 105-6, 86ff; West, 1998b). And boys are looking to fathers to encourage and guide them through the difficulties of urban and rural Australian life. The problem of under-fathered boys is being highlighted by our reading of the current literature on boys' disaffection from school and general under-achievement. Under-fathered boys are more likely than other boys to be hostile to authority and often become hyper-masculine in their search for an acceptable way to be male.

Many parents have told me that they want their children – often boys – to have men in schools. One writes:

I have a daughter and then I had three sons. The oldest is eleven. My daughter was quiet, well-behaved, popular with teachers and did well at school. My three sons are loud, physical, push each other around, climb trees and fences, jump on their bikes and race off in all directions making a racket. My daughter's needs were met at school, and I am thankful for that. My sons' needs have not been met. They need a male voice to hear and sense their needs and acknowledge their maleness. If they only hear female voices all day, that's unbalanced. Women just preach at them and talk at them: words, words, words. My boys want a man who raises his voice, laughs with them and plays outside with them. That means soccer, riding bikes, chasings, anything with a ball. It's all physical. Playing with a hammer or a ball or bits of wood is how boys learn to express themselves as a man. They smash things down and build them all over again. They are going to get jobs and they will need to use their hands as well as their heads. Men understand all that boy stuff. If the boys only have female teachers, how will they learn to be men?

(personal communication)

THE IMPORTANCE OF CLASS ROOM RELATIONSHIPS

What compounds this for under-fathered boys is the **crucial difficulty for boys of forming strong, useful attachments at school**. A principal commented

Secondary school leaves many boys totally miserable. Their years seem to be wasted. Retention rates increase, but the model of secondary schooling seems to be frustrating some boys
(West, 2000a: 50)

More children are being kept at school than in past decades, in which troublesome boys left to become apprentices or join a trade or the steelworks. These male, working-class jobs are fast disappearing (*The Economist*, 1999). More boys are thus kept in the straitjacket of school. Boys' own comments echo that of their principals. This is an extract from the Boys, Sport and Schooling Project:

Q. What are the rules of being a boy in Australia?

You can't do lots of stuff. You can't show emotions. You have to win. You have to have the last laugh (West, 2000a:51)

And boys complain consistently that nobody asks, nobody listens, nobody cares about their feelings anyway. (Slade and Trent, in West, 2002). Meanwhile boys are being asked at school to write down for critical review what they think about Shakespeare or Jane Austen or *Bladerunner*. Boys' vulnerability around emotions is heightened by their alexythimia, or lack of an appropriate emotional vocabulary.

Boys' relationships at school are thus critical. The OECD found that the top two factors in educational performance were teacher-student relationships and disciplinary climate. The third was a demand for high achievement. These three factors working together explain about 31 per cent of the variation between schools within countries in the OECD. (OECD:2001: 294). Hence the key importance of relationships. (See also Bartlett Report, 2002:160ff, West 2002)

As Martin explains (2002: 156) school is a place where boys learn what it means to be a boy and a man. Thus school can be, he says, an ideal context in which diverse kinds of men are celebrated in a way that gives permission for boys to be whatever kind of man he wants to grow into.

In private schools, artistic males can be observed, as well as more outdoors-focused males, sport -playing males, and so on. Schools such as Tudor House have many males around. And – not coincidentally - an atmosphere which summed up by giving permission to climb trees. This is a pleasure many other boys would be jealous of. But if boys see only one or two men in the school, [especially if these have little contact with the boys' experience of learning in classrooms] boys and girls see that teaching is women's work. Education and the whole world of learning become feminised in a boy's eyes. Women read books. Men leave educational institutions and go out into the world. These ideas are not helpful if we want boys to enjoy a healthy inner life which embraces

poetry, novels, art and music. Or if we want boys to understand the complex interplay of men and women in a modern marriage or relationship.

BOYS BECOMING MEN IN A CLIMATE HOSTILE TO MALES

Christina Hoff Sommers makes some insightful comments about males growing up in the USA. She attacks those who want teachers to practise girl empowerment and diminish the opportunities given to boys. Some of the material is somewhat overstated or polemical. However, it is material worth considering. Too often, proponents of social change have brought their political agendas into classrooms. She calls this the ‘tiresome misandry that infects so many gender theorists who never stop blaming ‘the male culture’ for all social and psychological ills” (2000:134). And some social change activists link violence by rapists or wife-bashing men to the actions of schoolboys. Many of these comments by Hoff Sommers have relevance to Australia.

A boy today, through no fault of his own, finds himself implicated in the social crime of “shortchanging” girls. Yet the allegedly silenced and neglected girl sitting next to him is likely to be a better student. She is not only more articulate, she is probably a more mature, engaged, and well-balanced human being. He may be uneasily aware that she is more likely to go to college. He may believe that teachers prefer to be around girls and pay more attention to them. At the same time, he is uncomfortably aware that he is considered to be a member of the unfairly favored ‘dominant gender’.

Gender experts at Harvard, Wellesley and Tufts believe that boys and men in our society will remain sexist (and potentially dangerous) unless socialised away from conventional maleness. It maybe too late to change adult men: boys, on the other hand, are still salvageable.

More and more schoolboys inhabit a milieu of disapproval. Routinely regarded as protosexists, potential harassers, and perpetuators of gender inequity, boys live under a cloud of censure, in a permanent state of culpability. Martin Spafford, a high school teacher in London, ..observes that boys are under siege. “Boys feel continually attacked for who they are. We have created a sense in school that masculinity is something bad’. (44,57)

We need to be cautious about reading too much into this. But it does resonate for those of us who listen to radio debates about masculinity, or debates among Australian educational researchers. There are strong voices supporting women and girls in most schools. Where are the voices supporting men and boys? **We need some pro-masculine men engaged with boys in classrooms and in school playgrounds to help boys grow into balanced men themselves.**

A LACK OF MALES AND THE LINK TO BOYS' DIFFICULTIES

The Review of Best Practice in Boys Education (2001) pointed to clear connections between lack of men in teaching and boys' difficulties in school. Research indicates that there are characteristically male ways of learning. This does not mean that all males (or females) learn in the same way. Males often prefer to learn actively, to take risks, to experiment, to concentrate on tasks, and to work on "right or wrong" answers. Clearly there are signs that the whole question of raising boys, their lives at school and in the workplace and the quality of their lives as adults concerns a wide range of people. In the process, the roles of men in boys' lives comes up incessantly. And this occurs in one country after another across the western world. (OECD,2003;Wilson,2003; Martin,2002; Aitken,1999 West,2002).

There is evidence that concern is increasing as evidence mounts up about boys' difficulties. The evidence ranges from a historically high suicide rate among young men (Fry et al.,1999) to declining motivation in, and performance of, boys in school leaving examinations. Despite the unfortunate lack of data from some governments, there is evidence that boys are overwhelmingly in the majority in school suspensions (Anon, 1999). We can readily agree with the assessment of John Head looking at related difficulties of young males in the United Kingdom (1999:4-9). Looking at the evidence which confronts us of so many young men suiciding, being suspended from school, in trouble on the streets and struggling to achieve at school, any sensible person would have to conclude that young males are in considerable difficulties. Not all young men, but sufficient young men to cause concern. The puzzle for future generations will be why it took governments so long to act. Boys' difficulties are entangled with two related issues: better fathering (as we saw earlier) and the lack of males in teaching.

* Boys and older men.

Boys' struggle to become balanced, achieving men is linked with the isolation of older people in our society, as discussions with the Council on the Ageing have shown. Older men who contact welfare agencies offering their services as mentors have too often been turned away. While boys suffer through lack of encouragement, older people often feel shut away from younger people, especially after their children divorce. Discussions with Aboriginal people confirm that Aborigines (as well as many other societies) take a great deal of care with the ways boys become men. Too often our young men in need of support and guidance are left for the whims of the internet and the media (West, 2002). *Certified Male* magazine, March 2000 argued that there was a great shortage of men volunteering to be a Big Brother for under-fathered boys. Macallum and Beltman (1999) suggest that older males may be attracted to school to act as mentors. Grandfathers and other retired males may be available for this purpose, provided certain safeguards are observed.

* Boys and Discipline

Teachers get older on average every year, according to the Baumgart report on teaching in NSW. They can find themselves weighed down by the problem of persuading boys to stay quiet in classrooms which were never designed for large numbers of semi- and sub-literate young people. The UK literature says that it is easier to teach girls because girls behave better, keep quieter and are more biddable. Boys dislike being told continually to 'sit down, shut up, write this down' (West, 1996a: 38; West, 2002). Many sit at a desk all day dreaming of the football game they will play that afternoon (West, 1999a). Many boys act out, are more difficult for an ageing teaching force to keep quiet, and create more problems for teachers. This appears to be linked with boys' high rates of suspension and low marks (see West, 2000a and 2002 for principals' comments on boys).

It can easily be seen that boys' underachievement is linked with the preponderance of boys among school suspensions and expulsions (West 1996a, chapter 2; West, 1996b; West, 1999b, West,2000a:48; West,2002 Anon, 1999) Schools are less and less able to maintain authority over pupils. Boys are less able to be 'controlled' in class by teachers who are embattled, enfeebled and disempowered. The UK research indicates that teachers may like boys less, and encourage boys less than girls. Some of

these arguments were picked up and given respectability by the Bartlett Report on Boys' Education, (2003;xxix)

Sebastian Kraemer in a thoughtful piece 'The Fragile Male' argues that males may be more sympathetic to young males because they, too, were once male.

He writes further:

The modern male is now more often seen as lacking qualities associated with females, such as self-regulation of emotions or reflectiveness (2001:4).

Australian school principals report that many boys are being suspended and expelled, often for "violence" (West 2000a : 48). But what does "violence" entail? Dr West has seen queues of children in a school, and told that they were the children who had been reprimanded or sent out of class. On some occasions, all were male. Some common reasons appear to be:

- * shoving another child in the lunch queue,
- * raising a voice against a teacher,
- * pushing, and so on.

As Olweus' and Kraemer's research makes plain, pubertal and pre-pubertal boys are physical creatures. They have testosterone belting around inside them. Adolescent boys do have big bodies, and they want to see what those bodies can do. No wonder boys commonly detest classwork but greatly enjoy sport (West, 2002). Of course there are exceptions. But we should not be surprised if males bully physically, while girls bully verbally and by excluding other girls from an in-group (Olweus 1993). But if all the available teachers are female, this common, probably normal male behaviour will be seen as bad and punishable.

Thus low numbers of male teachers works against boys and indirectly pushes them out of the education system. Education is increasingly feminised, in part because of this, from pre-school to university.

The Report on Best Practice in Boys' Education suggests that a much more active approach to learning may be part of the answer. Schools which engage boys often have a young, energetic staff, some of whom are male. And engagement is a key part of what binds people to education. Of course, many effective teachers of boys and girls are female. But males understand boys' need for active learning and active recreation. School principals report that whereas a female will often try to quieten boys down, a male will say "Oh you boys! Run down to the end

of the playground and kick a football for ten minutes and get rid of all that energy!”. Or some can take boys out for a swim on a hot day before settling them down for quiet reading (Dalleywater, 2001 and Best Practice in Boys’ Education Report, 2001). Private schools ensure that there are large numbers of young males and young families in and around the school. **Thus private schools have increasing numbers of males. State schools’ male teacher numbers steadily decrease (Ramsey Report ,2000:)**

* Changes in the Workplace.

It is no accident that boys are having difficulties in school at the same time as men are having trouble adjusting to a workplace increasingly emphasising teamwork, communication and multi-skilling. Working-class boys were once able to leave school for an apprenticeship, a job in a factory or unskilled labouring. As Daniel Goleman argues, we all need to be more emotionally literate. Working-class boys, coming from traditionally-constructed families, and with few models of actively-involved, culturally-rich men in their lives, leave school ill-prepared for the current world of work with its increasing emphasis on co-operation, teamwork and communication. It is working-class boys who most need men around them who can work with their hands and can relate to boys. It is precisely these boys who are least likely to find them in impoverished State schools.

In this way, the decline of men in teaching is linked with many current tensions in society relating to problems in masculinity.

ARABIC BOYS AND MALE TEACHERS

The current concern over Arabic boys in the media is relevant to these discussions. There are indications that many boys from Middle Eastern communities are very difficult to discipline in New South Wales State schools. The difficulty here is disentangling nationality, race, and religion in pinpointing why males act as they do. But immigrants from countries like Iraq, Syria and Lebanon appear to raise males who are hyper-masculine. Many of these boys excel in football, in kick-boxing, or in other hyper-masculine sports. They have little regard for formal schoolwork. Many go into bodybuilding; more than a few are tempted by the Faustian bargain of steroids. One such case study is provided in West (1996:116). Boys from these cultures seem to be taught that women belong in the home. They do not respect women who are not under

constant supervision by a relative. Males learn how to be a man from other males, not from females. If these young men are to learn a gentler form of masculinity, they will have to do so from other males. Learning how to be a man from a female is anathema to them. We need to find ways of getting some Middle Eastern males into teaching- a profession they seem to shun as women's work. Much more research needs to be done about how boys are raised in ethnic communities, and what can be done to raise them more intelligently.

WHAR UK RESEARCH SHOWS ABOUT USING MEN TO TEACH BOYS

Boys are bodies in perpetual commotion. In the UK much useful work has been done at Kirklees by Gary Wilson *et al.* to use males to catch boys' interest and lead them towards sound education and good outcomes. Gary Wilson explains how :

The street culture that exists within some communities needs to be fully understood by staff- its negative elements challenged and its positive elements celebrated.

Carefully employ strategies to involve boys in extra-curricular music, drama and art activities, as well as sport. This might involve inviting positive role models, as well as considering male-only groups of singers or performers...

Boy-friendly book displays could be a regular feature in libraries, based on research within the school and beyond, avoiding stereotypes and incorporating books from a wide range of genres and cultures.

Posters and bookmarks showing men as readers, and book reviews by male teachers and members of the local community, could be used in the library and classrooms.

PE departments need to be aware of the image they generate. Highly competitive or macho departments will tend to confirm many boys' suspicions of what being a man is all about, and will do little to help create a caring masculinity. (2003:28,35)

Thus it is not so much role models that seems critical here, but males modelling for boys the way in which they can become educated men. Again we can see that it is important for boys- and girls- to see enacted before them, models of thoughtful men who read and enjoy reading.

WHY DOESN'T TEACHING ATTRACT MEN?

There is a flight of men from teaching. Figures from the Department of Education, Employment and Training show that in the last ten years, the number of men entering teaching has gone down from 1 in 3 to 1 in 4. Yet males under 35 are the group leaving teaching the fastest. Teaching is an attractive career for women because it is relatively well-paid. The following comment might be very widely felt:

Teaching: it would be a great job, if I was a woman

-comment from a male student teacher in a study by Burn (1999).

Why isn't teaching an attractive career for males?

* The teacher education curriculum is deliberately girl-friendly. Because of the profound influence of feminism on the social sciences, teachers are being greatly influenced by feminism — many good university women teachers are feminists. Unfortunately, there is almost no teaching of men's issues — unless masculinity is seen as a problem to be fought against. So teachers are having the difficulties of girls in education explained to them. Issues of masculinity are not usually explained to them, unless it is done through a negative perspective. Males in education and the social sciences mention quietly that they often feel targeted by material or comments which appear to be anti-male. One student teacher commented on his teacher education: 'It was a war against men' (Burn, 1999:5). Probably this statement is an extreme one. However, it is true that most male students do not know how to defend themselves against such material. Nor is this the only difficulty faced by males in preparation for teaching. Early childhood educators at UWS report that few males survive the early child education course, especially after practical experience.

Studies going on in this university and elsewhere suggest some of the many problems that teaching is having in attracting men (Lewis et al, 1999). First, teachers are telling their students not to enter teaching. Second, it is now compulsory for people entering teaching to sign a declaration that they are not guilty of child abuse. Men are much worse at defending themselves against such accusations because their emotional language is poorer than women's (West, 1996). Males interviewed by Lewis felt very deeply the lurking accusation that any male who wanted to teach young children was morally suspect. Burn reports that a child in the UK said good afternoon to her male teacher and was told by a parent

“not to talk to strange men”. (Burn: 1999). This may not be the key factor in what does not attract men to teaching, however.

* Work by Burn (1999) and McCumstie raises many issues for males going into teaching. They argue that primary teaching, in particular, is culturally coded feminine. This is relevant to an inquiry on boys' education because in boys' education workshops the issue of male role-modelling comes up almost every time. Further, West has argued that in a feminised environment, boys feel pushed into the masculinised world of sport (1996a; 2000a). It is clear that expectations of beginning male teachers are different from those of beginning females. A comment from Burn is indicative. A male casual teacher is talking to a woman teacher:

It's all right for you. You don't go for interviews and get asked 'can you do the cricket and keep the little b.....s quiet?' Or 'we need a man to lift the heavy boxes'.

Do male and female teachers do the same job? It is a moot point, and one that would offend many in the educational establishment. The males Burn interviewed were given a disproportionate number of troublemakers, often boys. Reports from my former students suggest that many of these boys are under-fathered. This would support American research on fathers' contributions to a child's sense of wellbeing and achievement. Conversely, a male who is under-fathered often becomes introverted or hyper-masculine (see Fathers' Day article on the www.menshealth.uws.edu.au website).

Men who taught Kindergarten had to put up with “Look at that big man teaching those little kids! Isn't he sweet?”

Men who do enter teaching tend to gravitate into administration. Following a career path is an acceptably masculine task for males, who are still following the traditional script. In brief, a man's life is about work (West, 1996). As one young male teacher commented to Burn

Men need to bond with men and if there are not enough men in the profession...they are surrounded by members of the opposite sex...it's difficult

Burn

1999:28

As *The Economist* argued in a landmark article in September, 1996, it is foolish to imagine that one can understand the problems experienced by

boys without understanding the problems experienced by men. Girls' education has been very much tied up with issues of women's expectations of equality. Similarly, boys' education must be seen as very much involved with issues of masculinity and the directions in which men are headed.

THE EDUCATION CRITIQUE OF MALE TEACHERS

The educational establishment and well-placed educational researchers sometimes ridicule claims for increasing male teacher numbers. Too often, they use a technique known to philosophers as “knocking down a straw man”. They find the silliest versions of these arguments for increasing male teacher numbers, and lampoon them. They argue that we need quality teachers, as if the arguments for male teachers meant that ANY male teacher was better than a good female teacher. Of course, he is not. We do not need ANY male teacher. **We need good quality teachers of both sexes.** The Catholic Education Office, Sydney has made this clear. This is what parents demand. But teachers work in a job market. As the job market for males pays better than that for females, employers will have to treat the two types of teachers differently if they want to give parents male teachers for their children.

WHAT WOULD NEED TO CHANGE BEFORE MORE MEN WENT INTO TEACHING?

We have argued that the paucity of males in teaching is connected to a number of other difficult issues: a decline in school discipline, and the disengagement of boys from schooling.

But what do we have to do to get more men into teaching? Despite much clacking of tongues about needing more men in teaching, few have been able to answer this question. When Dr West taught at Wagga Wagga Teachers College in 1970-71, the primary education sections were almost equal in male/ female ratios – perhaps 40 or 45% male. How was this achieved? Places were allocated to females, according to a cut-off point in current school leaving scores. Places were then allocated to males according to a different cut-off. Whether this could be done again in the present era is debatable.

However, the matter could be solved at school level. In private schools, Headmasters deliberately target males. Headmasters seek out promising males and offer inducements. These include: salary packages, assistance with accommodation, and other considerations (Dalleywater, 2000). Private schools decide what kind of school they want: a busy, active

school in which boys are engaged by a variety of teachers of both sexes. In the process, boys create a mess, get untidy, and crawl all over the place. But they are being engaged by people who understand male energy. Probably, this is part of the reason that parents find private schools attractive: they offer males a sound disciplinary framework. Boys from one wealthy school commented that while other boys might tell teachers to “go **** yourself”, ‘you can’t get away with that sort of thing here’.

If males can be targeted in private schools, why not in State schools?

Getting more men into teaching is not impossible. Some approaches to the problem do seem politically difficult. It is simply a matter of what the community wants to regard as its priority. If private schools attract significant numbers of males, it will be clear that if parents want the full range of teachers for their children, they will have to choose private schools instead of State schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Careful attention must given to roles played by fathers and other men in encouraging boys and girls to learn. More research is needed on what happens to boys (and also girls) who grow up without adequate attention from a father. Fathers’ voices need to be heard by schools.
2. Pilot schemes should begin to find ways of nurturing men who are entering teaching. The aim would be to assist and encourage men to stay in teaching and help them with problems hindering them. The first step would be to listen to male teacher education students and assist them with their difficulties.
3. Teacher education programs should be made more male-friendly and less male-hostile. There ought to be subjects in the teacher education curriculum which examine boy-friendly learning and ways of successfully engaging boys .
4. State primary schools should be encouraged to target some positions for male teachers. This could be done in some pilot schools and carefully evaluated. Parents might be able to offer advice and assistance.
5. Careful study should be made of Gap students who act as surrogate teachers in some private schools. Gap students have finished school in the UK or elsewhere and spend a year attached to a school as sports coaches or similar. This is one way of bringing more males into schools.
6. Older males may be attracted to schools to act as mentors, as a recent Commonwealth Report shows (Macallum and Beltman, 1999).

7. Sustained research ought to be done on enhancing the work done by males in raising and educating boys.

8. Teachers need much more reward for effort. Ambitious males will not stay in a profession in which high-achievers get the same rewards as minimal performers.

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The Research Group on Men and Families is a group of researchers at the University of Western Sydney. It provides workshops for schools, parents and others. It stays in touch with research worldwide. Its research findings are disseminated through a wide network of media contacts. Its work includes better fathering, improving boys' education, and men's health (especially emotional health and body image problems). Seminars are provided for parents, adolescents and teachers, mainly in Australia. It has links with:

- * The Men's Health Information and Research Centre at UWS
- * The Council on the Ageing and Older Men: New Ideas
- * State schools in the Parramatta region
- * The King's School, Parramatta
- * Catholic Education Office, Sydney

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