

## Getting it Right Some of the Time

### An Appraisal of the Report on the Inquiry into the Education of Boys

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The statistical evidence showing that boys have lower literacy levels and lower average performance than girls in almost all school subjects is now overwhelming. Boys are also less likely than girls to finish school and enrol in higher education, with serious consequences for the students themselves and society in general.

The problem of boys' educational underachievement made it onto the political agenda with the establishment of a parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys in June 2000. Last month the inquiry's report was tabled in parliament. Titled *Boys: Getting It Right*, it makes 24 recommendations. These reflect three major themes:

- (i) that the document on a national gender equity strategy needs to be rewritten because it is based on a flawed model of masculinity that seeks to achieve equity by changing boys so that they become more like girls, a biased and futile approach;
- (ii) that boys' lower levels of literacy need to be addressed through strategies that take into account boys' difficulties in hearing and processing verbal instructions from the early years of schooling on, and that reading instruction in schools return to the traditional, phonics-based approach, and;
- (iii) that effective teacher education and training is paramount in delivering good educational outcomes and meeting the needs of all children.

These recommendations make good sense and can be implemented almost immediately. But other recommendations, such as a call for unconditional increases in teacher salaries and a reduction in class sizes, make less sense and are impractical. Salary increases should be tied to performance—that is, good teachers should be better paid, not all teachers—while the evidence of a relationship between class size and learning is inconclusive.

What is most surprising, however, is that the report fails to acknowledge a link between family structure and stability—that is, two-parent families versus single-parent families—and boys' educational problems, despite research and anecdotal evidence to the contrary. Yet it acknowledges that father absence is thought to be particularly detrimental to boys. Given that the majority of single-parent families are headed by mothers, it is hard to see how single parenthood and father absence can be considered two entirely different things.

This is not to attack single parents or their children, but to recognise that it is imperative to identify groups at risk of disadvantage in order to target assistance effectively. It behoves us to acknowledge where a problem exists, controversial or not, so that fewer children suffer disadvantage as a result. The inquiry into the education of boys has failed in this regard.

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## **Introduction: background to the inquiry into boys' education**

Statistics show that boys have lower literacy levels and lower average performance than girls in almost all subjects at school, and are less likely than girls to complete school and enrol in higher education. In June 2000, after a six month period in which the issue of boys' relatively lower school participation and performance rarely left the spotlight, the Commonwealth government announced a parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys.

The flurry of media and public interest revealed that this apparently new development could actually be traced back over the previous decade and before. A number of researchers and educators in Australia and overseas had been concerned about the underachievement of boys but the problem had been given little attention.

Several explanations can be given for the neglect of boys' educational decline. One explanation is that it was not until the late 1990s that the differences in achievement levels between boys and girls could be confidently described as significant and sustained. Another explanation is that some of the most influential people and organisations in the education industry and in academia were, and still are, resistant to the idea that boys should be given special attention.

The overwhelming statistical evidence forced many of these people to justify their position. Some attempted to downplay the statistics by pointing out that some boys do very well at school while some girls do poorly and that other factors must be considered—the 'which boys, which girls' approach.<sup>1</sup> Others suggested that gender differences favouring girls at school are balanced by gender differences favouring men in the labour force.<sup>2</sup> Still others eschewed any special efforts to improve boys' school performance as a backlash against the progress made in the education of girls in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

None of these arguments is legitimate. While it is true that not all boys are doing badly and not all girls are doing well, the distributions of performance show that far more boys are doing badly than girls at all levels of schooling and in all areas of study. It is also true that socioeconomic variables are related to school performance, but boys do worse than girls at all socioeconomic levels. The gender difference is smaller at the top of the socioeconomic scale than at the bottom, but the difference persists.

As for male labour market advantages, two responses are necessary. The first is that the lower average income of women is not necessarily an indicator of disadvantage. Women often choose jobs that are not as highly paid, for a variety of reasons, and their careers are often interrupted by childbearing and childcare. Labour force participation of women is lower for the same reason. We are likely to see boys' educational disadvantage of the last decade or two reflected in the labour market in years to come, as these cohorts of boys become a larger component of the post-school population. The second important consideration is the value of education for reasons other than employment and income, a point that will be expanded later.

The most extreme arguments against a focus on boys' education came from academics and commentators who are well-known feminists. They seemed to believe that any strategy to promote the education of boys must be at the expense of girls, and that it would (re)start the gender war. This is not the case, and indeed there are many benefits to girls in improving boys' education. Boys who are interested and involved in schooling will have fewer behaviour problems, which will mean fewer disruptions for all students and less classroom time devoted to discipline. Another benefit for females is that well-educated boys grow into eligible, intelligent men.

## **The problem of boys' educational underachievement: towards a solution**

Having established that there is indeed a problem, and that a solution is necessary, the next question is what to do about it. Providing an answer was the formidable task of the afore-mentioned parliamentary inquiry. Submissions to the inquiry came thick and fast. The 202 submissions came from sources including government departments, schools, teacher unions, parent groups, charities, universities, police, private organisations, and individuals.

An even greater number of people attended hearings and gave evidence to the inquiry. Using all of this information, the inquiry committee had to determine which arguments had the most merit and then to refine them into clear, sensible and realistic policy recommendations. In October 2002, the report of the inquiry was tabled in parliament. In many respects, the committee executed their task commendably.

The report, titled *Boys: Getting It Right*, makes 24 recommendations. They have three major themes. The first is that the document setting out a national gender equity strategy needs to be rewritten so that it reflects the educational requirements and entitlements of boys and girls in a more balanced way. The current document is based on a deficit model of masculinity—that is, it seeks to achieve equity by changing boys so that they are more like girls, which is a clearly biased (and futile) approach.

The second theme picks up that the most important feature of boys' educational underperformance is their lower levels of literacy. Inability or difficulty reading, writing and communicating can lead to disengagement, behaviour problems and, ultimately, lower than expected performance or failure. Two key recommendations are made that address the problem of literacy. One is to increase awareness of the impact of hearing and auditory processing difficulties on learning. Research has found that, in effect, boys' capacity for hearing and processing verbal instructions is, in general, less than girls', from the early years of schooling on. This is a remarkable finding, and one that was not well known prior to the inquiry. It has important implications for classroom instruction and pedagogy.

The other key literacy-related recommendation is that reading instruction in schools revert to the traditional, phonics-based methods—that is, a structured, sequential approach to reading which involves sounding out words and which is better suited to children with short attention spans. This method has been shown to be superior in overcoming reading difficulties for all children, but especially boys. It had been largely abandoned for the 'whole language' method in the 1970s, whereby children learn to 'read by sight' and memory without instruction in the patterns, framework and rules of words and language, but is now gradually coming back into favour.

The third theme is teacher training. The report makes the point that effective teaching is paramount in delivering good educational outcomes, and that teacher education must therefore be practical, of high quality and responsive to the needs of all children.

All of these recommendations make good sense and can be implemented almost immediately. Others, such as a call for an unconditional increase in teacher salaries and a reduction in class sizes, are ill-considered and impractical.

There are certainly good reasons for teachers to be better paid, but salary increases should be tied to performance, to on-going education that enhances teaching, and to the contribution teachers make to their school. That is, good teachers should be better paid, not all teachers.

As for class size, there is no conclusive evidence of a relationship between class size and learning. The research most frequently invoked as showing that smaller classes have lasting benefits—Project STAR in Tennessee—suffers from a fundamental methodological flaw, known as the 'Hawthorne Effect', that renders it meaningless.<sup>4</sup> In Project STAR, teachers and students were aware that they were part of a study of class sizes and had a vested interest in ensuring that smaller classes had better results. That is, it is impossible to conclude that the better learning in smaller classes was due to smaller class size, not the greater effort of teachers in those classes.

There is also a question of efficiency. Class size reduction comes at enormous expense, which includes not just the cost of more teachers and their education, but more classrooms and more classroom resources. Given the equivocal findings on the benefits of class size, it is arguable that spending money in different ways, such as on teacher education and training or curriculum resources, would achieve superior results.

### **Family structure and boys' education: the missing link**

That the report finds in favour of higher teacher pay and smaller class sizes is perhaps not so surprising. After all, it is state and territory governments budgets, not the Commonwealth's, that would be affected. What is most surprising is the way the report deals with the role of families in the education of boys.

In 1998, another Commonwealth parliamentary inquiry ('To Have and To Hold') concluded that two parent families conferred benefits on their children beyond the advantage of higher average income. Likewise, in the inquiry into the education of boys, a number of submissions demonstrated that changes in family structure and stability are involved in the decline in boys' educational achievement. Research and anecdotal evidence of a link between increasing numbers of single parent families and educational problems among boys was provided.

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It would perhaps be understandable if the inquiry found that the evidence was convincing but argued that family instability was beyond the scope of the report. Instead, however, the report rejects outright the relationship between family structure and stability and boys' education, claiming that 'characteristics such as low parental education and low income that are more prevalent in single parent families but have the same negative effects on children when they are present in two-parent families' (3.22) are responsible for any differences in educational outcomes, not the fact that one of the child's parents is absent, usually the father.

The report denies that family structure is important, yet makes the following statement about father absence: 'The absence of fathers in many families . . . has raised concerns about the under-fathering of children, which is held by some to be particularly detrimental to boys. This is a generally accepted, but not thoroughly researched, view that is supported by the anecdotal evidence' (3.32). The report then provides quotes from people working with at-risk boys and a school principal supporting this view. When around 90% of single-parent families are mother-headed, it is hard to see how single parenthood and father absence can be construed as two completely different things.

Furthermore, the report later emphasises boys' need for positive male role models and the importance of involving fathers in schools. 'Both boys and girls will benefit from the involvement and encouragement of their fathers as well as their mothers' (6.111) and ' . . . men can bring something different in addition to what is there and . . . their presence can be beneficial' (6.112).

The identification of a group that is not performing as well as comparable groups is not necessarily a naming and blaming process. In this case, it is not intended as an attack on single parents or their children. As US researcher Carl Bankston has said, 'it is a mistake to view the consequences of family structure as a matter of apportioning blame'.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is necessary to identify groups at risk of disadvantage in order to target assistance effectively. It behoves us to acknowledge where a problem exists, controversial or not, so that fewer children suffer disadvantage as a result. The inquiry into the education of boys has failed in this regard.

This brings us back to a point alluded to earlier. It was disappointing that the inquiry couched the significance of boys' education only in terms of employment prospects and earning potential. These things are, of course, important, but it is a shame to portray education in such a narrow way.

Boys deserve an education that introduces them to knowledge and learning for their own sake, that enables them to participate fully in their community and society, and to appreciate and enjoy the products of their culture and others—arts, science and literature—whatever their occupation. Hopefully, despite its flaws, the inquiry into boys' education will help to achieve this. Not all boys will be scholars, but a good education will help them to become well-rounded and intelligent young men.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, Cherry Collins, Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females in School and their Initial Destinations after Leaving School* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, Submission to the inquiry into the education of boys, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/efb/subs/sub143.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> For example, Association of Women Educators, Submission to the inquiry into the education of boys, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/efb/subs/subs174.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Caroline M. Hoxby, 'The Effects of Class Size on Student Achievement: New Evidence From Population Variation', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115:4 (2000), 1239-1285.

<sup>5</sup> Carl L. Bankston, III., 'Family Structure, Schoolmates and Racial Inequalities in School Achievement', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60:3 (1998), 715-23.