

BOYS' EDUCATION: RESEARCH & RHETORIC

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1. Introduction

2. Statistics

- National Literacy and Numeracy Benchmarks 2000
- PISA 2000
- Year 12 Results & Retention
- Higher Education Enrolments & Attainment

3. Three Underlying Trends

- Diminishing Presence of Men
- Feminisation of Schooling
- Gender and Socioeconomic Status

4. Six Action Areas for Schools

- Discipline
- Rewards and Encouragement
- Pedagogy
- Literacy
- Men In Schools
- School Structure and Classroom Composition

5. Conclusions

Introduction

I am not an expert educator or teacher of boys. Many people know much more about the day-to-day business of teaching than me. What I do know a fair bit about is research.

Millions of words and thousands of articles have been written about boys' education in the last few years alone, and I think I have read most of them. A lot of it is not very helpful. It is unhelpful because it based either on outdated gender theory or is methodologically flawed. In the past five or so years, however, there have been significant breakthroughs based on sound evidence.

This has occurred despite strong resistance to the idea that boys might be in need of special attention.

One example is a report commissioned and published by the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), called *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females and their Initial Destinations After Leaving School*. It was written by three academics who had been involved in the promotion of girls' education strategies in the 1980s. Throughout the report, the authors downplay the idea that boys are disadvantaged in schools at all, and imply that if they are, it's due to social rather than educational factors.

One section of the report describes disadvantage as arising from social and economic inequalities and cultural devaluation. It claims that Australia is becoming 'socially polarised' and 'culturally fragmented and intolerant as multiple claims for recognition spill over into racism and gender fundamentalism'.¹ The groups identified in the report as being 'devalued' are: the poor, minority ethnicities, homosexuals, women, indigenous groups, and 'Australian youth in general'. Add these up and you will get something like 75% of the population—in other words, the only group that experiences no disadvantage is white males. This all too familiar diatribe has no place in a Commonwealth government report on boys' education.

According to columnist and commentator Bettina Arndt, the report had to be extensively rewritten before it was published, because it did not sit well with the Department's concern about boys' education.² One has to wonder what the original version said.

This concern was ratified by a Commonwealth parliamentary inquiry. Submissions to this inquiry also provide numerous examples of the sort of opposition that people concerned about the education of boys have met in the bureaucratic and academic community.

To quote from the submission from the then Sex Discrimination Commissioner:³

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission disagrees with the view that...boys as a group are deserving of specialised attention.

Like the DETYA report and other submissions to the inquiry, the HREOC document swings the focus back onto girls and women, saying that the inquiry committee should not

...artificially limit their consideration to the few years at school in which girls enjoy comparable opportunities to boys

and requests that it be acknowledged that

...girls, on leaving school, are faced with employment and other forms of discrimination and that the school years are crucial for girls when it comes to developing capacities to deal with the far higher levels of discrimination and harassment that Australian women continue to face.

In other words, even if girls are outperforming boys at school, let them have their day in the sun because the workplace is a man's world.

There is, however, little evidence that women's post-school experiences can be called disadvantage. Women enrol in universities in larger numbers than men, and there is virtually no difference in youth unemployment rates. Women's labour force participation is lower, but this is to be expected given the fact that it is still biologically impossible for men to bear children. Average weekly earnings and salaries are lower for women, but this is also to be expected because of the different career choices women make and their interrupted career paths. According to a 1999 report from the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, 'female graduate starting salaries are rising at a faster rate than that of males and are now almost equal to male salaries.'⁴

Another example comes from the Association of Women Educators, who subscribe to the theory that gender is socially constructed. This myth is inexplicably entrenched in universities, despite mounting genetic and neurological evidence supporting what the other 99% of us know – boys and girls are born different. We can guide their behaviour and shape their attitudes, but only within the parameters biology allows us.

The Association of Women Educators blame 'hegemonic or dominant masculinity' for any problems that boys might experience and suggest that it is boys who must change. Once again, they put girls in the victim role:

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

They reject outright the idea that boys are disadvantaged in today's education system, a view that is not an extremist position, but is echoed in the submissions made by organisations as large as the Australian Education Union.

It is easy to see how Professor Peter West of the University of Western Sydney, an internationally respected researcher and writer on this topic, came to write in 2002:

*There is virtually no opposition to the policies and practices established to assist girls... Boys' education is something else. It has no legitimacy.*⁵

This is changing. While opposition still exists, the importance of addressing boys' educational needs is gaining currency. It is now accepted that while not all boys are having problems, a significant number are, and that trying to alter 'dominant masculinities' is unlikely to help boys today.

Before I go on to talk about the promising and valuable work that has been done on boys' education, I would like to set the scene with some relatively recent statistics.

Figure 1: Literacy and Numeracy 2000

These graphs show the proportion of boys and girls in Years 3 and 5 who achieved the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks. There is very little difference between boys and girls in numeracy in either year. In literacy, however, a small difference in Year 3 becomes a larger difference in Year 5. By age 15, as the next graph shows, the gender gap in literacy becomes even wider.

Figure 2: PISA 2000

The data in this graph is taken from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The gender difference in mean achievement in science was very small. The difference in maths achievement was larger but still not statistically significant—which means that it is possible that the difference is due to chance or error. But in reading literacy, the difference is very large and, of course, statistically significant.⁶

These are only averages, but underlying them are other telling statistics: only 1.7% of Australian girls were in the lowest reading proficiency level, compared with 4.7% of boys. At the other end of the scale, more than 21% of girls were in the top level, compared with just 14% of boys.⁷

Figure 3: Year 12 Results & Retention Rates

This table shows that in every state and territory for which data is available, girls outperform boys to varying degrees. This is in addition to the fact that a higher proportion of girls continue to Year 12. The retention rates of both boys and girls have increased over the 25 years to 2002, but boys have not kept pace with girls. In 2002, more than 80% of girls continued to Year 12, compared with 70% of boys.

Figure 4: Higher Education Enrolments and Attainment

Not surprisingly, the larger numbers of girls successfully completing Year 12 has had an impact on the gender balance at universities. The proportion of male higher education students has fallen — from 48% in 1988 to 43% in 2003. This may not seem like a big deal, but it has major ramifications for levels of tertiary education in the population. In 1991, 22% of males and 24% of females aged 25-34 had a tertiary education. In 2001, the figures had become 29% of males and 38% of females. A difference of 2 percentage points grew to 9 percentage points in just a decade.

Clearly, boys have experienced significant disadvantage. Fortunately, however, there are ways to tackle it. There is no single solution and there are no guarantees, but without a concerted effort, no progress can be made.

Highlighting the educational needs of boys, and trying to help them to experience success in schooling, is not drumming up a gender war. Just like identifying educational disadvantage among Australian Aboriginal children is not creating a race war. When an identifiable proportion of the population have been shown to be performing at a lower level than might reasonably be expected, it is our duty to investigate and respond. Boys are no exception.

Before I talk about boys specifically, I will talk about influences on learning generally. Two people have been particularly prominent in the literature: Professor Ken Rowe of the Australian Council for Educational Research, and Professor John Hattie, of Auckland University. Their conclusions have been remarkably similar and both have been instrumental in specifying which factors have the greatest influence on how much students learn. John Hattie came to the following conclusions after analysing thousands of studies.

Differences in the achievement levels of students can be attributed to six sources. The biggest influence on student learning, outside of student ability, is the teacher. Student ability accounts for 50% of the variance in student achievement. Home life, school characteristics and peer influences account for another 20% in total. The quality of instruction provided in the classroom—that is, the competence and commitment of the teacher—takes up the remaining 30%.⁸

If we want to affect the learning outcomes of students, teaching is the key. Not coincidentally, of the strategies that have been used to enhance boys' educational achievement and engagement, the most

effective directly involve the content and the form of classroom instruction. Schools and school systems that pay attention to this factor above all others are best placed to provide the best possible education for both boys and girls, but for boys especially. Val Steward, a teacher and researcher in the UK, found that ‘while good teaching and good learning usually went hand in hand, good teaching was especially important for boys’.⁹

This sounds straightforward, but in reality it’s a little more complicated. There are strong interactions between students’ innate abilities and interests, their social environment, and their response to the way they are taught and assessed. It is still important to consider all the issues. Furthermore, quality teaching is important as a concept, but it does not provide parents or educators with tangible ways to tackle the specific issues confronting them.

In reading the literature on boys’ education, many issues emerge, but they are not infinite. They can be organised into a manageable set of ideas and strategies. First, a look at some of the underlying trends.

The underlying trends

A diminishing presence of men in boys’ lives

Increasing ex-nuptial birth rates coupled with high divorce rates have made family life precarious for many children. In 1979, one in ten children lived in a single parent family. Twenty two years later, in 2001, this had grown to one in five. In around 90% of cases, it is the father who is absent.¹⁰

This figure of about one in five children without a full-time father underestimates the true number of boys living apart from their natural father, since there are also many boys in stepfamilies. Research evidence accumulated over several decades has shown that children in non-traditional families have more risks to their wellbeing.¹¹ In some studies, the introduction of a stepparent does not help and sometimes it even hurts.¹²

The physical absence of fathers in a large number of families is compounded by emotional absence of fathers in others. In sum, we have a large number of under-fathered boys, who in many cases do not find a father figure among their friends’ parents either.

But it doesn’t end there. Only 20% of primary school teachers are male.¹³ This is an average figure. In 2000, one in ten NSW public primary schools had no male teachers, and many more had males only in the executive staff.¹⁴

It is therefore quite possible for a child to go through primary school without ever having a male teacher. Many commentators have expressed the view that this is a problem for both boys and girls—a view largely shared by parents and the community. This issue has become prominent again in recent weeks. Yet there is an alarming lack of research investigating the relationship between teacher gender and student achievement. Any link, therefore, between boys’ declining school performance and the number of male teachers is largely speculative.

There are, however, a number of rationales for why such a relationship might be expected. First, it has been found that men are more tolerant of boys’ behaviour, perhaps because they are able to empathise, and perhaps because they are less nervous about losing control of the class.¹⁵ Second, men have a deeper, resonating voice, which seems to command more authority with boys. Third, they talk less and use language that is more familiar to boys.

This may sound superficial, but is not when considered in light of an Australian study on boys’ hearing. In the course of the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Boys in Australia, a striking piece of research evidence was presented. According to a team of researchers at the National Acoustic Laboratories in Sydney, boys’ hearing deteriorates more quickly than girls, and they are slower at processing auditory information. What this means in the classroom is that boys often are still

processing one piece of information or the first of a series of instructions while the teacher has moved onto the next. Boys can miss out on a lot this way and it is easy to see how the subsequent frustration might impact on their behaviour.

Fourth, boys believe that male teachers understand them better, and boys' engagement in the classroom is highly dependent on their relationship with their teacher.¹⁶

Fifth, Peter West, a teacher educator and researcher at the University of Western Sydney, says that primary teacher education students, who are almost all female, love pretty work and neat work. He advises that 'Good schools have order and the kids learn more in an ordered world. But boys' work shouldn't be assessed for its neatness or pretty borders.'¹⁷

Finally, boys need role models. Again, research is thin, but it seems to suggest that boys' behaviour and attitudes are influenced more by men than by women.¹⁸

These are, of course, generalisations, but they provide some clues to why male teachers might be important, and their absence lamentable.

Why are there so few men in primary schools? Yet again (do you notice a pattern here?) very little good academic research has been conducted into the reasons for declining numbers of male teachers in Australia. In education journals, more seems to have been written about the under-representation of women in executive roles in schools.

According to the findings of the *Inquiry into Male Teacher Numbers in NSW Public Schools* there are many reasons. Many of them apply equally to men and women, but several are perceived as particular deterrents to men:

- The often long waiting period between graduation and permanent employment;
- Teaching seems like remaining at school, which is not a thrilling prospect for a lot of boys;
- Being locked in a system with limited scope for advancement and which does not necessarily reward effort or ability;
- A feeling of vulnerability to allegations of child abuse and the suspicions of others;
- A lack of flexibility and mobility.

Another factor is salary. The OECD countries with the highest teacher salaries also tend to have the highest proportion of male teachers. So it seems that salary, if it is high enough, can overcome the other deterrents. Beginning teacher salaries in Australia are relatively high by OECD standards, but peak fairly early. Classroom teachers earn only 40% more than their starting salary, after 10 years of teaching.¹⁹ To earn more than that, they have to leave the classroom. Extension of the salary scale and performance incentives should be considered seriously.

Feminisation of schooling

Many commentators have voiced concerns that schools have become increasingly feminised. By this it is meant that the style and content of education now plays to the strengths of girls. For example, being able to work quietly and cooperatively in groups, to communicate effectively, to be reflective and introspective, diligent and methodical. Likewise, the desired outcomes of schooling are less about acquiring knowledge – which boys seem to be good at – than about developing generic skills.

Assessment has also changed. Gone are the days of sitting mid-year and end-of-year exams to determine most, if not all, of one's marks. Gone also are the days when a maths exam simply tested mathematical skills and knowledge. Increasingly, maths (or numeracy) and science tests require high literacy levels. As expressed by John Cresswell and colleagues at the ACER:

...the verbally presented, 'in context' problems require to be read, understood, translated into relevant algorithms, solved, then explained and justified. Such a process requires sophisticated levels of both verbal reasoning and written communication skills – which appear to be more ably handled by girls.²⁰

Another important change that seems to have disadvantaged boys is the move to continuous, cumulative assessment. There is some evidence that boys prefer, and are better at, high risk exams that test specific knowledge and skills.²¹ Their declining achievement levels have occurred during a period over which this type of assessment has gradually disappeared.

Another argument against school-based assessment is that both boys and girls agree that in coeducational schools, teachers favour girls.²² If a teacher's assessment of students is based on their performance in classroom activities, there is a good chance that boys' scores will be adversely affected by their behaviour, particularly if the boy does not have a good relationship with their teacher. Indeed, Professor David Fergusson and colleagues at Christchurch School of Medicine found this to be the case.²³

Gender and socioeconomic status

Some researchers and commentators on boys' education, including the authors of the aforementioned Commonwealth government report, have adopted an argument which is known as the 'which boys, which girls?' approach. They argue that boys' underperformance must be considered in light of its interaction with socioeconomic status and with ethnicity. By suggesting that only certain groups of boys are of concern, this argument is often used to downplay boys' disadvantage.

In fact, it reinforces it. Gender differences are one of the only persistent sources of difference in student achievement. Boys perform worse than girls at all levels of socioeconomic status. The very little data disaggregating ethnic or language groups show that gender differences are apparent among students from both English speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds.²⁴

In some groups the gap is larger than in others, but it is still there. The largest difference in the performance of boys and girls is found in the lowest socioeconomic group. Why might this be so? One reason is that low socioeconomic status families are more likely to be broken families, so father absence is more common in this group.

But we also know that the influence of socioeconomic status is not as powerful as teacher quality. If there is a strong relationship between low socioeconomic status and poor school performance, and there is, it must have more to do with the quality of teaching these children receive than with the characteristics of their families. The chain of logic suggests that if the lowest socioeconomic status children have the lowest performance, it must be that they are, on average, receiving poorer quality teaching. Boys are, for a number of reasons, particularly vulnerable to poor teaching, making their performance the lowest of all.

What can we do right now? For teachers, as the major influence on student learning, there are many ideas, some of which I will outline today. Not all of these ideas will be new to you—in fact I am probably preaching to the converted—but they may reinforce current programmes and offer some new approaches.

Action Areas for Schools

1. Discipline

Many writers and educators have claimed what most of us know—that boys need strong discipline. This does not mean harsh or unfair discipline, but that rules must be clear and consistent.

The boundaries provided by strong discipline give boys more freedom. When boys know what is expected from them and what will not be tolerated, they can feel more secure in the knowledge that they will not be treated unfairly or unpredictably.

This must be reinforced and supported by parents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents are becoming more likely to undermine the authority and discipline policies of schools. Non-government schools have some defence against this 'culture of complaint', but state schools often have to wade through hours of paperwork and red tape to take decisive action against recalcitrant students and defiant parents. Peter West suggests that this has contributed to the increasing preference for private schooling in Australia.²⁵

Some of the principles of disciplining boys described in the literature are:

- Allow boys to participate in the construction of rules so that they understand why certain rules are necessary.²⁶
- Allow boys to make suggestions as to how the rules might be enforced.
- Ensure that all boys know what the rules are and what are the consequences of breaking them.
- Discipline should be consistent but compassionate. There is a fine line, but sometimes zero tolerance is not the best policy. Boys have a strong sense of justice and respond badly to being treated unfairly.
- Avoid public confrontations and never humiliate boys in front of their peers. Ian Lillicoe, a well-known Australian principal, warns that this leads to point scoring.²⁷
- In the classroom, one of the most basic factors governing attention to task is teacher proximity. Arrange classrooms so as to minimise the distance between teacher and students as they move around the classroom.²⁸

2. Rewards and encouragement

The other side of discipline is rewards. Many of the principles of encouraging and rewarding boys are similar to those just mentioned for setting and enforcing rules:

- Allow boys to participate in deciding what rewards will be motivating for them.
- Be consistent with rewards and praise, but not to the point where they become devalued.
- Recognise good or improved behaviour publicly. Make sure that boys are not singled out for sporting achievement alone.

3. Pedagogy

This is the area where the most potentially useful information is available, but is generally underutilised. There are a number of simple strategies, underpinned by solid research, that can make boys' experience in the classroom more positive, and their teachers' life easier.

Some of the techniques that I am about to describe will not be appropriate for every student and every class. They are, however, simple and useful ideas that have been shown to be particularly effective for boys. Many of them are, however, often identified among the characteristics of effective teaching generally and are likely to benefit both boys and girls.²⁹

- *Highly structured lessons with short term tasks (gradually extended) and frequent changes of activity.* For example, five minutes of reviewing previous lesson, five minute quiz, five minutes introducing new material, ten minutes activity, five minutes summarising the day's lesson, five minutes setting homework or previewing next lesson.

This will also break up teacher talk. Few adults can stay focussed on someone else talking for long periods of time, let alone restless children and teenagers.

Use ‘scaffolds’ or templates to ease students into a writing task by giving them a framework within which to work. This is much less daunting than a blank page.

- *Active learning.* Many boys have trouble sitting still. Active learning can mean field trips and laboratory exercises, but it can be as simple as learning while active. Peter West suggests getting a restless class to stand in a circle and throw a ball to each other. Whoever catches the ball answers or asks a question or makes a comment on the lesson.
- *Clear objectives and explicit instructions,* not just on how to approach a task but also on how it will be assessed. Avoid using vague words like ‘discuss’ and ‘explain’. Be specific and repeat important information. Geoffrey Hannan, a UK researcher, suggests leading boys into the sorts of reflective tasks that they tend to struggle with by breaking a large task into a series of smaller questions.

It was pleasing to see that the School Certificate English paper in NSW (the Year 10 external examinations) this year, there were detailed instructions of what the examiners were looking for.³⁰ Assessment should seek to determine how much students know, not try to trip them up on what they don’t know.

- *High expectations tempered with an appropriate level of challenge.* This is extremely important and often underestimated. Boys need to experience success in order to be motivated to try. As Ian Lillicoe says: ‘Fear of failure outweighs the desire to succeed.’³¹ Boys would rather be seen as bad than as dumb. They tend to blame failures on external factors such as the teacher or luck, because their self esteem is often fragile.

This does not mean dumbing classes down. Again, caution must be used not to devalue success by making it too easy. Rather, set tasks that boys have a good chance of achieving and expect them to be able to. Self esteem is an overused concept, mainly because people think that it is a general sense. In fact it is quite specific. You cannot build a boys’ confidence in English by taking him abseiling.³² He must experience success in English to do this.

- *Regular feedback.* John Hattie found that this is one of the hallmarks of quality teaching.³³ Again it should be immediate and specific, so that the student knows exactly what you are referring to, and how to improve.
- *Greater emphasis on teacher-directed work rather than group work.* This is the most contentious and debated suggestion. Some researchers and educators argue the opposite—that boys need to be given more independence as learners. This might be true, but only when they have acquired the skills and habits necessary to work autonomously.

This is not the time to go into the pros and cons of traditional and progressive teaching methods and it will suffice to say that the jury is still out. I think it is fair to say that some children require more direct and controlled teaching than others. Teachers need to be able to tailor their teaching styles according to the needs of their students, rather than adhering to whatever theory is currently fashionable.

- *Competition.* Boys are naturally competitive, and the educational theories underlying current pedagogies and assessments discourage competition. It may be no coincidence that most boys relish sport, where the rules are unambiguous and the best player or team on the day wins.

Team sports show that competition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive, and both are healthy. Some boys’ schools in Australia and New Zealand are reportedly drawing on boys’ competitive streak to motivate them, to some success.

This is not simply conjecture based on observation. An analysis of Australia's PISA results showed that boys preferred a 'competitive' learning style, that is, boys were likely to report that they learn more when they are trying to be better than others. Girls preferred a 'cooperative' learning style, that is, they like working with others. Interestingly, the PISA results showed that high literacy scores were more strongly associated with a competitive learning style, which does not bode well for today's 'all must have prizes' philosophy.³⁴

A useful analogy used by Jeffrey Wilhem at the University of Maine is video games.³⁵ Almost all boys love them, and when you think about it, they follow the same principles just outlined. The game is broken down into a series of shorter challenges of increasing difficulty, each of which is slightly different to the one before it. The rules are clear, boys know what they have to do and each time they try, they get a little bit better. They can be competitive, and share information with their mates. These games are rarely easy, but boys do enjoy a challenge as long as they have a reasonable chance of succeeding.

4. Reading & Literacy

The greatest educational difference between boys and girls is in literacy levels. Some argue that this is not a new development, but the gap seems to be increasing and in any case there is no room for complacency.

Literacy does not simply mean reading. It also involves interpretation, thinking about what has been read, evaluating its overt and covert meanings, and being able to express that effectively.

According to PISA, the difference between boys and girls is smallest for the technical part of reading—knowing what words mean and being able to retrieve information. The gap increases with the complexity of the process required.

The literacy problem pervades all aspects of schooling. Poor readers will find most subjects more difficult, particularly now that even maths and science are more problem-based and, therefore, language-based. Literacy levels are, in turn, heavily influenced by the quantity and quality of reading done from an early age.

It is crucial to focus on literacy in the early years of schooling. Issues that have been raised in the literature include the following:

- *Good monitoring systems and early intervention*
Data is very important. Many teachers and schools are not accustomed to collecting and analysing data about student performance, but it can prevent poor readers from bluffing their way through primary school. Early attention to reading problems is crucial.
- *Spelling, grammar and phonics*
These have become unfashionable, but the evidence in favour of phonics is strong. Boys who fail to learn to read using the whole language approach often never catch up if they have never been given the tools to decode words.

Similarly, spelling and grammar provide structure. Poor readers will not automatically learn how to spell and use correct pronunciation. This must be taught and in the long run makes writing easier and more fluid.

- *Talk things through before writing.* Ian Lillicoe claims that boys write more fluently and in larger volume if they talk about what they might write first.³⁶
- *Introduce boys to literature by reading to them.*

Some people worry about the quality and narrow range of reading material in which boys are interested. They like to read for information—magazines, manuals and non-fiction—and they like ‘gross out’ books, preferably containing violence and toilet humour.

But James Moloney, an Australian children’s book author and former teacher, has identified a more general range of preferences:³⁷

- Action over emotion
- At least one main character they can identify with
- Humour and irreverence
- Sense of justice being done

Educators can tap into these themes to introduce a wider variety of books to boys, including the classics. Moloney makes the point that a distinction must be made between books to be read *by* boys and books to be read *to* boys. It is important to read books to boys that they might not tackle alone, either because of the language or because they are not immediately drawn to the story. Let boys read what they want to read, but gradually extend and challenge them.

- *Make sure the school library has books boys want to read, and a catalogue system that allows them to find them easily.*

This might seem obvious, but it doesn’t always happen. Some school libraries in Australia have been purged of books that teachers or librarians consider to be perpetuating gender stereotypes, or to not have sufficient literary merit. Within reason, reading something is better than nothing.

5. Men in Schools

I have already talked about the declining presence of men in boys’ lives. There is, of course, little that schools can do about the home lives of students. For state schools, the decreasing number of male teachers is more a systemic and cultural problem than one that schools can tackle on their own. There are, however, ways that individual schools might ameliorate the effects of this situation.

- *Male role models and mentoring programmes*

These sorts of programmes include:

- ‘Big Brother’ or ‘Uncle’ programmes;
- Having older boys read with younger boys;
- University students mentoring middle school students

Although mentoring is a popular idea, sometimes the expectations are higher than the outcomes achieved. Research evidence does not fully support the efficacy of many mentoring programmes, given the amount of time and effort involved.³⁸ Often it is the already confident, easy-going kids who benefit the most.

Nonetheless, some programmes have experienced success and those schools that want to take it on should research these programmes thoroughly, start small and evaluate them carefully.

- *Involving fathers*

The sorts of ideas I have presented so far have been relatively straightforward. This one might not prove quite so easy. Fathers are often the silent partner in the business of education. Nonetheless, getting them involved not just in their own child’s education, but in school life in general can be highly beneficial. The key is start strong and be consistent. Wherever possible and appropriate, include non-custodial fathers.

- *Parent-teacher partnerships*

This follows on from involving fathers. Try to ensure that parents are not simply called on for working bees and fundraisers. Keep them informed of their son's progress and contact them with any concerns before they become a problem. Impress upon them how important their participation and interest is.

➤ *Talking about masculinity.*

Many academics writing about boys' education have focussed on traditional or so-called 'hegemonic' masculinity as a barrier to engagement in schooling. This is sometimes known as the 'it's cool to be a fool' theory. Consequently many schools have adopted programmes such as the 'Machismo Project', which tries to break down boys' intolerant and destructive attitudes to schools and to each other.

Research in South Australian schools by Faith Trent and Malcolm Slade found a generally favourable response to these programmes from the schools, but that boys themselves were nonplussed.³⁹ They saw it as tangential to their school lives and rejected the idea that cleverness was ridiculed. Importantly, they felt that adult observers failed to see the difference between the clever boys and the ones who were deliberately and aggressively different, saying that these boys were singled out more than high achievers. This is a concern in itself, but shows that peer interactions are not as simple as they might appear to adults.

6. School structure and classroom composition

➤ *Single sex schools and classes*

The evidence in favour of single sex schools is fairly strong but can be confounded by the generally higher socioeconomic status of the students. Research by Professor Ken Rowe and associates in Australia takes this into account, and finds that these schools have higher average achievement regardless of family background influences.⁴⁰ Similar results were found in New Zealand in a longitudinal study by Professor David Fergusson and John Horwood.⁴¹

The evidence on single sex classes within coeducational schools is less conclusive. The South Australian school boys interviewed by Trent and Slade were generally dismissive, saying that separating boys from girls misses the point—that a good teacher will be a good teacher regardless of the class composition.

John Hattie at Auckland University agrees. He found that class composition provides only the opportunity for better teaching, not the means to provide it. If teachers do not adapt the way they teach to the peculiarities of the class, there will be no benefit.⁴² If single sex classes are part of an overall strategy, however, they can be positive.

➤ *Focus on Middle school*

Early literacy development is one of the crucial periods in boys' schooling. The other is the middle school years, particularly Years 7 to 9. Many boys enjoy the first year of high school, because it is so different to primary school. By year 8 however, the novelty has worn off and they often become restless. Many teachers agree that Year 9 is the most difficult year to teach. Australian research has shown that there is very little growth in reading proficiency in these years and that some boys even regress slightly.⁴³

During these years boys are going through dramatic physical and emotional changes. They are expected to behave like adults, yet in schools they are treated like children. Their attention spans are particularly short and they are looking for reasons to stay at school. Boys of this age are at greatest risk of becoming disaffected or lost in the system. The South Australian schoolboys interviewed by Trent and Slade saw years 8 and 9 as marking time because there were no specific goals to reach or qualifications to gain.

Many schools, particularly independent schools, in Australia have developed a school-within-a-school model in recognition of these issues. Some state secondary schools have been changed into several middle schools and a larger senior college. There is little good evidence as yet that this approach makes a difference to learning outcomes or retention rates. What is important is that schools and teachers ensure that these are not the forgotten years. The experiences boys have and the decisions they make at this time will affect their future school and working lives.

➤ *Homework*

Homework does not quite fit into this category, but it cannot be disregarded. Boys hate homework. It is often the thing they dislike most about school. In the later adolescent years, it interferes particularly with paid work. For most working class boys, if either their job or homework has to be sacrificed, the choice is easy.

Ian Lillicoe advocates giving minimal homework, and says it is particularly bad if it is used to make up for running out of time in class.⁴⁴ Research in the US found that students who completed more homework had higher student achievement, especially in high school, but it is possible that children from homes where homework is most likely to be completed are also advantaged in other ways. The researchers also stress that too much homework can lead to fatigue and academic disinterest.⁴⁵ Peter West suggests giving a time frame within which the work should be completed. This allows boys to ration their time better.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Boys today inhabit a different world, both in school and out of school. They have fewer rules and moral guidelines. Many are trying to juggle part time jobs and school, unsure which is most likely to offer them a future. They often find school life alienating and frustrating. This mismatch between boys and schools gives us only a couple of alternatives. We could try to change boys to suit schools, or we could try to change schools to suit boys. Neither of these is the easy or the best option. So we instead go for a little bit of both and try to make them meet half way.

Changing boys does not mean making them more like girls. It means recognising that boys must take some responsibility for the decisions they make. They are not passive victims and, if given the right incentives and encouragement, can affect change for themselves. Making changes in schools does not mean setting the pendulum swinging in opposition to girls. It means acknowledging that significant changes have taken place in education and that these changes have not always been in boys' interests. It means determining whether these changes are justified. Finally, it means taking action. We can spend another decade or two arguing over the definitions of gender and disadvantage or we can take the bull by the horns. As far as I can see that choice is easy.

¹ Cherry Collins, Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females and their Initial Destinations After Leaving School* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000), 82.

² Bettina Arndt, 'The Trouble With Boys', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (17 June, 2000); 'At Last, Boys Get Some Attention', *The Age* (4 December, 2000).

³ Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, Submission to the inquiry into the education of boys, <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/eofb/subs/sub143.pdf>

⁴ Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women, *Australian Women – March 1999*, http://osw.dpmmc.gov.au/content/resources/women_aus.html (accessed 19/2/01)

⁵ Peter West, *What IS The Matter With Boys? Showing Boys the Way Towards Manhood* (Sydney: Choice Books, 2002), 6.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Knowledge and Skills For Life: First Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000* (Paris: OECD 2001), Table 5.1a.

⁷ Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000, Table 5.2a.

- ⁸ John Hattie, *Teachers Make A Difference: What Is The Research Evidence?*, Paper presented at the Australian Council for Educational Research conference (Melbourne, 24 October, 2003).
- ⁹ West, *What IS the Matter With Boys?*, 126.
- ¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families*, Cat. 6224.0 (Canberra: ABS, various years).
- ¹¹ Jennifer Buckingham, *Boy Troubles: Understanding Rising Suicide, Rising Crime and Educational Failure* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2000).
- ¹² Ian Lillicoe suggests this is because when a new man is introduced to a single mother household, the order of things is upset. Boys who are used to being the man of the house, and who have shouldered that feeling of responsibility, can resent the imposition. ('Boys and Role Models', www.boysforward.com.au)
- ¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Schools, Australia 2002*, Cat. 4221.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2002).
- ¹⁴ *Inquiry into Male Teacher Numbers in NSW Public Schools—Report to the Minister* (September 2002).
- ¹⁵ Deborah Hartman, *I Can Hardly Wait 'Til Monday* (Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 1999); Alexander Wade, 'The Boy Can't Help It', *The Spectator* (2 September, 2000), Graeden Horsell, South Australian Council of State School Organisations, Press release, April 17, 2001.
- ¹⁶ Christopher Bantick, 'Respecting Boyness Can Get Boys Back to Schools', *The Age* (13 May, 1998).
- ¹⁷ West, *What IS the Matter With Boys?*, 85.
- ¹⁸ Richard Fletcher, quoted in 'Yes, Sir, Boys Need a Man About the Classroom', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 April, 2003); D.S. Mancus, 'Influence of Male Teachers on Elementary School Children's Stereotyping of Teacher Competence' *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 26 (1992), 109-128.
- ¹⁹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education At A Glance 2002* (Paris: OECD, 2002).
- ²⁰ John Cresswell, Ken Rowe and Graeme Withers, *Boys in School and Society* (Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2002), 9.
- ²¹ Madsen Pirie, 'How Exams Are Fixed in Favour of Girls', *The Spectator* (20 January, 2001), 21-22; also unpublished research on HSC English exams, Macquarie University; Arnot, Madeleine et al. *Recent Research on Gender and Educational Performance* (UK: Office for Standards in Education, 1998).
- ²² West, *What IS the Matter With Boys?*; Faith Trent & Malcolm Slade, *Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention: The Perceptions of Adolescent Males* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001).
- ²³ Fergusson, D., M. Lloyd & L. Horwood, 'Teacher Evaluations of the Performance of Boys and Girls', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 26:2 (1991), 155-163.
- ²⁴ Cherry Collins, Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod, *Factors Influencing the Educational Performance of Males and Females and their Initial Destinations After Leaving School* (Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000).
- ²⁵ West, *What IS the Matter With Boys?*.
- ²⁶ For example, Tony Vinson et al., *Independent Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW, Second Report* (Sydney, 2002) describes the success of the Glasser system at Canterbury Boys' High School in Sydney
- ²⁷ 'Principal Calls for Hands On Approach to Teaching', *7.30 Report* (2 April, 2002).
- ²⁸ Fred Jones, *Tools For Teaching* (Santa Cruz, CA: Fredric H. Jones & Assoc, 2000).
- ²⁹ For example, Malcolm Carr, Clive McGee, Alistair Jones, Elizabeth McKinley, Beverley Bell, Hugh Barr and Tina Simpson, *The Effects of Curricula and Assessment on Pedagogical Approaches and on Educational Outcomes* (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2000).
- ³⁰ Jacquelin Maley, 'Class Act: English Exam Gets Silver Lining with Lesson in Cool', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (11 November, 2003).
- ³¹ 'Principal Calls for Hands On Approach to Teaching', *7.30 Report*.
- ³² Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, 'Boys and Books: Literacy and the Lives of Young Men', see www.cdesign.com.au/aate/aate_papers/wilhelm.htm
- ³³ John Hattie, *Teachers Make A Difference: What Is The Research Evidence?*, Paper presented at the Australian Council for Educational Research conference, Melbourne (24 October, 2003).
- ³⁴ Fiona Sturrock & Steven May, *PISA 2000: The New Zealand Context* (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2002).
- ³⁵ Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, 'Boys and Books: Literacy and the Lives of Young Men', see www.cdesign.com.au/aate/aate_papers/wilhelm.htm
- ³⁶ Ian Lillicoe, 'The School Reforms Required to Engage Boys in Schooling', Presentation to Australian Secondary Principals Association Conference (Perth, August 2000).
- ³⁷ James Moloney, *Boys and Books* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2002)
- ³⁸ S. Turner & A. Scherman, 'Big Brothers: Impact on Little Brothers' Self-concepts and Behaviours', *Adolescence* 31:124 (1996), 875-882. Found that self-concept higher but behaviour unaffected.
- ³⁹ Trent & Slade, *Declining Rates of Achievement and Retention*.

⁴⁰ Ken J. Rowe, 'Schooling Performances and Experiences of Males and Females: Exploring Real Effects From Evidence-based Research in Teacher and School Effectiveness', Background paper for Australian Institute of Political Science and Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs Boys' Education Symposium (Melbourne, 22 November, 2000).

⁴¹ D.M. Fergusson and L. John Horwood, 'Gender Differences in Educational Achievement in a New Zealand Birth Cohort', *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 32:1 (1997).

⁴² *Journal of International Educational Research* (2003).

⁴³ John Cresswell, *Boys in School and Society*.

⁴⁴ Ian Lillicoe, 'The School Reforms Required to Engage Boys in Schooling', Presentation to Australian Secondary Principals Association Conference (Perth, August 2000).

⁴⁵ Harris Cooper, James Lindsay, Barbara Nye and Scott Greathouse, 'Relationships Among Attitudes About Homework, Amount of Homework Assigned and Completed, and Student Achievement', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 90 (1998), 70-83.

⁴⁶ West, *What IS the Matter With Boys?*.