

BOYS, SPORT AND SCHOOLING: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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When you boys line up I want a line so straight that I can shoot a bullet through George's head and have it go through the head of every boy in this class.

- Australian Kindergarten teacher, reported by Warren, 41.

This paper reports on a project about boys, sport and schooling. It begins by looking at the developing literature on masculinities. Attempts are made to comment on developments in Great Britain to a minor extent, but the main focus is on Australia. The project's methodology is then explained. Some data from the project is next set out, with extracts from the interviews with boys, before turning to a conclusion.

THE DEVELOPING LITERATURE ON MASCULINITIES

Once it might have been true to say that there was little written about men as men. There were, of course, libraries full of histories of men as princes and politicians, soldiers and sailors. But there was no academic attempt to examine what it means to be a man.

In 1996, it seems accurate to say that there is a burgeoning literature on masculinities issues. The debate is flourishing outside the academy more than it is doing within it. The mass media talk excitedly of 'gender wars'; the substance behind the words is often men's response to one variety or other of feminism. Sydney hosts a magazine for men (which is not about fishing, sex or football) called *Certified Male*. There are pro-feminist magazines, and magazines critical of feminism from the USA which sometimes reach

our shores. There seem to be more and more books in which women grapple with issues of masculinities. Some are full of a sense of men's otherness and mysteriousness, such as Heather Formaini's *Men: The Darker Continent*. (London, Heinemann, 1990). Books like Babette Smith's *Mothers and Sons* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1995) provide a compassionate examination of difficulties mothers have with their sons, and vice versa. Serious journalists find many issues worth examining, including men's violence, rape statistics, and Australia's high rate of teenage male suicide; Australia has the fourth highest rate in the world after Finland, Iceland and New Zealand, the World Health Organisation has found. Difficulties that boys are experiencing in schools have often been discussed in the media with a *Four Corners* TV special screened in July, 1994.

The academic study of masculinities has proceeded much more slowly. Some of the ground-breaking work was done by Connell. Connell hosted a conference on Masculinity and Gender Relations at Macquarie University in mid-1991. This was one of the first serious academic discussions of masculinity in Australia, from a generally pro-feminist and gay-friendly perspective. Journals such as *Gender and Society* have examined some of the thornier issues, usually from a feminist perspective. Indeed, feminist views of men are well known, with issues such as Ramazanoglu's article with the wonderful title of 'What Can You Do with a Man?' There is an international journal called *masculinities*, edited by Michael Kimmel from New York, based on a feminist perspective, but which admits other views. What has been done to date has often been done in Departments of Women's Studies, for there are no Centres for men's studies. Bob Connell's work has been done from the bases of Sociology and more recently a Faculty of Education. He has written some very substantial material about boys and masculinity. Allan Huggins is teaching a course in men's health as well as writing a report on men's health in Western Australia. But academic studies of men are scattered and difficult for lay persons to locate.

The problems of studying men have often been canvassed, most recently by David Walker's article in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (23 August, 1996). This article exhibited some endemic problems that men have in writing about academic studies of men. It grappled with the idea of how to study men without offending feminists, and mocked men in the academy as looking nervously over their shoulders in case someone unnamed heard them voicing their doubts about feminism. The article concluded that Iron John had not yet got his hands in the kitchen sink.

A key difficulty here is that the writer of the article is unable to confront his own masculinity. Like most of the men in my Penrith study, he gets close to talking about his feelings and then goes to water. He runs away into anecdote or humour. He can't tell us frankly what he feels himself about men's studies: is he for them or against them? The flippant comments about Iron John bear no relation to anything said earlier about British academics writing about masculinity. It seems to me that masculinity will never prosper as a field of study until men can talk more openly and honestly-especially about a key issue: what does it mean to me to be a man?

WHAT IS MASCULINITY ABOUT?

The most convenient way to set out some ideas on masculinity is to suggest some common themes of masculinity. These are based on my reading of the literature from Australia and the USA.

1. Males often seem to feel that their bodies are not good enough in some way. They are not strong enough, they don't have a big enough chest, their legs aren't defined enough; sometimes the dissatisfaction is more unfocussed. One of Connell's useful contributions to the developing field is his willingness to take a hard look at the central question of the male body. Another interesting and recent exploration of this idea is Ken Dutton's *The Perfectible Body*. Dutton explores the idea of an idealised male body from the Greeks and Egyptians, through the Renaissance and on to the Schwarzeneggers and van Dammes of today. He argues that muscular mesomorphs symbolises power and dominance, sexual attractiveness and enviable status among males (1995:375). I believe there is more attention to the bodies of men today than there has been at any time in Western history since the Renaissance. This whole issue is of crucial importance to any consideration of adolescent boys.

2. Asked what their masculinity is all about, males often say they are required to be tough. In a recent chapter in Chris Gittings' volume on masculinity and empire (West 1996a), I explored the idea of tough masculinity in an Australian country town in the era 1900-1920. The town is Penrith (named, I believe, after the town in Cumberland in Great Britain). It was once a rural outpost on the banks of the Nepean River where I am told 'everybody knew everybody'. It has been swallowed by the expansion of Sydney and is now a major centre in Western Sydney-a region of some one and a half million people. Its people are still mainly working-class and predominantly Anglo-Australian (19996c; a statistical appendix cites the relevant census data). I emphasise the context because masculinity is always made in a context of some kind, and there are variations according to the context.

In Penrith about the time of the First World War, there were many people who urged boys to be tougher, to play aggressive sports such as football and so on. If they did not do so, they were derided as mother's boys, or nancies. The same pressures were used to goad men into volunteering for war. This is consistent with my interviews with males from the same region aged 14 into the 80s (1996a, 1996c). Being male is often defined as not-female, nor not-gay. When one of the iron men-a type of elite athlete-was asked what it meant to be a man, he replied 'Not be gay'. This is from Bob Connell's little-known article 'An Iron Man', well worth serious study. Lynne Segal's comment that most men have a desperate fear of not being masculine enough is a point which underlies much of this need to be tough. The dread of being labelled as not masculine enough is not sufficiently understood by many who seek to understand boys.

3. Men feel that sport teaches them how to be tough so they can earn the admiration both of women and men. Sabo (1992) in a useful book called *Men's Lives* explains how a boy became an athlete:

I felt uncomfortable inside my body-too fat, too short, too weak. Freckles and glasses too! I wanted to change my image, and I felt that changing my body was one place to begin. My parents bought me a set of weights, and one of the older boys in the neighbourhood was solicited to demonstrate their use. I can still remember the ease with which he lifted the barbell.

This is very much the model in which boys often seem to become men: by gaining the assistance of an older, admired male.

4. This brings us to a fourth theme in masculinity: the role of fathers and-to a lesser extent-other older men in helping the boy become a man. A consistent theme in the Penrith interviews was the role of the father. Asked about masculinity, males talked of their fathers. "Well my Dad used to..." was a common beginning. Men also talked of other men: uncles, older brothers, teachers, coaches. The research I have done does support the importance of fathers for a son's emerging masculinity. And so popular writers such as Biddulph seem to have hit on a very important truth.

5. Masculinity is made in a context of place and time, often by the ways in which institutions act together. The boys who grew up in Penrith in the 1930s were held fairly tightly by nets of authority. They might festoon the bridge with toilet paper, or remove a girl's swimmers while she was swimming-but they generally got caught. They were held in place by fathers, by schools, and by the Christian Churches. The boys in the same place in the 1990s reported great changes in all of these. Fathers were less likely to be physically and emotionally available. The Christian churches had lost their authority. And schools were having their own crises of authority (West, 1996c, chaps. 1 and 2).

Boyd, in a stimulating recent paper, suggests that schools in Britain, Australia and the USA are unsure of whether they are committed to caring or committed to achievement (1996). And this would be just one more issue that schools are unsure about. But is this ambiguity what a boy requires when he is 14 or 15? I think not.

There is as yet no theory of masculinity. And I don't wish to join those who are forever pleading for one. The reality out there won't wait till the academy gives masculinity the dignity of its own academic gown. I am a historian, and I believe our understanding of masculinity needs to come from two sources. First, contextual studies which put masculinity in a social and historical context. An example is Murray Drummond's doctoral study of elite sportsmen-bodybuilders, triathletes and surf lifesavers. Drummond's athletes showed great consistency both within those 3 sports, and across the sports. All his interviews focused on the present or recent past.

The second source is much more threatening and difficult: a study of ourselves. What strikes me most about Women's Studies is that women are willing to bring into discussion their own hopes, fears and dreams. Can we men do the same? If we don't, I believe we will be trapped as the writer in the Times Higher Education Supplement was-into modes of communication like sarcasm and ridicule.

THE DEBATE ABOUT BOYS' PERFORMANCE IN AUSTRALIA

There is a debate about boys going on in a number of countries-in different forms. For example, it goes on in Germany. Dieter Schnack and Rainer Neutzling wrote a book called *Kleine Helden in Not: Junge auf der Suche nach Mannlichkeit*, published in 1990. The book suggests that boys are searching for an appropriate way of being male in a society which wants them to be big, tough dragon-slayers. A friend who read the book for me summarised it as saying that boys struggle to find an acceptable way of being masculine because they feel society is very critical of men. And they feel schools have been strongly feminised. The same point was made in a paper by Connell (1995).

The social-political context in Australia must be understood before we can understand policy emergence. There is a Federal framework in Australia. We have a national government (sometimes called Federal government). The State government however pre-dates this. State government got off the boat at Sydney Cove in 1788 when Governor Phillip arrived and ran up the current British flag. And education has always been an area in which the main action has taken place at State level. We also have local government, which does not concern us here.

Within the State of New South Wales there are accepted, legitimate actors. These are the Minister for Education, the State Premier and Cabinet, the Director-General of Education and the teachers' union, the Teachers' Federation, plus the Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Associations. Other groups are heard from time to time but these are the actors accorded a legitimate voice in the formation of policy. (Hogan and West present a view of educational policy making as it was in 1980; arguably, there has been no major shift in the balance among educational actors, apart from a shift towards greater Ministerial power and an apparent increase in the politicisation of policy-making. Galligan's volume examines some of these recent developments.)

The debate about boys first emerged in October, 1993. The peak parent body in my home State of New South Wales (NSW) is the NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Associations. The association's executive secretary, Mr Warren Johnson, announced that he had seen research suggesting that boys felt required to be tough, and that they thought it was cool to be a fool, while they disliked reading. He urged the Minister of Education in NSW to do something to change this. He wanted girls' strategies to continue to assist girls to cope with difficulties in school (Powell, 1993). There were already girls' strategies in operation and a National Action Plan for Girls.

These matters were taken up enthusiastically, though sporadically, in the media. The media in Australia have proved very interested in education, usually by positioning concerned parents as being denied justice by uncaring bureaucrats (Hogan and West, 1980). In this case, however, the men-versus-feminists part of the debate was often emphasised. The media debate sputtered fitfully and flared up when exam results came out, and on similar occasions. It kept a continuing pressure on the issue. In April, 1994 the State Government announced a Parliamentary Committee to look into the matter of boys' learning and behaviour. The committee was made up of Government backbenchers; normally a safe way of keeping control of a debate that threatens to get out of control. Its Chairperson was Stephen O'Doherty, MP. It called for submissions and consultations, and proceeded uneventfully for a time. In July, 1994 the matter blew up in the media, prompted by a debate on ABC TV 's current affairs show *Four Corners* called 'What About the Boys?'. The O'Doherty Committee announced its findings in October, 1994. In short, it urged the Government to continue to run girls' strategies, but said these should be complemented by boys' strategies. The Committee emphasised the attraction of sport, as well as subjects which re-inforced hard masculinity. Subjects perceived as feminine seemed to be English, History and Languages. As a result, boys who steered clear of 'feminine' subjects might have difficulty entering the workforce, as employers emphasised the need for employees who could listen, understand instructions and communicate with others (1994: 22-3). One extract from the Report pointed out the dominance of sport over schoolwork in boys' minds:

Boys do not want to be seen to excel except on the sporting field. They fear ridicule (and often are the victims of bullying)...if they stand out academically or in non-traditional areas such as music, dance and drama. Students at a number of high schools visited reported that boys do not like to be praised: it is not cool to achieve.

(1994-16)

These recommendations went to various bodies within the State bureaucracy. By February, 1995 one departmental gender officer announced that schools overwhelmingly supported the recommendations and they were in the process of implementation. One radical feminist publicly opposed the report.

One small hitch occurred in March. The government changed. The author of the report on boys, Stephen O'Doherty, was now the Shadow Minister. A new Minister, John Aquilina, announced he would review the gender strategy. There were long delays, and consultations with selected academics and parent representatives. In June, a new Gender Strategy was announced. It has been attacked in the newspapers by some parent representatives, but seems to be supported by others. It is not supported by those who have frequently, and publicly, advocated helping boys. Before I left Australia there were signs of this debate re-igniting.

One is amused at the irony of one pattern of argument which suggests that most parents of girls want their daughters educated in single-sex schools, while boys' parents want them educated in co-educational schools. It is significant that the single-sex advocates frequently suggest that boys are discouraging girls and preventing them from learning (these comments were made on ABC radio and in daily newspapers in late September, 1996).

While the public debate goes on, the academic debate is more muted. Some academics keep pointing to a long-term decline in boys' performance, relative to girls. This can be demonstrated by a graph showing a widening gap in boys' and girls' school leaving scores. The subject which shows the greatest gender differences is English: in this subject, girls' results are an average of 25% higher than boys', the McGaw Report suggested (1996).

One section of the O'Doherty Report pointed out that boys have problems with reading and that many boys are not interested in reading, seeing it as an activity suitable for girls (1994: 17). This agrees with the work of John Martin. In a chapter in Chris Gitting's volume edited in Great Britain, *Imperialism and Gender: Constructions of Masculinity*, Martin described the boys-own annuals which showed boys a path towards masculinity in the years up to 1950. Some of the limitations of this approach were a hostility to the intellect, and an over-emphasis on physicality. In another paper given at the First Australian Conference on Men's Issues he argued that 'Real Men Don't Read' (Martin, 1993). Once again, this pointed to a split in boys' minds. On one hand there were activities suitable for males, especially sport, and outdoor activity, including war when the time came. On the other hand there were all kinds of girls' activities, including reading. Difficulties that boys had with English were also discussed in the report by Teese et al., with the comment that failure in English had unfortunate results for boys: a lesser inner life, less contribution to the world, and less enjoyment of the world:

Boys, too [as well as girls] are disadvantaged. Their school careers, on the whole, seem to be less successful, to terminate earlier, to be characterised by failure at an earlier point in time, and to be more frequently accompanied by motivational and behaviour problems...Boys are less well integrated, they are typically less positive about school, and have a narrower view of what school is all about. When they can avoid doing English, they often do, and when they can't, they often fail.

(1995: 108)

This set of problems, Teese et al. said, was particularly true of working-class boys:

The lower the social status of boys, the less likely they are to take English (when it is optional) or the physical sciences or maths, and the more likely they are to fail all of these. It is working-class boys who over-enrol in maths and in physics also, and it is they, too, who are almost entirely absent from classes in literature or history or modern languages (especially in the country).

(1995:109).

New South Wales statistics have been analysed by Robert MacCann in the Board of Studies. He found a gap opening up between boys' and girls' average performance in school leaving results. Nobody has yet offered a satisfactory explanation why girls on average started pulling away from boys in 1990. Boys and girls can be matched for performance in Year 10, but by Year 12 the boys on average have been left far behind by the girls.

There are many social factors in performance. Gender compounds class, race and other factors. But why should gender seem so powerful?

THE BOYS AND SPORT PROJECT

For these reasons, I decided to begin a small project on boys and sport. It was not only the O'Doherty Report that said sport was a dominating factor in the way boys formed their ideas about masculinity (1994:25). My research on boys who grew up in Penrith showed sport as one of the main ways in which boys learned how to be a man in the company of other boys, and older men (West, 1996c, chapt. 7). I wanted to know why boys felt sport was more important than school. And I wanted to know what sport taught boys about becoming a man.

I stated earlier that academics need to look at their own masculinity in order to make this a real study. Sport was a difficult area for me, especially the matter of boys and sport. For most of my life I found sport a mystifying business—a bit like trying to understand the inner workings of the Trinity. At our Marist Brothers' School in Kogarah, south of Sydney, the Brothers used the cane, the rosary and the football to tame us boys. My Rugby League ability was minimal, and I came to hate sport and its power to turn men

and boys alike into shouting, victory-crazed devotees. The local football team was St George, called for short 'the saints'. When the priest stood up at Mass and said 'Let us pray for all the Saints' I thought he was hoping that Norm Provan and Reg Gasnier would lead the Mighty Saints to victory. And so I had to be aware of my own animosity to sport and sportsmen when doing the project.

The project used a qualitative paradigm. For methodology, we chose Lewis Dexter's book on elite and specialised interviewing. In short, we did not use a long list of questions to which the boys supplied answers. Instead, we worked out ways of getting the boys chatting informally and followed up answers. Sometimes we talked about the boys' own favourite topics, or took time off to go for a walk. Fourteen year-old boys are not known for their ability to communicate. We worked hard to coax them to talk.

We chose four schools in central and western Sydney. We did a number of things to protect interviewees. School names have been fictionalised and identifying features disguised. Greenslopes is a private school, one we call a Greater Public School. It caters for day boys and boarders. All the others have day pupils only.

Wallacetown is a Boys' High School catering to Years 7 to 12 in a working-class area.

The other two schools are close to each other. St Patrick's is a Year 7-10 school catering to boys aged about 11 to 16. Welham Vale is a co-educational school in a working-class area with boys and girls in Years 7 to 12. A Senior High School and a selective co-educational State school nearby, as well as St Patrick's, give it a particular character which could be called non-academic.

We chose boys who were reported by teachers as interested in a variety of sports: basketball, cricket, rugby league, swimming... and boys who-we were told-were not terribly interested in sport. Some boys could not be persuaded to talk, and we ended up with a list of "ums" and "ers" and half-sentences. We tried to retain some of these not-so-talkative boys, especially when doing so gave us some kind of spread of ethnicities. In the process I was aware that choice of interviewees could be idiosyncratic, and the process is far from objective. Choice of interviewees was also limited by our small budget; for nobody seems to think boys worth doing research on. Many or most research proposals in education say flatly that priority will be given to research on women and girls.

Each of the boys was in Year 8, aged 13 or 14. From ten or so interviewed, we found about eight who seemed to represent the major sports played in the school, a boy who was not so keen on sport, and some of the ethnic differences. We returned to the school 9 or 10 months later and re-interviewed those we had chosen to be part of the project. Interviews were written up and analysed. Themes emerged, and these were written up within each school. We wanted to preserve the context in which comments were made.

FINDINGS

These findings are preliminary, for analysis has not yet been completed. They are presented as part of an effort to understand the emerging masculinity of boys.

SPORT, POPULARITY AND BEING COOL

Being cool was the touchstone of many things the boys talked of. Sport is cool because it makes them feel popular, and this runs across all the schools. But it seems uncool for the boys to take their studies seriously. Sport offers the glittering prize of popularity-but is a prize that proves elusive to many boys. Bob, from Welham Vale, said it was OK to make mistakes in maths. But coaches, parents and other boys were less forgiving of errors in sport. This begs the question of the central importance of sport in Australian culture (Galvin and West, 1988; West, 1996, chaps. 7 and 8). The boys seem to have caught the values that mainstream society has taught them. They said the values are transmitted by peers, by school and by the media. I want to emphasise the second: that boys feel that school often gives them the message that sport is an unchallenged and unmitigated good. The boys who excelled in sport were supremely confident and could do little wrong in school or out of it.

Bob, from Welham Vale, made this comment:

It is a bit of a Catch-22, really. You have to be good at sport to get some really good friends. But then you have to have some really good friends to get into sport.

There is a cycle here of increasing confidence and skill among the young athletes. A boy like George at Wallacetown is popular among teachers; I noticed one or two who talked to him about his last game of football as a friend rather than as a subordinate.

Perhaps they hoped his popularity would rub off on themselves. George was the only working-class boy who looked comfortable, confident and relaxed when he spoke to me. (The boys from Greenslopes were, as a rule, also very confident). George is one of the boys who seems to have a lot of affection from older men, including a father, older brothers, and teachers. When he won a football trophy, he describes the reaction of his family and friends:

Me mum went erratic and they all started going crazy.

The emotional intensity marked the importance of the occasion, even though George's father acted more coolly.

CLASS, LIFE CHANCES AND SPORT: GREENSLOPES SCHOOL

There were different patterns emerging from working-class and upper-middle class boys. Some preliminary observations can be made at this stage. At the wealthier school, Greenslopes, boys said they enjoyed skiing, rowing, and horse-riding. These seem to be individual rather than team sports. Wealthier boys seem more able than working-class boys to leaven the pressures of team sports with sports which allow for more individuality. Clearly, too, these sports can be prohibitively expensive. At Greenslopes, as well as in other schools, boys can be ridiculed for being stupid: Kirk said

I get sick of being called a DFR. I may be rural but I'm not a DFR!

What does DFR mean?

D means dumb. F-well you know what F stands for. And R is rurals. But I'm not dumb. When that guy called me a DFR I showed him by getting 99 per cent for maths.

These boys talked of going to a range of occupations. Richard talked of going to Harvard—a place mentioned in a novel he was reading—though he felt this would probably end up being Sydney University. Greg hoped to gain entry to Veterinary Science (a course which requires very high school leaving marks). Mark plans to start his own business. Kirk says he will become an accountant, or follow his father into farming.

CLASS, LIFE CHANCES AND SPORT: WELHAM VALE SCHOOL

The Welham Vale boys had fairly fuzzy ideas about their future. Mike hoped he would be playing baseball. Rastik, a boy with a Czech father, said

I'd like to be famous. Famous in anything. If I can't get anywhere with my music, I'm going to try and break a record or something.

Bruce hoped to play football professionally.

Bob said he looked forward to the day when

Sport won't really matter because I am going to be in an office and no-one will care. I just think things can only get better.

Asked how he would raise a son, Bob said

I would probably teach him to be more aggressive, because I am never aggressive to anyone really, and it doesn't work.

This brings us to a central issue: the question of what it means to be male.

BOYS, SPORT AND SCHOOLWORK

The boys are intensely aware of their size and muscularity. Rastik, from Welham Vale, said he ran away and hid from other boys rather than fight. Then, he said, a friend showed him how to punch other boys. Now, when a boy picks on him, he responds by pushing him around.

Mark, from Greenslopes, gave the most detailed description of masculinity. I asked him what males did when he saw them on TV. He replied

Terminating other guys and injecting drugs into themselves.

Later in the interview I asked

What are the rules of being a boy in Australia?

Boys need a tough image. They have to look tough in front of their mates. Boys can't do lots of stuff. They can't show emotions. They have to win. They have to have the last laugh. Fighting is regular behaviour. If you don't fight back, they say you're a wimp...

They are the rules of any schoolyard.

Are you in that mould?

Not really. I think study is important.

What about all these tough guys like the ones on GLADIATORS?

Guys want to show off. They have to get attention. They have to be fit. I'm shorter than most, but I'll see how much I'll grow.

Asked what school was all about, he said

Enjoy yourself now. Why bother studying? Older men are losing jobs.

He went on to say

We have to reward boys, and not just the top performers. We have to give them more incentive to study.

This is a very vivid description of masculinity for a fourteen year old. Mark is unusually cogent and analytical. Notice the difference between an ideal of macho masculinity, which Mark sees as flawed, and his own sense of not being able to match it. He is not sure whether he WANTS to match it. But at the second interview, he said he was pleased to be growing taller and stronger.

The Greenslopes boys had some sense of having to work hard and getting to university, as explained earlier. But none of the boys felt that schoolwork could match the buzz they got from sport. Simon, from St Patrick's, gave the most vivid description of what he got from sport:

What's your proudest moment in sport?

When I got to the State [championships] for swimming. I didn't get a medal but I came pretty close. I was on the box ready to dive in. There were hundreds, thousands of people sitting in the big green stand at the

Aquatic Centre in Manly. And that's where Kieren Perkins and the others swam before they went to the Olympics.

Nothing in schoolwork could match this experience for the boys. I hope I don't need to remind a British audience of the immense admiration and respect Kieren Perkins has earned in Australia.

I asked how boys felt they had to behave. Kirk told me what boys do:

They get drunk, chase girls, smoke and break rules.

This seems rather precocious for a fourteen year old boy. Once again, it wasn't clear whether Kirk did these things himself. Perhaps he was looking forward to his later adolescence. It is important to know that Kirk was a big boy for his age, who seemed to be already organising bush parties to which boys and girls were invited.

Richard, also from Greenslopes, said boys 'pay each other out' by calling each other names. Girls fight by calling each other names behind their backs; boys did it openly, he said. Boys had to keep their voices low, and some get teased because 'they're not tough enough'.

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER

The Greenslopes boys are highly aware of their fathers, and the father's level of satisfaction in his work. All the fathers are professional men of one kind or another: doctors, dentists, graziers and so on. The sons of farmers have thought of staying on the land, although they are well aware that this can be challenging, to put it mildly, in a time in which farmers have been abandoning long-held family farms. One of the boys said his brother had followed his father into becoming a pilot; this seemed to mean that he had to find something else to do. Boys model themselves on their fathers, Nathan said. Richard said pastimes like cricket and fishing were passed on from father to son. Indeed, these boys seem to carry their fathers' ideas and ideals around with them at this stage of their lives, and seem happy to do so. Already they are forming the basis for their own behaviour as fathers, if we can judge from Dean's example, cited below.

Many of the working-class boys seemed to show that the link with fathers is important. One after another mentioned fathers when asked why they played a sport. Matthew, from St Patrick's, has followed his father into the triathlon:

When did you start doing triathlon?

When I was ten I think. My dad has done it since I was a kid and I'd go around watching him. He does some overseas and all. He went over to the Hawaiian Ironman, which is really big. And that's how I've become interested. Me and my brothers. So that's how we started following him.

The connection between the father, sport and emerging masculinity is a common pattern among these boys. A question about admiration brings a reply about admiring the father as well as others.

What of a boy separated from his father? Two examples are worth citing. Paul, from St Patrick's, said:

They split when I was eight. I didn't see Dad much except at weekends. I've got a step-brother and he's seen Dad more than I have. And he's not even his son. It used to bother me a lot-that there was another kid there that Dad was watching grow up. It doesn't bother me so much now. At least I had eight years with him.

I'm more sensitive to the fact that you need a father. You need that male bond. You need that father figure to put you in your place. There's things you do with your father that you can't do with your mother. Like muck-around fights. And you need a father's discipline. So there are things I've missed out on. I've missed having him around.

'It doesn't bother me so much now'-I wonder if it does; or if Matthew is tempted to follow so many other men into denying a powerful emotion. This recalls some of the data from the Penrith project (West, 1996c). The males we interviewed in that project

were very aware of their connection with a father, and hungry for his love. The males who had lost a father were hungriest of all, and had erected mental shrines to him.

Dean, from Wallacetown, spoke in a different way about his father.

What about your Dad? When was the last time you saw him?

Never have.

Never. Would you like to see him?

No, not really.

Why?

Well, when I was little he wasn't there. So what is the point now? My Mum is sort of both.

Dean says he disciplines his brothers, but sometimes 'I just lose my cool and snap'. He says he will be equally hard on his own children. I read this as a response which tries to minimise the words. I believe there is a torrent of emotions here which Dean fears to unleash. And yet he wants to express the emotions. Both these boys seem to be denying that they feel anything; Matthew says he has grown out of the emotion; Dean denies feeling any emotion at all, yet he has an anger that he can't explain.

IMPLICATIONS

We seem to be a long way from the debate about boys' under-achievement. And yet we are supposed to be interested in educating the whole child. Once again we could heed Boyd's warning (1996: 6-7) that educators need to keep abreast of the debate about what is a family, and whether schools are meeting the needs of families. In discussion about families, the needs of boys-and boys' need for fathering-needs to be kept in mind. In some of the literature on families, fathers have become almost invisible. A best-selling book by an acclaimed social commentator in Australia, Hugh Mackay, has on its cover a single mother and a businesswoman. Men are nowhere to be seen. And this fairly reflects the emphasis in the book, and in many other social commentaries. (These arguments are developed in West, 1996c.)

Boyd, like many other educators, talks quite reasonably about educators' need to understand the ramifications of increased parental involvement. How many of us are aware of the apparent lack of fathers' involvement in the lives of boys such as these? The boys who seem to need fathers the most-the working-class boys-may in fact see less of their fathers than other boys.

Helen Glezer and Don Edgar of the Institute for Family Studies in Australia write of the consequences for learning:

We have neglected half the potential for positive child development because we downplay the role of men...There is a stronger correlation with fathers' interaction [with children] than mothers'

(cited in West 1986: 87)

and Colin Mathers, after analysing the Australian statistics, writes that children from single-parent families are

significantly more likely to be disabled and handicapped....Boys aged 5-14 in single parent families were nearly 3 times more likely to have a severe handicap...

Boys (but not girls) in single parent families were reported to have significantly more chronic illness, chronic and recent illness and days of reduced activity.

As there are no fathers in the home in 82% of single parent families in Australia, this suggests that there is a linkage between fathers and sons' emotional health as well. But if fathers are unavailable, what can schools do? Writers like Biddulph (1995) say that the

answer is more men in the classroom. Perhaps it is. But at the very least, this **connection between father's support and son's performance and well-being** cries out for investigation.

The boys have huge respect for sport. It is associated with being popular. It has its costs: a lot of time and energy which could be spent on other things-including schoolwork. But schoolwork doesn't give them the same payoffs in popularity.

The boys would agree with a comment from Mike McIvor in the Penrith project:

They didn't encourage you to study. There were giant trophies for winning at sport and if you came top of the class you got a bit of cardboard.

(West 1986:20).

In the interviews, sport is associated in almost all cases with the father. Boys talked of playing touch football with a father. They laughed at fathers who tried to play the boys' sports, such as hockey or basketball, but seemed to appreciate the effort being made. A boy without a father, notably Dean, made a best mate of the football hero and the sports coach. Arguably, in these relationships he had developed father substitutes.

Some of the boys could see that they were helpless in their worship of the Great God Sport (as Patrick White, the Australian author, used to say). They could see that boys seemed to be achieving badly. Mark observed that his debating team was more likely to win against a boys' team than a girls' team. There were comments and ridicule directed at boys who were seen as 'dumb' or 'DFRs'. But this seemed not as strong as the ridicule and pity given to boys who didn't play sport. The following captures a fairly typical attitude:

Is sport a big thing here [St Patrick's]?

Yes it is. Most of the kids are into sport. Some of the kids just like to do well at school. Or just sit around, or just play a bit of basketball with their friends. Here are the odd few who just want to go to the library and study. They're kinda seen as outcasts. I'm not really friends with them. You don't normally hang round with them.

Who is looked up to most?

The guys who are good at sport.

The Boys and Sport Project is based on the here-and-now. We aren't sure whether these comments could have been made a century ago. Indeed, there are many contextual factors in this data, and I have tried to be open to all of them.

CONCLUSION

Our previous Prime Minister, Paul Keating, talked of making Australia 'the clever country'- but that will be difficult to achieve if boys feel that it's much more important to be good at sport than to study. The boys talked of the difficulty of balancing all their commitments, in terms of energy and time. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that these boys are too conscious of sport, and much too apathetic about the life of the mind.

It is sometimes said that men get more from education than do girls (*Gender Divide*, 1996: 22). However, it is not simply the matter of employment that we need to look at. When it comes to other factors, males seem not to do as well: they suicide more, and do it more 'successfully'. They suffer from more heart disease, they have higher rates of disability, and tend not to live as long (West, 1996c:191) leaning on analysis of statistical data by Mathers and others).

At educational conferences and seminars, discussions of gender have become commonplace. Of course, educators need to be aware of feminism and the whole question of what it means to be female. No sensible person questions that. But when it comes to understanding boys, it is time for educators to turn to other questions: what does it mean to be male, and what impact does this have on a boy's education and life chances? In brief, there seems to be a contradiction between tough masculinity-and schoolwork, seen as feminine or at least not-masculine (as Connell argues, 1989, 1995). We educators need to examine both masculinity and feminiinity and their relation to schooling. And we need to know why boys are in trouble all over the developed world (*The Economist*, September, 1996).

The most common response so far to the problem of boys' under-achievement in Australia has been to condemn dominant forms of masculinity. I wonder how successful these will be when applied to boys who tell us that they feel impelled to be tough at all costs.

Parents continue to remind us that they are concerned about their sons- as well-known commentator on women's issues Ita Buttrose has done recently (1998). While the debate on men's and women's issues has come a long way in the 1990s, we still seem stuck on the matter of boys' education. Until we understand the attraction of tough masculinity to boys, we will never begin to understand why boys seem to be underachieving throughout the western world, with the solitary exception of Japan.

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