

“IT AIN’T COOL TO LIKE SCHOOL”:
WHY ARE BOYS UNDERACHIEVING AROUND THE WORLD?
AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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Right around the world, boys are worrying educators. Parents of boys are tired of going to speech nights and watching a procession of girls getting academic awards while boys fidget, waiting for the sports awards. And parents are badgering teachers about the problem.

Boys’ difficulties are tied to many social issues: the decline of fathering and alienation of many men from families; the fact that jails are at least ninety per cent filled with men; society’s tendency to see men as useless unless they are in paid work; the demonstrably worse health outcomes that men experience. Churches, extended families, and older men. used to help raise children (West,1996a). As they decline, schools are expected to carry the burden. Yet half the school population, males, are disengaged from school. Many more boys than girls find school a complete waste of time, UK research says.

PISA STUDY

This is the Program for International Student Assessment carried out by the OECD. 32 countries so far have been reported on. The study is an attempt to gauge the experience of children in school, and search out problems. It argues that "The underachievement of young men is a significant challenge for education policy that will need particular attention if the gender gap is to be closed" (2001:127). Differences between males and females are highest on reflection and evaluation. That means the critical evaluation and

relating of text to personal experience. This is further evidence that English is a huge problem for boys. These problems begin for boys long before they get to school. We tell boys not to show their feelings, not to get excited (except around sport). Despite many preconceptions about males in other countries being 'more emotional' or 'more communicative', these things seem to hold true in every country surveyed. We do not know if they come from boys' biology, or the ways in which boys are raised. Probably both interact to hold boys back from doing well at English, unless they are certain kinds of boys. Boys themselves call such boys 'swots' and 'geeks'.

The Report says that differences among the countries are the result of students' learning experience and thus amenable to changes in policy. Brazil has a huge gender gap, with massive male under-achievement. Mexico and Germany also scored poorly. But every other country has a gender gap of some kind, right up to the best achievers, Finland, Japan and Canada. (2001:126)

these findings suggest that the under-achievement of young men is a significant challenge for education policy that will need particular attention if the gender gap is to be closed and the proportion of students at the lowest levels of proficiency is to be reduced . 2001:126-7)

And again, it argues that males stand out when we look at students who have low interest in reading, who don't read for fun, who rarely get absorbed in reading. **Many more males than females see reading as a waste of time** (2000: 127-130)

In every country studied, boys lag behind girls. The problems lie even in Mathematics and Science, where a small number of boys do very well, but far more do badly. But in English and reading, boys are doing much worse; their marks lie at the bottom of the scale like a chemical sludge.

BOYS: A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

Of course, universities have focused for the last thirty years on women and girls. That has been necessary, because for many years their concerns were brushed aside. But today's reality is that boys are being nominated as people who cause trouble for teachers and administrators. They disrupt classes, call out, annoy girls and brighter students. The problems have been sufficient for the Australian government to set up a national enquiry which is expected to report on its findings by September,2002.

DOES IT MATTER IF BOYS AREN'T ACHIEVING?

There have been suggestions that it doesn't matter if boys aren't achieving in school. Studies have shown that girls achieve well at school and are marching into universities in increasing numbers. But males are successful in gaining work and in getting promotion. A small number of middle-class women obtain well-paid jobs and there is a trickle of women through to executive positions. Does this mean that we shouldn't worry about boys' lack of success at school?

We can see that there are academic outcomes of which marks in school leaving exams are an example. But there are more general indicators of success: self-esteem, and general social and mental health. Recall that Australia is one of the top four nations in teenage suicide, and that there are high rates of suicide and unemployment among men over 45. All is not well with many males.

Outcomes for boys by all reports seem to be applying unevenly. A small band of boys, often from middle-class-to-upper-middle class homes, do score in the top ranges of academic school exit exams. Schools report marked differences among Asian students; in Asian homes there is more likely to be a culture which urges boys to study and achieve. On the other hand, there is a much larger band of boys in the lowest ranks of performance. This appears particularly true in English, and true to varying extents in other subjects related to communication. Girls are 11% more likely to complete school than boys. Boys in Australia and the UK are much more likely to be suspended and excluded from school.

Daniel Goleman is especially critical of males' social literacy, and suggests that we need to give boys special emotional education (1996:42-5). Discussion of outcomes must come before we can understand how to assist boys to achieve. Without this basis, we will be caught between academic outcomes and employment outcomes. Boys need not just better marks, but a wider emotional language. Alexythymia is sometimes used to describe males' inarticulateness- something many women talk about in males.

A BOY CULTURE?

I do not want to reinforce gender stereotypes. And we have to delineate two differing patterns. The first pattern suggests that in some ways, boys are similar. The statistics from PISA provide evidence of a boy culture which penetrates country after country. Why else would we have patterns of low achievement by boys in countries as diverse as Brazil, Finland, and Canada? The boy culture is based on traditional, sometimes called hegemonic

masculinity. Boys enjoy being active, making a noise, lording it over others, showing off in front of girls, and too often ridicule anything seen as feminine or gay. When you are a 14 year old boy, almost anything can be called gay if it does not endorse Neanderthal masculinity. Weaning boys away from this narrow definition to a broader one takes time and energy.

The boy culture is opposed to school. For most boys, school means ‘a hostile authority accompanied by meaningless work demands’, in Annette Macdonald’s words. Boys themselves, in research by Faith Trent and Malcolm Slade, say that too often teachers don’t ask, don’t listen and don’t care about boys (cited in West,2002). Boys and often girls too perceive school as being more attuned to the needs of people who are quiet, who communicate their needs effectively and are well presented. This is an unlikely description of boys, especially working class boys. Sebastian Kraemer argues that boys are driven in part by biology and in part by social conditioning to behave more actively and learn hands-on. Thus far we have looked at ways in which boys are generally similar.

A second pattern shows that there are cultural differences between boys across countries, races, cultures. Brazil’s boys have record levels of under-achievement and low interest in reading. Asian boys, as we said before, often over-achieve for their ability. Australian working class boys are also known to underachieve; Aboriginal boys spectacularly so. These boys are also liable to low self-esteem and suicide, as a tragic example demonstrated among a Sydney dance group. After much academic wrangling, we still struggle to understand all these patterns. Until we do so, we cannot do very much to improve life chances for boys.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

We must also take changes in the workplace into account. Some years ago, *The Economist* surveyed work patterns across the developed world. It found that employment in certain occupations is falling. The top five of these are all traditional working class male occupations: shipbuilding, footwear, leatherwork, ammunition-making, photographic supplies. The five fastest growing areas of work are residential care, data processing, health services, child care and business services. Women dominate in all of these growing professions. So some men may be being squeezed out of work. This will happen particularly if

- they are from working-class families and low status suburbs which have poor access to libraries, internet, and reading in the home

- they leave school early
- they can't cope with occupations that are not traditionally masculine.

In sum, the labour market is increasingly friendly to women, although the casualisation of work means that many of the new jobs are poorly skilled and poorly paid. Men are still called on in many industries, but less and less in traditionally male jobs. Young men themselves make jobs for poorly paid workers overseas with their relentless pursuit of name brand shoes, shirts and trousers.

I read with anxiety Daniel Goleman's account of social intelligence, with all its lists of tasks people will need to do well at in the new millenium: motivating oneself, listening, being self-aware, relating to others, working in groups. And I am afraid that males who are stuck in traditional masculinity will be poor at all these tasks. Goleman writes of the ways in which boys and girls live in separate social universes. They are schooled in different emotions. Girls are raised to connect with others, to identify emotions, to talk out their feelings. Boys are trained NOT to listen to their emotions. An extreme example might be Rugby League: the players have to listen to coaches and team mates, not to hear the pain in their legs and the beating of their hearts. Almost every week there is some footballer who is encouraged to have only a brief rest before going back onto the field. And footballers are held up for our interest and admiration, far more than scientists or industrial designers. Boys are much too aware of footballers, in my opinion. This gives boys messages that keep them stuck in hard masculinity. Boys are searching for role models. And they don't find many people of their own sex available to them.

THE QUESTION OF MALE ROLE MODELS

Role models have been much discussed by advocates for boys' education. Role modelling is allied to mentoring. The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls was published in Australia some years ago. It stressed that girls must be encouraged to free themselves from gender stereotypes. It argued that what mattered most was not what was said to girls, but what they saw. Thus it was important that boys and girls saw business executives of both sexes. Equally, children need to see teachers of both sexes. Studies show that children spend an average of 13,000 hours in school. To expose children only to teachers of one sex rams home the message that "only women teach" and "only women read".

Paul Bress' research shows that males and females use language differently. Females typically use two and a half times more words in a day than men. Being raised a girl encourages the demonstration of emotions; being raised a boy usually discourages it. We know that role modeling is important for African-Americans, for women and girls, for Aboriginal peoples. We would not want any person employed as a teacher who did not model the idea that learning is desirable. For boys, too, role models are important. Although women are vital in a boy's life, so also are males. The British medical writer Sebastian Kraemer, writing in the *British Medical Journal*, suggests that males – partly because of their own experience as boys – are often more tolerant of boyish behaviour than are females. In addition, he writes:

The care of boys is generally more difficult and therefore more likely to go wrong, adding to the deficits already existing before birth. Since most of the growth of the human brain takes place after birth, some early environmental stressors could lead to disadvantage for boys being 'wired in'. In any case, in boys the formation of secure attachment to a caregiver is more subject than in girls to parental unavailability, insensitivity or depression. (2000: 1611.)

The British researcher John Head, writing from King's College, London says boys in mother-headed families have more need of role models than boys whose fathers live with them, unless the non-resident fathers make themselves accessible.

The breakdown in family life has created another source of uncertainty, with the evidence suggesting that boys suffer more than girls from this experience. It seems that girls and women are more able to set up informal networks of friends to whom they can talk freely about their problems, which allows them to cope with their life. The macho image of men being self-sufficient and autonomous prevents male friendships from performing this role. Boys from single parent families, in a culture in which organized activities such as the Boy Scouts have declined, may be cut off from adult males and have to rely solely on their peer group for information and discussion. (1999:105)

The role of male Physical Education teachers is critical, but varies: Head says he or she may merely reinforce the worst of the boys' philistine, macho values. Or s/he may gain trust and acceptance and work to improve their horizons (1999:79)

We don't need ANY male teacher getting boys to be masculine in an unthinking way. We need men guiding boys towards a caring, thoughtful masculinity. A boy interviewed by West (2002) spoke to his mother about being with a girl and said 'Mum when you're listening to me I want you to put on a set of balls'. Boys do seem to need a sense of being masculine and being around masculine-acting people.

Bress argues that males and females have a different language – or **genderlects**. Tannen argues that a man's world focuses on competition, status and independence (“we're separate and different”). But she says a woman's world focuses on consensus, intimacy and connectedness (“we're close and the same”). Men learn from role models to talk in a lecturing mode based on demonstration of expertise and therefore status. Women seem to feel comfortable listening, also learned through role models. Masculine ways of behaviour are often adversary-based or ritualistic such as teasing. Women are encouraged to keep the peace [NB for school behaviours of males].

Men's voices and women's voices do vary. However, it is unusual to find women with a strong bass or baritone speaking voice. The depth, reverberation and strength of a man's voice is part of the characteristic quality of male teaching. Men speak less and in the classroom are more liable to speak in short sentences. “John!” or ‘Hey, stop that!’ sounds different when spoken by most men than it does spoken by most women.

Gilbert, leaning on work by Swann and Coates, suggests that fathers use more imperatives, jocular names, threats, directives and public language. They encourage children to perform and to display knowledge. Males generally avoid the intimate language characteristic of females. Perhaps this is because adult male behaviour towards children has to be guarded against the accusation of pedophilia or homosexuality. Mike McIvor in West commented ‘you're always on your guard when you're a man’. And again ‘It must be wonderful to be a man, because they're always telling us not to be a woman or a poofter’. (1996: 54). Males learning to become teachers are eloquent about the need not to show any behaviour which might be construed as offensive (Burn, 1999).

Mothers talk ‘motherese’: because mothers are more polite, and more likely to make indirect requests. For mothers, story-telling is more interactive. Research indicates that primary teaching is culturally coded feminine. It is strongly associated with caring and mothering in an age in which men's responsibility for raising and caring for children is widely questioned, according to research by McCumstie (2001) and Burn (1999).

Coates argues that children develop a sex-specific language from an early age (Cited in Alloway and Gilbert, 1997:107). Boys are more likely to play action-focused games. This limits the breadth and range of their language experiences. Girls' play is more often based on literary discourses: story books, fantasy etc. Their play prepares them for the dominant discourses of the pre-school and Kindergarten. Children's literature can be called feminised because it is so separate from the toys and games that boys characteristically prefer. Boys characteristically inflate their age because of the need to act as men; they seem to feel irritated when called ‘little’ or ‘children’ by female teachers. They may resist reading - and a teaching career? - as a result (Alloway and Gilbert 1997:107).

Accordingly, there are characteristic differences in the way teachers talk and interact with children. Male teachers were more likely to issue orders, to ignore problems and lecture in details. Female teachers were more likely to mention their own problems and use indirect commands, Bress says.

BOYS VALUE MALE TEACHERS

The secondary schoolboys interviewed by McCumstie greatly valued the opportunity to talk to male teachers. Comments were made such as these men 'listen to you'; 'are on the same level as us'; 'a bloke knows where you are coming from'. McCumstie interprets these comments as the boys understanding the male teacher connexion differently from their connexion to female teachers. The first was seen as bonding with a male. The second was seen as a connexion to a female, mothering or caring person. The boys talked enthusiastically of their male teachers as male role models. They talked about a role model as someone who- earned respect from others, gained admiration from other males; and showed leadership, perseverance, discipline and individuality. The boys saw these qualities in males in TV, movies, rugby and cricket as well as among their male teachers. The boys said their male role models were their fathers and male teachers (2001: 69). These were needed by all boys, they said, but particularly boys who had no father resident in the home. The boys felt men needed to pass on the baton of masculinity for the boys to develop as fully masculine males. (2001:70). Female teachers had admirable qualities, but were seen by boys in a different light from males.

MALE TEACHERS COUNTER SEXISM IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Garrahy (2001) presents research showing that children are socialised by school and parents. Over 13 years in a school day of 6 hours, pupils spend 13,000 hours at school. Most of that time is spent with teachers. Teachers give pupils beliefs which filter out some information and allow other information to be absorbed.

Boys and girls score in differing patterns. Girls' scores in maths and science are improving, in part because of programs designed to achieve this. However, boys' relatively poor scores in reading and writing have worsened relative to girls' scores. (2001: 82). The teachers studied were well-informed about stereotyping, but unintentionally reinforced gender stereotypes e.g. boys were interested in sports; girls were not. Reading provided examples of girls in non-stereotyped roles; but boys were shown in traditional roles. In one classroom, boys rushed through their work to use the reward – using computer materials. Girls were more methodical and meticulous and thus did not get much computer access. Another teacher felt it was 'natural' for girls to be better at language and more in touch with feelings. So while the teachers said they interacted with boys and girls equally as 'just children', they had different expectations of each according to stereotyped and untested assumptions.

For all these reasons, we need more men, but only good men, in teaching. We will probably have to increase teachers' salaries a great deal to achieve this. The cost will probably be offset by the saving we make in classes which are less disrupted, hours not spent with counsellors, hours not spent by administrators dealing with boys excluded from classrooms and suspended from schools.

DO FEMALE TEACHERS LEAN TOWARDS GIRLS?

Female teachers gave girls higher subjective evaluations than boys, the UK report *The Gender Divide* said:

It appears that one reason why girls often achieve more than boys in school is that they often demonstrate diligence, good behaviour and enthusiasm for learning.

In an era in which assessment has become much more important than hitherto, teacher assessments and evaluations may have hidden perils for boys who are difficult to keep quiet in class or who make teacher's lives stressful.

In part this is because many boys see classroom learning as feminised, separate from their own masculine world, and thus a waste of time (West, 1999; Wragg, 1997). But on the other hand, it is common for girls to see education as a ladder on which they can ascend to success. Teachers seem to prefer girls, while on the other hand boys were unfairly distributed among exclusions and suspensions. Perhaps boys were being unfairly discriminated against, *The Gender Divide* suggested in the UK.

.....**WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP BOYS?**.....

I recently completed a project called Best Practice in Boys' Education. It was located at The King's School, Parramatta but examined literature from around the world. There are no simple answers to boys' problems. But we are moving towards some directions that should show some results.

USING MENTORING

Mentoring is important because boys are strongly influenced by peers. The arguments about why males need a mate, and what mateship means to males, appear in West (1996). Boys want very much to be accepted by other boys. They are influenced by other boys to go out to play sport, see movies, or work. And they do so much more than girls do, according to Paulin and Dean.

Mentoring is raised by a number of reports, including Annette Macdonald's. It aims to harness boys' powerful need to look up to older boys.

Strategies using mentoring include:

- Paired writing sessions, with an older boy or an older girl encouraging a younger boy
- Getting male teacher education students to take an interest in one or two boys. A personal visit to the School could begin this. It could be followed up with phone calls and email messages. In Sweden, this works successfully: students visit boys in their homes or in family restaurants. The scheme is supervised to avoid risk and harm to boys
- Adopt a deprived school. Boys would visit the school and see first-hand the environment boys inhabit. They could provide assistance in listening to boys read, coaching in sport, and so on.
- Having a Primary School Activities Day in which secondary boys teach the skills they have learned to primary school students. This is done at Gordonstoun. A similar scheme has been observed at King's in regard to football coaching. Mentoring has been found to increase skills and confidence in both the mentor and the mentee..
- Bringing Old Boys back to School specifically to proselytise active reading
- Identify underachieving boys, especially in Years 8 and 9. Allow boys to choose a teacher mentor to discuss homework, deadlines and other matters.
- Using Year 12 boys to mentor a younger boy who is underachieving, as done in Boswells School in Chelmsford.

REFLECTING ON GROUPINGS IN THE SCHOOL

UK research shows that boys often underachieve because of the 'sets' or learning groups they are in (Klein, 1995). Thus the School could:

- * Examine the learning sets in the School
- * Pinpoint boys who are underachieving, and provide learning support for them in smaller groups.

HARNESSING FATHERS' INFLUENCE

Fathers have a strong influence on their children. Yet fathers are underplayed in research literature on the family. Buckingham points out that boys deprived of a father (e.g. because of divorce) often suffer academically. The proportion of children with low academic competence was found to be almost twice as high for sole parent families as couple families. Australian sole parent families are mother-headed in approximately ninety per cent of cases.

This evidence suggests that schools should

- Work harder at understanding the roles that fathers play in boys' lives
- Encourage fathers of boys to stay in their children's lives after divorce. This could be done through seminar(s) or a fathers' group.
- Provide talks by well-known figures on better fathering.
- Run fathers' websites.
- Activities for fathers and boys could be run, perhaps with a reading or sporting focus.. Getting boys to jog their fathers' memories often works.

- Men could be brought into schools in a number of ways. There are Grandparents' Days etc held by some schools. Rather than these one-off activities, it would be more productive to bring grandfathers into the school in a more continuing and systematic way e.g. for weekly sessions to hear boys read or watch them perform in some special activity. Fathering could be the subject of a debate 'That fathers are irrelevant in the lives of boys today'. [The title is intentionally provocative.]

MORE ACTIVE LEARNING

Teachers could usefully reflect on the need for active learning, and how it could be increased.

Some suggestions include:

- Starting lessons with a 'take 5' approach: 'write down 5 things you learned about Hannibal's battle strategies last lesson. Compare with your partner. How many of these had never been used before?'
- Ending lessons with an activity which sums up the key learning idea: 'Tell your partner: what was the most important thing you learned about veins in this lesson?'
- Visits to institutions such as Elizabeth Farm or the Power House Museum in which the intention is for the students to learn in a context designed to provoke curiosity, rather than for teachers or guides to retail information.
- Boys sometimes prefer to learn by means of debates, role-plays, and investigations. Boys in a study at the University of Wolverhampton wanted to learn in these ways (Bleach, 1997)
- Teachers at the School and boys themselves might take up this question and find useful answers.
- Stand boys in a circle and throw a ball to them. Whoever gets the ball has to make a comment about the activity they have just done.

THE NEED FOR STRUCTURE

Most boys need structured learning more than girls do. They don't cope well with long explanations and vague instructions like 'Discuss' and 'Explain', especially in junior high school.

Instead the School could:

- Set up models of structured lessons with say 3 minutes to do an introductory activity, followed by 5 minutes of discussion in pairs, and so on.
- Vary the partners with whom boys are working so that every boy works with the all other boys in the class. And the girls too!
- Make sure that assessment tasks provide sufficient instructions so that underachieving boys can identify the steps they need to follow to complete the work.
- Work towards larger writing exercises through building smaller steps.
- Show boys how to write essays, construct sentences and paragraphs.

INCREASING REWARDS

As boys are often disengaged from schooling, they need more incentives than girls to work well at school. Boys seem to need praise as much as girls, but get it less often. The reasons for this might require an investigation into the ways males relate, and the frequency with which praise is associated with acceptably male activities such as sport, rather than feminised activities such as reading and writing. (See Drummond, various works, and West, 1996). The school could review its pattern of rewards for good academic work, and check with boys on how they would like to be rewarded.

IMPROVING LITERACY

Kowaluk, Martin and others have provided evidence that boys' imaginations are being captured by sport or computers; but 'real men don't read'. The school could work harder to provide support for readers and boys struggling with reading.

Suggestions include:

- Assess the reading habits and preferences in boys in the danger years, around Years 8 and 9. Use the data to improve strategies for boys' literacy.
- Have a Book Week in which every teacher talks about books he/ she read in her/his mid-teens. However reluctant the sports-oriented teachers are to do so, it is they whose influence may be the most valuable.
- Provide a wider range of non-fiction material: stories related to TV stories, war themes, science fantasy, nature investigations, fishing, football magazines. All have a place in getting boys to read more enthusiastically.
- Try getting boys to learn by means of individualised instruction on cards or through a contract with a teacher.
- Using older boys to visit younger boys to listen to their reading and provide academic encouragement.
- Working with boys to provide suitable incentives and rewards for readers. Ask boys what rewards would work.
- Use computers in creative ways to get boys to interact with poetry through dramatic and interactive exercises.

REVIEWING THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL

As the New Zealand Report noted, there is in many schools an anti-learning culture (Aitken, 1999:40. Boys form strong friendship groups, and the boys may do extreme things to stay in the group. In one Sydney example, a group of boys all walked out of an exam at a pre-arranged time to show how little they cared about exam marks (Flood, 1999)..

In general discussions about boys and English, boys' persistent problems have been noted (see for instance Kowaluk,1999 and West, 1998). The school could do a small survey to find out what boys as a whole think about the priorities of the School.

IMPROVING WRITING AND ASSESSMENT

Most boys feel frustrated by an emphasis on terms like ‘Discuss...’ and perhaps even ‘Account for...’ and ‘Explain...’. By the end of Year 12, students should be able to know how to act on instructions like Discuss. But in earlier years, they need to be shown how to provide an argument for a point of view and marshal evidence within ordered paragraphs. Boys also respond well to Geoff Hannan’s strategies :

- List the reasons why...
- Provide arguments for...

[And this one, which doesn’t neatly fit it anywhere]:

- ‘I bet you I can write down more factors of the number 9 than you can in 1 minute’
- ‘Bet you can’t remember why the war broke out’.

Boys enjoying showing the teacher up. A bit of this doesn’t do much harm. It might get boys learning despite themselves.

LISTENING TO BOYS’ LEARNING NEEDS

Evidence is provided in this report that more boys than girls feel school is a complete waste of time. The School could improve the enjoyment and satisfaction boys have of school by:

- Ensuring that boys’ learning needs and preferences are listened to and acted upon.
- To this end, doing classroom research with the boys about how they prefer to learn.
- Don’t stereotype boys by assuming that boys are all the same. Encourage boys with unusual interests. Set the tone by providing for differences in learning styles, reading matter, approaches to reading.

USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The research shows that boys often favour learning that is related to computers. Accordingly the School could

- Ask boys how to improve teaching in each subject
- Provide more opportunities for computer-assisted learning
- Continue assistance given to teachers and others in the School who help boys learn on computers
- Encourage cooperation among boys who have various ability with computers. Don’t set computer-strong boys against sport-successful boys

RAISING EXPECTATIONS

This is the key to much of the work being done on raising boys’ achievement in the UK. Research suggests that teachers expect less work from boys, especially in English. If ‘real men don’t read’, most boys seem not to want to read. Too many academics underestimate the importance for boys of being masculine in ways that are acceptable to their peers.

It is a good point whether teachers like boys who are reflective, or introspective rather than outgoing and action-oriented. Teachers too often expect boys not to be interested in reading and writing. The boys then prove that the teachers were correct in their expectations.

Suggestions could include:

- Making sure that homes or boarding houses have people on hand who actively promote reading
- Making a suitable range of reading available to boys in homes. As in so many other things, this would necessitate working closely with mothers and fathers.

USING HUMOUR

Males relate to other males through humour. This can take the form of harmful teasing. But teachers who connect with boys use humour in more positive ways. Jokes are part of the daily lives of males, as many good teachers know.

The jokes should not push boys into stereotypes by mocking boys who are not strong or powerful. It is unfair of teachers to praise popular, sporty boys, and deride boys who are modest in their achievement. Many a boy has been mocked by teachers and has turned out to be an outstanding achiever : Churchill was thought to be the stupidest boy in his school. Barry Humphries' genius was not appreciated by the schools he attended.

Boys' difficulties are embedded in many daily practices in schools and in the education of teachers. But they are not insurmountable. Social unrest among boys, and pressure on governments by increasingly educated parents will in time force policymakers to act on the problems noted above. Every human being has the right to a satisfying education – boys included. Just as we want to encourage girls to do everything they want and exceed their potential- so we should do with boys.

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