

Boys' underachievement in school: Some persistent problems and some current research

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This paper looks first at some issues of masculinity, before turning to some popular books on the subject. It then reports on a project about boys, sport and schooling. 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 some general conclusions about educating boys.

The developing literature on masculinities

Once it was true to say that there was little written about men as men. There were, of course, libraries full of men as depicted by historians, psychologists, and sociologists. But there was no academic attempt to examine what it means to be a man.

In 1999, there is a burgeoning literature on masculinities. We now have a men's health policy being developed in every State in Australia. If we want healthier males, there are huge implications for the way we educate boys as tough, mindless oafs or as thinking people. There seem to be more and more books in which writers grapple with issues of masculinities. But the coverage in the media on men's issues is based in cliches. Masculinity is portrayed in the media, and especially by Hollywood, as natural and innate. But the difficulties inherent in such a portrayal reveal that masculinity is much more a work under (re)construction than something immutable.

The academic study of masculinities has proceeded slowly. Academic 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?' What has been done to date has often appeared in Women's Studies Departments and Centres, for there is almost nothing approaching a centre for men's studies. Conceptually, this points to a curious phenomenon. Academics are able to talk about 'women's history', and 'women's issues' in sociology and politics. But there have been virtually no academics who have been able to talk about 'men's issues'. So conceptually, Australian academics seem unable or unwilling to articulate ideas about men as men, unless this is done from a general feminist or profeminist perspective.

Those who have written about this subject are often to be found, not in universities, but in the outside world. But before we turn to them, we need to have some idea of what masculinity is about.

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 a reading of the literature from Australia, Britain and the USA.

1. Masculinity needs to be proved. Man is forever at war, says Norman Mailer, because he can never assume he has become a man (cited in Segal, 1990, 104). In other words, masculinity is in a state of uncertainty; it continually has to be proved. This begs the question: proved to whom? The answer seems to be: to other men, to partners, particularly women; and to oneself. Traditional masculinity is based on three dicta or musts: *perform, protect, provide* (West, 1996a, 45-50). All of these incorporate the idea of proving or testing. The male must prove that he is not female, and not homosexual. The idea of proving occurs in most of the western literature on masculinity. In *The Iliad*, Hektor meets his wife Andromache. She begs him not to go out and fight. But he replies "War will be the men's concern." And off he goes to meet his fate and be slaughtered by Achilles. For thousands of years men have been expected to go into battle, whether on the battlefield or the football field. Boys appear to listen avidly for the signs of what society expects of them as they grow towards manhood. And the *leitmotif* is testing (West 1996a, 50; 1999b,2-5).
2. Part of this proving or testing takes place around and through the male body. Discussions of footballers in popular newspapers are very often about whether this team can beat another, or about so and so's groin injury. Males often seem to feel that their bodies are not good enough in some way. They seem to feel they are not strong enough, they don't have a big enough chest, or their legs aren't defined enough: perhaps all of these. And perhaps they know that all human beings decay. However much males brag and boast, the icons of masculinity themselves succumb to the seeds of destruction which masculinity contains. In Foucault's conceptualisation, the body is 'a volume in perpetual disintegration' (McNay, 1994, 90).

The male body is one very susceptible to presentation and interpretation in the light of cultural values. An interesting recent exploration of this idea is Ken Dutton's *The Perfectible Body*. Dutton traces 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. But if the body can be perfected it is not yet perfect. When Sam Fussell wrote *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder*, he explained that he went into bodybuilding because the attempt at physical perfection 'grew from seeds of *self-disgust*' (1991, 140, emphasis added). And the contradictions abound: bodybuilders make their bodies hard, but in developing pectoral muscles, their bodies begin to resemble women's bodies (while those of female bodybuilders who use steroids resemble men's bodies). However much the rhetoric of bodybuilders is about permanence ('abs of iron, pecs of steel...'). Fussell's book makes it clear that bodybuilding is a pursuit taken up mostly by young men who are desperately trying to arrest old age. Further, Dutton asks, can ultra-male bodies such as those of Arnold Schwarzenegger emphasise or transcend masculine-feminine boundaries? The answer is uncertain

(Dutton 1995, 310ff).

Many of the males who were interviewed in Penrith spoke of dissatisfaction with their bodies. Those who were bodybuilders are sometimes very dissatisfied with their bodies, apparently more so than other men. Many men take up body-building to push away their insecurities. But the anxious gaze of the bodybuilder at his own reflection shows that these insecurities can never be eradicated, as Drummond has found (1996, 289).

But insecurities are found in other sportsmen, both amateur and professional, as well as bodybuilders. Sabo (1990, 5) explains how a boy became an athlete. His parents arranged for him to learn to use weights by being taught to use a barbell by a muscular boy who lived nearby. This is very much the model in which boys become men by gaining the assistance of an older, admired male, as we shall see below.

3. Many men feel required to be tough. West explored the idea of tough masculinity in an Australian country town in the era 1900-1920 (West 1996c). The town is Penrith, once a rural outpost on the banks of the Nepean River. 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. The context is emphasised because masculinity is always made in a context of some kind, and there are variations according to time and place. Arguably, there was more security for men in an era like that of World War I than there is today. In these times, masculinity was harnessed to the chariots of war. Women were often involved in a country town in helping the war effort. But gender lines were firm by today's standards. Boys were urged to become soldiers; women were seen as nurturers of one kind or another (West 1996c, 221).

Being a man in a small town in Australia is different from being a man in East Africa. Yet there are always parallels and similarities across cultures, as a reading of any comparative work on masculinity shows (see for example the van Leer Association Newsletter, 1992; Schnack and Neutzling; Morell, 1994; or Leal, 1999).

Here is the difficulty: in some senses we can talk about masculinity as something men share, as Whissel explains (1996, 265). This is *not* to say that masculinity is innate, nor that anything is essentially masculine. Yet there are huge differences among men according to ethnicity, and class, and whether a man identifies as gay and straight. There is a whole literature now devoted to Queer Theory, which celebrates the symbolic disruptions of gender categories like 'man', 'woman' and 'gay' (Connell, 1995, 59). Some of these ideas about masculinity are explored in the literature referred to below by Foucault, Connell, Kimmel and Messner, and West.

In Penrith in the 1930s there were many people who urged boys to play aggressive sports such as football. If the boys did not do so, they were derided as mother's boys, or nancies (West 1996a, 30). Being male is often defined as not-female, nor not-gay. Men feel that sport teaches them how to be tough so they can earn the admiration both of women and men. Most of all, it allows them to feel acceptably male to themselves. What is worth emphasising here is that what seems like strength to others (women, in particular) may not seem like strength to the men themselves, as we saw above.

4. A consistent theme in much *popular* writing about masculinity (Biddulph, 1995; Edgar, 1997) is the importance of the father in making boys into men. The same idea occurs in research in Australian masculinity. Asked about masculinity, males talked of their fathers: "Well my Dad used to..." was a common beginning when men were quoted in the chapter on fatherhood in West (1996a). Men also talked of other men: uncles, older brothers, teachers, coaches.

Fatherhood is a very old idea which in some ancient literatures is a taken-for-granted. *The Iliad* is suffused with talk of fathering. Everybody is so and so, son of someone else. Men are shown in complex webs of lineage and friendship. Yet today many researchers and policymakers construe families as mainly about women and children. This reflects some important social realities: fathers do leave families; some fathers die or become ill; some families appear never to have fathers. So it is common sense to recognise mother-headed families as part of the gender landscape of western contemporary society (Burns & Scott 1994). But it is also true that social commentators *portray* families as mainly about women and children. One example is *Working for children*, a study of parenting which has just over two pages on fathering out of more than 275 pages). A recent Australian report was titled *Fitting fathers into families*, as if fathers had never belonged in families but were being put in to keep them quiet (1999).

5. In the study of Penrith males mentioned earlier, it was found that in the 1930s and 1940s boys were kept in place by nets of authority. Those nets were made up primarily of fathers, other men, police, schools, churches, members of the community (West, 1996a, 21-4). Boys might remove a girl's swimmers as they swam in the river, or steal from a shop, or blow up letter boxes with penny bungers. Usually they got caught. The boys who were interviewed in the 1930s almost always got caught, though there were some exceptions. Most of them seem to have felt that they had to conform or be expelled from polite society, and that was something they were not prepared to contemplate: 'anyone who [rebelled] was earmarked in the town', said one man who grew up in the 1940s (West, 1996a, 11). Arguably, the nets of authority have been weakened today. In part this is because fathers, as explained earlier, do not have the respect in the community they once had, while the authority of churches and police has eroded (West, 1996a, 93).
6. Masculinity is defined very commonly as what other states of being are *not*. When men are asked 'what does it mean to be a man?', the answer is nervous laughter (West, 1996a, 130ff). We could interpret the nervousness by saying that if a man's masculinity is questioned, he has to be ready for an attack of some kind. In one case the following answer was received: "It must be wonderful to be a man, because they're always telling us the worst thing you can be is a woman or a pooffer" (West, 1996a, 54). There have been a number of explorations of the complex ways in which masculinity is integrally involved with homosexuality (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1987; West, 1996a, 183-4). Further, Foucault argues that there is no essential masculine quality

because the body and every other aspect of masculinity is subject to re-interpretation.

But in the world of most mainstream Hollywood movies, masculinity is still seen in simple terms. The best men win: they win women, they win prizes, they defend the USA against numberless threats and invaders. Other men lose: they are ridiculed, unattractive, and rejected by women. The huge gulf between academic and popular ideas of masculinity is well worth emphasising. And the problems of being a man who acts as a man can involve much self-doubt for an actor, as Bingham makes clear in a chapter significantly called 'I'm Not Really a Man, but I Play One in Movies' (1994). Thus while masculinity is presented as a smooth, untroubled surface - comprising muscles, a strong jaw and, frequently, a few words in an Austrian or Belgian accent punctuated by grunts - the person behind the mask experiences many more problems than might be suspected by an unaware viewer.

7. Men can be masculine in different ways. Connell's book shows a rainbow of differences among men, even if one remains within a city such as Sydney (1995). The differences include an 'iron man' who runs and swims professionally as well as a man in Western Sydney who has sex with men and calls it 'a bastard of a life' (Connell, 1975). The rainbow may not be the most appropriate metaphor considering the way in which a man who seems simple and untroubled can reveal himself as susceptible to doubts and uncertainties, and troubled by his appearance (see for instance Josef in West, 1996a, 133-35). Neither men's work life, nor their life outside work can be characterised as essentially masculine, for there are too many differences behind the facade of apparent similarity. Some men go to the gym; others to the races; some ever go to either, or go regularly to church. Even in the gym, male behaviour can have a variety of meanings: a pat on the back or a surreptitious glance can mean different things to the people involved, or those who watch (Bolger, 1999). Or as Foucault suggests, 'the body bears the stigmata of past experience' (McNay, 1994, 90). Displays of the male body can occur in Wagga, on Bondi Beach and on Oxford Street, in - or outside of - the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade. They can be perceived as part of a homosexual display, or as part of masculine toughness, or as both. As Dutton again emphasises, displayed for whom? is the question in an age in which a body displayed for gay men can be taken up in mainstream culture and become something for women to gaze at, or vice versa (Dutton, 1995, 339).

There is huge variety in masculinity across class, race and ethnicity. Most working-class suburbs have a very strong overlay of tough masculinity. Yet, as found in *Fathers, Sons and Lovers*, there are other forms of masculinity there too which coexist with and contradict the displays of tough muscularity. Indeed, the tougher the masculinity, the more it becomes entangled with gay macho and a parodying of masculine pose. In the 1997 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras there was a group of men dressed in flannel-necked shirts self-parodying themselves as 'Westies Against Homophobia'. Wealthier suburbs appear to permit a more relaxed style of masculinity, but the compulsion to be tough can still be seen, as is becoming clear in an ongoing project on masculinities in Bondi. For example, there are many forms of South American masculinity in which the macho display is important (Leal, 1999, 6-7).

These are merely some basic ideas about masculinity which need to be understood if we are to understand the issues in educating boys. Nor can male academics studying masculinity ignore the fact that we implicate ourselves in the ways in which we feel constrained to defend, deride, and satirise other men and other masculinities. Our understanding of ourselves as men needs to come from two sources. First, contextual studies which put masculinity in a social and historical context; for example Murray Drummond's doctoral study of elite sportsmen - bodybuilders, triathletes and surf lifesavers. The second source is much more threatening and difficult: a critical study of ourselves.

Popular writing about boys

There is a debate going on in most sections of the developed world about the education of boys. In Germany, Dieter Schnack and Rainer Neutzling's book *Kleine Helden in Not: Junge auf der Suche nach Mannlichkeit* was published in 1990. In it they argue that boys are searching for an appropriate way of being male in a society which wants them to be big, tough dragon-slayers. They suggest 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. This note was echoed by the Danish writer Nils Kryger, who argued that progressive thinking in education had championed girls, but largely ignored boys (c. 1994). The boys he interviewed were hostile to school, resisted most of the school's attempts to change them and were very critical of feminist spokes-persons.

These ideas were being explored by other writers in other parts of the developed world. They came partly as a reaction to progress made by many girls, while boys as a whole appeared to lag behind. Qualifications need to be made. In particular, boys from certain kinds of elite schools continue to do well in Australia; these include academic selective schools, as well as schools with high fees and very old traditions usually called Great Public Schools. There are also indications that some racial groups do better than others, with Chinese and Vietnamese names featuring high on achievement lists. The bottom rung in most subjects seems to be occupied by white working-class boys (especially in country areas) Pacific Islanders, and Aboriginal boys (see Teese et al. 1995, 108ff).

These matters were being discussed in daily newspapers and on television in the 1990s. Then in the late 1990s, a book made a strong impact among parents in Australia. Steve Biddulph was a family psychologist but has become well known as a spokesman on men's issues. His book *Manhood* looked positively at issues in a man's life and suggested that men and women could work positively towards improving each other's lives. In 1997 Biddulph followed this with *Raising Boys*, which looked at masculinity in a positive way, advising parents about raising their sons towards thoughtful manhood. It took a strong, simple line rather than providing sociological analysis. So far, this might be the kind of book that might be popular mainly among Christian fundamentalists. But some complex issues were addressed. In particular, Biddulph said pointblank that some males did grow up gay and parents might do better to reconcile themselves to that rather than fight it. Biddulph argued that there are basic physiological and psychological differences between boys and girls. He made suggestions about what boys need in school- for example, less repression and more releasing of boys' energy (Biddulph, 1997, pp. 128-32). This book was on the bestseller lists in Australia for some eight months and in late 1998 was released in the United Kingdom.

Research on boys' performance

While the public debate goes on, the academic debate is more muted. This seems to be because the debate about boys is linked to questions of feminism, and any questioning of girls' success or boys' perceived difficulties has been linked with a reaction against feminism. For example, Mills and Lingard suggested that to advocate assisting some boys in school was to push back feminist advances (1997, 290). Curiously, they suggest that the debate about boys was conducted by mythopoetic men's movement figures, but fail to cite any of the academic research which has pointed out that boys' achievement seems to be lagging behind girls', on average. These academics think that by invoking the word 'backlash' they render any further discussion of boys' underachievement unnecessary. Such academics could have been envisaged when Karl Mannheim argued that academics maintain accepted ideas as dogma, a holy priesthood guarding the limits of acceptable thought (1991, 139). All research ought to be questioned, and no issues are finally resolved in the minds of the true academic. To Foucault's followers, Biddulph's arguments were probably seen as essentialist (McNay, 1994, 90). But this should not prevent them being considered.

In fact there has long been research which has pointed to a long-term decline in boys' performance, relative to girls (West, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Teese et al., 1995). This can be demonstrated by MacCann's research, summarised by a graph showing a widening gap in boys' and girls' school leaving scores. However, there is a stream of writing which can be illustrated by Alloway and Gilbert which argues that girls have had only apparent success, for their success in school leaving results does not carry through to later life (1998, 7).

The McGaw Report on school leaving results supported these findings. It said

In 1991, males were over-represented at the top and bottom of the Tertiary Entrance Ranks, while the females were over-represented in the middle ranges.

By 1995, the position had changed markedly... Females are now over-represented in all the high Tertiary Entrance Rank ranges and males are even more over-represented at the bottom. (1996, 108).

Nobody seems to be able to explain satisfactorily what happened from 1990 onwards to assist girls, on average, to do better than boys and improve this performance year after year, nor why boys have begun to do so poorly, relative to girls. The gender divide holds true in many circumstances: it seems true from the evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls achieve better in literacy tests than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys. And it does seem from other evidence that gender, class and race compound each other, so that girls from wealthier homes do better than working-class Anglo-Australian boys, and boys from some ethnic groups (West, 1996, ch. 2 and Teese et al., 1985, 108). This is in accordance with the earlier statement that masculinity is always made in time, place, and culture.

There are some important general statements which still hold true. In Australia the subject which shows the greatest gender differences is English: girls' results are an average of 25% higher than boys' (McGaw, 109). Similarly, a report into achievement throughout Australia found that

Where boys can avoid doing English, they often do; and when they can't, they often fail. Only certain subjects are real subjects for boys (Teese et al. 1995, 108-9).

This is supported by results in the United Kingdom. The high school subject of English holds too many uncertainties dear to be comprehensible to the uncomplicated dominant masculine mind, which as explained earlier in this paper is attracted to notions of strength, muscularity, and beating opponents. It is a rare young man that can maintain his position as a heterosexual male, appreciate sport, and perform outstandingly in English (for an example see Mike McIvor in West, 1996a, p. 77). For the rest, English is enemy territory (Alloway and Gilbert, 1998, p. 11). Boys and reading and boys and literature are frequently mentioned by teachers as trouble-spots in educating boys. In public discussion of the Higher School Certificate examination, some boys claimed that it was unfair to ask them to write about love.

The academic debate has so far looked at the edges of the issue, rather than penetrating to its core. Why are many boys doing so poorly at school, relative to girls? Yet if girls do so well academically, why aren't their results carried through into later success? This article's scope is confined to boys.

The historical dimension

Much of the debate about boys' underachievement ignores historical issues. But masculinity is always made in a context. Seventy years ago, males and females lived separate lives. In country towns, boys would help Dad on the family farm - picking apples, feeding animals. Girls usually helped their mothers with cooking and cleaning. Those I interviewed summed this up - "boys worked outside, girls worked inside" (West, 1996a, 7; for the surprisingly similar US experience, see Rotundo, 1993, 47).

In the 1930s country town I studied, boys seem to have looked up to their fathers, who were usually seen as the breadwinners of the family. Boys played up, but they were kept in check by teachers and parents. A boy who misbehaved in the street would be 'kicked up the bum' by a policeman (West, 1996a, 11). And boys were keen to grow up to be a man. Men were almost invariably fathers, or were attached to a family in some other way as grandfathers or uncles. Our respondents say that fathers were almost always liked, respected, and feared (West, 1996a, 42). There were significant exceptions such as Brian, who tells his story of paternal violence:

Every night, we'd come home. And later on, the lights would come on in the driveway. We'd all disappear. And then we'd be dragged out of bed. He'd be drunk and he'd beat one of us, and then we'd all be lined up in height army style, and we'd all be hit. And it came out years and years later...we found out that all of us, at some stage, had planned to murder my father (West

The idea that fathers were once uniformly virtuous reflects some kind of nostalgia for past certainties. But evidence from the Penrith study reinforces Rotundo's arguments. Rotundo, in brief, shows that in nineteenth-century USA, the doctrine of the spheres let women rule in the domestic sphere, while the family was represented by, and gained its social status from, the father (1993, 218).

Males in trouble?

An article in *The Economist* in 1996 suggested that boys' learning problems were paralleled by difficulties in the workforce for many men, especially working-class men. As work is increasingly based on skill, rather than muscle, it suggested, men have lost the edge they once had. Women are gaining the majority of the jobs in vocations that are growing: residential care, computer and data processing, health services, business services, and child care. Men account for two thirds or more in the five sectors declining fastest: footwear, ammunition, shipbuilding, leatherwork, photographic supplies, according to the US Bureau of Labour. Asked about their lot, men say that it is not nearly as good being a man today as it used to be (*Age*, November 1997). These comments point to the collapse of many traditional labour markets for males, as well as the nostalgia for a perceivably untroubled past, as we noted earlier. While an elite group of men clearly continues to do well, one commentator points to an underclass of men who live on the fringes of society (Arndt, 1998).

The perceived difficulties of men are paralleled by those of boys. Boys are performing on average worse than girls in almost every major country except Japan, according to *The Economist*. In the USA, the worst difficulties are experienced with Afro-American boys. Across Europe, the problems are sufficient to warrant a cross-national study based at the University of Cambridge. Apparently, once again, an elite group of boys doing quite well. But on average, boys' performance relative to girls has declined.

Special attention has been given to the problem in England, where the Labour Party issued a paper *Boys will be boys? Closing the gender gap*. The UK Labour Government is committed to equal opportunity, and it sees boys as having unequal chances in education, especially working-class boys, Caribbean boys, and boys who started school too early. Notice the attention given to particular groups of boys (Blunkett, 1999).

A study *Boys and English* was begun to investigate the problem boys have with that subject. It found that most of the pupils having difficulty learning to read are boys. At the age of 7, boys are already doing worse than girls, on average. The differences between boys' and girls' average performance has widened in the years 1981-1991, the study found.

These findings are broadly applicable to Australia. In March, 1997 Federal Minister for Education, Dr David Kemp, released a study by the Australian Council for Educational Research. It showed a wide range of literacy problems. Moreover, the gap between boys and girls has widened over the past 20 years. Especially at risk are Aboriginal boys, boys from working class areas, and boys from homes where the first language is not English. There are some patterns common to all these studies which show particular problems recurring among particular groups of boys.

The boys and sport project

The project this paper is based on is called the Boys and Sport Project. It arose from the forementioned debate over boys' performance. In particular, it arose from issues arising around sport. The O'Doherty Report argued that sporting events on television and other factors encouraged boys to glamourise violence, and encouraged them to feel that society preferred aggressive forms of masculinity (1994, 25). The research project sought to understand why boys felt sport was more important than school, and what sport was teaching boys about how to be a man.

The project was based on four schools across Sydney. Researchers interviewed 14 year old boys because this age was frequently mentioned by headmasters and teachers as a troublesome age. The researchers also wanted to talk to boys at the onset of becoming a man. This concept is a complex one, but discussion usually focuses on reaching certain milestones: gaining a job, getting a driver's licence, finishing school or university, going to war (see West, 1996a, 59). This is also an age in which becoming a man (and not a woman or a homosexual) seems to take on great importance for boys. The schools in the project included coeducational and boys' schools, Catholic, State and GPS schools. Deliberate efforts were made to include a wide span of boys from different racial, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds. Choice of a boarding school allowed us to talk to boys who grew up in towns far distant from Sydney. We gave the schools fictional names: Greenslopes for the wealthier school, which had boarders; St Patrick's for the outer suburban Catholic boys school; Welham Vale for the outer suburban co-educational school; Wallacetown for the suburban boys' school which had a centre for excellence in sport. It is possible that a different choice of schools might have made some difference to the findings which emerged.

The boys were revisited after nine or ten months to get a glimpse of their progress in that time. Changes were noted. Boys were asked to comment on how they felt they were changing. The following themes came up after analysis.

The attraction of sport

The boys stressed the importance of being cool. Sport was seen as cool, and an essential activity for boys. Bob, from a co-educational State school, says. "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."

Boys who did not play sport were seen as 'fat and lazy...and they never have any friends'. A boy who was not good at sport sat in the library at lunchtime and was called an outcast, said a boy at St. Patrick's school.

In a wealthier school, the boys seemed to have a wider range of options. These boys played a variety of sport, from Rugby Union to skiing and skateboarding. There is a much narrower range in the State schools, where a boy is marked out if he is not good at football. But boys have to be masculine in a perceived tough manner in all the schools where we did the research. A boy who is different can have a much harder time, as West argues (1996, chapters 11 and 12).

Fathers and sport

Many of the boys went into a sport that their father played. One boy became a triathlete after watching his father compete. The boys showed great concern about their relationship with their fathers. Many went into sports, apparently, to be close to their fathers. As Drummond has argued (1996) sport and masculinity are very closely entwined. A boy who is good at sport gets a great deal of positive encouragement from all the males in his life. And the reverse is true. A male who is poor at sport has to battle to get positive endorsement.

While many boys talked positively about a father, Dean was an exception.

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

A: Never have.

Q: Never. Would you like to see him?

A: No, not really.

Q: Why?

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

This conversation is typical in many ways of conversations with males reproduced in West, though easily the most abrupt (1996a). Foucault himself, it has been observed, 'was a man of supreme discretion, of deliberate reserve, of tensile silences (Miller, 1993, 357). But what do the silences mean? Males frequently appear to fly from answering about their feelings into humour or anecdote. Feelings seem to be unsafe, putting a male at risk of being attacked (as Josef remarked, cited in West, 1996a, 135). And so this conversation need to be interpreted.

I feel Dean is afraid to unleash a torrent of emotion. He feels that his father's absence has deprived him of many things. In Dean's search for acceptance, study takes a low profile. Perhaps boys like Dean embody some of the consequences of growing up without a father. There could be some other circumstances which gives his conversation this staccato and highly-guarded quality, uncharacteristic of the other interviews as a whole. Some of the problems involved between boys and their fathers, especially after divorce, are explored in West (1996a) Gilmour (1983) and Jordan (1985). The entire discussion on Dean and his mate is on the website at the end of this paper.

What does it mean to be a boy?

The boys talked eagerly on this subject, especially Mark, a self-confessed 'computer nerd' from Greenslopes, a well-endowed private school.

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

A: Boys need a tough image. Boys can't do lots of stuff. You can't show emotions. They have to win. They have to have the last laugh. Those are the rules of any schoolyard.

Mark said that he watched TV, he saw men 'Terminating other guys and injecting drugs'. However complicated it is to act masculine (as we saw earlier) boys see men as uncomplicated. Mark is unusual in that he can describe the representation of men in a reflective and self-reflective way. The connection between boys and men is still significant, as it was in 1930s Penrith or in nineteenth-century USA. Boys still appear to look to men for a lead. But Mark says a common attitude today was, "Enjoy yourself now. Why bother studying? Older men are losing jobs." To gauge from this comment, some boys are aware of the difficulties working-class men, in particular, are having in the job market.

Boys from Greenslopes school showed more sense than most of having to work hard and get to university. One talked about going to Harvard. But none of the boys felt that schoolwork could give them the charge they got from sport. Simon, from St Patrick's, said one of the most exciting moments of his life was swimming at the State championships.

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.

Again there were differences among the boys. Boys from country areas like Dubbo or Jindabyne had a range of activities associated with the wide outdoors: snow skiing, horse-riding, swimming in the dam. One or two of the country boys seemed very precocious, talking of dances, parties and girl-chasing. Perhaps some of this was an attempt to talk up the boy's emerging masculinity or hoodwink the interviewer. They complained of being called DFRs ['dumb fucking rurals']. Certainly, the language and attitudes of country boys seemed to reflect a life spent more in the outdoors than on a suburban street.

Boys and study

Study seems to be one of the last priorities among the boys. Their major concerns are being popular, playing sport, and gaining the affection of their fathers; these are closely related. Study is a much lower priority.

Conclusions

As research on boys continues, it might be appropriate to end with some issues and dilemmas rather than a neat set of conclusions.

1. Much more research needs to be done on school culture. In our study, the message from boys was clear: peers, parents, and teachers want us to be heroes; and we have to prove our masculinity on the football field (or sometimes the basketball court, or in the pool). Some schools are looking harder at the culture of the school before they start looking at what strategies to implement in order to induce boys to achieve higher academic scores (see Hawkes, 1998). Changing the culture of masculinity in the school may open up some possibilities for changing boys' behaviour and performance.
2. One of the key factors in our research, as in UK research, is the attitude of the teacher (Boys and English, 1993, 2). We tell males not to express their feelings, and yet we ask them to write about love, fear and other emotions in English classes and exams. But if teachers appreciate boys' needs, and expect them to do well, experience in the UK shows that achievement is much higher.
3. Teachers must stay flexible to channel boys' energetic and exuberant masculinity. The Baumgart Report said that New South Wales teachers were, on average, getting nine months older every year. Teacher flexibility can increase boys' achievement. Some boys will never write a letter, but will e-mail a friend. Writing and reading tasks will engage boys if they are framed with boys' interests in mind. We have to keep finding ways of getting boys talking, and I don't mean that babble of half-sentences that many males are still talking in a group when they arrive at university. In regard to technology, Sanger and others in the UK argued that computers were an important part of staying abreast of boys' mental development. Yet the revolution in technology is leaving many teachers behind, with the probable exception of teachers in some wealthy schools. Boys and girls are being socialised by TV, video and the internet (Sanger et al., 1996, 82). School could become an irrelevance as a socialising agent for boys whose role models are Mike Tyson, Bart Simpson and the kids in South Park (West, 1998a).
4. Boys respond to people who listen to them. They are looking for someone who offers them hope. Teachers who succeed with boys generally get the boys on-side first, according to a report *The Gender Divide*, issued by the UK's Equal Opportunities Commission.
5. Many of us have ingrained attitudes about boys and girls. We may be forcing attitudes on boys which are no longer appropriate to today. The UK research argues convincingly that much more needs to be done to get boys exploring feelings (Office for Standards in Education, 1993, 23). Yet feelings lie solidly within literature and many other subjects too - history, and French, for instance. All of us have to examine our own attitudes to boys. The physical education teacher in a Sydney suburban school who said 'Son, if you can't kick that ball properly, go home and put on your mother's dress' was doing a lot of harm. Lipsyte (1994) argues convincingly that football and other aggressively-packaged sports are implicated in patterns of violence against women and other men. There is much work to do before we can feel confident about the influence of many teachers of Physical Education on the burgeoning masculinity of young men.
6. We need more research on who is getting the rewards in school - on speech night, in the classroom. An older male commented on his schooling: "There was a giant trophy for winning at sport, and if you came top of the class you got a bit of cardboard" (West, 1996a, 20.) The balance in the boy's mind between study, sport and social activity needs a lot of work in most cases. And why this happens with many boys - but not all boys - is something we will have to keep in mind.
7. The power of sport to move boys to great emotional heights and depths needs careful investigation. The boys we interviewed showed very strong feelings about sports, and sportsmen in the school, including sports teachers and students good at sport. The suggestion in reports of the Columbine High School massacre in the US in mid-1999 that certain boys resented 'the jocks' (the well-praised athletes) and went on a violent rampage in part because of this resentment might well be a reminder that adolescence is a time in which feelings of resentment and jealousy of peers can become uncontrollably intense.
8. Australian schools can learn a great deal from efforts made in the UK to assist boys. UK schools are specifically required to comment on boys' performance and that of girls. If this was required of Australian schools, we would get more progress in boys' achievement because schools would be forced to confront the issue. UK schools have found that the quickest way to improve a school's performance is to address boys' underachievement.

Finally, there are considerations for developing theories of masculinity.

There are four crucial areas of embodying a masculine self, argues Lambevski. These are first, the labour market and workplace; second, body image and forms of communication [about bodies]; third, pleasure; and finally, risk (Lambevski, 1988, 1). We found that the body is central to boys' ideas about themselves. The body seems uncomplicated but is very much susceptible to interpretation by different people, and groups of people, in different contexts, for different purposes (Dutton's exposition of the difference between the heroic male body and the male pin-up is a useful case in point 1995, 339ff). Better theories of masculinity might help us find ways of creating schools that take account of boys' changing bodies and changing attitudes to their bodies. In the process, we might understand why many boys are underachieving in school in most of the developed world.

Can what we teach boys be informed by theory about masculinity? Can we persuade them that what is called male and what is called female are floating signifiers? (Dutton, 1993, 349).

Too often boys' problems in behaviour are seen as innate, or based in biology (there is an intelligent discussion of some of these issues in Whissell, 1996, and in *Boys and English*, 1993, 27). But the apparent simplicity of masculinity is beset by problems of presentation and interpretation. Masculinity is presented as uncomplicated in the Hollywood movies; yet we saw that the actors themselves had difficulty when they had to act masculine. Perhaps this misses the real point. Masculinity itself might be the drama - one in which men

can never stop acting.

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He argues that the paucity of males in teaching is linked to a decline in school discipline, educational outcomes and problems in getting boys interested in schooling. (West, 2002). Considerable inroads have been made in researching teacher lives, however female teachers' experiences in single sex boys' schools, largely remains an under-researched area. I Can Hardly Wait Till Monday: Women Teachers Talk About What Works for Them and for Boys, University of Newcastle, Callaghan NSW West, P. (1999b)

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