WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS?
Issues of masculinity in schools

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We believe that a book of this nature, which attempts to develop further understandings about masculinity within the context of current debates about the boys, is timely, given the continued moral panic that persists about boys regarding their disadvantaged status relative to girls. Even as we write this preface, a national inquiry into the education of boys is under way in Australia, initiated by the Federal Minister for Education, Dr Kemp. Not surprisingly, many of the submissions to that inquiry continue to promote the view that boys are victims and are attributed a disadvantaged status (see Lingard and Douglas 1999). This tends to support the need for a book of this kind which is committed to problematizing the simplistic conceptualization of boys as a homogeneous group whose interests are set against those of girls (see Collins et al. 2000; Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli in press).

Research undertaken with boys spanning Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States is brought together in this collection. The focus for each of the contributors is addressing issues of ‘what about the boys’ in relation to their own research and informed perspectives on boys and schooling. Many focus on what boys (and girls) themselves say about their experiences of schooling and sexuality and use their voices as a basis for drawing out what the implications might be for those working in schools. In this regard the chapters are written with a broader audience in mind – particularly teachers and administrators in schools with the view to using research to illuminate the effects of masculinity in the lives of boys and girls at school.

All of the contributors are concerned to highlight the impact and effect of certain forms of masculinity on the lives of boys at school, but locate their research and/or discussion within the context of the boys’ education debates outlined by Foster, Kimmell and Skelton in the introductory chapter. Many
have also indicated what the implications of their research are for daily practice in schools and classrooms. In this sense, the research documented here has major implications for the professional development of teachers in schools and for student teachers in tertiary institutions.

Sociologists like Bob Connell (1987, 1995) have been particularly influential in drawing attention to how social, cultural and historical factors have influenced the various ways in which ‘masculinity’ comes to be defined and embodied by boys and men. We see the contributors of this book building on this work. They highlight that there are many forms of masculinity that are played out in the context of a complex set of power relations in which certain types of masculinity are valued over others. Many also draw attention to the role of a dominant form of masculinity, which comes to be defined in opposition to femininity, and highlight that association with the feminine for boys can often lead to other boys questioning their sexuality (see also Frank, 1987, 1993).

Other factors such as race, class, ethnicity and geographical location are also taken up to develop an understanding of the various ways in which boys learn to relate and behave in certain social situations and within particular educational institutions. In this sense feminist educators and theories also inform the perspectives on boys and schooling elaborated in this book. Such perspectives have contributed significantly to producing valuable insights into the links between gender and power (Davies 1993; Steinberg et al. 1997), specifically in terms of illuminating boys’ social practices and ways of relating at school (Cox 1995; Davies 1995; Skelton 1996, 1998; Kenway 1997; Kenway et al. 1997; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1997; Yates 1997; Epstein et al. 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998).

All contributors recognize that schools are important arenas of power where masculinities and femininities are acted out on a daily basis through the dynamic processes of negotiation, refusal and struggle (Giroux and McLaren 1994). In other words, these papers illustrate that there are indeed social constraints and power imbalances in educational sites, but that gender regimes are more shifting and contradictory than theorists supposed in the seventies and eighties (Jackson and Salisbury 1996; Kenway et al. 1997). In this sense, each chapter included in this collection builds on studies into boys at school which have been undertaken by Kessler et al. (1985), Walker (1988), Macan Ghaill (1994) and Epstein (1994).

The contributors also suggest ways forward and beyond the popular and simplistic views which stress the need for boys to reclaim lost territory. There is a powerful discourse of neglect informing many of the popularist debates about the boys which continue to assert that provision for the educational needs of girls has been at the expense of boys (Yates 1997). Moreover, the idea or assumption that boys are somehow victims or ‘losers’ now competing with girls who have suddenly become the winners is also refuted strongly by the various positions that are taken up in this book. Compounding such a position is the view that biology needs to be given equal consideration
in developing an understanding of boys' behaviours and learning orientations. This argument continues to be promulgated within the context of these debates about the boys (see submissions to Australian inquiry into boys' education at http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/eewr/Epfb/sublist.htm) as if appeals to biological sex differences and essentialism are somehow outside the effects of certain power relations (see Fausto-Sterling 2000). As Peterson (2000) has illuminated, appeals to biological determinism have been used historically to enforce a binary categorization of gendered behaviours always within the context of and in response to the perceived power gained by women. Moreover, as Lingard and Douglas (1999) have lucidly illustrated, the debates about the boys in the nineties have been characterized by a strong backlash against feminism and this continues to be the case as we enter the new millennium.

If we are indeed to encourage diversity and citizenship in multicultural societies it is crucial that issues of opportunity, access and distributed success be foregrounded in debates about gendered educational outcomes. Collins et al. (2000) have addressed this in a recent governmental report on the factors influencing the educational performance of males and females in school and their post-school labour destinations. In line with the positions taken up in that report, we believe that policy formulation and curriculum development in schools must avoid the popularist tendency to assert a binary oppositional and 'competing victims' perspective on the factors impacting on the social and educational experiences of boys and girls. This will only lead to homogenizing and normalizing boys and girls on the basis of biological sex differences and, hence, reinforce the very versions of masculinity which the research shows have detrimental consequences for both the former and the latter.

This book, therefore, is offered as an attempt to provide a more informed perspective on the social practices of masculinity impacting on boys' lives at school. We hope that it will have the effect of moving the debates beyond the feminist backlash rhetoric which persists in casting boys as the 'new victims'. If anything, as the contributors of this book argue, the issue that needs to be addressed is the investment that many boys, men and schools have in promoting a particular version of masculinity which is to their detriment in the sense that it limits them from developing a wider repertoire of behaviours and ways of relating. Until a commitment is made, particularly by men and boys themselves, to addressing the role that sexuality, homophobia and misogyny continue to play in how many of them define and negotiate their masculinities, we believe that very little will change.

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CHAPTER 1

‘What about the boys?’
An overview of the debates

VICTORIA FOSTER, MICHAEL KIMMEL AND
CHRISTINE SKELTON

Introduction

In this chapter we are concerned to provide an overview of the debates ‘about the boys’ in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. The ways in which these debates have emerged in all three nations are discussed at length to highlight the kind of polemic which continues to inform the moral panic surrounding the plight of boys who have acquired the status of the ‘new disadvantaged’ (see Epstein et al. 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Lingard and Douglas 1999). In fact, we highlight how the issue has been portrayed in each context as the education crisis of the nineties and how this problem has been attributed to the impact of feminism with a number of writers, educationists and therapists directly attacking the women’s movement for the ‘damage’ it has supposedly done to boys! We also draw attention to how a significant feature of these debates involves reinscribing binary oppositions between, for example, boys/girls, femininity/masculinity, etc. where girls’ success is seen at the expense of boys (see Kenway 1995; Yates 1997). Driving much of this rhetoric, which is espoused by the popular media and men’s movement advocates, is a fundamental biological determinism and competing victims syndrome with boys’ interests being set against those of girls (Cox 1997). In this chapter we explore further these kinds of problematics and highlight how a feminist backlash rhetoric informs the moral panic suffusing the debates about boys’ education in all three countries.
Boys’ underachievement in the UK

This moral panic has characterized much of the debates about boys’ educational issues in the United Kingdom (UK). If articles in national newspapers are to be believed then ‘boys’ underachievement’ began in the UK in 1995 and rapidly became a ‘moral panic’ (Epstein et al. 1998; Griffin 1998). For example, the main professional newspaper, the Times Educational Supplement (TES), carried headlines declaring that school work was ‘Not for wimps’ (6 October 1995) and later asking ‘Where did we go wrong?’ (TES 14 February 1997). Education correspondents for broadsheet newspapers similarly headlined articles which discussed ‘The failing sex’ (Guardian, Education Supplement, 12 March 1996) and called for schools to provide a ‘Classroom rescue for Britain’s lost boys’ (Independent, 5 January 1998). That ‘boys’ underachievement’ has or should become the gender issue for schools is evident in speeches given by government ministers. Since the comments of a Chief Inspector for Schools, Chris Woodhead, that ‘the failure of boys and in particular white working class boys is one of the most disturbing problems we face within the whole education system’ (TES 15 March 1996), education ministers have called for schools to ‘challenge the laddish anti-learning culture which has been allowed to develop over recent years’ (Stephen Byers, Standards Minister, 5 January 1998), noting that ‘Many schools are already addressing the issue of boys’ under-achievement successfully – but too many schools are not’ (Morris 1996).

However, despite the media and government inference that boys’ underachievement is a recent phenomenon here in the UK, problems of boys and schooling have long occupied a central place in studies of primary and secondary schools. Indeed, as far back as the seventeenth century, the English philosopher John Locke, among others, expressed a concern for boys’ problems with language and literacy (Cohen 1998). More recently, literature on schooling written in the 1960s and early 1970s cautioned teachers against grouping boys according to academic ability as it resulted in less academic boys developing negative attitudes towards education and schools (Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970). There were also studies which showed how social class impacted upon boys’ experiences of school (Parker 1974; Willis 1977; Robins and Cohen 1978), and where the effect of ‘race’ on education was under investigation the unwritten focus was on how the white, Eurocentric nature of the curriculum alienated and disadvantaged black and Asian boys (Wright 1986; Mirza 1992). Thus, the ‘problem’ of boys’ underachievement was, in the 1960s and 1970s, conceived of in terms of inequalities of social class and/or ‘race’ rather than gender. In the 1990s the ‘problem’ of boys’ underachievement is constructed as a consequence of ‘boys being boys’ resulting from the major changes to the educational system.

A series of Education Acts, passed under a Conservative government (1979–97), effectively shifted emphasis away from the idea of education as a means of promoting social democracy, where the eradication of inequalities was
What about the boys? An overview of the debates

seen as necessary for the collective good, onto social diversity through promoting freedom of choice. This was achieved by moving the locus of power away from local education authorities (LEAs) to schools. The Education Act 1986 began this process by creating new governing bodies for schools. These new structures required fewer LEA representatives and more parents and people drawn from the local community, particularly those with knowledge and skills in the field of business. Greater powers were awarded to governing bodies in the Education Reform Act (ERA) 1988 when they, rather than LEAs, became responsible for school budgets. A funding formula was brought into operation whereby 80 per cent of each school’s budget is determined by the number and age of the pupils (Whitty et al. 1998). In addition, the ERA allowed schools to adopt an open enrolment policy. Previously, schools were limited as to the number of pupils they could take and restricted to taking children from specific catchment areas, one of the reasons being to ensure other schools could remain open. The open enrolment principle meant that popular schools were allowed to admit as many pupils as they chose. Thus, the ERA set in place a market situation whereby ‘educational institutions compete[d] with each other for finances and for consumers or customers as parents and/or students’ (David 1995: 68).

However, this apparent move towards decentralization was counteracted by an increase of the central powers of the government. This came in the form of the introduction of the National Curriculum together with the implementation of complex assessment and reporting procedures. Pupils were to undertake national tests (known as Standard Assessment Tasks: SATs) at the ages of 7, 11 and 14. Schools were (and are) expected to ensure pupils achieve a particular ‘level’ by the time they reach these ages. In addition, schools were to be regularly and rigorously inspected. These inspections were central to the Education (Schools) Act 1992 which introduced national league tables. These tables ranked schools according to pupils’ performance in the SATs and took no regard of the socio-economic context of individual schools.

Thus, the scene was set for the emergence of the ‘boys’ underachievement’ debate. In order for schools to survive they had to attract ‘clients’ in the form of parents; they could only attract parents if they were able to demonstrate they provided and delivered a high standard of education. Schools were judged to be ‘effective’ by the national league tables according to their success in getting pupils to reach the requisite standards at ages 7, 11 and 14. Those schools which were ‘effective’ according to this criteria would thrive while the others would go to the wall. Despite the controversy raised by such naive and simplistic approaches to judging a school’s ‘effectiveness’ (Ball 1994; Mortimore and Whitty 1997; Whitty et al. 1998) they have pushed schools into a position where, to survive, they need to address any areas which appear to have shortcomings. As places in the league tables were given according to examination performance then schools looked to their own results. It was in analysing the statistical results that the gender gap in
performance across the majority of subjects, which had actually appeared in the 1980s but had gone relatively unremarked, became evident.

The complexity of boys’ performance at school has been well rehearsed (Teese et al. 1995; Yates 1997; Murphy and Elwood 1998; Raphael Reed 1998; Arnot et al. 1999). We know that boys are well represented among the highest and also the lowest achievers. We know that the least differences in gender attainment occur between boys and girls from higher socio-economic groups and the most differences between those from lower socio-economic groups. We also know that inequalities generated by ‘race’ inequalities have apparently greater impact than those caused by gender (Gillborn 1997). These factors are not unique to the UK but have been identified elsewhere (see Lingard and Douglas 1999). The intention here is not to explore gender differences in academic achievement (for detailed analysis see Arnot et al. 1996), nor is it to explore fully the debates surrounding the simplistic framing of the ‘boys’ underachievement’ debates in the UK (see Epstein et al. 1998). The following section summarizes the discourses surrounding the ‘problem of boys’ in order to consider what approaches are being taken.

‘Failing boys’

In a recent collection of papers concerned with the ‘problem of boys’, the editors identify three dominant discourses evident in debates about boys and achievement; these are ‘poor boys’; ‘failing schools, failing boys’ and ‘boys will be boys’ (Epstein et al. 1998). The ‘poor boys’ discourse has also been labelled as the ‘lads’ movement’ (Kenway 1995). Here boys are positioned as ‘victims’, specifically of: single (fatherless) families; female-dominated primary schooling; and feminism, which has enabled girls’ successes. This, as we will illustrate later, is also the case in Australia and the United States. As Epstein et al. (1998: 6–7) say:

In the context of education and debates about boys’ underachievement, the supporters of the ‘Lads’ Movement’ develop a range of arguments which blame women for the failures of boys. If it is not women teachers, it is mothers; if not mothers, it is feminists; most often it is a combination.

The ‘failing schools, failing boys’ discourse emerges directly from the school effectiveness and school improvement movements. A ‘failing school’ is one which does not produce pupils with high levels of literacy and numeracy and above average passes in public examinations and/or does not achieve set standards laid down in external inspection procedures. These schools are seen as failing the boys (and presumably girls) who attend them. Unlike the ‘poor boys’ discourse it is rare for proponents of the ‘failing schools’ discourse to make overt and direct attacks on feminism.
Finally, the ‘boys will be boys’ discourse conceives of boys in conventional, stereotypical ways and attributes these traditional characteristics to ‘natural differences’ as a result of biology and psychology. This discourse has much in common with ‘poor boys’ in that boys have been made ‘victims’ because of feminist women’s successes at promoting the female over men and maleness, thus challenging traditional ways of being a man. Epstein et al. (1998: 9) have pointed to the contradictory nature of the ‘boys will be boys’ debate:

What is particularly interesting . . . is the way it manages, at one and the same time, to posit an unchanging and unchangeable ‘boyness’, which involves aggression, fighting and delayed (some might say indefinitely!) maturity and yet situates poor achievement at school as extrinsic to boys themselves.

In terms of the ‘solutions’ offered to tackle boys’ underachievement the ‘boys will be boys’ and ‘poor boys’ discourses are similar.

The predominant approach to tackling boys’ underachievement comes into what Lingard and Douglas (1999) have termed in the Australian context ‘recuperative masculinity’ strategies. Here the argument is that ‘boys’ specific needs are subsumed under the priority given to girls and minority concerns, leaving them in the role of villains who must change in order to alleviate the problems they cause’ (Lingard and Douglas 1999: 133). An example of this approach can be seen in the following extract taken from a report on an action research-based partnership between a university education department and a local school into the factors influencing the motivation and performance of Year 8 (12–13 years) boys:

. . . males are having to reconcile themselves to a reversal of roles. They face the loss of their traditional superiority . . . They have no formal ‘men’s liberation movement’, no informal male equivalent of ‘the sisterhood’, to help them cope with their increasing loss of identity, their disaffection and their sense of hopelessness. (Bleach et al. 1996: 6)

Thus it can be seen that a basic premise of recuperative programmes is that boys and girls are different but should be treated equally.

Teachers wanting to find ways in which they might address boys’ underachievement are most likely to come across strategies linked to the concept of ‘recuperative masculinity’. For example, the TES constantly carries reports of schools’ use of football as a means of stimulating boys’ interest. The government too has looked to football as a strategy by sponsoring a scheme called ‘Playing for Success’ which links clubs in the Premier and first divisions with specially set up study centres. While some academics have argued that drawing on conventional masculine cultures such as violent, competitive sports to tackle boys’ underachievement are counter-productive in that they entrench macho stereotypes (Epstein 1999; Francis 1999), others have commented that ‘anything has to be worth a try’ (Wragg 1999: 9).
Other solutions to addressing the problems boys may be experiencing can not only marginalize girls but also, occasionally, rehearse the gendered pedagogies and practices found to be operating in schools in the 1970s. For example, in the research report by Bleach et al. (1996) just mentioned, recommendations are made that subvert the findings of feminists which show that in the classroom girls’ needs are often ignored. Girls often experience difficulties in mixed sex groups where boys are monopolizing equipment and the teacher’s time, and demonstrating intimidatory or harassing behaviours (Clarricoates 1983; Jones 1985; Frith and Mahony 1994). However, these research findings have been disregarded in the recommendations by Bleach et al. (1996: 25):

Various approaches are being explored . . . for encouraging . . . boys to maintain a positive attitude . . . These include . . . giving boys a high profile in showing visitors around or performing in public, pairing boys with girls in group work to expose them to the ‘feminine’ skills of language and reflection . . .

Similarly, it is proposed by supporters influenced by recuperative approaches that more men teachers be encouraged into teaching to provide boys with male role models. Feminists have questioned the simplicity of the assumption that more men teachers would eradicate the problems many boys experience in school (Skelton 1994; Pepperell 1998; Smedley 1998). Indeed, there is ample evidence in studies of schooling of men teachers who adopt particular ‘macho’ styles of interaction often associated with the ‘lads’ (see Willis 1977; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Connolly 1998). As Penn (1998: 246) argues, ‘men do not necessarily modify their views on coming into a woman’s profession; they bring their masculinity . . . with them’.

There is, as yet, little evidence of programmes for boys in schools influenced by pro-feminist approaches where boys’ problems are located within a larger concern for social justice. The book by Salisbury and Jackson, Challenging Macho Values (1996), provided activities whereby teachers might work with boys to consider how they go about ‘doing’ masculinity. Similarly, Pickering (1997) offered schools and teachers various ways in which they could consider how masculinity was constructed within their own sites in order to identify the causes of the underachievement of the boys they taught.

Although a distinction is being drawn here between recuperative approaches and pro-feminist programmes, both tend to concentrate on interpersonal relationships. The reason for the focus on the ‘personal’ has been argued to be a result of pragmatism rather than ideology (Mills 1998), as opportunities for schools to deal with personal and social issues are dependent upon the spaces available between national curriculum subjects. At the same time, such distinctions are not part of the ‘language’ of the boys’ underachievement debate. Indeed, differences between the various ways of considering and tackling ‘boys’ underachievement’ have yet to be picked up by either the government or the media. The UK has yet to begin to address publicly
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who these ‘failing boys’ are and to see them in relation to girls who are also ‘failing’.

The Australian case: presumptive equality

Similarly in Australia boys are being constructed as the ‘new disadvantaged’. In fact, much of the rhetoric in the popular media in Australia about failing boys appears to be driven by a backlash mentality which is informed by the presumption that boys experience educational disadvantage in ways which are comparable to that of girls. The context of ‘presumptive equality’ has characterized the politicization of boys’ education in Australia over the past five years or so, in a trend very similar to that experienced in the UK and described by Weiner et al. (1997: 1) and Arnot et al. (1999) as a ‘moral panic’ that boys are the new disadvantaged in schooling. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that the focus on ‘failing boys’ in Australia also emerged as a reaction against girls’ apparent superior performance and is driven by a ‘recuperative masculinity politics’ grounded in discourses of presumptive equality (Foster 1996b).

We draw out further nuances and meanings in the term ‘presumptive equality’ as an explanatory framework for understanding contemporary trends in relation to issues of boys’ education in Australia and show how these are working rhetorically together. The particular discourse of presumptive equality (Foster 1995) is founded on a model of gender as equivalence in which the asymmetry of gender relations is ignored. This obfuscation of the ‘material pay-off’ (Connell 1994: 4) which men and boys enjoy as a result of their dominant position in the gender order and the social and political reality of ‘male advantage’ (Eveline 1995, 1998) permits simplistic notions such as the suggestion that men are the new second sex to gain popular acceptance. On this model, complex philosophical accounts of women’s secondary status such as that of de Beauvoir ([1949] 1972) herself (but see also Lloyd 1984; Pateman and Gross 1986; Code 1991; Gatens 1991, 1997; Luke and Gore 1992; Probyn 1993) are ignored and men’s place in gender relations is seen as roughly equivalent to women’s place, and of the same order of oppression.

Equal disadvantage, equal victims

Following from the equivalence model is the proposition that boys are as disadvantaged as girls, and now possibly more so. This is a seductive and emotive line which has appealed to some parents who are genuinely concerned about their sons’ development. Despite boys’ greater post-school rewards as a population and the higher resourcing of boys’ education extensively documented in a succession of national and state reports and in the gender and education literature, it is now held that schooling disadvantages boys. Warren Johnson, the Executive Officer of the New South Wales Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations, wrote in Education (1994)
that 'it is demonstrable that many boys are in states of educational, social and emotional distress and they are in genuine need of targeted resources'.

Johnson lists as evidence the already disproportionate resources going to boys, such as counselling and special placements, special classes for emotional and behaviour disturbance, intensive remedial classes. At present, several Sydney regions estimate that 90–95 per cent of these resources go to boys.

The construction of boys’ advantage in education as disadvantage is a rhetorical twist which increasingly has been used to great effect. Much of this rhetoric originated with health workers, psychologists and pop education writers who argued spuriously that inadequacies in boys’ schooling were the cause of what has become a familiar catalogue of problems: head injuries, suicides, male violence and so on. Learning difficulties were conflated with the social manifestations of the problems of masculinity, and these arguments were illogically applied to education in an effort to reframe what are primarily social problems as educational ones (for an excellent critique see Gilbert and Gilbert 1998).

Connell (1995: 208) argues that this process, which he calls ‘masculinity therapy’, relies on ‘a redefinition of power by shifting from the public world to the inner world of emotion’ and (p. 210) ‘a preoccupation with emotional relationships, a speculative method and a satisfaction with snippets of evidence’. Gilbert (1998: 21) describes ‘a conservative and potentially divisive men’s movement, which rejected feminism and wanted boys’ work to be seen as separate from the broader project of the democratic reform of schooling’.

Unsubstantiated and extreme claims of boys’ disadvantage are commonplace, such as that of Brown, who teaches at a prestigious Sydney boys’ independent school and who argued in the journal Gifted (1994) that we are creating a new ‘underclass’: gifted males! He urges that advocacy is needed for the white, male, Caucasian, non-migrant child. More common media representations are ‘girls are outperforming boys’; ‘girls are succeeding at the expense of boys’; ‘boys are struggling’; ‘boys are in deep trouble’, and these have been taken up as conventional wisdom. Media reporting of the 1998 New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC) results frequently referred to girls’ apparent success as ‘dangerous’.

**Girls’ educational ‘successes’**

Australia is typical of most western countries, where girls are now achieving statistically slightly better average school-leaving results than boys, in turn occasioning a hostile populist ‘backlash’ against this success (Foster 1996b; 1998; Martino and Meyenn, Preface, this volume). For example, a recent international collection (Mackinnon et al. 1998) argues that education in the twenty-first century will be ‘dangerous terrain’ for women.

In New South Wales, Australia (the largest state), the debate has focused almost exclusively on Higher School Certificate results, in what Gilbert (1996: 8) refers to as ‘a narrow reading of assessment figures’. Moreover, a rapidly
developing academic literature is providing an analysis and critique of claims of male disadvantage (for example, Connell 1994; Foster 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Gilbert and Gilbert 1995; Yates 1996; Weiner et al. 1997). An entire 1995 issue of the Swedish journal, Lararutbildning och Forskning i Umeå (Teacher Education and Research in Umeå) was devoted to the subject and at least two international collections are planned or recently published (Mackinnon et al. 1998; this volume). This literature demonstrates that there is very little common ground between academic research and populist discussions of gender differences in schooling and its outcomes.

As Weiner et al. (1997: 1) note, in the new populist discourse male failure in education is posited as a corollary of female success. They comment, however, that ‘although there is little evidence that girls’ improvement in examinations has been at the expense of boys, the predominant gender discourse in the mid 1990s is that of male underachievement’ (authors’ emphasis).

**Girls’ and boys’ different uses of schooling**

While media statements such as ‘girls are outperforming boys’ have become commonplace in both Australia and the UK, they are inaccurate in several ways. First, they confuse performance, or measured achievement, with participation – that is the number and composition of students. Second, they ignore the question of the inequities in post-school rewards for girls for the same or better achievement at school. These claims are typically based on the outstanding achievements of a small, select group of girls, not representative of the diverse female population, and ignore complex within-gender differences for both boys and girls. Most important, they obscure the crucial point that, to date, girls’ school achievement has had no positive impact on post-school career prospects for them. The latter have in fact deteriorated (Daniel 1993; Korosi et al. 1993; DETYA 2000).

Furthermore, recent Australian research (for example, Teese et al. 1995; NSW Board of Studies 1996; Yates and Leder 1996; Lamb and McKenzie 1999; DETYA 2000; Foster 2000a) shows that gender differences have emerged in students’ use of schooling as a credential, and in post-school rewards, where girls are faring worse than boys for the same or better achievement than them. The populist climate which sees boys as the new disadvantaged has obscured, first, the fact that there is no clear nexus between school achievement and post-school pathways for girls in the way there is for boys, and second, the question of why these pathways remain so restricted and limiting for girls, including the highest achievers.

**Origins of the discourse of male disadvantage: two rhetorical shifts**

In Australia at least, there have been two interrelated shifts in the discourses of disadvantage relating to gender. The first is in the rhetoric alleging that
boys are the new disadvantaged, as has already been discussed. It is interesting that some of the recently emerging academic literature on boys' education tends to decontextualize boys and men from their asymmetrical power relations with girls and women in society, and in education. For instance, in an entire 1998 issue of the journal Change: Transformations in Education, which was devoted to boys' education and published by the University of Sydney, discussion of girls' continuing inferior post-school outcomes was virtually non-existent, as was a consideration of the unchanging nature of the sexual division of labour in private domestic life (Wolcott and Glezer 1995; Bittman and Pixley 1997; Dempsey 1997).

The second shift is in the construction of girls themselves. In Australia, initial attempts to achieve greater educational equality for girls centred on positioning girls within a deficit framework, in which they were seen as lacking in relation to male norms of the educated person. Equity policies encouraged girls to measure up to those norms (Foster 1992). The following Education and Training Strategy for Women of the NSW Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs (1989) is an example of this deficit framework formulated as policy:

In schools, girls:

- have a low level of participation in technical and key science subjects and in highest level mathematics and science courses;
- consider a narrow range of options in making career choices;
- have lower levels of self-esteem.

It is clearly a major discursive shift from this earlier deficit framework to the current depiction of girls as actively succeeding, and even beating boys, in male educational terrain. It is significant that in Australia the most contested curriculum areas are the high-prestige male-dominated areas of mathematics and science. It was only in 1997 that in New South Wales for the first time a girl topped 4 Unit Mathematics, the most difficult level of study. Nevertheless, this was widely misconstrued in the media as girls collectively beating boys at maths and science, and over a longer period of time. Certainly a significant factor in the recent politicization of girls' school performance is the nature of the contested areas themselves and the casting of girls as interlopers and 'space invaders' (Foster 1996b; 1998) in high-status educational terrain assumed to be the natural preserve of males. One wonders about the news value of girls beating boys in life management, or child and family studies, or care, for example!

It is interesting that the 'What about the boys!' refrain is endemic in countries which have experienced quite different policy contexts. For instance, Mahony and Smedley (1998: 49) note significant differences between the British 'particularly hard version of economic rationalism' and the Australian policy framework which is to some degree underpinned by social justice and equity principles. The subtext of the refrain is that notions of educational
equality for girls entail taking something very crucial away from boys: their supremacy as learners, as well as the caretaking resources of women and girls, to which boys are assumed to be entitled. By contrast, male educational interests had earlier been strongly supported by a construction which emphasized girls as lacking, rather than viewing boys themselves as being advantaged (Eveline 1995).

Moral and ethical issues for boys

There is a great deal of evidence that boys’ curricular and life choices are severely circumscribed by dominant notions of masculinity, and the desire of many boys to eschew any association with the feminine or curriculum areas related to the private, domestic sphere (see for example, Collins et al. 1996; and DETYA 2000). Indeed, education can be seen to be concerned primarily with the initiation of young men as citizens into the ‘productive’ processes of society and its culture (Foster 1992: 58). In this context, women and girls are often cast in the role of caretakers of the learning environment (Foster 2000b) and of boys’ needs, according to what Pateman (1988: 126) calls an unspoken ‘sexual contract’ whereby the functions of caring, nurturance and emotional support are seen as belonging to women. The ways in which both boys and girls live the curriculum, in its broadest sense, reinforce this sexual contract.

On the other hand, the tenor of the current debates about boys and their schooling is having serious consequences for girls’ equal standing with boys as learner-citizens (Martino 1997; Foster 1997, 2000b; Arnot and Dillabough 2000). The very processes in schooling which aim to empower boys place girls in a contradictory and paradoxical relationship with the rhetoric of equal and democratic participation which characterizes much contemporary education discourse. An unspoken question is, what would happen to boys if girls do become boys’ equals as learners and stop being their caretakers? Interestingly, during the current backlash period in Australia, there has been no acknowledgment that girls’ equal or better achievement in male-dominated subjects would actually be beneficial for boys in that it would give them an opportunity to see girls in a new, healthier light as respected peers and equals. And how would both boys’ and girls’ development as learner-citizens be enhanced by a curriculum which foregrounded the values of caring in both public and private life?

These questions, however, are not being addressed in the current debates about the boys in England and Australia and have important implications for boys’ social, intellectual and emotional development, and for their futures as citizens able to participate in equal social and personal relations with women. This educational problem can only be addressed by school programmes which encourage boys to broaden their curricular and life choices, and their hopes and dreams for fulfilling human relationships.
Boy trouble in the US

In the United States similar anti-feminist and backlash discourses also appear to drive debates about the troubles boys are experiencing. In fact, some would go so far as to claim that there is a virtual war against boys in America. Best-sellers’ subtitles counsel us to ‘protect’ boys, to ‘rescue’ them. Moreover, these texts construct boys as failing at school, where their behaviour is increasingly seen as a problem. For instance, we read that boys are depressed, suicidal, emotionally shut down. Therapists advise anguished parents about boys’ fragility, their hidden despondence and depression, and issue stern warnings about the dire consequences if these problems are not addressed. What is important to highlight is that these kinds of discourses are not dissimilar to those informing the feminist backlash rhetoric driving debates about the boys in Australia and the UK.

For example, in the United States some argue that elementary schools are ‘feminizing’ boys. Gurian (1998) claims that, with testosterone surging through their limbs, the requirement that boys sit still, raise their hands, and take naps leads to ‘pathologizing what is simply normal for boys’. He states that boys are given the message that ‘boyhood is defective’. Virtually all the boy advocates invoke the same statistics: boys are four times more likely to kill themselves than girls, they are four times more likely to be diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, six times more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and fifteen times more likely to be the victim of a violent crime. In fact, there has been an explosion of boy books, most by therapists who alternate between psychological analyses of boys’ development and handy guides for raising good boys. In some senses, of course, the evidence is convincing that boys are in trouble – perhaps worse trouble than they have ever been. Yet most boy advocates misdiagnose the problem and thus offer the wrong course of treatment.

Boys should be boys

For some observers, boys will simply be boys – if only we would allow them. This means that grown-ups, and especially meddlesome women, have to get out of their way and stop criticizing them all the time. It is nature, not nurture, that supposedly propels boys towards loud rambustious play or sadistic experiments on insects. For example, therapist Michael Gurian (1996, 1998) adroitly points out the nearly unbearable pressures on young boys to conform to behaving in certain ways, to resort to violence to solve problems, to disrupt classroom decorum, to take risks – not because of peer culture, media violence, or parental influence, but because testosterone propels them towards aggression and violence. Feminists, Gurian argues, only make the problem worse, with an unyielding critique of the very masculinity that young boys are trying so desperately to prove.
The apologists’ over-reliance on biology lead them to misread the evidence, to overstate the difference between the sexes and ignore the differences among boys and girls. We have already demonstrated the effects of such a position in the UK and Australia in terms of how ‘failing boys’ are constructed as the ‘new disadvantaged’. It also leads writers like Gurian in the United States to celebrate masculinity as the simple product of that pubertal chemical elixir. Gurian (1998), for example, celebrates all masculine rites of passage ‘like military boot camp, fraternity hazings, graduation day, and bar mitzvah’ as ‘essential parts of every boy’s life’ (p. 151). However, the reports of boys dying at the hands of other boys on their bar mitzvah are not mentioned. Furthermore, his claim that boys have a harder time in school than girls ignores all reliable evidence from, for example, Sadker and Sadker’s (1994) Failing at Fairness. According to writers like Gurian, feminist emphases on gender discrimination, sexual harassment or date rape only humiliate boys and distract us from intervening constructively. These misdiagnoses lead to some rather chilling remedies. Gurian (1998) suggests reviving corporal punishment, both at home and at school – but only when administered privately with cool indifference and never in the heat of adult anger. He calls it ‘spanking responsibly’, though school boards and child welfare agencies might call it child abuse (p. 175). Such overly simplistic explanations, which rely on a biologically deterministic argument, ignore the evidence that boys are not just boys everywhere and in the same way. Few European nations would boast of such violent, homophobic and misogynist adolescent males. This begs the question: if it is all so biological, why are Norwegian or French or Swiss boys so different?

Boyhood as therapeutic opportunity

Another group of therapists eschew testosterone-tinged testimonials, and treat masculinity as an ideology that needs to be challenged. Kindlon and Thompson (1999) write that peers present a young boy with a ‘culture of cruelty’ in which he is forced to deny emotional neediness, ‘routinely disguise his feelings’ and end up feeling emotionally isolated. Pollack (1998) calls it the ‘boy code’ and the ‘mask of masculinity’ – a kind of swaggering posture that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic, impervious front. Pollack’s observations provide an important parallel to the work on girls. Gilligan’s (1997) astonishing and often moving work on adolescent girls describes how these assertive, confident and proud young girls ‘lose their voices’ when they reach adolescence. At the same moment, boys become more confident, even beyond their abilities. Boys suddenly find their voices – as girls lose confidence, boys seem to gain it – but it is the inauthentic voice of bravado, of constant posturing, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence. The boy code teaches them that they are supposed to be in power,
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and thus begin to act like it. In fact, recent research on the gender gap in school achievement illustrates that girls suppress ambition and boys inflate it. In other words, girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally ‘masculine’ educational arenas such as maths and science. Only the most able and most secure girls take such courses. Thus, their numbers tend to be few, and their grades high. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado (and many facing strong family pressure), are likely to over-value their abilities, to remain in programmes though they are less qualified and capable of succeeding.

This difference, and not some putative discrimination against boys, is the reason that girls’ mean test scores in maths and science are now, on average, approaching that of boys. Too many boys who over-value their abilities remain in difficult maths and science courses longer than they should; they pull the boys’ mean scores down. By contrast, few girls, whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to ‘trespass’ into a male domain, skew female data upwards. This is something that has been highlighted in the discussion about the dichotomy of ‘failing boys’ and ‘successful girls’ in the British and Australian contexts.

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences. Girls’ mean test scores in English and foreign languages, for example, also outpace boys. But this is not the result of ‘reverse discrimination,’ but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a ‘feminine’ subject. Research in Australia by Wayne Martino found that boys are uninterested in English because of what it might say about their (inauthentic) masculine pose. ‘Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic,’ commented one boy. ‘Most guys who like English are faggots,’ commented another. The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Stimpson (1998) recently put it sarcastically, ‘real men don’t speak French’. Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love it. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules, but rather one expresses one’s opinion about the topic and everyone’s opinion is equally valued. ‘The answer can be a variety of things, you’re never really wrong’, observed one boy. ‘It’s not like maths and science where there is one set answer to everything’ (see Martino 1997).

It is not the school experience that ‘feminizes’ boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. ‘The work you do here is girls’ work’, one school boy recently commented to a researcher. ‘It’s not real work.’ It’s the ideology of traditional masculinity that inhibits boys’ development as well as girls’ development. Boys eschew school work for the anti-intellectual rough and tumble; girls’ achievement is inhibited by the incessant teasing and harassment of those rough and tumble boys. Most therapeutic analyses, however, do not touch these questions; it is always fears suppressed, pain swallowed. Kindlon and Thompson (1999), for example, write that the ‘culture of cruelty imposes a code of silence on boys, requiring them to suffer without speaking of it and to be silent witnesses
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to acts of cruelty to others (p. 92). But where does it give them permission to become victimizers?

The complexities of the social experiences of boys and girls negotiating their way through adolescence and schooling, however, is largely ignored by these therapists who rely on their clinical practices for examples, but then generalize from their patients to all boys. And ‘all’ boys refers to middle-class, suburban, white, heterosexual boys. Cute blond boys stare at us from all the books’ covers, while inside the authors ignore large numbers of boys whose pain and low self-esteem may have to do with insecurities and anxieties that are somewhat more concrete. Gurian’s books disingenuously place one boy of colour on each cover, but no real discussion of race in the book. Similarly, Thompson and Kindlon generalize from their work at an elite prep school. This tendency to homogenize boys also extends to issues of sexuality. In much of the therapeutic literature there is a sense that all boys are white, middle-class and heterosexual. Most casually treat homosexuality, dropping in a brief mention, ‘explaining’ it as biological, and urging compassion and understanding before returning to the important stuff. Only Pollack devotes a sensitive and carefully thought-out chapter to homosexuality, dismissing biological claims and actually using the term ‘homophobia’.

Confronting privilege requires different strategies for intervention. Not surprisingly, the most coherent programmes are offered not by therapists at all. No ‘rescuing’ or ‘protecting’ for British high school teachers Salisbury and Jackson (1996) – they want, as their title indicates, to ‘challenge’ traditional masculinity, to disrupt the facile ‘boys will be boys’ model, and to erode boys’ sense of entitlement. And for community activist Paul Kivel (1999) (he co-founded the Oakland’s Men’s Project), raising boys to manhood means confronting racism, sexism, homophobia – both in our communities and in ourselves. Their books are loaded with hands-on practical advice to allow adolescents to raise issues, confront fears, overcome anxieties and allow teachers to dispel myths, encourage cooperation, and discourage violent solutions to perceived problems. The most valuable material helps boys deconstruct sexuality myths and challenge sexual harassment and violence. ‘We believe that masculine violence is intentional, deliberate, and purposeful’, claim Salisbury and Jackson. ‘It comes from an attempt by men and boys to create and sustain a system of masculine power and control that benefits them every minute of the day’ (p. 108). Both these books, in fact, are the only ones to recognize that not all boys are the same, and that one key to enabling boys to express a wider range of emotions is to challenge the power and privilege that is part of their cultural heritage.

The therapists know that being a boy can mean the isolation and chronic anxiety of having to prove your manhood every second. Boyhood is a constant, relentless testing of manhood. And it is also freedom from manhood’s responsibilities, and can mean the exhilaration of physical challenge and athletic triumph, the blushing, tentative thrill of first sexual exploration, the carefree play. However, boyhood also means the entitlement to get your
way, to be heard, the often invisible privileges that come from being a man, the ability to see your reflection (at least if you are also white and heterosexual) in virtually every television show, action-hero comic book and movie, and be seated at every board room in the nation. In short, boyhood is the entitlement to and the anticipation of power.

The ‘other’ boy crisis

Such an argument leads to the ‘real’ boy crisis in America – not the crisis of inverted proportions that claims boys are the new victims of a feminist-inspired agenda run amok. The real boy crisis usually goes by another name known as ‘teen violence,’ ‘youth violence,’ ‘gang violence,’ ‘suburban violence,’ ‘violence in the schools’. And girls are certainly not perpetuating such acts of violence. But imagine if all the killers in all the high school shootings in America – in Littleton, Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, and Jonesboro – were all black girls from poor families who lived instead in New Haven, Newark, or Providence. There would certainly be a national debate about inner-city poor black girls. The entire focus would be on race, class, and gender. The media would invent a new term for their behaviour, as with ‘wilding’ a decade ago. We would hear about the culture of poverty; about how living in the city breeds crime and violence; about some putative natural tendency among blacks towards violence. Someone would even blame feminism for causing girls to become violent in vain imitation of boys. Yet the obvious fact that these school killers were all middle-class white boys seems to have escaped most people’s attention.

The real boy crisis is a crisis of violence, about the cultural prescriptions that equate masculinity with the capacity for violence. This is supported by the following statistics:

- Men and boys are responsible for 95 per cent of all violent crimes in this country.
- Every day twelve boys and young men commit suicide – seven times the number of girls.
- Every day eighteen boys and young men die from homicide – ten times the number of girls.
- From an early age, boys learn that violence is not only an acceptable form of conflict resolution, but one that is admired.
- Four times more teenage boys than teenage girls think fighting is appropriate when someone cuts into the front of a line.
- Half of all teenage boys get into a physical fight each year.

The belief that violence is manly is not a trait carried on any chromosome, not soldered into the wiring of the right or left hemisphere, not juiced by testosterone (it is still the case that half the boys do not fight, most do not carry weapons, and almost all do not kill: are they not boys?). Boys learn it.
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Violence, Gilligan (1997) writes, 'has far more to do with the cultural construction of manhood than it does with the hormonal substrates of biology' (p. 223).

**Feminism and the boy crisis**

Feminism has been helpful in this sense because it has offered the most trenchant critique of that cultural construction. The women’s movement accomplished, at least partly, two important goals. First, women challenged all forms of gender discrimination – against both women and girls. Through every portal once closed to women – every profession, including the science and medicine, the military and its training colleges, every college and university – women have marched, despite all the putative biological evidence that women could not accomplish this, or, if they could, that they should not want to do it. As a result, the women’s movement offered to young women a set of new role models – strong, accomplished, assertive, competent, creative. More young girls idealize Mia Hamm these days than boys idolize Michael Jordan. Here boys have been left behind. Gone are the bastions of untrammeled masculinity, the Virginia Military Institutes and the fire departments, Princeton and Yale. Despite all the models that encourage girls to be strong and assertive, there are precious few that encourage boys (or men, for that matter) to be as compassionate as they are competent, as able to express emotions as they are to excel professionally. These days, it is far easier for a girl to be a tomboy than a boy to be a sissy.

Feminism has also changed the rules of conduct – in the workplace, where sexual harassment is no longer business as usual, on dates, where attempted date rape is no longer ‘dating etiquette’, and in schools, where both subtle and overt forms of discrimination against girls – from being shuffled off to home economics when they want to take physics, or excluded from military schools and gym classes, to anatomy lectures using pornographic slides have been successfully challenged. Moreover, there have also been legal cases that have confronted bullying, and sexual harassment by teachers and peers.

In addition, feminism has offered a blueprint for a new boyhood and masculinity based on a passion for justice, a love of equality, and expression of a fuller emotional palette. So it is not surprising that feminists will be blamed for male bashing. In fact, it would appear that the anti-feminist right wing are the real male bashers. When apologists like Michael Gurian – or, in Australia, Steve Biddulph – claim that boys will be boys, they are promoting a particular version of masculinity which is treated unproblematically as an effect of biological sex differences. In fact, over a decade ago, feminist critic Miedzian (1991) offered the only reasonable response to these insulting images of an unchangeable hard-wired violent manhood. Even if we assume that the propensity for violence is innate, the inevitable fruition of that
prenatal testosterone cocktail, we still must decide whether to organize society so as to maximize boys' 'natural' predisposition towards violence, or to minimize it. Biology alone cannot answer that question, and claiming that boys will be boys only leads us to abandon our social and political responsibility.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to address some of the complexities and problems surrounding the ways in which boys' educational issues in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have been articulated. What we have emphasized is that boys have emerged as a target for specific problematization by the popular media, certain educationists and men's movement advocates in terms which are governed by a particular feminist backlash rhetoric. In this sense, attention has been drawn to the fact that the problems boys are experiencing in schools and the wider society are not new (Cohen 1998). Moreover, in these times such problems are often understood to be attributed to the direct exclusionary effects of a feminist political agenda designed to promote the interests of girls. We believe that it is important for those involved in curriculum development, teaching and policy formulation in schools and education departments to gain a detailed understanding of the politicized nature of the ways in which these debates about the boys have been conducted and in so doing develop an informed perspective on how to address the issues facing boys and girls in school.

Notes

1 Each contributor submitted an account of the boys' education debate in his or her own country which was then worked into the chapter in its present form by the editors of the book. We would like to emphasize that no one author is responsible for the words of the other.

2 'Wilding' was a term that was invented by the media in the aftermath of the brutal assault and gang rape of a young white female investment banker by a group of young black and Latino males in Central Park, New York City. It referred to the way that these young minority youths were out of control, and enjoyed sexual and physical predation as sport or simply a way to pass the time.

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