

Contextualising and Utilising the ‘What about the Boys?’ Backlash for Gender Equity Goals¹

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Introduction

The ‘What about the boys?’ refrain in contemporary educational discourse is one element of a broader masculinity politics which attempts to argue that men are the new disadvantaged and that masculinity is under siege and in crisis in the face of the putative success of the feminist reform project. The rise of mythopoetic and men’s rights manifestations of masculinity politics—what has been called the ‘recuperative’ arm of such politics which attempts to reassert male privilege and to re-emphasise an essentialist masculinity (Lingard & Douglas 1999)—is also linked to a range of other backlashes in the face of the multifarious ‘manufactured uncertainties’ (Giddens 1994) which accompany globalisation in its various forms, economic, political and cultural. The new racisms evident in the political articulations of Le Pen in France, the National Front in other parts of Europe, One Nation in Australia, are also linked to the pervasive insecurities and economic depredations which globalisation of the economy produces when national responses are of a crude economic rationalist kind. But just as the ugliness of these backlash national chauvinisms perhaps has opened up some potential space for more thoughtful social democratic political responses to globalisation, so too with the recuperative men’s movement and the ‘What about the boys?’ call in education.

This paper attempts thus to do two things. First, it seeks to contextualise these recuperative masculinity discourses within these broader frames, while at the same time acknowledging the shortcomings of backlash accounts (Roman & Eyre 1997, McLeod 1998). Thus, it is suggested that the rise of such politics, while being related to a reaction against feminism, is also correlative to the impact of globalisation. This contextualisation involves some consideration of how these issues have been dealt with in the media and in other cultural productions. Secondly, while greater emphasis is given to contextualising recuperative masculinity politics in schooling, an argument is also proffered that the concern for boys’ schooling, manifest as a focus on underachievement in the UK, a concern about underachievement and antisocial male behaviour in Australia, potentially can be utilised towards the goal of gender justice (cf. Mills & Lingard 1997a, b). Feminists have long recognised that boys and men need to change if feminist goals are to be achieved. While the proliferation of feminisms under the effects of what we might call ‘post’ theorising has complicated such politics (cf. McLeod 1998), ‘gender multiculturalism’, as Bob Connell (1995) has called it, which encourages and supports multiple ways of practising masculinity and femininity within a more equal gender order, remains a central goal of such politics.

The approach taken to masculinity politics in this paper is one of pro-feminism (Douglas 1994; Connell 1995, pp. 220–224; Flood 1997; Messner 1997; Lingard & Douglas 1999). This is not the place to deconstruct the concept of pro-feminism (see Lingard & Douglas 1999), but suffice to say that there is always a tension in such

¹ This paper has developed out of a forthcoming book (1999) *Men Engaging Feminisms Pro-feminism, Backlashes and Schooling* (Buckingham, Open University Press) by Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas.

masculinity politics concerning the balance between focusing upon the costs (and pain) associated with masculinity, notions which require considerable theorising in their own right, and support for feminism, with Vic Seidler's (1994, 1997) work fitting into the former camp and Bob Connell's (1995) the latter. There is the additional question of which feminism pro-feminist men ought to be pro, a question not pursued here (see Messner 1997, Lingard & Douglas 1999).

Before turning to the argument of the paper, some brief comment is required about the actual reality of male/female differential performance in education, along with a succinct comment about backlash. A deconstruction of the data on changing patterns of male/female school performance rejects the essentialising of girls and boys, of young women and young men in that debate. We need to consider which boys we are talking about—middle class boys, working class boys, black boys? and which girls? Such analysis also rejects the stance of 'presumptive equality' which underpins most 'What about the boys?' calls, an assumption which simply equates females and males as equivalent but different populations (Foster 1994), neglecting the power differentials between them.

What is the picture then regarding male/female performance in schooling? (see Teese Davies, Charlton & Polesel 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert 1998; Lingard & Douglas 1999 for detailed accounts of the data here.) Some gains have been made by females in respect of retention to the end of secondary schooling, in access to university and in academic performance, but still on a terrain which valorises what we might call technical rational versions of masculinist school subjects such as the maths and the sciences. Middle class girls are doing maths and sciences in greater numbers in postcompulsory secondary schooling and challenging their middle class male counterparts for the highest grades, but many more boys continue to do these subjects. Thus crude comparisons of male/female performance on these subjects need to consider which boys and which girls we are talking about. Often the performance of middle class girls in high status subjects is compared with the poor performance of working class boys on these same subjects and the deduction made, that all girls are now outperforming all boys, a patently absurd notion. Heavy gender segmentation of the curriculum remains with girls choosing a broader range of subjects than boys with apparently limited support in schools for broadening boys' subject choices in the postcompulsory years (Collins et al. 1996). Boys choose humanities and social science subjects in much smaller numbers than girls, a pattern also reproduced for modern languages.

Social class remains an important 'determinant' of school performance and works together with gender so that middle class boys by and large perform better than working class and Aboriginal boys, with the same class differentials being true for girls. In respect of literacy, over which there has been much media and policy concern, girls do better than boys. However, this picture is once again complicated if we factor in social class, race and ethnicity. In terms of anti-social and destructive behaviours, both inside and outside school: boys dominate the statistics for school suspensions and expulsions, suicide, road deaths, delinquent and criminal behaviour and so on. These statistics reflect the toxic elements of hegemonic masculinity, but also suggest that something needs to be done about them—a concern for social justice demands no less.

We also know that the conversion of these (limited) educational gains (for some girls) into post-school gains for young women in relation to careers, income and life trajectory are still somewhat limited when compared with the pay-offs for their male counterparts. Furthermore, it is doubtful if girls and women feel any safer now as they go about their everyday and everynight activities than they did in the past. The evidence on schooling

also indicates a considerable amount of harassment of girls by boys (and of boys by boys and of female teachers by boys) (Collins et al. 1996). Despite this situation, there is a way in which for young and successful men and women, educationally and in career terms, there is something of what Sylvia Walby calls a ‘gender convergence’ (1997, p. 2) under way. At the same time, there are economic and life trajectory polarisations between generations of women (Walby 1997) and amongst young males (in class terms), and amongst young females (in class terms), as globalization of the economy and a politics of post-welfarism together produce redundant populations and underclasses (Bauman 1997). The transitions from school at compulsory leaving age to apprenticeships and skilled blue collar jobs for many boys from working class backgrounds have been disrupted and in many cases destroyed as labour markets change. Paul Willis’s working class boys now often learn how not to labour. More generally, the broader labour market shows a decline in the full-time labour force participation for men and an increase for women; nonetheless, men still dominate the full-time labour market.

The contemporary call for a focus on boys’ schooling is usually accompanied by the assumption that the feminist reform agenda generally and in schooling specifically has achieved its goals. (See Yates (1997) for a deconstruction of this type of account.) However, any review of the school performance data would suggest that the challenge to the success of middle class boys is coming from a select group of high achieving academically oriented girls who now challenge these boys on their own terrain as part of the trend towards middle class gender convergence. The goals of the feminist reform project in school were always much broader than this. And as noted, these gains for this select group of girls do not convert into equal life chances beyond schooling. And working class, poor and Aboriginal boys continue to do badly, but this is not new news, while girls from similar backgrounds do little better.

When set against these performance data, this assumption indicates a backlash is at work, particularly if one accepts Susan Faludi’s (1991) narrow conception of backlashes as episodic and historical occurrences in response to the perception, correct or otherwise, that ‘women are making great strides’ (p. xix), with small gains here often read as ‘great strides’. There is another backlash element at work if one understands that at the same time as many of ‘What about the boys?’ protagonists reject that girls and women are in any way disadvantaged as a group, they are attempting to mount an argument that boys as a group are the new disadvantaged in schooling and that feminism has contributed to this situation. While backlash is reasonably useful in a political and strategic sense, it is inadequate as a conceptual and theoretical device for explaining what is going on; it fails to recognise structural changes and theoretical developments within feminism itself, and works with an inadequate account of history (cf. Roman & Eyre 1997, McLeod 1998), shortcomings raised at various points in the argument which follows.

Contextualising masculinity politics

As already noted, the rise of backlash politics must be seen in the context of the depredations of a globalised economy, the social disinvestment of post-Keynesianism and contemporary ‘manufactured uncertainties’, the problems created by human interventions in both the social and natural worlds (Giddens 1994). The result has been redundant populations—those experiencing long term unemployment—and a growing inequality between the haves and the have nots, who are ‘supported’ by a much meaner welfare

system most often targeted on improving the 'employability' of the socially redundant rather than the creation of jobs. Wark (1997) has argued that the confluence of what he calls 'social rationalism'—a society which only rewards those with the right credentials irrespective of ascribed features to do with gender and race—with economic rationalism—which ensures a bleak employment future for many, as well as a widespread feeling of job insecurity—together form the backdrop to the politics of resentment and backlashes of various types. For example, emergent backlash national chauvinisms and new racisms. The social rationalisation element of this pairing has seen a range of progressive social policies, including anti-discrimination, affirmative action, multi-culturalism and the like, as manifestations of what Nancy Fraser (1995) has called the success of a politics of recognition as opposed to a politics of redistribution, across the last couple of decades. Difference has had more political clout than material inequality. Wark thus argues that the two—social and economic rationalisation—have worked in a symbiotic relationship with each other and led to the attacks on affirmative action and equal opportunity programs which seek to remove the barriers to opportunity and has reconstituted these progressive policy developments as privileging certain groups—thus the attack on so-called 'political correctness'. The gap between those with the right credentials for the new globalised labour markets and those without also spawned the politics surrounding 'the battlers', particularly the male, blue-collar, urban and rural working class. Angry white males became a target group for political parties of both right and left. Trends in male and female participation in the labour market also contributed to an accompanying gender politics; the gender convergence which Walby (1997) speaks of also precipitated a gender backlash, while at the same time feminism in all its forms has directly challenged men.

As Michael Kimmel (1996) has suggested, over the last twenty-five years or so, feminism has changed very considerably the expectations and experiences of women. Women have demanded equality with men in all spheres of life or alternatively their reconstitution to better meet the needs of all. Those changes have affected, as well as challenged, men in different ways. At the broadest level, Kimmel observes, feminism has ensured the widespread recognition of gender as a central organiser of social life. That recognition has also 'granted' men a gender; no longer are men, or rather European middle class men, the silent voice of theory and progress, but rather their interested and partisan positionality in contemporary political and social debates has been laid bare by this recognition, as has the very construction of the selective tradition of history. The male voice is yet another standpoint, but one infused with power. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* showed how the equation of male experience with human experience *per se* 'othered' women, and feminists have challenged the practice of regarding women as other. As Susan Bordo (1997, pp. 192–193) puts it: 'As cultural critics, feminist theorists have produced powerful challenges: to dominant conceptions of human nature and political affiliation, to norms of scientific, philosophical, and moral reason, to ideals of spirituality, to prevailing disciplinary identities and boundaries, and to established historical narratives'.

Kimmel also argues feminism has been an important element in the vastly increased participation of women in the paid workforce. Other factors have also been at play here, including changes in contraceptive and reproductive technologies and changes in the structure of the economy and labour markets in the face of globalisation, including downward pressures upon wages. This change has also affected work opportunities for men, as well as relationships between men and women within the workplace. A confluence of factors has ensured widespread insecurity regarding jobs, while the move to more

service oriented economies in 'western', 'post-industrial' societies in the context of globalisation, has witnessed the collapse of many traditional working class male jobs, a scenario which was the focus of the British film *The Full Monty*. Middle class men have also been challenged to some degree by 'career women'. Writing about the US situation Kimmel & Kaufman (1995) have noted:

Although...economic, political and social changes have affected all different groups of men in radically different ways, perhaps the hardest hit *psychologically* were middle-class, straight, white men from their late twenties through their forties. For these were the men who not only inherited a prescription for manhood that included economic autonomy, public patriarchy, and the frontier safety valve, they were also men who believed themselves entitled to the power that attended upon the successful demonstration of masculinity (Kimmel & Kaufman 1995, p. 18).

Feminism has also led to a greater demand by women that men take a fairer share of domestic labour and child care. In their Australian research, Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (1997) show how a vast majority of men accept that there ought to be equal participation by both sexes in domestic labour and child care, but that the actual reality is a far cry from that commitment, with women still bearing the greatest burden of all aspects of domestic labour. They thus speak of this aspect of male/female relationships within the home as one of 'pseudomutuality' (1997, p. 81), where the acknowledgment of the ideal of mutual responsibility for domestic labour does not translate into practice. Nonetheless, there has been some challenge to men here, if more at the level of ideology than practice.

The final change wrought by feminism, according to Kimmel, is the demand by women for reconstituted intimate and sexual relationships with their partners, as well as women's reconstitution of their own sexuality and sexual pleasures. Anthony Giddens (1992) in *The Transformation of Intimacy* has written about this latter change in some detail, documenting the emergence of what he calls 'plastic sexuality' and 'pure relationships', as sexual experience has been emancipated from reproduction and potentially from the 'rule of the phallus' (1992, p. 2) in conditions of greater male/female equality in intimate relations. Women's demands for the equalisation of relationships inherent in the transformation of intimacy also have potential implications, Giddens argues (1992: Chapter 10—'Intimacy as Democracy'), for public forms of democracy and the organisation of the economy. Now, one might be able to debate the extent to which this women (and feminist) driven transformation or even revolution, as Giddens suggests it is, has actually occurred in sexual relations, but there is clearly veracity in the observation that some changes have occurred in these respects. These also provide a challenge to men with the publicity given to the release of Viagra indicative of some of these pressures.

Thus Kimmel (1996) is suggesting there are both structural and individual, public and private, challenges to the various forms of dominant or hegemonic masculinity. As already noted, the 1997 British film hit, *The Full Monty*, deals with many of these challenges to contemporary masculinities in a humorous, telling and analytical, yet perhaps depressing fashion. The resonances of the film with contemporary audiences—its 'bardic function' (McCarthy 1998)—is indicative of the efficacy of Kimmel's observations regarding changes, or more aptly demands for changes by women, and their impact upon men, set against the manufactured uncertainties of the contemporary postmodern world and rapidly globalising economy. Issues concerning men and feminism generally, and more specifically

men and feminist reforms in schooling, are thus also framed by a melange of political, economic and cultural changes contingent upon globalization and related challenges to the modernist political project. These changes also provide some pointers as to desirable goals for gender reform in schools which focuses on both boys and girls in a relational rather than zero sum fashion, and considers the role for men in such reforms—ideas which are taken up in the final section of this paper. Before turning briefly to a consideration of how recuperative masculinity politics can be reclaimed for gender justice in schooling, the next section of the paper considers the bardic function of cultural representations of masculinity politics as another element in the contextualisation of the call for a focus on boys' issues in schooling.

The cultural production of masculinity politics

Many of us had the experience of learning a new word in our vocabulary during our formal education and then discovering it everywhere we read, almost as if our learning of the word brought its greater use into being. My experience of the question of men and feminisms is similar—it is everywhere, throughout popular culture and the media, as well as the texts of high culture and theory. The same can be said of a perception of masculinity as 'under siege, on the defensive and under reconstruction' (Kenway 1995). And again in relation to men, boys, feminisms and schooling. There has been a 'discursive explosion' (Bordo 1997, p. 146) about these matters throughout western culture and in a Foucauldian sense, such discourses are simultaneously both repressive and productive.

For instance, many of the novels I have read recently seem to deal with a politics of masculinity one way or another. Think of Pat Barker's trilogy about the first World War—*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*—which is historicist in the sense that contemporary issues to do with masculinity politics are played out and analysed in an earlier time. Interestingly, tender and caring relations between men are established in the context of the destructive collapse of the social arrangement under conditions of total war; as Pat Barker the author puts it: 'One of the paradoxes of war—one of the many—was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was ... domestic, [c]aring' (1992. p. 107). Throughout the trilogy, there is also the hint of an intimate relationship between specific masculinities and sexuality in the life of one of the key protagonists, the bi-sexual working class officer, Prior. Think of the social theorist and proto politician, David D'Anger, one of the central characters in Margaret Drabble's *The Witch of Exmoor* (1996), who thinks of himself as the 'New Millennial Black British Man' (1996, p. 21), practising a hybrid, post-colonial masculinity. Again, T. Coraghessan Boyle's American novel, *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), is concerned with gender role reversals, as well as race politics linked to the globalization of the economy, and the paradoxical pursuit of the American dream by an illegal Mexican migrant couple in Los Angeles who practise traditional gender relations, while the 'successful' American couple with whose lives theirs interconnects and to which they aspire, practise otherwise—he a sensitive new age man, a journalist on an environmental magazine and responsible for child care and domestic duties and she a high flying realtor. In almost a backlash fashion, Fay Weldon's quirky recent novel, (1997) *Big Women*, deals with feminism (in publishing) and also its effect upon men—'men are people too'—including the often tense and non-communicative generational relations between fathers and sons, wrought by changes in masculinity which have resulted from feminist critiques. Pursuing this men as the new victims line a little further, in an article in *The*

Guardian newspaper on 4 December 1997, Weldon asked if feminism had perhaps gone too far, because boys and men were now in a sorry state, while girl power was triumphant.

Contemporary films are also replete with concerns about masculinities, and their relationships with feminisms. As already pointed out, the British hit film, *The Full Monty*, is the most recent and one of the best informed in a sociological sense, as it deals with the impact of globalization upon working class men and their masculinities as traditional labour markets have been destroyed and replaced by an entrepreneurial culture which demands a performative self, but not the performative self of all, as indicated by the creation of long term unemployed and an underclass. The film's screenwriter, Simon Beaufoy, has been quoted as saying the film's success has obscured 'the sadness at its heart: the disenfranchisement of working-class men' (Barber 1998, p. 23). The Kevin Kline comedy, *In and Out*, has a wonderful scene where the chief protagonist, who is going through an awakening in respect of his (homo)sexuality, practises walking and gesturing on the advice of a 'how to' cassette about 'doing' hegemonic masculinity which demands a particular disciplining of the body. The Michael Douglas character in the 1994 'anti-feminist, proto-resentment' film, *Disclosure*, is 'the great twentieth-century suburban middle-class male victim, flattened and spread out against the surface of a narcotic screen' (McCarthy 1998, p. 85). Susan Bordo, in her analysis of this screen version of Michael Crichton's best-selling novel, rejects the producer's claim this is 'just a movie, not a polemic', and in contrast notes that 'both the novel and the film read like a litany from the white male hell of contemporary gender politics' (1997, p. 141). As she also argues, pursuit of the question of whether or not a woman can harass a man requires consideration of the structural inequalities, including power, between men and women. The analysis in *Disclosure*, as with much of mythopoetic and men's rights argument, eschews such structural analysis. Instead, they operate from the stance of 'presumptive equality'. A number of contemporary television programs play on the rise of the 'new laddism' in response to feminism; the British series, *Men Behaving Badly* is the archetype here. Angry white males have been all over the US media and films since the eighties. Think of the Michael Douglas angry white male character in *Falling Down*, or the 1997 film *In the Company of Men*, which as one critic put it, seems to confirm Germaine Greer's observation in the *Female Eunuch* that 'Women have very little idea of how much men hate them' (Slattery 1998, p. 5).

In quite a different mode, the films of Canadian film-maker David Cronenberg ponder the boundaries between old and emergent forms of masculinity and between masculinity and femininity. For instance, *M. Butterfly* depicts a French diplomat in Beijing who falls in love with a Chinese opera singer to whom he discloses state secrets only to eventually discover 'she' is a 'he', while characters in the controversial *Crash* transgress the boundaries of hetero and homo sexuality. As Ramsay (1996, pp. 84–85) notes, 'In his films male characters do not colonise, withstand, or overcome the body, the feminine, the irrational, or the unconscious: They collapse into them'.

Current affairs programs regularly take up the What about the boys? issues in relation to schooling. For example, in October, 1995 the BBC's highly rated current affairs program, *Panorama*, ran a program entitled *Men Aren't Working*, which contrasted the negative school and post-school experiences of a group of young men with the more positive performances of their female counterparts (see Heath forthcoming). This program essentialised males and females, failing to ask which males and which females this phenomenon related to. The influential Australian television current affairs program, *Four Corners*, ran a much discussed program entitled *What about the boys?* in July, 1994,

which, *inter alia*, articulated the concerns of some feminist mothers with their sons' schooling and which sat in an intertextual relationship with the O'Doherty Inquiry into boys' education in New South Wales.

Newspapers and magazines throughout the West have been full of articles about the reconstitution and defence of masculinities under dual pressures from feminism and changing labour markets—all amplified by the contemporary condition of uncertainty. For example, 'Men must help men, for crying out loud' (*The Australian*, 1 May 1995), 'Why masculinity is for losers' (*The Observer* 29 October 1995), 'Catch Eastwood to study men; academic interest in what it means to be masculine may be turning into a new campus rite of passage in the US' (*The Straits Times* (Singapore), 30 November 1996), 'Altered States: The 'feminisation of America' is a paradox. It is a triumph of the feminist movement—and a sign of anti-feminist backlash' (*The Courier Mail*, 11 January 1997), 'New Women Old Men' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 1997), 'Bourbon, bullets and beer: the blokes' book that kisses PC goodbye' (*The Australian*, 15 July 1997), 'Secret men's business: Far from being absent in the cultural world, manhood is everywhere' (*The Australian*, 4 March 1998), 'Law to make men share housework' (*The Courier-Mail*, 3 April 1998), 'What's the snag for 90s men: Misogynist predator or feminist victim?' (*The Weekend Australian*, 4–5 April 1998), 'The Descent of Men' (*The Weekend Australian* 13–4 June 1998).

With the increasing globalization of culture, many of these articles have been syndicated in various newspapers across the world. Perhaps the best case in point here is an article which first appeared in *The Economist* in England on 28 September 1996, entitled 'Tomorrow's Second Sex', which appropriates de Beauvoir's characterisation of women in her feminist classic of the same title, to refer to the likely future status of men. This article has been syndicated across a huge range of newspapers in many countries and precipitated much debate in men's movement circles. The opening of the article basically summarises its argument; it suggests that boys are doing worse than girls at school, women dominate jobs that are growing (see Weiner, Arnot & David 1997 for a critique here), men will not try to do women's work, 'joblessness reduces the attractiveness of men as marriage partners', and without marriage and work men become lawless. In summary, the article suggests that men 'are failing at school, at work and in families' and that this cannot totally be explained by economic changes, rather 'male behaviour and instincts' are involved (1996, p. 23). There is much one could say about this article and its arguments, but suffice to say here that the data on male/female school performance, as noted earlier are much more complex than this article suggests. While more women are entering the work force, male/female wage differentials remain substantial even with the same qualifications, the labour market continues to be heavily gender segmented with women concentrated in sales and service, and career progression between males and females remains disparate and unequal. Apparent male 'lawlessness', and we would add imprisonment rates, can be linked to the economic depredations of globalization which have produced an underclass and what Bauman (1997, ch. 3) calls a transition from the welfare state to prison, as well as 'jobless ghettos' (Wilson 1997), and a widening gap between the rich and the poor who have become more numerous. I would also reject the essentialist biological reductionism of *The Economist* article with respect to those behaviours which are described as instinctual. (See also Gilbert & Gilbert (1998, pp. 36–46) for a critique of biological reductionist accounts.)

One could draw up a long list of newspaper articles from around the world which also deal with the boys' question in education and the related issue to do with the reduction in

numbers of male teachers. A brief selection of mainly Australian articles will be provided here to give something of the flavour. And I should add that as I was completing this paper such articles just kept coming! Concerning boys: 'The Trouble with Boys' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1995), 'Suspensions from school: boys top the class' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1996), 'How to keep the beast out of the boy' (*The Australian*, 23 May 1997), 'Closed Book Boys: Chapter and Verse' (*The Courier-Mail*, 4 October 1996), 'Nobody loves us, everybody hates us...Why today's teenage boys have become pariahs' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 1997), 'Boys to men' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 22 March 1998). The latter article quite presciently observed:

It struck me that the girls I see around school have the latitude to play sports, wear makeup, be tough or soft, smart or silly. They've benefited from a women's movement that has allowed them a wider range of roles. Yet the boys seem stuck in 1950, clinging to stereotypes of the Marlboro Man and James Bond (Ryan 1998, p. 4).

Concerning male teachers: 'Classrooms need men' (*The Courier-Mail*, 26 October 1995), 'Men Wanted: Must Be Good Role Models' (*The Courier-Mail*, 14 March 1996), 'Men, Young Turning From Teaching, Principals Told' (*The Courier-Mail*, 5 October 1996), 'Men wanted as Teachers' (*The Sunday-Mail*, 13 October 1996), 'It's Goodbye Mr Chips—Guys give our schools a miss' (*The Sunday-Mail*, 12 January 1997), 'Sex Traps for Men Teachers' (*The Sunday Mail*, 26 January 1997). These articles contribute to some sort of panic about the low numbers of male teachers, while also documenting the 'sex traps' which keep men out of teaching, particularly in the early childhood domain. This lack is often linked to the prevalence of single parent families (usually headed by a woman). For example, the then Queensland Minister for Education was reported as saying: 'In today's society, we've got boys who will never have a male teacher in their school life and, at the same time, don't have a male at home' (*The Courier-Mail*, 14 March 1996). The US bestseller, *Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem*, by David Blankenhorn (1996), also articulates a similar concern about single female headed families.

This documentation is relevant because cultural representations of all sorts are both 'productive and generative', not merely mimetic in mode (McCarthy 1998, p. 87). Cameron McCarthy (1998, p. 87) notes, 'In this sense, popular culture—the world of film noir and the B movie, of tabloids and the mainstream press—constitutes a relentless pulp mill of social fiction of transmuted and transposed power'. All these cultural forms, he suggests, fulfil 'a certain bardic function, singing back to society lullabies about what a large cross section and hegemonic part of it "already knows"' (1998, p. 83), reinforcing their beliefs and working against attempts to alter social patterns of gender relations.

This bardic function is perhaps no where more obvious than with the 'backlash blockbusters' (Mills 1997, p. 11)—a range of books throughout a number of countries which have become best-sellers and which articulate the need for men to seek their true (essentialist) masculinity and which are to varying extents either more or less antagonistic to feminism. Warren Farrell's (1994) *The Myth of Male Power* is probably the most egregious of these, particularly given the transmogrification from his earlier pro-feminist stance. Robert Bly's (1991) *Iron John* is another of these bestsellers and, despite its North American cultural flavour of therapeutic self-help, has been widely influential beyond those shores. Bly's neo-Jungian account of masculinity seeks to reinstate men's traditional

role of initiating boys through various rites of passage towards manhood. There is some echo of this position in the contemporary call for more male teachers, particularly in primary schools. The more pertinent questions are which sorts of males providing which sorts of role models, and a recognition that the homosociality of all male environments can reinforce sexist behaviour rather than ameliorate it. Consider here for a moment the culture of all male senior management, football clubs, all boys' schools, male university colleges. Interestingly, Seidler's (1997) *Man Enough*, written from a pro-feminist position and rejecting Bly's essentialism and neo-Jungian stance, nonetheless accepts Bly's call for new ways for boys to become new sorts of men, while also accepting that there is a crisis of masculinities in western societies.

In Australia, the books of psychologist Steve Biddulph—*Manhood: A book about setting men free* (1994) and *Raising Boys* (1997), have been extremely successful in a small market, also indicating their bardic function in respect of contemporary confusions and defensiveness about masculinities. Biddulph's *Manhood* echoes some of the essentialist posturings of Bly's arguments when he speaks of the need for men to retrieve the 'repressed memory' of the masculinity of Cro-Magnon man who was 'wise, tough, skilful, nurturing, courageous and in touch with the forces of the universe' (Biddulph 1994, p. 166). I have found that it is Biddulph's work which Australian teachers who are interested in boys' issues in school have read and this is explicable, given the lack of material in the domain. In Biddulph's favour is that he problematises masculinity, even if in an essentialist fashion, and he also recognises the need for feminism. And at least his books have opened up the debate. The somewhat more reactionary views of Farrell are also articulated by those males in the teaching profession who take an ugly stance on feminist reforms. However, a more common stance today is for teachers, including male school administrators, to argue that feminism has succeeded with girls in schools—women and girls have remade themselves over the last twenty years or so, there is now a pressing need for men and boys to remake themselves, as one school principal explained to me in a recent conversation—and thus there is a requirement now for boys' policies. In this context, the backlash blockbusters appear to offer some 'easy' solutions to very busy educators whose work has been intensified through the performative culture of restructuring and who often require 'quick fixes' on the run, as it were. And more theoretically sophisticated and practical accounts such as Jonathan Salisbury and David Jackson's (1996) pro-feminist book, *Challenging Macho Values: Practical Ways of Working with Adolescent Boys*, do not make the bestseller lists anyway, probably for the same reasons that Biddulph's does. Further, some excellent and sophisticated feminist accounts (for example, Sylvia Walby 1997) also appear to overstate the case concerning girls catching up with and outperforming boys in education.

Of course, there have been instructive and populist accounts of backlash written from a feminist perspective which have been successful sellers, for example, Susan Faludi's (1991) *Backlash: the Undeclared War against Women* and Marilyn French's (1992) *The War against Women*. However, in the contemporary political context they perhaps speak more to the converted, and French's account is exceedingly pessimistic about any gains for women which have resulted from the second wave of the women's movement, while Faludi's account is too one dimensional, speaking about 'the' backlash and working with a somewhat simplistic and repetitive progress/reaction account of the flow of history, suggesting any gains for women will always be met with resistance (McLeod 1998). perhaps the strongest backlash in contemporary politics is the claim by some men that they are now a disadvantaged group requiring earmarked state polices, at the same time as

there has been an attack upon the very notion of group disadvantage when applied to women, ethnic minorities and so on. This fits within the broader context of what McCarthy (1998) has called the contemporary politics of resentment and is perhaps best exemplified in the emergence of a white, working class male militia movement in the US, which wrought its worst in the horrific Okalahoma bombing. The politics of angry white males are everywhere throughout the west. Resentment politics are also evident elsewhere in the rise of new racisms and in the emergence of an anti-feminist men's movement. Often these political sentiments are brought together in one grouping as with elements of the gun lobby and with One Nation. Resentment is also manifest in the most pungent anti-feminist elements, usually associated with men's rights, of the 'What about the boys?' refrain in education. However, the bardic function of media and other cultural representations and productions has seen the boys' issue in schooling taken up by even moderate groups within the society. In a research project I am currently involved in, which is looking at school-based management, interviews with school principals have shown boys to be the major equity concern in schools at this moment. When principals did talk about equity it was by and large about boys and while some female principals defended feminism and sought to deconstruct the boys' backlash, other female principals also articulated a concern for boys.

The political question then becomes: How can this concern (and recognition that boys too have a gender) be utilised for gender justice through schooling? Thus I am arguing that something needs to be done for and about boys in school, but this needs to be framed by pro-feminism and a recognition that feminism has not achieved its goals for girls in schooling or for women in the broader society. Indeed, it would appear that at the same time as some detraditionalisation of sex roles and expectations is occurring, there is also a retraditionalisation going on (Giddens 1994). It is to a brief consideration of these issues to which the paper now turns.

Reclaiming the concern for boys' schooling for gender justice

Boys' issues in schooling need to be incorporated within system and school gender equity policies and programs. A competing victims syndrome approach must be rejected, as well as backlash accounts. Gender needs to be seen as relational sets of practices formed in respect of hierarchies of differently valorised constructions of masculinity and femininity, including sexuality. All teachers have a responsibility in relation to these matters of making schools supportive learning environments for all students, both male and female, and especially those practising marginalised masculinities and femininities. Gender justice in and through schooling is a core professional issue for teachers. More male teachers are needed, but more female administrators and senior executives in systems are needed as well—we still have a heavily gender segmented labour market in schooling, and contemporary restructuring has probably exacerbated this situation (Lingard & Douglas 1999: ch. 3). As Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) argue, more male teachers will help break the association of learning and intellectuality with the feminine. And men do have a responsibility to work with boys around the negative effects (as well as the rewards) of hegemonic practices of masculinity. This is, however, a different justification for more male teachers, than that usually articulated, as indicated in some of the newspaper articles listed earlier in this paper. (See also Mills (forthcoming))

Increasingly, schools are being asked by educational systems, now shrouded in a culture of performativity, to use performance data to critically reflect upon curriculum and

pedagogy and differential student outcomes in an attempt to improve these outcomes. Gender aware readings of such data are important for effective intervention strategies. Such readings would recognise the whole panoply of ways gender affects both subject choice, performance and engagement with schooling. Much of the current commentary on gender and performance in schools (particularly but not exclusively in the media) only looks at half the picture and often neglects the gender segmentation of the curriculum and works with essentialist readings of both boys and girls. There is a definite need for schools to try to broaden boys' subject choices, as they have attempted with girls (and been successful to some extent, at least with middle class girls). This will not be an easy task as subject choice correlates with social valorisation of different subjects and their links to well rewarded careers and so on. Androcentrism has also been at the heart of the attempt to get more girls into maths and science. We need to move towards valuing of subjects across the curriculum.

Schools and teachers, along with systems, need to recognise which boys are doing badly and intervene in appropriate ways, through funding, policies and practices. This will require considerations of gender and social class, poverty, Aboriginality and so on. The same is the case for girls. However, a word of caution is in order, for often the interventions for boys, for example, in respect of reading/literacy actually reinforce dominant modes of masculinity.

Masculinity itself, or the social construction of gender, needs to be a matter discussed in schools, specifically in relation to some of the isolating and stifling aspects of hegemonic practices for both boys and girls and their relationships. This is recommended by the national document, *Gender Equity: A Strategy for Australian Schools* (1997). Gilbert & Gilbert in their concluding chapter to *Masculinity Goes to School* (1998) survey the approaches schools have taken to this particular issue and more generally. Many schools have dealt with masculinity in relation to discipline policies and bullying (at the same time many schools fail to see the link between masculinity and bullying). They suggest these approaches should be located within a school gender equity policy which focuses on discipline, bullying, harassment and curriculum choice and content and be integrated with issues of racism, sexuality and disability (1998, p. 234). (Also see Martin Mills's article in this special number of *Change*.) Additionally, they recommend that an understanding of the social construction of gender needs to be integrated throughout the curriculum and the school's structure and practices. They support small single and mixed sex groupings for discussions amongst young people about the formation of gender identities and gender relations (1998, p. 234). Such discussions are usually part of human relations type school programs. Skills in relation to 'resolving conflict, resisting sex-based harassment and bullying' also need to be developed in schools (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, p. 234; Mills 1998). The Gilberts also suggest the need for schools to address the affective requirements of both boys and girls. A whole-school approach is most effective to the achievement of the goals which underpin these particular strategies (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998, Mills 1998).

Conclusion

The argument throughout this paper has been that the 'What about the boys?' refrain in contemporary educational discourse is both repressive and productive. This call must also be located in the context of a number of political backlashes spawned by globalisation. While it has been acknowledged that backlash is too simplistic a concept to explain what is

occurring, the concept probably still retains some purpose as a strategic political tool for grouping opposition to reactionary forces. (And recuperative masculinists (both mythopoeists and men's rightists) have certainly understood the political effectiveness of strategic essentialism in respect of men and boys!) A better analysis, however, requires a fuller understanding of the apparent, as well as supposed, 'threats' and challenges to masculinity and men posed by feminism, and a contextualised analysis of the impact of the various flows of globalisation and the dominant regime of political responses to them. The uncertainties, inequalities and insecurities, individualism and small state ideology which have in a synergistic fashion accompanied and been a by-product of the dominant market liberal responses to globalisation have provided a structural and cultural context for the rise of a variety of backlash political movements, including anti-feminism and recuperative masculinity politics. What appears certain, though, is that this destabilisation and the pushing of boys' issues onto the educational agenda have together opened up a terrain which can be utilised for broadening the goals of gender equity in schooling. A number of contemporary policy documents in education attempt to do this, for example, the O'Doherty Report in New South Wales (1994) and *Gender Equity: A Strategy for Australian Schools* (1997). However, while each needs to be applauded in its support for gender frameworks which deal with both boys and girls, while recognising the structural inequalities between men and women, they both are nonetheless defensive documents in a policy sense. They work more to close down the recuperative masculinist accounts which assume the success of feminism and thus see no further need for a focus on girls. They also do not work effectively as policy documents; *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* is not user friendly as a policy document and has not had wide support and distribution by the state systems of education.

None of this is to suggest that gender equity policies and practices in schooling aimed to achieve a more gender-just society, as well as gender multiculturalism, will be easy. The contextualisation of the backlash in terms of globalisation provided throughout this paper, clearly suggest otherwise. And, of course, even if we get the policy discourse right, there is a whole swag of educational policy implementation literature, which confirms differential take-up of policies in schools. As Jane Kenway and her colleagues (1997) have noted and so ably demonstrated in their research, there is always a mysterious gap between hope and happening in respect of such policies. Nonetheless, educators need to struggle to reconfigure the boys' backlash within a framework of gender equity and reject the presumptive equality built into the backlash, while working for a more gender just schooling and society. This is a struggle in which both women and men need to be involved and for men, it is my feeling that some of the earlier feminist suspicions of pro-feminism have waned somewhat in the face of theoretical developments and political backlashes (Digby 1998). At the same time, gender concerns need to be reconnected with issues of race, class, sexuality and disability. I do not want to be overly sanguine here, but it does seem that more thought is now being given to appropriate (read social democratic) responses to globalisation, which in turn also provides a more encouraging terrain for the sort of pro-feminist gender policies and practices that this paper has argued for.

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