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# Boys: Getting it Right: The 'New' Disadvantaged or 'Disadvantage' Redefined?

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## Abstract

*Over recent years there has been widespread concern for masculinity and the education of boys in Australia. In the policy arena, this has involved a federal parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys (Boys: Getting it Right: Report on the inquiry into the education of boys, October 2002) and a federal government response to this inquiry (June 2003). This was followed by a review of the current education policy directed at gender, the Gender Equity Framework, and the development of strategies to increase the number of men going into teacher training. The way in which Getting it Right and the federal government talk about boys and disadvantage is important. This paper argues that there is a particular understanding of disadvantage at work in this policy arena. It is an understanding of disadvantage extracted from a wider gendered power order.*

*The paper argues that Getting it Right's particular understanding of disadvantage as outside of power differentials is achieved by two policy approaches. First, the Report compares some indicators of both girls' and boys' situations, but in a selective way. I call this a 'selective comparative approach'. Second, the Report emphasises the importance of focusing on the separate needs of boys and girls, just when the indicators of girls' position in society cannot be ignored. I call this a 'mere difference approach'. These policy approaches assume particular understandings of boys, girls and gender which, I argue, underpins a fundamental misdiagnosis of the problem with deleterious results for boys and girls.*

## Introduction

Boys' educational disadvantage has received much media, academic and some policy attention in most westernised countries (Bouchard *et al* 2003, Collins *et al* 2000, p. 20,

Mahoney 2003, Smith 2003, p. 283, Titus 2004, p. 145, Weaver-Hightower 2003, pp. 471-472, 475). Many authors have identified the 'moral panic' status this area has achieved over the last decade, particularly in the media (Lingard 2003, p. 50, Smith 2003, p. 283, Titus 2004, p. 145). Weaver-Hightower (2003, p. 475) notes that there has been a spectrum of responses to this attention, noting Australia for its federal government policy action in the area. As such, lessons can be learnt from the Australian experience thus far.

Since March 2000 when the federal government set up a parliamentary inquiry into the education of boys, there has been a significant amount of federal government action in this area with around \$8 million being directed into boys and education (Nelson 10 June 2004). The inquiry produced the Report, *Boys: Getting it Right: Report on the inquiry into the education of boys* (Standing Committee on Education and Training October 2002) and a federal government response (Minister for Science, Education and Training 2003). Since then, many of its recommendations have been taken up. Most notably, its call for providing male role models has been followed with the government seeking amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act so as to enable measures to encourage men into teaching. Further, the Report's recommendation that there be a rewriting of the current policy, the *Gender Equity Framework* (MCEETYA 1997), has been taken up. As such it is important to understand the way in which *Getting it Right* addresses the boys in education area. Of particular concern in this paper is the way in which the Report constructs disadvantage.

There have been other notable Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) funded reports on the area of boys (and girls) and education such as *Factors influencing educational performance of males and females in school and their initial destinations after leaving school* (Collins *et al* 2000) and *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys* (Lingard *et al* 2002). These tend to take a different theoretical approach than *Getting it Right*. They tend to be influenced by understandings of the construction of masculinities and femininities and the multiplicity of these and hence, with respect to disadvantage, tend to take a 'Which boys? Which girls?' approach. Though, this is not to suggest that they have not themselves been limited by the current political context (Lingard 2003, pp. 51-52). Nevertheless *Getting it Right*, seems to be steering current policy directions. Also, its construction of disadvantage reflects and is reflected in 'backlash blockbusters' (Mills 2003) and the media (Lingard 2003). Further, as Lingard (2003) observes, in the context of the 'evacuation' of gender equity policies at the national level, the media is taking on a '*de facto* policy' role in this area. *Getting it Right* taps into and is picked up by the established media discourse on boys and education.

In this national and international context it is important to understand the way in which the Report *Boys: Getting it Right* and the federal government's response (Minister for

Science, Education and Training 2003) to this have a particular understanding of disadvantage with deleterious effects for girls and boys. The Report extracts 'disadvantage' from the wider social context of gendered power relations.

This paper is based on the assumption, following Connell (2002, pp. 5-6 & p. 142), that there is a 'gender order' in society under which men (and boys) are more advantaged than women (and girls): there is a 'patriarchal dividend' for men as a result of an 'unequal gender order' (Connell 2002, p. 142, Weaver-Hightower 2003, p. 471). That is not to assume that gendered power relations are uni-dimensional. Rather, despite the complex and dispersed nature of power, hegemonic masculinity prevails with deleterious effects for girls and indeed, boys. Of course, hegemonic masculinity may change over time and location. However, *at present*, it needs to be acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity is extant and *in its present form* can be harmful to both girls and boys. Further, I assume that differences between girls and boys are not merely natural biological differences but need to be situated within a particular social context (Connell 2002, pp. 47-52). This allows for a critique of the relations between girls and boys, and the relationship between femininity and masculinity, whereas extracting disadvantage from the wider gendered power relations produces a focus on boys alone, ignoring girls, and essentialising girls and boys such that the relations between them are not seen as significant.

Before proceeding it should be noted that the push for attention to boys comes from (at least) two quite different directions.<sup>1</sup> There has been a concern among some feminist policy activists and academics regarding the differential power attached to masculinity and femininity, and the consequences of this for both girls and boys. The point here has been to challenge hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, the mainstream media, politicians and some other academics (Browne and Fletcher 1995, Trent and Slade 2001) have been much more concerned with the different experiences of boys *per se*, outside the context of power differentials. Mills and Lingard (1997) suggest the Australian debate has been 'fuelled largely by concerns articulated within the mythopoetic men's movement' or recuperative masculinity politics (Lingard 2003). These tend to see 'men and boys as the "new victims"' (Lingard 2003, p. 41, Mills and Lingard 1997, p. 278). This difference in approach is significant as it appears that this latter approach underlies *Getting it Right*. In his discussion of the submissions made to the inquiry Lingard (2003, p. 50), rightly in my view, observed that many of the responses offered worked within a recuperative masculinity politics. These, despite some responses that worked within an understanding of the construction of gender seem to be the ones that have been taken up by the Report.

*Getting it Right* is popularly understood as offering a policy solution to the 'problem' of the 'new' disadvantaged: boys. However, far from doing this, the Report offers a

new understanding of 'disadvantage'. It presents disadvantage as outside of power differentials: it suggests simply that there are differences between boys and girls, and that boys' needs are not being met. In contrast, the argument here is that these differences are socially constructed and reliant on a power differential. Therefore, the key issue should be challenging these differences. The danger in *Getting it Right's* understanding of disadvantage is that power is ignored and masculinity and femininity get essentialised so that they are seen as fixed, unitary and attached to one's sex.

This paper analyses *Getting it Right* through the lens of 'disadvantage'. My argument is that 'disadvantage' is an 'essentially contested concept' (Sturman 1997). That is, it can take on different meanings at different times for different purposes, and these multiple uses indicate substantially varied agendas. Eveline (1994) argues that the term 'disadvantage' detracts attention from the power of those holding advantages. While this may be the case, some uses of the term 'disadvantage' are more mystifying of power relations than others. While whether we accept particular understandings of disadvantage and reject others is clearly a normative judgement, I argue that understanding disadvantage outside of gendered power relations should be rejected. The consequences of understanding disadvantage in this way are that the relational connection between girls and boys is overlooked, the situation of girls can be ignored, and masculinity and femininity become essentialised.

To demonstrate that *Getting it Right* shifts the meaning of disadvantage in policy documents, the paper shows that the indicators for judging disadvantage are in fact not new; that they are selective; and that disadvantage is attached to any finding of difference. The last section of the paper turns to the question of whether my argument is consistent in terms of criticising *Getting it Right's* essentialising tendency while calling for an acknowledgement of the gendered power order under which girls are less well off.

## **Boys: Getting it right**

The particular focus of this paper is Chapter Two of *Getting it Right*. While it is important that the Report as a whole is not ignored, and this is acknowledged throughout, analysis of Chapter Two provides us with a good insight into how the Report shifts disadvantage outside of the wider gendered power relations. Entitled 'Stating the case: school and post-school outcomes', Chapter Two covers 'a range of outcomes and measures of attainment and what they reveal about the relative achievement of males and females in society, education and employment' (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 7). It is the part of the Report that justifies a policy focus on boys. My argument is that throughout this discussion the Report tends to use what I think of as

two distinct approaches, depending on whether the indicators under discussion reveal boys' 'disadvantage' or not. I call these approaches the 'selective comparative approach' and the 'mere difference approach'.

*Getting it Right* shifts the indicators of disadvantage and extracts it from the wider gender order by two seemingly contradictory moves. It compares boys' situation to girls' (the 'selective comparative approach'). It also fails to compare their situation to girls (the 'mere difference' approach). Which approach the Report adopts depends on whether the indicators are more favourable in terms of supporting boys as the disadvantaged group. The result is disastrous. The situation of girls is ignored in both moves, as is the relationship between girls and boys. Further, girls and boys (and masculinity and femininity) become essentialised. In all this, fundamental insights about the construction of gender get ignored. Such insights include that many issues affecting boys are the result of complex constructions of masculinity, indeed, that some of these issues are the result of privilege.

### **The selective comparative approach: Boys as the 'new' disadvantaged and selective indicators of disadvantage**

The introduction to *Getting it Right* presents boys as the 'new' disadvantaged. Whilst the Report states that the focus is on assisting 'all students to achieve their potential' (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. vii), the relevant group becomes boys. The foreword by the chair, Mr Kerry Bartlett MP, claims explicitly that boys are not coping as well as girls:

In recent decades greater attention has been given to addressing past inequities which had worked to the disadvantage of girls and women in education, the workplace and the broader community. While some of these inequities still exist, many parents, teachers, academics and community workers have expressed concern that, particularly in the area of education, boys are not coping with the changes as well as girls (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. vii).

There is an assumption here that girls have made gains and that, although 'some... inequities still exist', boys are now the ones who are suffering the most. The implication here is that boys are the new disadvantaged (cf Hayes and Lingard 2003, p. 2, cf Titus 2004, p. 148). This has links to the recuperative masculinity discourse which sees men as the new disadvantaged (Lingard 2003, p. 41). Indeed, throughout the Report are references to the 'relative disadvantage of boys'<sup>2</sup> and that boys have been 'more adversely affected' by social, labour market, and, significantly, policy change. The reference to policy change implies that the earlier educational policies that targeted girls have hurt boys. This presumption is never illustrated nor defended. Moreover, this presumption rests upon a claim that there is something new and

negative in boys' situation, a representation of the problem that is challenged below. It is also part of the recuperative masculinity politics that blames feminism for boys' situation (Lingard 2003).

The government has reinforced this focus on boys as the new disadvantaged. Its response to *Getting it Right* states that '[i]t is clear the educational needs of boys must be addressed'. As we saw above, it has committed a total of around \$8million to boys' education (Nelson 10 June 2004). And the Education Minister, Brendan Nelson's, media release about the government funded Boys' Education Lighthouse Programme, while recognising that it is 'imperative that nothing is done which undermines the important and necessary progress which has been made in the last twenty years in the education of girls' emphasised that 'the evidence is overwhelming that boys are falling behind in our education system' (Nelson 27 November 2002, and again Nelson 10 June 2004). Further, the Minister states:

Boys are doing worse than girls in some key indicators of educational performance, and evidence shows that the 'gap' between boys' and girls' performance has increased over time, especially in operational literacy. In addition, in some measurable areas, the performance of boys, as a group, appears to have declined over time (Nelson 26 June 2003).

The overall picture presented is one of boys' as the 'new' disadvantaged within the education system. And, further, it is clear that this is 'in comparison' to girls.

However, I argue that boys are not the 'new' disadvantaged. Rather, the Report shifts the 'indicators' of disadvantage. Despite the overall impression of *Getting it Right* that boys are relatively disadvantaged, a closer reading indicates that the areas where the Report understands boys to be clearly disadvantaged in comparison to girls is in retention rates, expulsion and suspension rates, lower levels of literacy and social and cultural outcomes (I shall address how the Report deals with performance and post-school pathways in the discussion of the 'mere difference' approach below). However, all of these indicators have existed over the last 20-30 years. Boys' retention rates have been lower than girls since the early 1980s. Boys have always been expelled and suspended in greater numbers, and they have always succeeded less at literacy (Hayes 2003, p. 11, Smith 2003, p. 288, Titus 2004, p. 148, Yates 1997, p. 339). The situation for boys is not new. The difference is, these factors are now seen as indicators of disadvantage.

The story is similar with social and cultural outcomes. The Committee emphasises that such outcomes are relevant to assessing the situation of boys:

The additional indicators suggested included rates of depression and mental illness, attempted and completed suicide, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, motor vehicle deaths and injuries, juvenile crime and detention, violent crime and adult rates of imprisonment (*Getting it Right* 2002, pp. 36-37).

Again the 'measures' listed to show where boys 'are not doing well' are not in fact new. Indeed, in one of the many Government reports into the education of girls in the 1970s a minority report drew attention to these areas of concern for boys (Yates 1997, p. 339). So these 'indicators' of boys' situation are not new. They have been around and known for years. The point is that this challenges the popular understanding of boys as the 'new' disadvantaged. It also challenges the Report's assumption that previous equity policies targeting girls have adversely affected boys.

Admittedly, it could be argued that, since these indicators have existed for a long time, boys have been unfairly neglected. However, my point here is that the indicators of disadvantage have changed. Further, such a position ignores the wider social context in which these indicators exist(ed). They ignore that women have a lower standing in society than do men. Indeed, these are 'loaded' indicators (Yates 1997, p. 339). We need to ask: Why aren't areas that adversely affect girls mentioned here, such as status, harassment, victims of domestic violence, rape, anorexia, bulimia, amount of domestic responsibility? Or, as Yates puts it: 'literacy but not mathematics; alcoholism but not those on welfare payments; imprisonment rates, but not rates of those in political office, etc.' (cf Weaver-Hightower 2003, p. 471, Yates 1997, p. 339). To be clear, I do not wish to reduce this discussion to a competition as to which indicators of disadvantage count. My point is deeper than that. It is firstly to highlight that indicators of 'disadvantage' that were not seen as relevant are now seen as relevant. It is also to emphasise that the indicators of boys' 'disadvantage' and the indicators of girls' disadvantage are connected and interrelated, a point I return to below.

We have seen that *Getting it Right* and the Government talk about boys not coping 'as well as girls', the 'relative disadvantage of boys' and boys being 'more adversely affected'. Such an analysis I term a selective comparative approach of girls and boys. Certain selective criteria are assessed by sex to ascertain that boys are the new disadvantaged.

This selective comparative approach falls into what Cox (1997) terms a competing victim syndrome. Cox warns against claims for finite resources based on "the most disadvantaged group" position as it can create '*real divisions*' (p. 75, emphasis in original). She claims that it is far more beneficial to challenge the system, which

'*doesn't suit a lot of people*' (p. 77, emphasis in original). However, this system which Cox wants challenged is hegemonic masculinity, or, in her words, 'Anglo-Saxon, Western European masculinity' (p. 78). Further, she is clear that inequality cannot be ignored (p. 76). Behind her position is the assumption that it is through considering both girls' and boys' experiences and their relationship to hegemonic masculinity that we can really address this inequality.

Cox's comments about creating 'real divisions' and ignoring hegemonic masculinity need to be fleshed out. With respect to creating real divisions, this has links to the wider theoretical tradition that understands policies as creating that which they speak (Beilharze 1987, Bacchi 1999). This tradition insists that policies shape social relations instead of reacting to them. So Bacchi and Eveline (Bacchi and Eveline 2003, Bacchi 2004) talk about the ways in which policy itself can be a *gendering* process. In *Getting it Right* 'girls' and 'boys' are treated as discrete and static social categories in competition. A focus on the statistics of boys' social situation tends to reproduce 'boyiness' as part of a person obscuring the processes which produce boys as exhibiting this 'boyish' behaviour (Bacchi 2004, Titus 2004, p. 150). As Connell observes, it is important to focus on gender relations rather than upon gender differences (Connell 2002, p. 9). This is because girls' and boys' 'differences' become the focus and are attached to some notion of a biological binary divide instead of recognising the processes which produce girls and boys as different. Thus, the selective comparative approach simultaneously essentialises girls and boys while ignoring the relationship between them.

This ignoring of the relationship between femininity and masculinity and hegemonic masculinity is particularly concerning when we consider the solutions offered by the Report. The Report has an insufficient theoretical understanding of the statistical data attached to girls and boys. The main explanation offered for boys' disadvantage is a lack of role models for boys (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. xxii). On these grounds the Report stresses the importance of getting more men into teaching (cf Mills *et al* 2004). However, a focus on getting men into teaching as role models also essentialises men and women (Gill 2004, pp. 8-11). It assumes that men and women have particular distinct qualities to offer. If this were the case one could suggest that the Government ought to get more women into defence so that Australia's defence system can be run differently. Further, the focus on role models in *Getting it Right* makes no mention of diversity amongst men and boys (Gill 2004, pp. 8-11). Indeed, there is a complete silence with respect to the importance of providing gay, disabled or non-English speaking background male role models.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, a focus on role models assumes a simplistic understanding of power. The implication is that boys are influenced from the outside (and from above) to behave in particular ways. This ignores that boys are inside the discourses which offer numerous ways to be (Connell 2002, p. 77). Merely

providing male teachers may not change boys' behaviour. Indeed, Mclean (1997a, 1997b) notes that there are valid reasons in today's society and in schools for boy students to behave the way they do: it pays off to be masculine and to behave the way boys behave (McLean 1997a, 1997b). Focusing on role models ignores the impact of hegemonic masculinity. Disadvantage is shifted outside of the wider gendered power order.

We have seen that the selective comparative approach essentialises girls and boys, pits them against each other, ignoring the relationship between them and the wider gender order in which they exist. The mere difference approach has similar results but through a different method.

### **The mere difference approach: The educational needs of boys**

This chapter provides evidence that many of the old gender divisions in education and employment still exist almost unchanged. This repudiates the suggestion that too much has been done for girls and that now it is the boys' turn. It is more constructive to seek to understand the issues in boys' education as a need to address boys' under-achievement rather than as a need to 'correct' an apparent disadvantage relative to girls. The way forward for both boys and girls is to identify their joint and separate educational needs and to implement a policy framework and strategies to address those needs (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 8).

What I call the 'mere difference approach' appears in the Report when it is no longer possible to ignore indicators that show that girls are still disadvantaged. These indicators are evident in gendered subject choices (choices that also challenge the understanding of boys' 'lower' achievement) and post-school education and employment. Indeed, as we can see in the quote above, the Report acknowledges that Chapter Two 'provides evidence that many of the old gender divisions in education and employment still exist almost unchanged'. However, in one swift move their significance is discounted by insisting that it is appropriate to focus on the 'joint and separate educational needs' of boys and girls. That is, having set the scene as boys being relatively disadvantaged, the Report changes tack, arguing that it is not in the game of suggesting that 'too much has been done for girls and that now it is the boys' turn'. Rather, it claims to be more 'constructive' by seeking 'to understand the issues in boys' education as a need to address boys' under-achievement rather than as a need to "correct" an apparent disadvantage relative to girls' (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 8). While on the one hand this passage in the Report appears to indicate tensions within it (see Ailwood 2003, p. 20), I describe the shift in argument as a rhetorical ploy that manages to keep the focus on boys by side stepping girls' indicators of

disadvantage, just when they become too obvious to ignore completely. The Report manages to mention and then to discount the indicators of girls' disadvantage by pretending to be even-handed, almost by suggesting that it is inappropriate to offer a competing victim analysis. And yet the Report asserts this after it has done exactly this – offered selective indicators of boys' disadvantage. To be even-handed in this view means ignoring girls' disadvantage and reducing the problem to 'mere difference'. Titus (2004, p. 154) observes a similar phenomenon in the US where protagonists of a discourse of 'moral panic' over boys' underachievement tend to 'employ an equal rights rhetoric to argue that boys are shortchanged, [yet] they also deny inequality as a social problem when they contend that gender disparities favouring males do not reflect social injustice'. Similarly, Lingard observes with respect to the backlash politics prevalent in the Australian boys and education discourse:

The backlashes reject the notion of group identities and group disadvantages and thus reject the concept of women as a disadvantaged group; yet at the very same time they attempt to constitute males and boys in schools in an essentialized fashion as the new disadvantaged (Lingard 2003, pp. 39-40).

Chapter Two goes through academic performance, post-school opportunities in employment, apprenticeships and further study, and finds that both girls and boys are doing poorly in different areas. What follows is a call for a rewriting of the *Gender Equity Framework* (MCEETYA 1997), the current gender policy, to provide for an 'overarching policy structure for joint and distinctive boys' and girls' education strategies' (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 69).<sup>4</sup> It calls for an addressing of both 'boys' and girls' social and educational needs in positive terms' (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 69). The Government response to *Getting it Right* takes up this call for a review of the *Gender Equity Framework*. It describes the *Gender Equity Framework* as setting 'out the way schools address gender equity issues, and does not specifically identify issues pertaining to boys', as though these are separate from gender equity issues. It claims that the review is necessary so that 'boys and girls are able to find and achieve their own potential in an educational context which takes into account their differences' (Minister for Science, Education and Training 2003). However there is no distinction made between the *types* of different (and, in its terms, separate and distinct) educational needs of boys and girls, nor the relationship between them (Collins *et al* 2000, p. 2). There is no acknowledgment of power differentials. Thus, disadvantage is reduced to separate or distinct needs, to mere difference. There needs to be a recognition here of how the Report itself constructs boys and girls. It sees them as beings with descriptive differences in educational needs, differences not at all related to being located in a particular gendered power order.

One of the areas discussed in Chapter Two is performance.<sup>5</sup> The Report concludes that the narrow focus of the media on Year 12 results obscures the fact that there is still a gender divide in terms of subject choices – girls and boys are still doing different subjects along traditional gender lines. Thus even if girls are achieving higher overall marks and some girls are getting higher marks in some maths, in the main they are doing subjects that are far less valued in society. Further, girls tend to choose subjects below their ability, while boys will choose subjects above their ability. The Committee recognises that there are significantly different cohorts of students doing various subjects so that it is unproductive to compare their results. Indeed, the Report observes that more work needs to be done to encourage girls to undertake subjects commensurate with their ability and to assist girls who are underachieving due to ‘social or other factors’ (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 31). It then suggests that boys need to be assisted in broadening their subject choices, particularly with respect to English (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 31).

It could be argued that a focus on boys’ need to improve their literacy skills is a positive move by focusing on boys and moving away from the deficit model that positioned girls as the problem and, further, that it creates space for a focus on understandings of masculinity. Indeed, Mills (2003, p. 70) suggests that recent discourses have served to ‘give boys a gender’.<sup>6</sup> However, this space for a focus on masculinity and boys is not taken up. We saw this, above, in the understanding of gender as distinct from boys’ issues. Further, this lack of understanding becomes particularly clear in the face of calls for male teachers as role models and the concern for styles of teaching to suit boys. The problem is seen as teachers and teaching practices, rather than as constructions of masculinity. Lastly, the fact that the issues for boys are seen as separate from girls is concerning. It is precisely because of the current social and political situation for women and men that girls and boys choose particular subjects.

The Report addresses differences in the labour market for girls and boys. These still seem clearly to support girls’ disadvantage, though the Report does not explicitly acknowledge this. Boys are both more likely to be employed and unemployed. This is noted to be due to differences in labour force participation rates (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 38, cf Collins *et al* 2000, pp. 3,5). One suspects this hides women who are ‘at home’. Indeed, women are more likely to be not studying and not in the labour force (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 39, cf Collins *et al* 2000, pp. 3,5). Women are more likely to be studying and to be working part-time (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 38). The Report observes that women and men have ‘differing’ labour market participation and opportunities but that ‘young men earn significantly more than young women’ (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 39). Indeed, of 19 year olds in full-time employment, boys with low levels of literacy earn more than girls with high levels of literacy. Surprisingly the Report concludes:

However, the objective of public education must be to enable all students, irrespective of their sex or other background factors, to achieve their full potential. While the labour market disadvantage of women exists and warrants its own policy responses it can never be a justification for down-playing the educational needs of any individual or group (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 40).

Again we see the same rhetorical ploy. When it becomes impossible to ignore indicators of girls'/women's disadvantage, it is time to become 'even-handed'. This is accomplished by reducing the importance attached to the indicators showing girls' lower employment options and wages, and by insisting that it is important to address 'the educational needs of any individual or group'. To bypass indicators which show that girls/women are not doing so well, the Report produces them as 'mere difference'. In this logic 'difference' inheres in individuals and groups. No attention is paid to the factors producing difference (Bacchi 2001). Most notably, no attention is paid to the relationships between masculinities and femininities or to the wider social context of a gendered power differential and gendered relations.

The theme in these areas (performance and post-school options) is that girls and boys have different outcomes in different areas and that all of these need to be addressed. However, this understands disadvantage as mere difference. It does not take into account the power differential associated with these different outcomes. Girls earn less, have less access to positions of power and have a lower status in society (Connell 2002, p. 142). Further, *Getting it Right* does not take into account Schofield *et al's* definition of gender as the '*relational or interdependent* character of men's and women's everyday lives' (Schofield *et al* 2000, p. 251, emphasis in original). Girls'/women's and boys'/men's lived realities are related. Men benefit from women taking on the home and caring responsibilities (part of the reason for women either being in part-time work or outside of the employment statistics altogether). There is a specific understanding of disadvantage at work here; one extracted from the wider gendered power order. A focus on a relational understanding of gender allows the gendered power order to be taken into account. The focus is on how hegemonic masculinities disadvantage girls through direct behaviour and through constructions of femininity and restrict boys who do not conform to dominant constructions of masculinity. There is also a focus on how masculinity and femininity are inter-related. *Getting it Right* rejects this interpretation because it wants to focus on boys, without understanding the relationship between femininity and masculinity. While the Report does refer to the 'joint' educational needs of boys and girls, the overall impression is a descriptive list of separate and distinct educational needs. Thus, whether the selective comparative approach or the mere difference approach is adopted by *Getting it Right* the understanding of gender as process and inter-relationship is

ignored. In the former, the indicators of disadvantage are selective such that one side of the picture is deleted, and thus the interrelationship can be ignored; in the latter the indicators of disadvantage of both girls and boys are seen as discrete entities and hence again the inter-relationship can be ignored.

The focus in the Report on the separate and descriptively different needs of girls and boys reduces disadvantage to mere difference. Much work has been done by feminists on understanding that inequality is much deeper than mere differences (Bacchi 1990). Someone is not unequal simply because they are treated differently or have different characteristics. There is more to inequality than this. There needs to be some sort of '*harmful* treatment' (Bacchi 2004). This allows for recognition of power in the social location of people. The point here is that the differing educational needs of girls and boys are not themselves evidence of the 'relative disadvantage' of boys. The Collins *et al* (2000, p. 2) report acknowledges this by asking 'which differences matter and why'. What should be significant to determining disadvantage is the varying status and power attributed to these 'differences' (as well as the processes present in allocating difference). So, for example, it is significant that the pay-off for girls' higher performance in literacy does not correspond to higher earnings or status. Such an understanding of disadvantage or inequality allows for a challenging of the wider social system in which boys and girls are located. This would include a challenging of hegemonic masculinity. Simply focusing on the descriptively different educational needs of girls and boys allows for an ignoring of the advantages of this system to men and boys (Eveline 1994, Collins *et al* 2000, p. 7).

Further, the focus in the mere difference approach on the separate or distinct educational needs of both boys and girls tends to essentialise girls and boys. The 'needs' of girls and boys become fixed and attached to their sex. Thus the Report, in both the selective comparative and mere difference approaches, essentialises girls and boys by treating the categories as fixed and distinct. A consequence of this essentialising is that differences amongst boys and differences amongst girls are obscured (Collins *et al* 2000). Hayes (2003) notes that to talk predominantly of the differences between girls and boys creates a restraint on who can be talked about as disadvantaged. The disadvantages of girls and boys who are 'indigenous, poor, isolated, queer and/or from a non-English speaking background' (Hayes 2003, p. 11) get silenced (see also Ailwood 2003, p. 22, Collins *et al* 2000). Indeed, as we saw earlier in the focus on increasing male role models there is no mention of the different masculinities that could be represented. Nor is there sufficient mention of the different needs of different groups of boys (Collins *et al* 2000, pp. 3-5).<sup>7</sup> This is despite numerous calls for a 'Which boys? Which girls?' approach (Teese *et al* 1995, Collins *et al* 2000) and which was encapsulated nicely by the contemporaneous report by Collins *et al*.

The focus on the joint and separate educational needs of girls and boys and the essentialist understanding of girls and boys underpinning this ignores the ways in which the subject is formed through power relations (Bacchi 2001, p. 114). Carol Bacchi calls for a relational understanding of difference which ‘challeng[es] the location of difference *in* a group or individual’ (Bacchi 2001, p. 115, emphasis in original). Bacchi’s claim is that difference is about the ‘attribution’ of difference, rather than some pre-existing difference that is ‘identified’. What follows, she argues, is that there needs to be attention paid to ‘the *activity* involved in allocating “difference”’ (Bacchi 2001, p. 116, emphasis in original). This allows for a critique of deeper power dynamics in the formation of the different ‘educational needs’ of boys and girls. A focus on constructions of masculinity and femininity allows for such a focus without essentialising girls and boys. *Getting it Right* fails to address questions of constructions of gender.

To recap, on the one hand *Getting it Right* wants to stress the urgency of dealing with boys’ needs and hence argues that boys are ‘more adversely affected’ and ‘not coping as well’. This selective comparative approach lapses into a competing victims analysis that pits girls against boys and extracts their situation from the wider social context. On the other hand *Getting it Right* can’t ignore women’s relative disadvantage in some well-known indicators, so here the Report talks about addressing the needs of *each* group, or rather addressing boys’ needs *irrespective* of girls’ needs, as if these are completely separate. This ‘mere difference’ approach ignores the wider gender order in society, adopting a view Foster calls ‘presumptive equality’. This view involves:

... first, the presumption that equality for women and girls has been achieved; second, the presumption that men and women are equal in the sense of being equivalent, symmetrical populations, having different but equal problems; and third, the presumption that men and boys are equally disadvantaged in society and schooling as women and girls (Foster 1994, p. 1).

Such a view is based on an ignoring of the wider gendered power relations in society. Thus, both the selective comparative approach and the mere difference approach essentialise girls and boys, extract disadvantage from the wider social order and ignore insights about constructions of gender and the inter-relationship between femininities and masculinities.

## **Am I being consistent?**

Am I being consistent in my analysis? On the one hand I have argued that focusing simply on the statistical indicators of girls’ and boys’ situation creates an essential

understanding of gender. Yet, on the other hand, I have argued for an acknowledgement of the wider gendered power order in society. This second claim, one could argue, is based on an assumption of girls as a group, thus invoking precisely the essential understanding of girls that I have critiqued. It could also be argued that I have uncritically accepted hegemonic masculinity as an essential category. However, claiming that there is a wider gendered power order in society does not necessarily invoke an essential notion of girls' disadvantage. It is not fixed or attached to one's sex but rather responds to the current situation that locates girls in that position. Thus, it is *not* a claim that girls are and will always be disadvantaged, but that *at present* they are located in a society that offers women less power and lower status than men (Connell 2002, pp. 5-6). Similarly, with respect to hegemonic masculinity, throughout the paper I have made it clear that the processes that produce hegemonic masculinity need to be addressed precisely so that it will not always exist in its current form.

None of this is to say that there are not some areas where boys are missing out in schools, such as gaining the social and communication benefits from literacy and being confined to a narrow range of behaviours through dominant acceptable norms of masculinity (Collins *et al* 2000, pp. 6-7, Weaver-Hightower 2003, p. 478). However, almost paradoxically, it seems that this lack of communication and social skills and limited range of behaviour are the very things that will gain one benefits in society. As authors such as Connell (1995) and McLean (1997a, 1997b) argue, while some boys 'suffer' from dominant understandings of masculinity (either by missing out on these skills or through homophobic, racist or classist treatment), in the end, with respect to women, boys benefit from the 'masculine dividend': they enjoy a higher status than do girls and women. Thus, while there are significant individual 'costs' that men and boys suffer from the present gender order, and these should be addressed, it should not be forgotten that at present the gender order is unequal for women and girls. Indeed, Mills (2003, p. 67) suggests that the 'traumas and pains' men experience are often the 'price of privilege' rather than the 'consequences of oppression'.

Relatedly, Yates suggests that it is important to consider not only the success of girls in schools but also the 'pay-off' that is supposed to accompany this success (Yates 1997, p. 341). As Yates points out, this is not yet happening:

In fact in Australia, the picture regarding what has happened to males and females as a result of school reforms and labour market changes is mixed. While there has been change in some 'outcomes' areas (more women now undertake degrees, and more enter medicine and law; and there has been some decline in women's unemployment rates), there is also evidence of lack of change in others: overall women in Australia

still enter a relatively narrow range of jobs, are a minority in the senior ranks of most areas of employment and particularly in business, and their average weekly incomes relative to men improved steadily from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s, but have remained static since the late 1980s at around 83% (Yates 1997, p. 341, see also Hayes 2003, pp. 10-11).

And this says nothing of the weight of work women undertake in the domestic sphere. Similarly, Hayes (2003) observes that while the concern for boys is about them 'failing, and falling behind girls', and one could add the harm they cause themselves, the concern for girls was always about 'the need to gain a status they never held' (Hayes 2003, p. 10).

So, it is not that boys do not have issues that need to be addressed. The point is that there is a misdiagnosis (or at times a seeming *lack of* diagnosis) of the problem in *Getting it Right*. It seems to suggest that the problem is lack of male role models or that previous policies were at the expense of boys and failed to take into account boys' distinct needs. This is made possible through taking disadvantage outside of an understanding of power. Such a misdiagnosis is harmful to both girls and boys. It fails to see the interrelationship between girls and boys and their relationship to hegemonic masculinity. A more useful understanding of the problem is that the situations of girls and boys are interconnected and must be understood as part of a wider gender order which produces particular types of femininities and masculinities. Similarly, Weaver-Hightower (2003, p. 490) suggests that we need to be able to write about girls and boys in the same article or book, and I would add policy.

What is important in this understanding is not that 'girls are disadvantaged' (or 'boys are disadvantaged') but the process through which this happens. That is, there needs to be an understanding of the different available forms of masculinity and femininity and why one (hegemonic masculinity) is valued over, and at the expense of, others. Focusing on hegemonic masculinity and constructions of gender allows for an understanding of power not as a uni-dimensional force but as something that is everywhere and multi-dimensional (Connell 2002, p. 59). There are all sorts of different masculinities and femininities and these are located differently with respect to hegemonic masculinity. Such an understanding avoids essentialising girls and boys but takes into account the present gendered power order. *Getting it Right* fails to do this.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Weaver-Hightower (2003, pp. 475-479) for a discussion of six different catalysts for the 'boy-turn'.
- <sup>2</sup> Hayes (2003, p. 10) points out that Teese *et al* (1995) also talk about 'relative disadvantage'. But the quote Hayes offers suggests that they do so in the context of understanding differentials in status and power.
- <sup>3</sup> There is some mention of the importance of Indigenous male role models (*Getting it Right* 2002, pp. 31-36), but the discussion of issues for Indigenous boys is isolated from the wider discussion and ultimately the report claims that a sufficiently in depth discussion can not be undertaken by the report.
- <sup>4</sup> Whilst the report does also refer to the 'joint' educational needs of boys and girls, the overall impression is a descriptive list of separate and distinct educational needs.
- <sup>5</sup> The Report also looks at higher education and concludes, along much the same lines as it does with the performance measures, that more is concealed than revealed in these results (*Getting it Right* 2002, p. 40). Whilst more women are enrolled in tertiary education, there is a significant gender divide in areas of enrolment with men in higher status areas (*Getting it Right* 2002, pp. 40-41). Further, men are in positions of power within the workforce.
- <sup>6</sup> Note, however, that Mills is not unequivocally positive about these discourses, but merely pointing to a possible benefit.
- <sup>7</sup> Note the discussion earlier in endnote 3 about *Getting it Right's* discussion of issues for Indigenous boys.

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