

## Engaging Boys in the Arts

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### Abstract:

The problem of the "missing males" in the arts has been the subject of discussion for some time. This presentation examines the extent of this, particularly in performing arts, based on historical data and recent fieldwork. It reflects on the level of involvement by males in schools and in the broader community. In studying the cause of this trend, it discusses the construction of masculinity in the arts through societal forces including the media, school influences, peer expectations, parental wishes, teacher attitudes and texts. It also refers in detail to the nature of stereotypes that prevent boys from participating in the arts. As such as there is a focus on aspects of bullying as a contributing factor. The session will draw on current research and bring together some strategies for engaging boys through the examination of best practices employed by individuals, schools and broader communities.

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### Preamble

"Tell me what your male friends think about your dancing." All of a sudden there was silence. His confidence level went from one hundred to one. At first he started to ramble without really answering the question, so I asked it again. Within seconds, he was crying. He started telling me that he didn't want to go to school anymore because he was constantly being harassed and he was actually beaten up several times--all because he danced. He said his classmates--boys and girls alike--were always calling him a fag. (Gold 2001)

There is a wide range of activities in which boys can be considered to be different or non-traditional and therefore persecuted. The arts are one of these activities. As most of the current writers' work has centred on music, this will be the major focus. There will be some reference to the other arts, particularly dance, where the levels of discouragement and avoidance of gender incongruent behaviours seem to be high. Educators whose specialities lie in other areas in the arts will no doubt resonate with some of the ideas espoused here. The paper is structured to give provide a brief background on boys' participation (or non participation) in the arts, then proceed to look at some initiatives in schools that have helped to engage boys in the arts.

### **What are the origins of these harassing behaviours?**

The basis for boys avoiding the arts can be found in the concept of devaluing femininity and the related behaviours of male gender role rigidity, avoidance of femininity and homophobic bullying. (For a detailed examination of these concepts, refer to Harrison 2002a: *Devaluing Femininity: it's role in determining musical participation by boys.*)

The avoidance of femininity can be seen in this reference from North (2001):

However, in seventh grade, I showed up for the first day of tap class and discovered I had been deserted! All the boys were gone. It wasn't cool anymore; they had buckled under to some unwritten law that boys don't dance.

There is little doubt that musicians, singers, actors and visual artists have, at one time or another, received similar treatment as some of the data revealed below indicates.

Forsey (1990) provides some explanation for this treatment:

Males manifest their power through rivalry and ambition, the intimidation, dominance and exploitation of lesser beings - females, children and weaker males, disregard for intimacy and the self-knowledge and empathy that intimacy engenders, rejection of any personal qualities or accomplishments that may be considered feminine.

These manifestations are generated and reinforced by society through family, education, religions, tradition, peer relations and the media. Through these channels, society nurtures gender related traits that are perceived as more desirable than others. Helgeson (1994) suggested that traits were only desirable when gender roles and gender were the same. Participation in gender incongruent activities is socially punished through bullying: verbal and physical abuse which result in loss of self-esteem and social exclusion.

This fear of being labelled a fairy, a wuss or a fag, of being perceived as feminine or homosexual, prevents boys from expressing emotions that are encouraged in girls. Males, it has been found, are viewed more negatively than females for gender role transgressions (Jackson and Sullivan, 1990). The role played by parents, peers and teachers who show more concern when males deviate from traditional role prescriptions is significant.

## How are the arts really viewed?

The Kinsey Institute report (Levitt and Klassen 1973) found that one of the beliefs American adults held was that only certain occupations were appropriate for homosexuals. These were subsequently dubbed "sissy work." Levine (1995, p. 219) provided examples of the types of occupations that may be culturally approved in this category, listing them according to "feminine" behaviours. They included nurse, librarian, airline steward, waiter, interior decorator, hairdresser and dancer, musician and artist.

It may also be true that heterosexual men avoid the so-called homosexual professions, resulting in a higher proportion of homosexuals in those areas. (Lehne 1995 p. 334) confirms the notion that homophobia limits areas of male interest:

Homophobic men do not participate in sissy, womanly, homosexual activities or interests. Maintenance of the male sex role as a result of homophobia is as limiting for men as female sex roles are for women. An appreciation of many aspects of life, although felt by most men in different times of their lives, cannot be genuinely and openly enjoyed by men who must defend their masculinity through compulsively male-stereotyped pursuits. Fear of being thought to be a homosexual thus keeps some men from pursuing areas of interest, or occupations, considered more appropriate for women or homosexuals.

Lucy Green's work in England focussed on attitudes to involvement in many musical activities, finding boys were not keen to be involved in some musical activities because of its perception as being un-masculine. "Its sissy" and "its weak" were common responses from teachers and students involved in Green's survey. Green concluded "both boys and girls tended to restrict themselves or find themselves restricted to certain musical activities for fear of intruding into the other sex's territory, where they may be accused of some sort of musical transvestism" (Green 1993 p. 248).

According to Hanley (1998, p. 58) "singing is viewed a feminine activity - boys who engage in singing are feminine by implication." Some of Hanley's subjects had a negative view of male participation in singing because male peers view singing as girls' stuff, one respondent relating that "they (the peer group) is hung up on the image that boys don't sing and those who do are gay or sissies or whatever - weak anyway" (1998, p. 57).

Plummer (1999, p. 149) illustrates how different activities can attract homophobic criticism giving this example of the experiences of a singer: "...I used to sing... and that was something that was wussy or pansy, pooffer. I used to really like singing and so I was annoyed because everyone else used to persecute me because of it."

Martino (1997a) gave an example of a student who was targeted as an "art boy" because he carried an art file and of how this harassment quickly escalated to "fag boy" and physical violence.

Boys are faced with these homophobic realities every day, often time and time again. Robbie Mackey, Choreographer and director, at Disney World comments:

I remember vividly the fear that would wrap itself around me as the school lunch break approached. Would the guys on the football team once again form their ritualistic circle around me and chant their obscenities? Or how many class rings would bruise my skull as I made my way down the hall

between classes? During roll call, who would be the first person to mumble "faggot" after my name was called?

### **How do we get more boys "doing" the arts?**

Rofes (1995, p. 83) suggests that some policies be implemented to prevent "sissies" from being targets: Teachers and administrators need to be involved in interrupting, confronting and disciplining, for without doing so, they are guilty of complicity. Schools must examine the overt and covert ways in which they honour certain kinds of achievement in boys and ignore other kinds of achievement including offering a wide range of academic and extracurricular offerings.

If these are the kinds of challenges facing our boys, how can we go about making the arts an integral part of boy's lives. Rofes (1995) maintains that schools must address the pain of "sissy boys" and its impact on mental health, low self esteem and poor academic performance.

Subjects involved in Harrison's (2001) case studies reported a lessening of the bullying in the last two years of secondary school enabling them to pursue their interests:

Subject 1: It got better as I went through, and by the time I was in year 12, I was receiving quite the opposite from the other students. They started to have a lot of time for my voice.

Subject 2: In year 11 and 12 with school productions, suddenly music, acting and singing were accepted by the majority of students. I really loved the productions because I had been so lonely

This is also reflected in the words of dancers as Greg Russell (2001) concurs:

High school is where it all changed. I had always participated in sports and was shocked when one day some of the guys from the soccer team asked me to help them with their balance and stretches. I fell over backwards! This is when I realized that it was OK to be who I wanted to be and not worry so much about pleasing others or what they think.

There is another positive twist on aspects of being bullied for involvement in the arts from Michael Taylor a U.S.--Dancer, master teacher and assistant choreographer for Radio City Rockettes:

The boys didn't only hate me because I danced and was different, but because the girls loved me! The poor guys were trying to be as macho as an 11-year-old can be, and the girls were interested in the faggot-boy who danced! They didn't know what to think, is what I think. The teasing went on, slowly diminishing, until high school, when it virtually disappeared.

The role of sport has been referred to earlier. There are positives that can be drawn from sport but there are also some negatives. According to Colling (1992 p. 134), the positive side includes the benefits of health, the setting it provides for non-destructive aggression, the development of a person's reflexes and agility, the promotion of excellence, the development

of teamwork, the sense of achievement, the mastery over weakness and structuring of leisure time.

Tim Hawkes (2001) also refers to the positive aspects of Australian sport that include physical, social, emotional, academic and moral benefits. Choosing the right amount of sport, the right type, the right coach and the right skills and attitudes are clearly very important.

The negative aspect is that it can promote intolerance and the idea that ethics can be supplanted by the need to win at any cost. Competitions can also stifle men's co-operative and vulnerable side. Of significance in the current debate is men's inability to play to enjoy themselves or to suspend self consciousness.

Pollack (1999 p. 273) summarises this argument:

As much as they offer a break form the Boy Code, a chance for openness, expression and intimacy, sports can also push boys back to loneliness, shame and vicious competition...they cause some boys who are not involved in sport to feel left out ashamed and unworthy.

In relation to the direct connection between the arts and sport in Australia, McKay (1991 p. 170) offered this:

...males are also oppressed physically, emotionally and sexually by sport and those who reject its macho aura are often ostracised or stigmatised by males and females. Male dancers and figure skaters are frequently subjected to ridicule about their manliness from both males and females.

Data from Harrison's (forthcoming) study concluded:

Subject 8: Many boys found it impossible to accept someone who had a passion for something that was not sport related. This was the only type of passion that most of the students were comfortable with, was that which was expressed on a football field.

Sporting analogies can be harnessed for use in the arts. This needs to be done with some caution, as it can serve to reinforce hegemonic masculine stereotypes. The point that needs to be made quite clearly here is that behaviours are being targeted, not sexuality. The issues are equality, tolerance and a person's sexuality or perceived sexuality as exhibited by so-called "feminine" or homosexual behaviours is irrelevant. What is relevant is that boys and girls are able to engage freely in whatever activities they desire.

What is required is a change in societal views of masculinity and femininity As Adler (1999) suggests: proposed answers point not only to instructional strategies but to fundamental cultural attitudes and practices.

### **What about specifics?**

Griffiths (1995, p. 18) suggests that in order to bring about change the following steps should be employed:

- Awareness raising.
- Involvement.

- Policy development.
- Strategies.

Considering these four elements, the following suggestions have been found, through the literature and through practical experience to be of some help in engaging boys in the arts:

- A political approach which assist in changing societal views of masculinity and femininity through the media, government etc.
- Development of policy documents
- Involvement of the entire school community: Administrators, teachers, students and parents need to be aware, supportive and active including strong leadership from administration.
- A review of curriculum materials in relation to the presentation of images of masculinity and femininity
- In schools, a zero tolerance approach to bullying of any kind.
- An emphasis on perseverance: students need to be aware that they will be appreciated in senior school
- Discussion, counselling, information sessions
- Teacher monitoring of their own actions and attitudes, as well as those of the students
- The use of role models: teacher, community, industry and student
- In the performing arts, careful selection of repertoire and uniform: initially meeting students at where they are at
- Flexibility in timetabling for classes and co-curricular activities, particularly in relation to conflicts with sport and work
- Personnel
- Hard work and taking it seriously, producing high standards which are honoured by the community
- Providing a variety of opportunities: a balance between a range of activities including sport, the arts and academia is important
- Cautious use of sporting analogies
- A developmental program that starts boys young and keeps them involved in the arts
- Single sex activities

There is no "quick-fix" solution to these issues. The change needs to be at a macro level. Those involved in education can never doubt that the micro changes are capable of bringing about macro change.

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