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GENDERING ACHIEVEMENT:

***A DISCURSIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION
OF BOYS***

A doctoral thesis of:
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Katherine Hodgetts B.A. (Hons)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates accounts of male students' 'under-achievement' generated in the context of hearings within the Australian House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys.

An introductory chapter outlines dominant accounts of the 'crisis' in boys' education, demonstrating that this 'problem' represents a socially and historically situated version of what counts as academic disadvantage. This chapter also introduces the historical analysis of Cohen (1998), whose findings suggest that accounts of boys' failure as the result of educational conditions have deflected attention from the role of masculinity construction in reproducing boys' underperformance. Chapter 2, outlining the discursive approach of this thesis, details the manner in which the present study expands upon Cohen's findings: through analysis attentive to the rhetorical structure and ideological function of contemporary accounts of boys' failure.

Three analytic chapters examine the interpretative repertoires through which witnesses to the Inquiry constructed boys' 'underachievement'. Two of these repertoires involved the representation of male failure as the result of either 'inadequate teachers' or 'inappropriate curriculum'. The analysis focuses upon constructions of boys' inherent 'needs' and 'abilities' that were central to such accounts, illustrating that the depiction of these qualities as 'immutable' positioned the flexibility of teaching practice/curriculum content as the only means of improving boys' attainments. Constructions of teachers and curriculum as 'to blame' for male underperformance are argued to protect the notion of boys' inherent ability, and to depict the provision of conditions necessary for its manifestation as an educational, and moral, requirement.

A third analytic chapter turns attention to constructions of 'the male learner himself' within accounts of boys' achievement decline. It is argued that dichotomous constructions of male and female students worked to naturalize boys' success even when it was not evident, and to pathologize girls' manifest achievement, through the conflation of masculine traits with 'authentic scholarship'. This pattern is argued to produce a dilemma between the maintenance of a masculine identity and successful engagement with school. Ultimately, it is suggested that speakers who simultaneously problematized and valorized hegemonic schoolboy masculinity risked perpetuating the problem they aimed to solve. A concluding chapter addresses the implications of this study for educational policy and practice.