

## **ARE THEY ALL THE SAME? *A Project to Examine Success Among Adolescent Males in Secondary and Tertiary Education***

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*Yeah, I'll take part, but I don't see what it'll do. The people who've got control are the ones who have to change; have to give up being control freaks, seein' everythin' the way they want to - but then they'll see this boys' stuff you're doin' their way, I bet. They'll pick on the stuff that suits them, so they won't really have to do nothin', eh?*

*Anyway, the ones who do well at school are the ones who are like the teachers. In twenty years they'll be running the schools and nothin' will have changed - except most of 'em'll be women. But that's no big difference. A control freak's a control freak. Men or women, doesn't matter. (a boy out of school who left in the middle of Year 11)*

### **Listening to the boys**

This paper provides an overview of what boys are saying about the phenomena of declining retention and achievement, and how educational outcomes for boys might be improved. In doing so, it summarizes an aspect of research currently in progress at Flinders University, Adelaide, exploring the impact of developmental and cultural factors, as well as methods of assessment, educational organization and expectations, on the success levels of adolescent males in secondary and tertiary education. The research is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Evaluations and Investigations Program).

In brief, the boys think that the adolescent years are the most significant. They are clear and uniform in their perspective of the issues and problems in these years, and in their general view that declining rates of achievement and retention are inevitable because the adult world is 'not listening' and 'not genuinely interested' in either their view, their well-being, and for many, their educational needs and outcomes.

The boys are generally very clear about their educational experience. They have obviously thought about the phenomena, often and at length, and have well-formed views about a range of factors that continue to shape and direct their achievement and their ability or preparedness to remain at school. Although they are not familiar with the literature, most of them have seen or heard retention and achievement issues discussed in the media. From what they have said, it is clear that they regard the views of the adult world, on these matters, to be simplistic to the point of being wrong, largely because they don't ask young

people what they think; they certainly don't ask in a way that establishes trust and mutual respect; they don't listen, and they don't really want to know, particularly if it requires or necessitates substantial changes on their part.

Although much of what the boys have said differs significantly from the literature and what passes as 'common sense', these differences will not be dealt with at length in this paper. Here, it is our intention to present an overview of what the boys are saying. We have not tried to make judgements about the truth or falsity of their views, not because these are not matters of importance, but because they are of little pragmatic value until we are able to understand 'their views' in the context of 'their reality'. This has been the essential focus and aim of the research to date.

To usefully investigate matters concerning young Australians, it is increasingly important to recognize that the ongoing democratization of Australian society, at least in part, has been a process of understanding and accepting difference; not just the rhetoric of understanding and accepting difference, and not just differences of mere perspective, but the genuine recognition that there may be a different reality for others, upon which their views are based, and within which their views are equally efficacious.

There is, however, one issue that is raised in the literature and one that needs to be addressed in order to make sense of much of what the boys are saying. They are clearly very contextual, albeit not always consistently, in their understanding of the issues and problems that they believe explain the phenomena of declining retention and achievement. They include a broad range of issues and identify an equally broad range of factors, the significance of which lies as much in their dynamic interdependence as it does in their diversity, or in the particular issues or factors that they choose to talk about at length and at a particular time.

### **Going beyond the constraints of our cultural logic**

Although poor academic achievement, or the choice to leave school early, are more easily understood as separate, isolated outcomes, they remain inseparable aspects of a plurality of interacting and compounding conditions. For example, the experiences of boys in education are varied and variable, involving a diverse range of phenomena: family environments, cultural/philosophical commitments (including some as fundamental as varied perceptions of time and space), socio-economic conditions, physiology, different school environments, teachers, activities and achievements out of school, attitudes, chance events, perceptions of success and the good life, the idea of what it means to be male, an adult, young, up-to-date and many others. This diversity raises some fundamental issues about methodology, the expectation of research, and perhaps more importantly, it draws attention to the impact of the paradoxical state of the dominant cultural logic on both the problem itself and on the way it is understood (Slade & Morgan 2000:71).

Although it seems difficult and perhaps impossible to think or talk about everything in order to think or talk about something, it must be acknowledged from the outset that the dominant culture pre-disposes us to think and talk in terms of fragmentation and certainty, rather than interconnection and relativity. This is a fundamental predisposition with no less than a fundamental influence on how we understand time, space, identity, knowledge, truth and values (Spradlin & Porterfield 1984). It not only shapes our understanding of what is 'real', 'correct' and 'valuable', in education and learning, it also limits our vision of what might be done and it directs what it is that we try to do. Paradoxically, it is our success at applying fragmentation and certainty that has created both the logical and the pragmatic imperatives to think in terms of interconnection and relativity. Furthermore, it has created the necessity

that this be done both in and through education into the 21st century (Delors 1998:19; Slade 1998a, 1998b).

The idea that our reluctance to meet this philosophical challenge in education might itself be a large part of the problem that forms the focus of this research seems not to have been pursued to any great extent in the literature. Nonetheless, the compelling reality of interdependence is often recognized, hence the strong tendency in the literature to bring research pathways and outcomes together. However, from what the boys are saying, they have failed to come together enough.

Browne and Fletcher (1995), Kenway (1997), Epstein et al. (1998) and Collins et al. (2000), for example, see the need to bring many different approaches together in an attempt to be comprehensive. Nonetheless, these stay largely within the fields of masculinity studies and gender reform and, rightly or wrongly, inform the kinds of strategic initiatives, like the use of 'boys only classes' or 'boys groups', that the boys in this study believe either miss the point or simply make matters worse.

Similarly, Pallotta-Chiarolli (1998) expressly emphasizes the need to 'move beyond' the restrictive influence of false dichotomies like the 'either/or positioning' that sustains the 'nature versus nurture' debate. Epstein et al. also acknowledge the need to break through this kind of restraint:

...the discourses in which debates about the schooling of boys have been framed are both narrow through the ways in which the terms 'achievement' and 'education' have been understood, and masculinist in style; that they lack historical perspective; that it is unhelpful to set up a binary opposition between the schooling of girls and that of boys, according to which if one group wins, the other loses; and that questions around equity and differences among boys and among girls as well as between boys and girls are key to understanding what is happening in schools (1998:4).

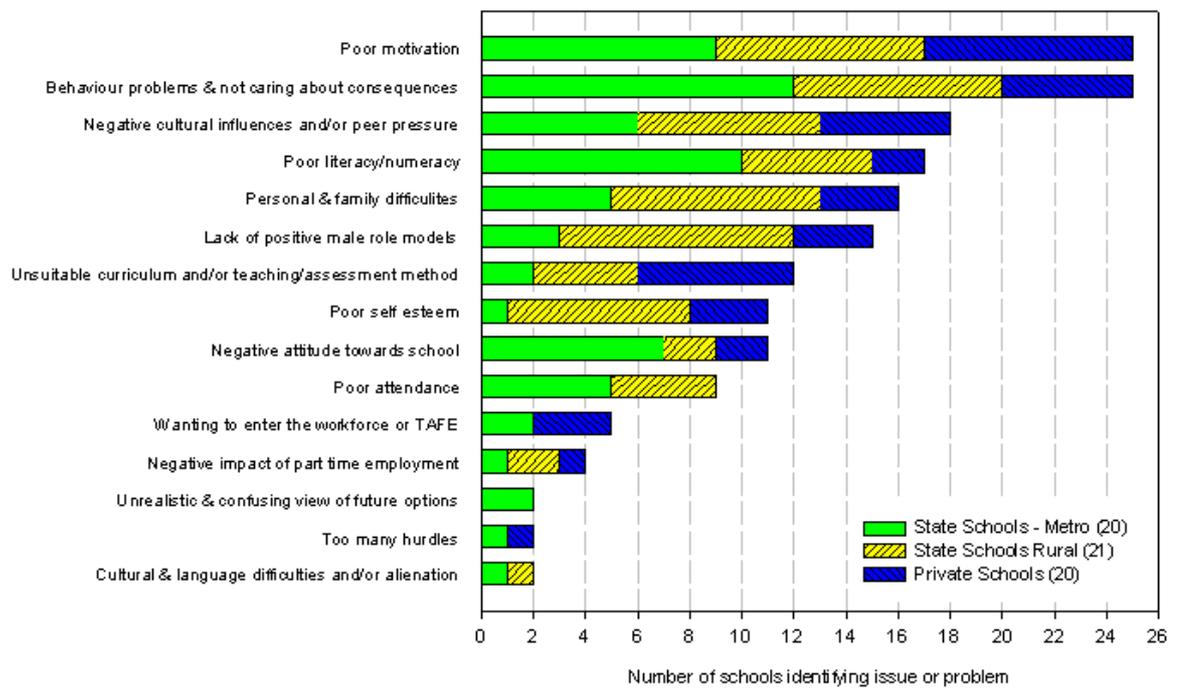
With these views, it seems that the boys are in complete agreement. Moving beyond the dominant cultural commitment to fragmentation and certainty is a necessary condition of dealing effectively with the issues and problems that shape and direct current changes in retention and achievement for boys.

### **Identifying the issues and the appropriate methodology**

In addition to a review of the literature, a questionnaire was sent to all secondary schools in South Australia, in a bid to gauge interest in the project and to establish the issues and problems shaping changes in rates of retention and achievement for boys. The questionnaire was primarily introductory, asking only four questions:

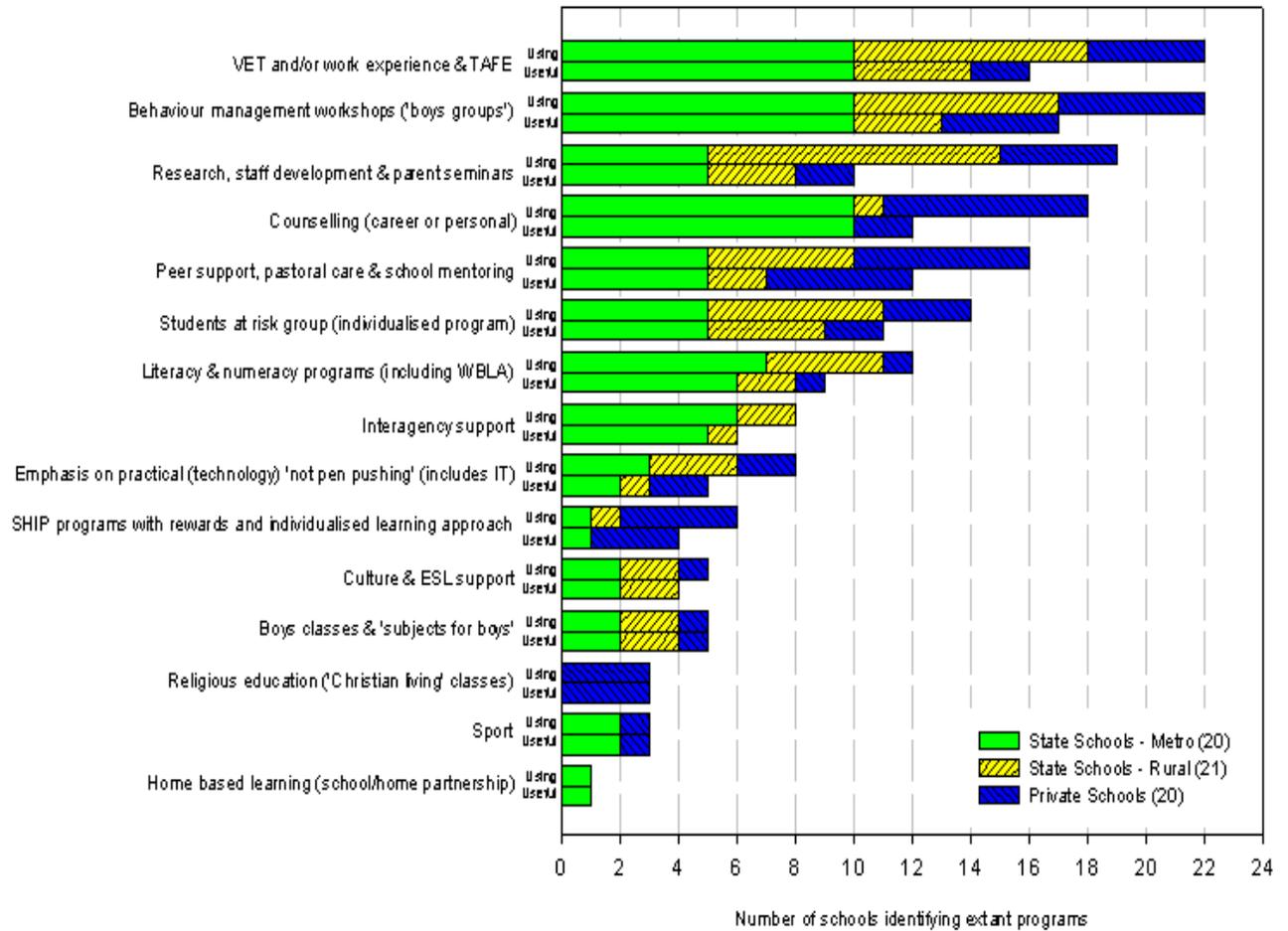
1. What are the central issues and problems concerning and affecting the achievement and retention of adolescent males at your school?
2. What programs are in place to deal with the problems you have encountered?
3. Which initiatives are proving to be useful?
4. Would you be prepared to be part of our project, allowing us to contact you early in the new school year?

From both the literature review and the introductory questionnaire to schools it was evident that the issues and problems were being understood and treated more in terms of 'problem boys' who are not coping, than problems that boys more generally face whilst trying to fulfil their learning needs. The focus appeared to be largely on 'boys at risk' and the strategic emphasis on 'fixing up the boys'. This is clear in figures 1 and 2, which graph the responses of 61 secondary schools to the first three questions in the introductory questionnaire. In figure 1 the issues and problems identified by the schools focus largely on deficiencies in the boys and this is consistent with their choice of strategies (figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Issues and problems identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire

It is worth noting that although extant programs were considered useful by most schools, they were not as useful as the schools had hoped. Most responses were cautiously optimistic, some were pessimistic, and several simply declared that they had no programs in place.



**Figure 2.** Extant programs identified by schools in the introductory questionnaire. Indicates programs the schools are currently 'using' and the extent to which they consider them 'useful'.

A one day conference was held with staff from the participating schools, at which the issues and problems were discussed and extant strategies were reviewed in more detail. Several new issues emerged:

- The issues and problems cannot be dealt with solely in terms of gender equity and that we must avoid comparing males and females;
- We must avoid the narrow, misleading focus on 'fixing up the boys';
- It is particularly important to genuinely listen to 'what the boys are saying';
- We need to understand the influence of conflicting paradigms and the perception of inconsistencies within the prevailing paradigm. For example, inconsistencies between:
  - policy and practice, and between the rhetoric and experience of education;
  - notions of success, achievement and appropriate behaviour;
  - prevailing expectations and what is actually achievable;
  - different fundamental perceptions of time and space, and of identity, knowledge, truth and values;
  - the recognition, acceptance and application of changing cultural realities - including the impact of democratization, globalization and information technology.

In response to these emerging issues, a methodology was chosen that enabled us to gather the views of all boys, both those who are considered 'problem boys' or 'boys at risk', and those who 'appear' neither to have, nor to be, problems in education. This was done in two stages. The first using a qualitative research method, namely, talking with 600 boys in 60 focus groups at 20 schools, selected from over sixty participating schools and balanced across all sectors. At each school, three groups of 10 boys were involved, including one group each of Year 9 and 11 boys, chosen at random, and one group of mixed Year 9 to 11, chosen by the school as 'boys at risk', either academically or in terms of behaviour. The focus groups met for two, ninety minute discussion sessions. These were understood as informal discussions in which the boys were asked to discuss the phenomena of declining rates of achievement and retention, drawing upon their own experiences in education.

To encourage the boys to freely and openly express their views, it was agreed that no teaching staff would be present and the views expressed would be strictly confidential. Adult participation in the focus groups was limited to the Project Research Officer (Malcolm Slade), whose role was primarily to listen, and subsequently to record and summarize the views expressed.

The boys were asked to speak from their own, individual educational experience, including their perceived needs and aspirations, as well as to speak in the language of their choosing, and to broaden or redirect the discussion where they thought necessary.

Their views were recorded and summarized and at the second 90 minute session the summary was returned to the boys for critical assessment, further comment, refinement, and verification.

In the second stage, the task of understanding 'what the boys are saying', was primarily an extension of the first stage and involved talking with a further 1200 boys in 120 focus groups at the remaining 40 schools. These groups met for one 90 minute discussion only, toward the end of which they were asked to critically review the ongoing summary of what other groups had been saying. A small selection of groups completed a trial questionnaire consisting of 100 statements that had been made by the boys at the first 20 schools. Although this research tool is not yet refined, the aim was to develop a list of commonly made statements about the issues and problems, in a language that 'made sense' to the boys, and to provide a mechanism which might be used to give quantitative definition to our understanding of what they had been saying.

This stage also involved further data collection from boys out of school and adolescent males in their first year of tertiary study. Results from boys in their first year at Flinders University indicate that although the pattern of attrition is becoming more severe for both sexes, the trend is greater for males.

## **WHAT THE BOYS ARE SAYING: AN OVERVIEW**

*I want to leave school 'cause it's a hole. The teachers suck, the workload sucks, homework sucks, the uniform sucks. Mum won't let me leave because she left at Year 11 to work in a factory, sewing. (Year 11)*

*There are good things about school, but the bad things outweigh the good. (Year 9-11)*

The boys willingly offer their views, showing noticeable surprise about having been asked to make meaningful comment, as well as initial caution, fearing that their comments will be held against them. The boys soon demonstrate relief that they are able to offer their views in their own way, using their chosen language, and in a context that engenders mutual trust and respect. Indeed, the focus group sessions, both in terms of form and content, are being identified by the boys as examples of what might easily and productively be achieved in the classroom.

At the start of the sessions the boys are assured that recorded discussions remain fully confidential, and in most cases this amounts to a commitment that the recorded discussion will only be heard by the researcher. Ironically, towards the end of the sessions, the boys often ask if the tape could be played to their teachers. Although it remains agreed that it

won't be, it would seem that getting the teachers to listen, in a context that involves somebody from the 'outside', and in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, is high on their list of priorities. It is also apparent that when boys are allowed to talk freely and to choose their own language and mode of expression, they are more articulate and expressively confident.

### **A uniformity of viewpoint**

Despite the broad diversity of the sample, the boys uniformly identify a range of important factors. This uniformity of viewpoint is particularly significant in three senses:

The first sense is the uniformity across the schools. The boys we talked with were from 20 schools balanced across all sectors. Following the introductory questionnaire, a decision was made to arrange the data into categories based on school sectors, or on the basis of differences between the schools' recognition and response to the issues and problems. This proved to be inappropriate. The only significant association between what the boys were saying and the school itself amounted to local issues; particular instances of views expressed in common with all other boys. The views themselves were similar across all schools.

The second sense is the uniformity across levels of achievement. After visiting the first few schools, the distinct uniformity of views raised concerns about the randomness of the selection. It seemed that the schools were selecting boys who were all medium to low achievers. Because most of the boys had spoken with some degree of disaffection, we wrongly assumed that none of them were high achievers. In subsequent schools, after more than one hour of discussion, the boys were asked to give comment on how they were going in terms of achievement. The results were surprisingly representative of the broad range of boys in schools. Some were very high achievers, some very low. Some described themselves as 'nerdy' types who were doing well, others who were doing well but preferred to do other things and didn't really care much about schoolwork. Some had behaviour problems but were high achievers, and there were others who kept out of trouble but just couldn't do the work, and so on. In brief, the sample was diverse and broadly representative. Nonetheless, the simple, but significant feature of the discussions was that the boys were largely in agreement, often to the extent where one group would follow another, without having spoken to each other, and talk of the same issues, the same problems, the same people; identifying the same teachers as examples of good teachers, describing the same forms of humiliation, the same frustrations, teaching and coursework inadequacies, and so on.

In the third sense, the boys uniformly emphasized the interconnectedness of these factors, and of their constituting phenomena, drawing upon subtleties and nuances in explanation that are not apparent in the literature. These appear, from the perspective of the boys, to be not accessible to much of the adult world. Although their understanding of interconnectedness, and the difficulty that the adult world is having in making the cultural transition from fragmentation and certainty to interconnectedness and relativity, is more intuitive and experiential for the boys, it is no less influential in their thinking and their expectations.

The conviction, for example, so often displayed by the boys, that the adult world is not listening, needs to be understood to mean both that they don't seek, don't hear and don't respect the views of the boys, and that they don't listen carefully. In other words, that the adult world persistently gets things wrong because *'they like it simple'* and that *'they just look*

*at one thing'*. There are many examples of how this has a broad and significant influence, both on the achievement and retention of boys, and on the way that the boys respond to adult views and strategies.

### **It's not that simple**

Most boys, they say, have *'got a life'* and would do a lot better at their schoolwork if teachers took other aspects of their lives into account when setting homework, assessing a piece of work or setting deadlines.

*I've got a social life, volunteer work and sport; not just school. (Year 9-11)*

*If you don't finish your work, the school doesn't give a shit. You just get zero. (Year 9-11)*

Similarly, they say, teachers get behavioural 'problems' wrong because they don't ask how and why something happened, and with an open mind. Instead, *'they just pick on the boy with a reputation'*.

*I got accused of selling drugs at school 'cos my friend did. 'Cos I knew him I got interviewed first. They accused me before anyone else, just 'cos of my past. I've never been involved with drugs. (Year 9-11)*

*You'll go to say your side of the story to the teacher and they'll go, 'don't answer back', or 'don't lie'. You never get to say your side. (Year 9-11)*

Teachers would understand more if they would *'just listen to you'*.

### **Masculinity crisis?**

Conspicuous by its absence from their expressed views, has been the concern, evident in the literature and the media, that boys are troubled by some kind of masculinity crisis and that this influences their achievement and retention. Surprisingly, in a 90 minute discussion session, in which the boys were very open and thought themselves to have been comprehensive, there was very little discussion about any aspect of being male and its significance in education. This was even more surprising at schools where programs aimed at developing their self-awareness, self-esteem, self-confidence and their perception of 'being male', were known to be in place and known to have involved a large number of the focus group participants.

At this stage, it appears that if there are issues and problems concerning 'being male' in education, or in society generally, most boys don't see them, or don't see them looming large in the context of issues and problems that influence their lives at school. When asked, they talk about them as issues and problems that are of interest to adults because they are mainly for and about adults.

Once again, they show puzzlement and irritation when the broad range of interconnected factors, involving bad teachers, an out-of-date school culture and a boring, repetitive and irrelevant curriculum, remain largely ignored whilst strategies, that amount to 'fixing the boys', are implemented.

It is unlikely that the boys will uniformly support any strategic initiative that is raised by teachers who they do not consider 'good teachers', and that is raised within a schooling

context that shapes and directs most of the issues and problems that influence their achievement and their preparedness to finish Year 12.

### **Literacy and numeracy?**

Despite the emphasis placed on improving literacy and numeracy for boys, as both an explanation and a strategy to deal with declining retention and achievement, the boys in this study showed surprisingly little interest in the issue, remaining consistently puzzled by explanations and strategic initiatives that are directed solely at 'fixing up the boys'. It seems that for most boys, many of whom are high achievers, literacy and numeracy are valued and treated as any other aspect of the educational offering:

*If I need it, I'll learn it. If I don't, I won't.* (Year 9-11)

Once again, it would seem, that what offends boys about strategies that are intent upon 'fixing up the boys' is that, in the context of their school experience, these are seen to be the product of people who don't listen to them, don't respect their views, don't really care about their educational outcomes, and who are more intent upon finding 'quick fix' solutions, for self-interested reasons, which demand minimal change on their part.

### **It's not that 'it's not cool to be clever'**

A fourth example is the boys' response to a notion (which is popular in the literature and the media) that boys in general think it's 'not cool to be clever'; more negatively, that they think 'it's cool to be a fool'. As a generalization, they believe the notion to be simplistic to the point of being false.

Although most boys acknowledge that in Years 8, 9 and 10, they occasionally '*give shit to the smart people*', it is thought that most of the '*paying out*' that is done about cleverness, like any other kind, is either done between friends, '*in fun*', is not a significant negative influence on either their attitude to achieving or their performance at school, and that it is far less likely to occur from Year 10 onward:

*Mostly happens in Year 9.* (Year 11-12)

*If you're still here after Year 10 then you don't have to be, so you're here to do something, and if you don't then you should leave and do something else.* (Year 11-12)

Furthermore, some people '*are paid out for being dumb*', that is, because '*they are not smart*':

*I actually see a lot of people that are not smart being paid out ...* (Year 9)

Nonetheless, some 'paying out', and some that is identified as intentionally harmful, is directed at the '*real nerds*' but it is claimed that this is retaliatory; is done in different ways, and for reasons that have little to do with cleverness or achievement. The '*real nerds*', it is claimed, bring it upon themselves by being deliberately and often aggressively anti-social, sometimes to the point of being offensively elitist.

The boys see the adult interest in 'its not cool to be clever' more as an example of how the adult world seems determined to be wrong either by taking things out of context, or by trying to understand these things without appealing to their contextual significance. Indeed, most

boys believe that adults do this with agreement between themselves and with such conviction that they invent stereotypes which they all use, and which they accept without question, but which are obviously false. For the boys, this is what explains the adult interest in dealing with stereotypical boys, even when there aren't any. More particularly, it explains why adults invent the stereotypical boy who is supposed to believe that 'its not cool to be clever':

*It's just a stupid stereotype that people have made up. (Year 11)*

*I don't think it [being clever] is uncool ... (Year 9)*

*It's cool to be clever. If you're clever then you can make more money. (Year 11)*

Instead, it is these misunderstandings themselves that are said to have an impact on achievement and retention, largely by way of creating disaffection and the belief that there are '*too many bad teachers*', and parents who just believe what teachers tell them:

*Parents go 'you just don't want to try 'cause it's not cool' ...[I say] 'Mum, I'm trying but I'm getting shit marks 'cos I don't understand and I've asked the teacher but they just don't want to answer the question. (Year 11)*

This issue of trust and respect repeatedly appears in the focus group discussions. Most boys talk of the difficulty and often the impossibility of establishing a relationship of trust with adults. Interestingly, they talk of trust and respect being established between themselves, in a range of ways, some of which involve '*paying out*', others are more physical, like pushing, shoving, messing up hair or clothing, and so on. They also talk of how the teachers and school rules '*get in the way*' in these communicative social matters.

Indeed, one of their observations about what constitutes a good teacher, is that it is someone who understands their ways of communicating, using these to established trust and respect. A good teacher is one who participates in these practices and enjoys the humour that distinguishes the odd incident of '*serious paying out*' from general '*stuffing around*'. A good teacher, it seems, is one who is involved enough to be contextually flexible or pluralistic; someone who accepts the rhetoric of education, in practical, if not theoretical ways, particularly the importance it places on the relativity of identity, knowledge, truth and value. Notwithstanding, boys occasionally talk of the best teachers as those who are '*given shit*' by other teachers because they are flexible enough to join in with their students. Ironically, of course, this amounts to the suggestion that teachers also pay each other out, but not always in fun.

In general, the boys admire cleverness. This is one of the reasons why boys value and admire girls and the minority of boys who are high achievers, believing that their own complaints about unfair treatment take nothing away from the successes that these people are having.

### **It's not just about gender**

The fifth example, which we will deal with in more detail below, is the popular view that girls are getting a better deal in schools. The boys agree, but in a way that shows the popular view to be incomplete to the point of being false, largely because it separates one issue from the range of interconnected issues and phenomena that they know to be significant and know to be interconnected.

## Factors identified by the boys - a selection

The boys identified a range of interconnected factors, emphasizing the following:

- *boys do not value school - except for the social life - school is not about learning;*
- *girls get a better deal, but so do boys who are compliant;*
- *schoolwork is boring, repetitive and irrelevant;*
- *school doesn't offer the courses that boys want to do - courses and coursework should be getting you ready for a job*
- *homework is neglected or rejected because it is too intrusive, destructive and ultimately unachievable without sacrificing more valued aspects of their lives;*
- *Years 8, 9 and 10 are a waste of time and the Year 11 workload is deliberately made excessive;*
- *school pushes boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation - it's just too hard to stop it;*
- *there are too many 'bad' teachers, and too many old teachers who don't like kids and who don't stay up with things;*
- *good teachers can make a bad lot tolerable, but there are not enough good teachers (around 10%);*
- *school presents too many contradictions; too many debilitating paradoxes, eg,*
  - *school expects adult behaviour but doesn't deliver an adult environment;*
  - *school pushes the rhetoric of education but produces the opposite in practice;*
  - *school is all about getting most boys out of education;*
- *culturally celebrated rites of passage into adult life, like getting a driver's licence, owning a car, getting part time work, buying your own clothes, helping to run a household and establishing sexual relationships, are a negative influence on staying at school;*
- *school is too out-of-date - too detached from the real world - too detached from the rest of our lives;*
- *school is like a prison, but even prisoners get toilets they can use.*

## **'Girls get a better deal'**

The boys uniformly and emphatically claim that girls get a better deal at school. In the classroom, the girls get more help and attention from teachers, better marks for similar work, more leniency in terms of work deadlines and behaviour, and more freedom to talk and move about:

*Girls get favoured more than boys ... (Year 9-11)*

*Yeah, I agree with that totally ... (Year 9-11)*

The boys also uniformly believe that girls are trusted more to go out of the classroom, to use the library, to work elsewhere or to use resources located in other rooms; that girls' requests to use the toilets during class time are never denied, whilst boys are usually told to wait, and that girls are allowed to leave the room in groups whilst *'they'd never let us do that'*:

*If we want to go to the library....like, if the girls ask they can go...but we're not allowed.....they [the teachers] don't trust us ... (Year 9)*

*If the teachers see you for one minute out of class and you get suspended for it, and you haven't even done nothing wrong ... (Year 11)*

Most boys claim that they are not trusted at all; that *'girls get more excursions'* and that they occupy most of the positions of responsibility in the school because *'they are preferred by the teachers'*:

*Yeah....just little things...like they have girls days out and stuff like that .... (Year 9-11)*

*We don't get any of the benefits that girls get...like excursions and things like that ... (Year 9)*

In general, the boys believe that girls are given more encouragement to stay at school, whilst many boys are actively discouraged; told that they are not clever, not well suited to the work, made to feel that they don't belong and that it would be in their interests to leave.

## **But it's not simply about gender**

Although the issue of girls getting a better deal is raised in terms of gender, it is treated more as a matter of fact; one that is considered to be well-known by both boys and girls, but one, the significance of which is explicitly qualified as their discussion develops:

- they make the point that not all girls are the same, and some girls get a better deal than others;
- although girls always get a better deal relative to boys, they also make the point that not all boys are the same, and some boys get a better deal than others;
- girls are seen to be getting a better deal as a consequence of other, more broadly significant factors; primarily that there are *'too many bad teachers'* who have *'too much power'*, and that *'school is out-of-date'*, *'too inflexible'*, *'has nothing much to offer'*, and too narrowly defines achievement and success. For example:

- bad teachers favour students who conform and comply, and allow students to benefit from '*sucking up*' - its not so much about gender as not being stuck with bad teachers;
- the curriculum favours students who like a particular kind of work, done in a particular kind of way - although most boys find this to be boring, repetitive and irrelevant, the issue is not about gender as much as the lack of appropriate options and the flexibility to enable students to pursue their own learning needs and their preferred learning style and direction;
- school neither recognizes nor values the needs and achievements of students in other aspects of their lives - it is not so much about gender as students being penalized for having a life beyond school (in many ways the kind of life that is promised as an outcome of school) and punished for not being prepared to give up that life to meet the demands of a school system that is unnecessarily oppressive, out-of-date and inflexible.

Despite their uniform conviction that girls get a better deal, the emphasis is either not upon gender from the outset, or it moves away from gender, and their experience with good teachers is sufficient in itself to make this necessary. For them, this is not only compelling, it is obvious and must be well-known to all who have experienced life in the classroom, including '*the teachers*'.

Not surprisingly, the boys are at difference with attempts, either by educational institutions, through research and the choice of corrective strategies, or by the media and the community generally, to focus solely or largely on gender equity or gender differences to explain the declining rate of achievement and retention of boys, or of boys relative to girls. Mostly, this is expressed as puzzlement; a genuine failure to understand how the adult world could make such large mistakes about the obvious. Often, it is expressed more contemptuously, as an example of the adult preference for simplistic analysis, or for the self-interested kind that draws attention away from the real issues; to avoid having to challenge the status-quo or to effectively respond to a complexity of issues at the one time, most of which require self-criticism and big changes on their part.

### **Boys only classes just don't work**

From remarks made in some discussion groups, it would seem that boys only classes are increasingly seen, by the schools, as a useful strategy to deal with declining achievement and retention in boys. The boys uniformly disagree. In all classes other than PE or Technical Studies, the boys believe that such a move can only make matters worse.

Although they are strongly of the view that girls get a better deal in the classroom, they do not believe that separating them from the girls would be an improvement. For example, if this is done on the basis of gender differences, it ignores the reality that some boys, and at some time, most boys, prefer learning environments that are similar to those that would suit most girls and vice versa. In other words, by focusing narrowly on one difference, other differences are denied. It is similarly self-defeating when done in a bid to achieve gender equity. Given their dynamic and diverse nature, the division of girls and boys into separate classrooms results in the inequitable imposition of 'equity'. Besides, girls, in girls only classes, might get an even better deal, and so on.

Interestingly, most boys believe that they work better when girls are in the classroom. This is partly because they like their company and '*they are good to look at*', but it is also because their presence provides the richness of diversity and the asset of cleverness, good work

practice and the pragmatically driven focus on achievement that results in them making the best of a bad lot; one that clearly pays dividends in the classroom for both boys and girls alike.

The significant difference is not whether or not the class is all boys or all girls, but whether or not it has a good teacher. The best classroom environment is one in which there is the conjunction of diversity and the kind of good teacher who is comfortable with difference and not troubled by the riddle of relativity and its application in teaching practice.

Like compulsory sport, uniforms, and so on, it seems that gender-based favouritism or prejudice, where these are present, provide 'local' factors that serve as instances or indicators of the more significant and somewhat general causes of declining achievement and retention.

### **'Basically, there are too many bad teachers' - a paradoxical dilemma for boys**

*There are definitely good teachers and bad teachers. If we could get rid of the bad teachers we'd know who to get rid of. (Year 9)*

Despite the broad and complex association of factors, the boys consistently and emphatically see their retention and achievement problems primarily in terms of their relationship with teachers and what they see to be a proliferation of 'bad' teachers who are given too much power. A uniformly repeated view is that a 'good' teacher can make a bad lot tolerable and make achievement in an otherwise repressive, oppressive environment seem possible.

They have been clear, constructive and detailed in defining the constituting features of 'good teaching'; providing us with more than sixty necessary features. Interestingly, the emphasis is always placed on the personality of teachers; their ability and willingness to establish relationships of mutual respect and friendship with their students. In most schools, however, less than 10% of their teachers were thought to meet the criteria.

A good teacher is one who:

- *listens to what you have to say;*
- *respects you as a person; treats you like a friend; treats you as an adult;*
- *is relaxed, enjoys their day, and is able to laugh, especially at mistakes;*
- *is flexible, adjusting rules and expectations to meet the needs of individuals and particular circumstances;*
- *explains the work; makes the work interesting; finds interesting things to do;*
- *doesn't humiliate you in front of the class; doesn't try to destroy you or get you to leave;*
- *doesn't write slabs of work on the board to be copied;*

- *lets you talk and move about in the classroom;*
- *doesn't favour girls, or the boys who do what they're told;*
- *doesn't keep picking on people who have a reputation, pushing them to retaliate;*
- *doesn't mark you down because of your behaviour;*
- *gives you a chance to muck up and learn from it;*
- *doesn't keep telling you you're no good and should leave school.*

The focus of discussion in all groups either starts out as, or quickly turns to, teachers. All of the boys, to varying degrees, resent what they see as largely ineffective, out-of-date teaching by people who they think cannot teach, shouldn't be allowed to teach, have lost interest in teaching, and who are unnecessarily, inequitably, inconsistently, and usually unsuccessfully, authoritarian.

From their remarks about good teachers, the boys are identifying teachers who go beyond the 'policies and pretence' of education and its contemporary rhetoric about thinking in terms of interdependence and relativity. Essentially, they are describing teachers who, professionally and personally, are taking risks by listening, responding, respecting, trusting and valuing their students more than the rules, the policies, the legal precedents, their training, careers, the reputation of the school, and in some cases, small but vocal groups of parents:

*Good teachers are flexible with your behaviour. You can joke in class. We drop a couple of words we shouldn't but he doesn't give detentions. He breaks the rules of the school but he doesn't break his own. He's nice to you so you abide[?] by him, we've got respect for him. (Year 11)*

Ironically, the kind of non-compliance that characterizes these teachers seems to make them more successful at teaching and more valued as positive role models and often mentors:

*Whatever they do, is what we do. If they're a good teacher and they do better stuff, we do better stuff. If they are a crappy teacher, we do bad stuff. (Year 9)*

*They be good to you, you be good to them.....that's it. (Year 9-11)*

*... they are not completely strict ... no one really talks a lot and there is not a lot of telling off in the class.... Everybody seems to have respect for everyone else and there is not a lot of mucking around. (Year 11)*

*We'll get further with teachers like that ..... we're motivated to work if the teacher's relaxed. It makes it fun. We want to work. (Year 9)*

*If the teacher's relaxed we're going to achieve more because we want to achieve more. (Year 9)*

Furthermore, from the criteria of 'good teaching' it is evident that these teachers display a genuine, practical commitment to the democratization and liberalization of the young. In doing so, they are effectively offering a resolution to many of the paradoxes faced by the boys, and to the debilitating despair that ultimately shapes and directs their educational outcomes. In other words, they give them sufficient reason to believe in themselves, in others, in the value of learning and of working toward long term goals; that what needs to be done in their lives can be done, and that their confidence in the logic that led to despair was well founded. Although they *'feel better'* with good teachers, they also feel vindicated.

*For a while, I thought it was just me, that I had problems or somethin'. But since I've had [a 'good' teacher] in maths, it's all changed...everything's better...even other stuff...and that was last year. I'd like to get him for everthin'. If we had him this year, I reckon I'd do real good. (Year 11)*

Interestingly, 'good teachers' might be male or female. They are not necessarily young, but it helps. Furthermore, being young does not necessarily make a teacher a 'good teacher'. Young teachers are more likely to meet the boys' criteria for good teaching because *'they are closer to where we are'*. Young teachers are thought to like what they are doing more than most older teachers, and they *'try harder'* to *'have fun'*, and to make the work interesting. Importantly, when the boys talk about young teachers being 'closer' this is not explained simply in terms of age. Young teachers are more likely to *'treat you like a friend'*, to know about *'the things we're interested in'*, and to understand the kinds of problems that school creates for young people. More generally, young teachers are thought to be culturally more up-to-date; paradigmatically more in tune with the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, teachers who meet the boys' criteria for good teaching, are often thought of as 'young' teachers, regardless of their age. Age, in itself, is not the issue. The distinguishing features of good teaching remain largely focused on the ideas, attitudes and practices of individual teachers.

### **The downward spiral of disaffection**

Having experienced one or two good teachers, the boys want to know why the rest can't be trained properly and why the material they teach can't be made more interesting and more relevant. To them, the logic is straightforward, ie, good teachers and good teaching are demonstrably better for all, 'so why don't they just do it':

*Because our teacher treated us well and everything then everyone treated him well back, he didn't have to say be quiet all the time because he was so good to us we were just good back to him and we just shut up and did our work. He respected us. (Year 9)*

Given that the boys are unable to fault their logic, they seem left with the unwanted conclusion that the teachers (and perhaps most of the adult world) can't see the need for change and remain insensitive to their plight, can't change when they need to, despite the seriousness and urgency of their plight, or simply don't want to change. The response from the boys to each of these is similar, ie, disaffection, making resistance seem necessary, which compounds the problem, leading to resentment, anger and retaliation. The display of their response seems to be all that differs from boy to boy. For a few it is a minor irritation that is easily dealt with through compliance, but for most, the compulsion to respond, directly or indirectly, becomes an obstacle to achievement:

*We get them back and muck up with teachers that don't respect us. (Year 9)*

Despite the immediate satisfaction of being heard by way of causing disruption, the spiral of disaffection, resentment and anger is not considered by the boys to be a response that is likely to achieve a great deal. It appears to be a last resort, and perhaps a cry for help or a response driven by despair; not only the more familiar subjective 'feelings' of despair, but a rational, objective despair. Put simply, this is the reasoned, rational conviction that what must be changed cannot be changed; that due rational process leads to this conclusion and without 'fiddling the books' it can lead to nothing else (Medlin 1989). The cheery optimism of teachers and counsellors, who say that they understand, and which itself is driven by objective despair, merely confirms the paradox.

Objective despair logically follows from the boys' experience in education and they show very little interest in denying the logic that makes it necessary. Indeed, they seem to be determined to follow this logic at any cost. Hence, too often the spiral of disaffection is a process that they consider 'necessary':

*You can't just sit there. You got to fight back, muck up, or somethin'. What else can you do? (Year 9)*

Strategically, either denying their use of this logic or asking the boys to deny the logic itself, is pointless. It would be far better to provide them with reasons to change the logic, for example, more 'good teachers'. From what the boys are saying, the prevalence of 'bad teachers' and the boys' inability to avoid or control the impact that these teachers have on their lives, remains the primary and most troublesome of the many paradoxes confronting these boys daily.

From epidemiological research findings during the last 10 years we've learnt that unresolvable paradoxes of this kind can have a broad, as well as both immediate and long term, impact on human health, particularly in the formative years (McEwen 1998). Interestingly, it is also thought to influence human behaviour and the ability to learn.

### **The curriculum turns out to be what happens in the classroom**

For most boys, schoolwork is boring, repetitive and irrelevant. However, from their perspective you cannot change the curriculum unless you change the teachers:

*School is, like, boring, and teachers they are boring. (Year 9)*

Are you saying that the teachers are boring, or is it the work itself?

*No, the teachers make it boring. They rave on about stuff that is not exactly necessary. (Year 9)*

How do you think these 'boring' teachers affect your work and your achievement?

*They make us sleepy, and then you can't concentrate properly. (Year 9)*

What about the work itself?

*It depends on the teacher. Our French teacher doesn't explain anything. She, like, gives us work sheets, 'here, do that'. She just goes and sits down. We don't end up doin' it and we get duty slips. (Year 9)*

When the boys talk about both the work and teachers being boring, irrelevant and repetitive they do this as though these were inseparable aspects of the one process that they simply call 'school'. This includes school organization and its culture; the length of the lessons, the day, the school week, the term, and so on, as well as homework, uniforms, attendance and behaviour expectations. They also include aspects of the built environment, like enclosed classrooms, toilets that can't be used, as well as gates and fences *'that make you feel like you're in prison'*, and libraries that keep boys out. For the boys, these are all interdependent and causally interrelated aspects of their attitude to the work.

Nonetheless, their emphasis consistently and uniformly returns to the teachers as the primary factor; the one that must be changed before any of the others can be changed; the one which by changing will change all of the others. For most boys, the fault primarily lies with the teacher because the power lies with the teacher to make the necessary adjustments, but they don't. For them, the outcome is that boys learn less because teachers teach badly:

*You don't really learn that well if you can't concentrate because you're bored. (Year 9)*

*Teachers should do more things to make it interesting. They could do creative things instead of just sitting down filling in things on a work sheet kind of stuff. (Year 9)*

*It's the same for all lessons pretty much. (Year 9)*

It is important to note that the boys refer to the work as being boring in several ways:

- It is inherently boring because *'it's all theory'*;
- The work has been done before, ie, it *'is too repetitive'*;
- the work is done in the same way, lesson after lesson, day after day, year after year, ie, we read a novel and *'do a review about it'*, then we read another novel and *'do a review about it'*, or we watch a movie and *'do a review about it'*. Sometimes *'they just get you to do assignments'* one after the other, or you just sit in classrooms and *'copy out of books or from other people'*. That's *'all we ever do'*.
- It presents no challenge, ie, it's *'real easy stuff'*, and because it is easy it gets boring;
- The work is not relevant, ie, it's *'stuff you can't use'*, or *'you won't even use in the work you want to do'*, by which they mean *'real work'* outside and beyond school:

*We do real easy stuff ... we've done it all before ... it's heaps boring; its all theory ... stuff you can't use. (Year 9)*

*I think school is too repetitive. Like in English you do the same things over and over again. We watch a movie and then go and do a review about it, then we read a book and do a review about it. That's what I get sick of doing ... (Year 9)*

*We've been doing that since Year 8 and 9 and 10 ... (Year 11)*

*I find that Year 11, (and 12 I've been told) ... that it's pointless, because you don't learn anything. They just get you to do assignments. You don't learn anything at all ...*

*When you do assignments, you don't really care what you do, you just write it down so you can finish it ... (Year 9-11)*

*You only copy out of books or from other people, so you're not learning anything ... (Year 9-11)*

*And in maths its just sheets [work sheets] ... (Year 9)*

*And in maths they give you things you won't even use in the work you want to do. It's pointless. (Year 11)*

*In lessons like science, languages and maths it's the same stuff rolled off again and again. (Year 9)*

*My marks in maths have dropped considerably because of the way the teacher's teach. (Year 9)*

Although several subjects are talked about as inherently boring, irrelevant and repetitive, the boys consistently believe that a good teacher can make any subject interesting.

*My teacher has made a big difference in my work in maths. My mum spoke to the teacher 'cause she thought I was cheating. (Year 11)*

All of the boys either expressed or supported the view that they '*do better*', in terms of self-esteem and achievement, with better teachers; they muck around less, they concentrate more, they work harder in class and they usually get the homework done.

Basically, the boys believe that by changing the teachers you have already changed the curriculum. In other words, the curriculum turns out to be what actually happens in the classroom, and learning turns out to be what the participants actually take away with them and use.

In understanding their views about the curriculum, stereotypes and other dichotomous distinctions become prohibitive and destructive. All boys say that they learn better when they are '*doing things*'; '*interesting*', '*hands-on*' things. Nonetheless, what constitutes '*doing things*', or things that are '*interesting*' does not fit into the more traditional dichotomous divisions between '*academic*' and '*technical*', '*theoretical*' and '*practical*' or '*abstract*' and '*concrete*'; in which things academic, theoretical or abstract are necessarily passive and uninteresting, and things technical, practical or concrete are necessarily active, interesting and more '*real*'.

Science and maths are regarded by some boys as subjects that involve interesting, active tasks that they enjoy. Some of these are practical, but most are theoretical or abstract. The same boys speak of their interest in sport and in a range of classes involving mechanics, cooking and drama, because they amount to '*doing things*'.

Significantly, these culturally archival concepts are at their most destructive in information technology, where most traditional distinctions become fuzzy. The boys, for example, fail to understand why computer games and the use of email are excluded from their academic program, why teachers spend so much time '*trying to block internet sites*' that are easily accessed from home, why teachers don't understand computers much, why they '*force students to learn what they already know*', and why teachers and librarians stand guard over computers that have already passed their use by date.

## Staying on to Year 12 - a choice between a rock and a hard place

The spiral of disaffection is more often destructive for boys who are declared low achievers or who, more accurately, are non-achievers at school. These boys are both more prepared to accept the consequences of non-compliance and retaliation and less able to absorb these consequences in terms of the impact on their level of achievement. For them, it seems to be more important to get the immediate satisfaction of resistance and retaliation; to respond to what is perceived to be injustice, immediately. Nonetheless, these boys generally see themselves as able to do well under the right conditions - perhaps even to Year 12 and beyond. Whatever their choice(s) of direction, they remain aware, albeit vaguely, of the advantages of completing Year 12:

*If I could leave tomorrow, get a good job, just out of the blue, there's no way I'd be here, but because of unemployment you need school - to get Year 12 and tertiary education helps a lot. (Year 11)*

However, most have decided that the conditions are not only not right, they are intolerable. They find themselves with no alternative other than to adjust their expectations and for many boys it seems that they view their options, in education and their career, negatively; more in terms of what they can't do. Their view of themselves; of their abilities and their potential for success, is conditioned more by the immediate circumstances of their schooling than by what they might learn or what careers they might pursue were these conditions more flexible or more suited to their needs. They seem to know that this is happening, but they feel powerless to control these events and accept the need to scale down their expectations. They know that they're being assessed, and that their lives are being shaped and directed, more by the limitations of their schooling than by an objectively fair assessment of their ability and potential.

This further compounds the paradoxical dilemma of education, namely, that they have to stay in a place that they believe they can't stay in, doing work that they believe is of no value, in order to get qualifications that they believe do not accurately measure their ability, but which they will need if they are to get the chance to demonstrate their real ability to learn 'on the job'.

A surprisingly large number (perhaps more than half) of the boys say that the price of finishing Year 11 is too high. Although most of the Year 9 boys think that they could make it to Year 12, the retention figures suggest that they won't. Many boys have already left school before Year 11, and around half of the Year 11 boys we spoke with indicated that they would not be going on to Year 12. Many of these considered themselves unlikely to pass Year 11. The remainder thought that they would do Year 12, some because their parents wanted them to, and others because they could, and that they might need it in the future. Most of these boys felt that there was little point in going on to do tertiary study without a clear career pathway in mind. Only a small number said that they had been focused on getting good grades in the early years (9 and 10), as progressive steps toward finishing Year 12 with the kind of results that would lead to university study and on to their chosen career. These were usually the boys with ambitions to be doctors, lawyers or engineers.

Unfortunately, the prospect of coming back to do Year 11 or 12 at another time, for all boys, is simply rejected. Learning is synonymous with school: 'life long learning - no way!' It seems that their school experience has firmly established a negative and necessary association between formal learning and what they understand as an institutionalised, unpleasant waste of time, dealing with matters having no obvious relevance to their lives and their perceived needs and interests, and demanding the kind of personal sacrifice and general

disempowerment that makes the hazy promise of long term rewards simply and ultimately *'not enough'*.

### **Three versions of 'a better place'**

The boys, whether they are the ones who are not achieving, who are not achieving their best, or who simply don't like the conditions under which they are being successful at 'achieving', often present an idealised version of TAFE, the world of work, or senior college, as the solution to their problem. These are usually boys who know someone who has taken one of these options. Even at their worst, these alternatives offer them hope; often enough to preserve their self-esteem along with confidence in their own judgement that the world beyond school can only be better.

Whether or not these boys are getting accurate reports about these alternatives is not the most important issue. Their focus on these alternatives, and the way they describe them in their discussions, provides us with models of what they see to be better learning environments; options that they would like to pursue and that they believe would effectively deal with all of their current problems. As alternative models of a better place, they provide templates for change in schools.

Basically, these are templates for adult learning environments. Importantly, the boys see a distinction between adult learning environments and the senior school model. Senior schools remain schools, and for most boys, they offer little more than minor concessions for those who make it to Year 12. Adult learning environments offer the full recognition of adulthood.

Although their options are expressed as idealizations, they are common in that at least one of them will be seen to offer each of the boys, despite their diversity of backgrounds, abilities and interests, a way of getting out of oppressive, restrictive school environments that are seen to be out-of-date and dominated by bad teachers who prefer to establish control rather than mutual trust, respect and a place 'with' their students in the process of learning. The boys talk about TAFE and senior college as educational alternatives offering better teachers, more flexibility, more freedom, and where the students are treated with more respect and more generally, as adults. Paid work experience is seen in a similar way; it offers more interesting tasks, less pressure, more real learning opportunities, more respect, freedom, an adult identity and immediate rewards; recognizable rewards, namely money and the adult lifestyle that it can buy.

### **The paradox of achievement - the unrecognized CV**

From what the boys are saying, it seems that at Year 11 most of them have achieved a great deal. They are very perceptive, intelligent young men who are struggling to believe in themselves and surviving conditions that would destroy most adults. At Year 11, and at about 16 to 17 years of age, these boys have an impressive CV; one that must make any researcher wonder why you're asking them to focus on their declining rate of achievement.

The boys seem to be aware of their achievements, and aware that the adult world, particularly the world of education, affords them little or no recognition. In its place, the boys find themselves systematically excluded from being seen to be achievers. Although the boys show an awareness that success means different things for different people, they are puzzled, disappointed and in many cases angry, that the adult world persistently fails to recognize those successes that, in contemporary Australian society, are clearly 'rites of passage' into adulthood. For example:

- they have found and sustained part time work, and at a time of high unemployment (in excess of 60% of the Year 11 boys say they are working, with the average being around 15 hours - in some groups all the boys were working and some are working 25 to 35 hours a week in low paid jobs with difficult conditions and often have supervisory responsibilities);
- many are licensed car drivers;
- they have managed to maintain, for over three years, their involvement in an education process that they believe to be unsuitable and often hostile to their needs and interests;
- they participate in some sort of competitive sport, whether it be in organised team sports or in more individual pursuits like skate-boarding (more than 60% indicated a weekly commitment in the range of 6 to 12 hours, spread over 2 to 5 days each week)
- they maintain a social life with both male and female friends;
- they make difficult decisions, eg, about drug use;
- they deal with family problems, including pressure to achieve;
- they continue to adjust to rapid physiological and psychological changes;
- they cope with the increased responsibilities of adulthood, whilst being actively denied the accompanying adult freedom and empowerment;
- they sustain a fundamental belief in their culture - expressing this through their individual integrity, their passion for freedom, and their strength to resist perceived injustice against all odds;
- they are surviving an advertising industry that makes promises that it cannot deliver, and popularizes goals and 'norms' that cannot be realised;
- they remain forward looking and largely optimistic, despite being taught about the horrors of converging social and environmental crises which threaten human survival on a global scale.

Despite these and other 'positive' achievements, the boys find that they get very little recognition for their successes - recognition coming mostly from their peers. Few rewards are given and their gains have no impact on their school grades. Furthermore, the boys find themselves judged by their teachers, the school, and often parents, as being 'failures', 'poor achievers' or just not being capable of applying themselves to difficult tasks.

It would come as no surprise to the boys to learn that the focus of the literature and the media, when dealing with the declining rates of retention and achievement, is essentially directed toward 'fixing up the boys'. It would come as even less of a surprise to learn that the character of responses, from our introductory survey of participating schools, was similarly directed at 'fixing up the boys'. It would seem that the boys themselves see their problems very differently.



They see themselves stuck with an unsuitable learning environment that they cannot change, largely because it is constituted by teachers who don't care. Although they identify the curriculum as irrelevant and unchallenging, their experience with 'good' teachers has shown this to be an unnecessary outcome. Furthermore, it is one that is made worse because it is dominated by authoritarian school policies and practices that achieve nothing other than wasting classroom time, making education an unpleasant experience, and creating a pre-occupying focus on getting out of school as soon as possible. Once again, their experience with 'good' teachers has shown them that this is also an unnecessary outcome. The choice, whether or not to correct declining rates of retention and achievement, they believe, lies largely with the teachers.

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