

## **BOYS' EDUCATION**

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This paper, loosely headed '*Boys' Education*' will endeavour to discuss such issues as the relevance of current school policies, curriculum issues and common themes in boys' schools.

In talking to Principals both in New Zealand and Australia, one of the central themes discussed was how relevant are our Educational policies to the real needs of our pupils. Although this is frequently discussed by Educators, it does not always translate to active school policy.

Let me give you a very topical example; that of keeping all young people at school as long as possible. Now there are some students who would happily stay at school till they draw the pension, if in fact there is one when they finally get out the school gate! They will study forever because 9-3 sure beats 8-5 and five days a week are more attractive than six. However the professional scholars seeking to avoid the real world are a minority. On the other hand, young people compelled to stay at school till they reach the 'political leaving age' are not a minority and pose an entirely different problem.

As a secondary principal of long service, I know that this policy is totally unresponsive to the real needs of today's young people. Some of my more cynical colleagues would argue that this has something to do with keeping kids off the streets and masking unemployment. Leaving that aside, I believe that this policy is deeply flawed. Many teachers have seen the effect of keeping students at school who just don't want to be there. They are often moody, unresponsive and, let's be honest, confrontational and difficult to handle. These reluctant scholars produce very little work of substance and as an added 'bonus' disrupt the learning of good students who want to be at school and have a definite plan for their futures.

The logical step from here is how to cater for these students who seek an alternative pathway (to use the jargon). There is much talk that the new curriculum will offer something for everybody, a broader more assessable curriculum, a no-fail system. This may have some merit, but there is a sneaking suspicion from some secondary teachers that this is a further dilution of academic standards.

Back to the reluctant student – the short answer is that many of these students would benefit from apprenticeship workshops, practical experience and courses that would capture their interest and that would lead on to employment. They really don't see the value of whether Richard II's divine right of kingship was in dispute and frankly they don't care. However, put a tool in their hands and a sensible programme and they are away. Students, especially boys, need to strongly feel that the study they do is relevant, enabling them to acquire a skill or qualification that will make them employable.

One of the themes I wished to examine on my sabbatical was the much-discussed topic of 'Boys' Education'. The reason that I have relegated this to the second section of this paper is that much of the area of boys achieving or not has been fairly rigorously addressed already.

In the schools I looked at, namely St Bede's College in Christchurch, Wellington College, Christchurch Boys' High and Christ's College, Canterbury were only too aware of the importance of treating boys differently in order to achieve the best outcomes.

It would become tedious if I was to outline the central concepts or the specific philosophy that underlines all these fine schools. However if we just glance at a few we will be able to get some appreciation of their Educational endeavours.

Wellington College outlines a key concept when it states, "We recognize that the college's foremost task is to be concerned with people. Positive and affirming interpersonal relationships are fostered at all levels, among students, staff and board members, parents, Old Boys and friends of the college." To my way of thinking this is exactly what all educational institutions should aspire to, and interestingly this is one of the key aims of Rosmini College. Wellington College continues to lay down the established priorities for their students, and again I reiterate that these are fairly constant objectives across most of the boys' schools I looked at.

#### Other key aims at Wellington College

- an extra curricular programme which promotes keen and competitive interest in sports and art.
- an awareness of the history and traditions of the college, and society at large.
- a sense of being part of a caring community which has rules and freedoms which mirror the expectations of an ordered society.
- Frequent reminders of the intrinsic importance and value of each individual within the life of the college community. (Compare this with the central aim of Antonio Rosmini – *Every individual is a child of God and must be treated as an end, never as a means to an end.*)
- a staff which is united in its commitment to excellence in the classroom, and to support for the wider life of the college.
- a sense of order and discipline which goes hand in hand with a respect for authority.

The next college that I had a look at was St Bede's, Christchurch. Bedeans are expected to:

- tolerate and respect diversity and to promote acceptance and friendship as a firm foundation for Gospel values.
- develop sound work habits and organizational skills with regard to their studies.
- develop a sound approach to competition, learning to win with humility and lose with grace.

Again, Christchurch Boys' High has similar aims and values. Central to its philosophy is, "*to challenge each pupil to realise his potential in the pursuit of academic, cultural and sporting excellence.*" The Headmaster talked of "*the importance for his students to pursue excellence in academic work, sport and culture, in discipline and behaviour, and in service to others*".

Indeed, every Headmaster I spoke to placed strong emphasis on preparing their students for a changing world, but were confident that if their students strove for a love of learning, humanity and tolerance, society, as well as themselves, would be richer.

Schools are aware of the modern challenge and from my perception are well prepared to meet it.

To change tack slightly – teachers are now having to cope with the new curriculum. This offers key learning skills, or strands, that are taught or embodied in various subjects, waiting for the enlightened teacher to unpack them for the attentive student to absorb. There is a definite freedom and flexibility about the new curriculum and teachers' responses vary from 'terrific', 'fantastic', to 'here we go again' on the ever turning and changing educational ferris wheel.

One cannot evaluate the merits or demerits of the new curriculum at this early stage, and one would be totally presumptuous to make any judgements until it has been taught for a safe period of time. However I will say this – Western Australia is introducing a new curriculum and it is quite a contrast to ours. There is more insistence on 'CONTENT' and a back-to-basics approach. English sees the return of spelling and grammar and a healthy insistence on studying traditional and modern literature. No longer will creative writing ignore spelling, grammar and punctuation. History will focus on accurate historical details and ensure that clarity and aptness of expression is given the importance it deserves.

Many educators will no doubt say that this approach is too formal, regimented and dull. They will point out that Education has to change rapidly to keep up with the times. The knowledge wave is here and we must surf it. The New Zealand curriculum is far more creative and allows pupils and teachers the opportunity to think more widely. This new approach shifts pedagogy from being teacher-centred to more student-centred. Individual differences will be catered for in more lively group work. The teacher will become a facilitator, and more from the front of the class, and integrate with the students.

So there you have it – formal content, traditional teaching versus child-centred learning discovery. Of course these are generalizations but, like many generalizations they are close to the mark. Current events are interesting – it may be unfair but information technology claims to have us up to speed with change almost before it happens. Maybe, but with the knowledge wave almost drowning us, no-one seemed to warn us of the impact of the recession that has affected so many lives.

I suppose my point is that we need to look carefully at current Educational philosophy, and above all not rush into the latest educational theories doing the rounds. Research shows us that developing countries are out-gunning Western countries in gaining skills and qualifications. Could the answer be in the fact that they work harder, have a traditional curriculum and value education more than we do. I will leave people to draw their own conclusions on that debate.