

## **Focus: Boys' Education in Co-educational Schools**

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This study was completed over an eight school week period between July and August 2006.

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In Australia:

- Maroochydoore State High School
- Gympie State High School
- Glenala State High School
- Redbank Plains State High School

And in New Zealand:

- Cromwell college
- Dunstan high School
- Mt Aspiring college
- Wakatipu high School

### **PURPOSE**

The investigation was at three levels. The focus was on the strategies co-educational schools are employing to improve learning outcomes for boys, particularly in Years 9-11.

1. Visits to four co-educational state schools in Australia which are involved in the 'Success for Boys' programme.
2. Readings on boys' education, with a particular emphasis on case studies of co-educational schools who have had success in modifying programmes to better engage boys.
3. Visits to four rural co-educational schools in New Zealand.

### **RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Over the last decade there has been a steady decline in boys' achievement and engagement in schooling. This has been well documented and is not just confined to New Zealand. It is an issue in a number of other western countries as well.

Levels of disengagement and underachievement are reflected in;

- *Rates of stand downs and suspensions.* In 2005 male exclusions outnumbered female exclusions by 3:1. Those aged 13-15 accounted for 79% of all exclusion cases.
- *Retention rates.* In the period 2000-2005 exemptions for boys outnumbered girls by 2:1. (Source: A report on New Zealand student Engagement Ministry of Education 2005).
- *A gender gap in NCEA.* 10-12% more girls achieve NCEA Level One than boys. The gap widens at Levels Two and Three. This is further compounded by the retention issue. External results, particularly in Languages and the Arts significantly favour girls as does the numbers of excellences.
- *Declining numbers of boys in tertiary education.* In 2004 42.6% of tertiary enrolments and 43% of enrolments in bachelor degrees were male. 2006 figures from Otago University for total enrolments are:
  - Males 43.8%
  - Females 56.2%
 There are significantly more females than males in nearly all courses. The only exception is Commerce.

## **FINDINGS (INCLUDING METHODOLOGY)**

My investigation was conducted on three levels.

1. What is happening in schools in Australia particularly in relation to the Success for boys programme?
2. What do case studies tell us about successful programmes to address issues for boys in coeducational schools?
3. What is evident from a snapshot of New Zealand schools?

## **WHAT IS HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS?**

### **The success for boys programme.**

In the schools I visited the ignition for improving outcomes for boys was their involvement in the 'Success for Boys' programme. This does not mean that some schools had not already developed programmes on their own initiative. However, external funding is a great stimulus to action.

Success for boys is an Australian government initiative designed to improve the participation and learning outcomes of boys in Australian schools. In 2006, 800 schools around Australia are implementing the programme. Three of the four schools I visited had opted into the programme this year.

The programme provides for individual schools and school clusters to receive grants of up to \$10,000 to undertake professional learning programmes on boys' education. At least 80% of the funding has to be spent on professional development with staff. Gympie State High School shared \$70,000 as part of a cluster of two High Schools and 4 primary schools. They had a team of key personnel charged with identifying and implementing strategies to improve outcomes for boys.

The key element of the 'Success for Boys' initiative is the professional learning resources developed by James Cook University in 2005 in conjunction with the Department of Education Science and Training.

The 'Success for boys' professional learning materials consist of 5 modules providing learning guides, activity sheets, slides for group presentations and associated readings. The modules provide a comprehensive professional development programme for staff. Each module represents 4-5 hours of staff development time.

The first three modules are of particular relevance to this investigation. They provide some key questions, information and strategies for improving the achievement of boys in a co-educational setting.

### **Module One - Planning Guide and Introduction**

This module invites participants to focus on the issues, particularly in relation to their own schools, to encourage expanding repertoires of practice and to establish a plan for action. Some of the key ideas of particular relevance are:

- Many boys in early adolescence do not value school and are in a downward spiral of disaffection and resentment.
- In order to improve learning outcomes for boys at school we need to focus on three things:
  - i. Understanding boys better and engaging them more fully by concentrating on their sense of self, their relationships and the cultures within which they engage
  - ii. Provide high quality teaching and learning opportunities. Quality teaching demands higher level thinking, connects with the students' experiences, takes place in a supportive environment and recognises difference.
  - iii. Ensuring that wider school practices reflect what is happening in the classroom "Boys perform better in schools that have a strong learning culture and sense of community, and that demonstrably value all pupils by celebrating their achievements and by treating them fairly and with respect..." Ofsted (2003,p3).

### **Module Two - Boys and Literacy**

This module invites an examination of current research on boys and literacy. It challenges myths about boys, promotes a framework for improving literacy outcomes for both boys and girls and suggests a strategy further planning. Some of the key ideas of particular relevance are:

- Attempts to improve boys' literacy should not result in reduced support for girls' literacy learning
- On average, boys when compared to girls, are doing less well in school-based literacy performance
- Not all boys are doing poorly and not all girls are doing well at literacy related tasks
- Boys and girls tend to prefer different types of texts; boys preferring informational and girls preferring fictional
- Significant deficit thinking surrounds boys' poor achievement in literacy
- We need to redefine what it means to be literate; e.g. incorporate traditional definitions of literacy with that provided through newer communication technologies
- Teachers can adopt practices to improve boys' literacy outcomes
- An expanded repertoire of practice should focus on three main areas:
  - i. Harnessing a boy's interest in active learning
  - ii. Expanding the ways in which boys express themselves and incorporating choice and personal experience
  - iii. Focusing on a sense of who they were and how they were valued at school.

A focus on quality teaching is of more value than school organisational change

### **Module Three - Boys and ICT**

This module explores ways ICT can be used to improve boys' engagement and achievement. The key idea is that the value of ICT lies in the way it can be used to embed the processes and purposes of the curriculum inside engaging real world tasks that students enjoy.

The remaining modules are titled Mentoring for Success and Indigenous Boys.

The schools I visited were in the preliminary stages of using the 'Success for Boys' modules with staff in both their own and contributing schools. They also offered other programmes and initiatives designed to better engage boys. These included:

- Establishing project teams from within staff. Maroochydore State High School has developed an initiative named BASS (Boys Achieving School Success). A project team supported by behaviour management funding is charged with researching and promoting

best practice, as well as supporting specific boys' education initiatives (see Rock and Water programme). The school also, as part of a cluster, employs someone to act as a boys mentor to work across all schools. The target group is boys who are disengaging or 'at risk of disengaging'.

- One school operated laptop classes. At Gympie State High School (roll 1150), parents chose to supply laptops for their children enabling three "laptop" classes at Year 9 and two at Year 10. The students were kept together for English, Mathematics and Science. Teachers were expected to embrace teaching strategies that made use of the technology available. While the classes were mixed gender, the programme was seen as an innovative way of keeping boys engaged in learning.
- Developing a sort of niche branding with a particular emphasis on things that would appeal to boys. One school linked with a local rugby league club and offered half year specialisation in rugby league as an alternative to the physical education programme. They used personnel from the club to assist with coaching and mentoring. The same school was also developing a brand as a country music school of excellence, with participation in national and international festivals.
- Schools were able to involve students in traineeship. This was a step towards an apprenticeship. Students entered paid employment for one or two days a week and were able to continue with school based subjects.
- One school used senior boys in study times to assist in classes with juniors. The senior students were timetabled into classes on a weekly basis to support underachieving boys.

#### **RELEVANT OTHER CASE STUDIES AND PROGRAMMES**

- Over 4000 teachers in Australia have been trained to implement a programme called Rock and Water. It was developed by Freerk Ykema in the Netherlands. It is a programme designed for boys and involves the learning of skills associated with conflict resolution, self awareness and self reflection. It incorporates physical exercises linked to mental and social skills. In Between a Rock and a Hard Place, (Boys in Schools bulletin Vol.9 No 1 2006), Paul Edwards outlines how the programme was implemented in a number of high schools in NSW and the initial outcomes.
- Hunter Sports High School developed a partnership with Newcastle University. (Building on Boys' Strengths, The Boys in School Bulletin Vol 9 No2 June 2006). They began the year with a camp for new entrant boys. It involved fathers and other males. The focus was on the boys' thinking, about themselves as male, who they wanted to be, how they preferred to learn and what and who will help them to achieve their goals. Staff designed 'boy friendly' resources. 'The big message in the program was to explicitly link boys' male identities to positive behavioural and learning outcomes' ( p12).

#### **WHAT IS EVIDENT FROM A SNAPSHOT OF NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS?**

I visited four New Zealand Schools ranging from Deciles 7-10. These schools were rural or semi-rural. Rolls ranged from 435-750. All schools identified some issues with boys' achievement and engagement (although less so in the Decile 10 school). While in all schools the boys were achieving well against national figures there were common trends of higher stand-downs amongst boys, more girls receiving awards for academic work at Years 9/10, a disparity in achievement at Years 11-13 and a higher retention rate for girls in senior classes. Schools were adopting wide-ranging strategies in efforts to lift the achievement levels of boys. These included:

- All schools operating professional development programmes which, to a larger or lesser extent, focussed on boys and learning. These ranged from quite specific activities eg attendance of staff at national and local conferences on Boys' Education, to others that encouraged teachers to review teaching practices; eg study of multiple intelligences, learning styles
- The establishment of boy's only classes. However, this was not widespread and had tended to occur in a specific year for a particular reason; eg high number of boys with reading

difficulties. Principals favoured the development of strategies to meet the needs of boys in mixed gender classes.

- A strong emphasis on literacy. All schools had programmes with a focus on improving literacy. In most cases the target group was significantly boys. Part of one programme at Year 9/10 involved boys working with a tutor to identify and organise reading materials around subjects they were taking. Most schools operated buddy reading programmes
- Some school specific initiatives which particularly appeared to target boys included:
  - i. A Head of Science establishing a policy that in every period there is some 'hands on' activity
  - ii. The development of guidelines for the 'purposeful lesson'. This included formal starters, sharing of learning objectives and end of lesson review of 'what we have learnt today'.
  - iii. Use of the SCT to work with classes on goal setting and targets and what it means to be a good learner.
  - iv. Class action plans that target learning needs including literacy
  - v. Use of RTLB's to measure and analyse off task behaviour and advise teachers
  - vi. Programmes designed to lift the self esteem of boys
  - vii. Workshops with Celia Lashlie and Karen Boyes
  - viii. Newsletters on boys' issues and engagement informing and involving parents
  - ix. Modifying programmes at senior level to involve more practically based activity; eg technology and the use of ITO modules
  - x. The development of challenges at particular year levels; eg Year 10 certificate involving academic and activity based programmes like Duke of Edinburgh (Young New Zealanders challenge).
  - xi. Surveying levels of engagement across the school through a Lifestyle survey and looking for ways to increase participation.
  - xii. Using the specialist learning teacher to target students at the top end of the discipline system with IEP's, individual mentoring and goal setting and liaising with parents.
  - xiii. Consciously bringing strong male role models into the school.

## IMPLICATIONS

So what does all this mean? The issue of boys learning is a complex one. However, firstly, we need to have a clear picture of how boys are achieving in our individual schools, particularly from Years 9 to 11. We need to look at the disciplinary actions, the retention rates, the academic awards, the levels of school involvement, the literacy and numeracy data and determine how well our boys are doing. We need to survey our boys and ascertain attitudes to schooling, what they think of the place, how motivated they are and what they like and dislike about learning. While many boys will be achieving well, national data suggests that in many schools there will be a negative skew towards boys.

Secondly, we need to be aware and make staff aware, of the type of classroom climate necessary in co-educational schools to allow both boys and girls to be successful. Staff need to be aware of the importance of relationship, self and structure in developing successful learning outcomes for boys. There needs to be an awareness of the nature of boys, of how boys learn and what constitutes 'boy friendly' resources. We need to accept that by engaging more boys we are creating better learning environments for girls. We need to work with staff to acknowledge that with boys particularly, the teacher is paramount.

"The most critical aspect of working with boys in the classroom is to make a connection with them". (Ian Lillico. P15 Australian Issues in Boys Education)

"Boys are different. But not so different. Just different enough to need their own style of teaching....They learn first through relationships. If there is one thing I would tattoo on every teacher's arm, it would be 'boys only learn from teachers who like them'. If they perceive you don't like them, then you might as well walk away.' Steve Biddulph (p.iii Educating Boys.The Good News)

And thirdly (but not necessarily in this order), we need to create whole school cultures that are more conducive to improving learning outcomes for boys. Staff have to be supported by professional development programmes that address the issues mentioned above. They need to have the tools to do the job. We need to create boys action groups of interested staff who will read and share research and successful practice. We need to review the school organisation, structure and environment and reflect on how conducive these are to the learning needs of boys. We need to listen to boys and we need to look for ways of involving parents (fathers particularly), in schooling and the transition of boys to manhood.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is a wealth of information on what is a very complex issue. I have purposefully tried to retain a narrow focus. What are schools doing to improve learning outcomes for boys in years 9-11 in coeducational schools? As I have read the research and case studies I have asked 'how does this fit into a coeducational setting?'

Australian schools have the benefit of a government funded professional development programme (\$A20 million in 2006), 'Success for Boys', designed to promote boys' education across all types of schools. Much of my investigation has focussed on this and the research published through the 'Boys in Schools' programme. This is not to say that excellent practices are not occurring in New Zealand schools.

I have enjoyed the opportunity over the last weeks to read and reflect. I have also appreciated the chance to discuss boys' education and wider issues with colleagues on both sides of the Tasman. It is now time to translate some of it into action!

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