

## **A contemporary perspective in Educating Boys**

*Ian Lillico*  
*Principal City Beach High School*  
*Kalinda Drive, City Beach, WA 6015*

Over the last ten to fifteen years we have seen a steady decline in boys' academic achievement, appropriate behaviour, self esteem and emotional growth resulting in the increased alienation of boys in the schooling system, particularly in Years 7 to 10. Schools need help in managing, motivating and engaging boys in the learning process and their participation in life generally.

The alienation of boys has cost individual schools and the education system millions of dollars in teacher and administrator time, programs to combat truancy, behaviour interventions etc. In fact the deputy principals and principals in our schools are giving boys so much of their time in pastoral care, discipline and support that they are not able to spend the time they would like to, providing curriculum leadership and teacher support. If we can change the situation for boys in our schools there should be gains in teacher morale and administrator time. Research is indicating that part of the problem lies in the downturn in boys' literacy and their consequent inability to glean information from books and printed material, which increases progressively from year 3 to year 10 and beyond.

A further issue impacting on young males is the changing world of work and the steady reduction in the number of labour-intensive jobs which (in the past) were often taken up by boys without an academic leaning. We must help boys to move forward and not be content with *behind the scenes* work as in the fast-food industry. We must encourage boys to develop their interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence to compete in a workforce which is changing from brawn to brains! The continued fracturing of the family unit and low engagement of male guardians in their sons' schooling has further exacerbated the problems boys face in their school years.

Many males, therefore, are *at risk* in terms of their academic achievement, behaviour, aspirations for the future and low rates of participation in the social, caring and citizenship aspects of school life. Beyond school they pose a risk to themselves and others as statistics on male suicide, car accidents and juvenile crime indicate. Suicide is, now, the main cause of death of young males in Australia between the ages of 15 and 24, followed closely by car crashes, which also indicate risk-taking and a devaluing of life. Home invasions, burglary and use of illicit substances are also an indicator of *at risk* behaviour, predominantly perpetrated by young males.

The inability of many males to sustain relationships with women, often leading to domestic violence and the demeaning of women in society, is a further reason to tackle issues of violence, relationships and sexuality at school by instituting programs for boys and girls separately which deal with gender construction. Such programs need to be brought to the

attention of teachers and school leaders if the outcomes desired for both genders are to be realized.

Changing the disruptive influence of the boys should also maximise the potential for the girls in our system. The gains made by girls and women over the last twenty years have been enormous. A sustained set of programs and policies by State and Commonwealth education sectors, together with the women's movement, has helped girls on a variety of fronts. If such a series of affirmative actions was embarked upon for boys I am sure we would see an improvement in boys' learning with a consequent improvement for girls due to the removal of some of the negative influences and behaviour of boys in the classroom and school yard. There are no *quick fixes* and it will take some years to see a major change in boys, but there are many things that schools can do (on a number of fronts) to lay the foundations on which to bring about improvements in boys' learning and behaviour.

We should organize schools around students with the 'unit' of education being *the child* and not *the subject*. Schools who espouse subject choice and breadth may not be around in the next few years as the knowledge explosion will make many current schools obsolete. Many schools are failing boys who see little relevance in a system that deals in outdated information compared to what they can progressively access at home with improved I.T. in homes.

There are many historical, cultural and societal reasons for the decline in boys learning and behavioural outcomes over the last 3 decades and the issue is emotive and requires a long-term cultural shift in the way schools operate. It will mean re-thinking our curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, professional development, pastoral care policies, behaviour policies, value systems and school structures.

We need both men and women as teachers and administrators in our schools trained in mentoring both boys and girls due to an increasing erosion of traditional family life. There are many programs, structures and initiatives that schools can develop which, over time, will make a difference in both the short and longer term. We need to work with parents, and particularly fathers, to get them more involved in their children's learning and general development into adulthood. Schools should offer forums for parents to discuss some of the problems they face at home and work with them using the assistance of teachers and other professionals.

Central to understanding boys is the *boy code*. Though they give an impression of being tough and uncaring, they are hurting on the inside. Teachers need skills in seeing through the masks that boys wear – particularly when in groups and low-ability classes. We need to talk with them about such issues as they are caring and sensitive underneath. Movement and activity with boys is a key in getting boys to *take their masks off*. A second strategy is ensuring they are not shamed. Girls are shame sensitive, but boys are shame-phobic. Steve Biddulph says *boys learn teachers* and not subjects. This means that developing relationships in the classroom is central to getting improvements in boys' educational outcomes.

*The time is overdue to throw out* some of our archaic practices and policies in schools that are not working for our boys. If schools are to remain the major source of education for all our children, we must ensure that boys get a better deal. We must experiment with alternative ways of doing our *core business* - helping each student (boy or girl) realise their maximum potential in a safe, caring environment. There are many strategies that have been developed to

assist schools and parents help and understand boys. It is time that all schools face up to this challenge and start to make schooling better for boys. We can change the *not cool to be smart* attitude of boys because Australian educators lead the world in caring, innovation and dedication to our kids.