

The Education Jigsaw

Educating in the 21st Century

Workshop presented by
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What are the trends so far in C21?

In a recent article published in the *Guardian* (2002), the claim was made that

“girls now outperform boys in developed countries around the world and governments want to know why.”

Searching the literature leads one to the conclusion that although issues surrounding the education of boys are a first world phenomenon, there are greater indications in English background countries that the dichotomy between ‘success’ and achievement for boys is far greater than for girls. It is obviously important to recognise that this is not a bilateral difference and that issues of class, culture, location, parental education (particularly that of mothers) have an influence but nevertheless, the trends which have been identified in Australia, particularly in secondary schools are mirrored in the British Isles, Canada, the US and New Zealand to name a few.

In a speech I gave to the Centre of Excellence conference in Perth in January of this year, I identified the following trends, which indicated that:

The retention rates at school peaked in 1992, the retention rate for girls in Australia has been higher than for boys since 1977 and the gap between retention rates is growing. Early suggestions that it was those in the low socio-economic group who were leaving and taking up non-professional jobs predominated what discussion there was, followed by a realisation that these jobs were vanishing (although not as fast as some would suppose). However, post-1992, it was impossible to maintain this fiction as more and more boys across the socio-economic spectrum did not complete year 12. Somewhat cynically, I would suggest that when the children of the powerbrokers began to walk away from education, there was deemed to be a ‘crisis’.

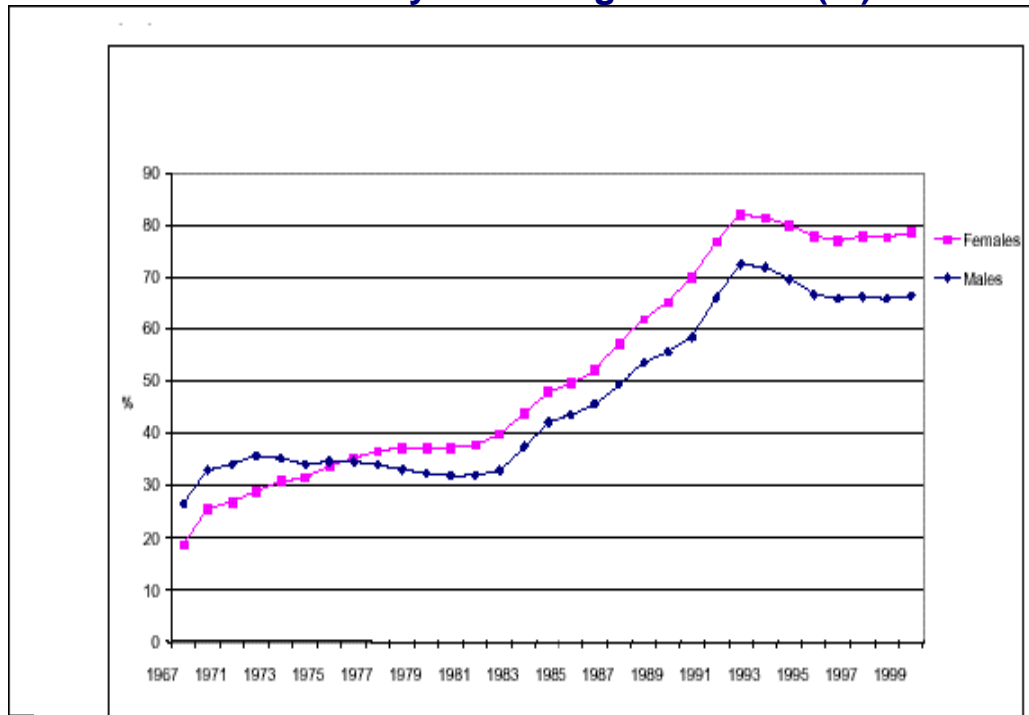
There are obviously still differences in the numbers of students who choose to leave school early in high and low socio-economic areas and in State and Private schools, but the phenomenon exists across all groups in all locations. It is clear, however, that there is a higher rate of non-completions in rural areas than in urban. This too is not a new development but understanding its impact is important. It is also important to note that the rate of suicide among young males is higher in rural than urban areas.

(Trent: 2002)

Although not covered in these figures, trends among Indigenous students in these directions are even more pronounced.

These trends can be seen in the data produced in the submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry on the Education of Boys* by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA:2000:18).

Chart 1: Apparent retention rates from the commencement of secondary schooling to Year 12 (%) 1967-1999



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia, various years; Commonwealth Department of Education; Department of Employment, Education & Training (1991) *Retention and Participation in Australian Schools, 1967 to 1990*, AGPS, Canberra

At a time where, the prevailing view among politicians is that completion to year 12 is essential and the South Australian Government as one its first acts in the education field has raised the school leaving age to 16, it would seem important to understand why students are leaving school, from their point of view as well as from the official point of view.

What are the purposes of education? Who decides?

Education is, as Humpty Dumpty might argue, a ‘portmanteau’ word. It means whatever those who use the word choose it to mean, and it changes both through political and social pressure. According to business it means getting people work-ready, for many academics it means absorbing information at a high level and being able to transform, question and use it, for some students it means obtaining a credential which allows passage to the next stage and often further credentials.

It seems that if we are to tackle the areas of the Jigsaw - Ethics, Values and the Life of the Spirit, the Life of the Mind, Politics and Governance, Educating in the New Century and Creating Resilience in the Community and fit them together to make a whole picture, we need to tackle some of the conflicting messages which staff and students often get.

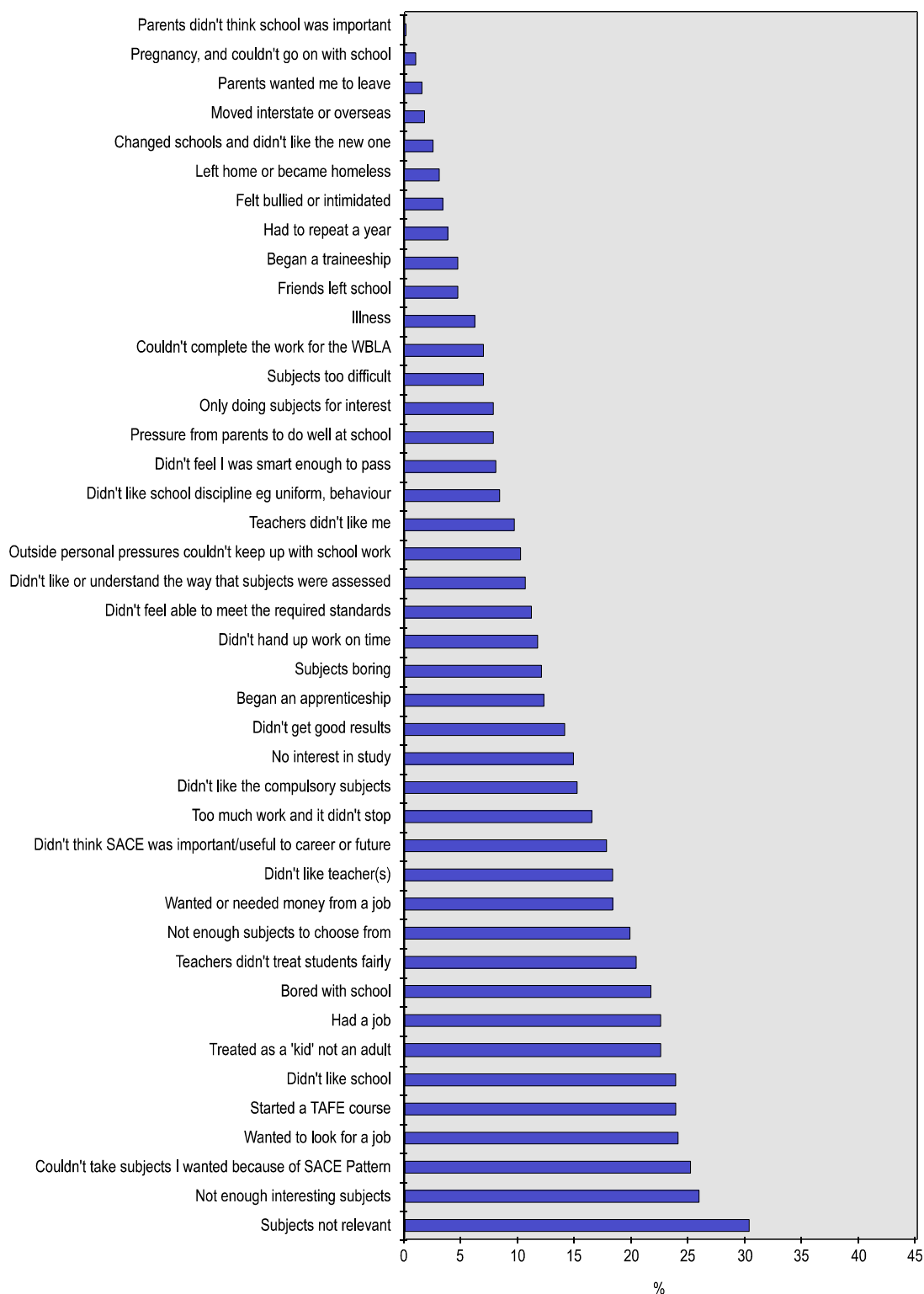
What are the perceived views of schooling systems, teachers and students?

The views they expressed to us in the Flinders study, are reinforced by a study undertaken by the Secondary Schools Assessment Board of South Australia in 1999, whose results show two important things-

- the differences between the perception of staff and students, and
- the almost complete lack of self analysis undertaken by the staff, with a view of the boys' being responsible for their dilemma.

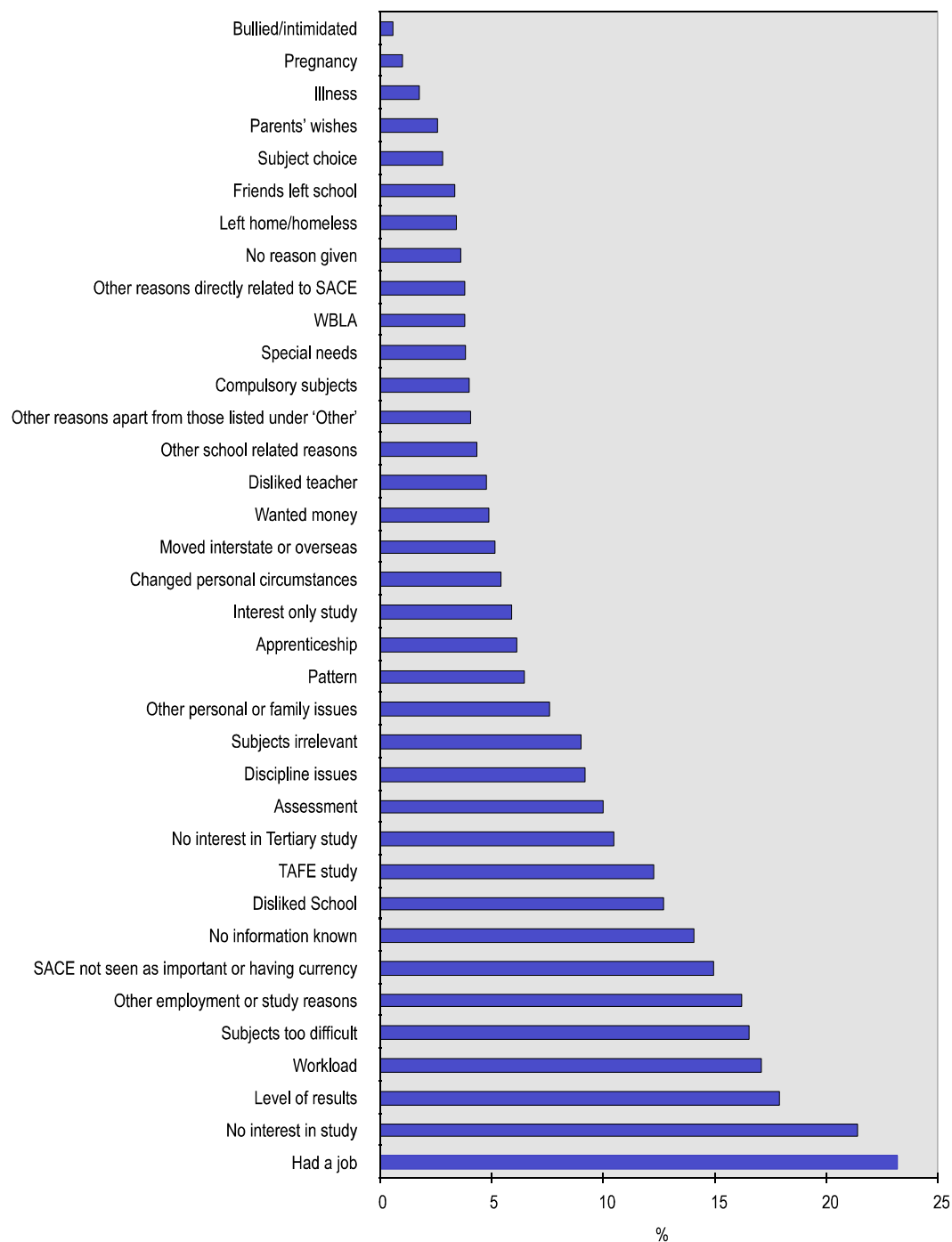
The responses of students and staff in the SSABSA study are graphed below. The lack of correlation between the ascribed reasons for students in senior secondary schools failing to complete year 12, shows a very different world view.

Figure 2: Students' reasons for leaving school



Source: SSSABSA July 1997:95

Figure 3: Response of school staff outlining students' reasons for leaving early



Source: SSABSA July 1997:89

If one compares the responses of the two groups, some interesting differences emerge. The staff, in general attribute most of the reasons for students leaving school, to factors around the students themselves. Their perceptions are that students generally leave because they have a job, or are 'unsuccessful' – no interest, poor results, too difficult, too much work. These characteristics focus on the student rather than those trends which emerged both from the students in this study and from what the boys we interviewed told us.

In this survey, the students indicated that dissatisfaction with school was the overriding reason for leaving, be in subjects, the way they were treated or general interaction with teachers (SSABSA: 1997).

This was the view of the boys who took part in the study we at Flinders University conducted in South Australia in 1999. The Study set out to look at adolescents' perceptions of the retention and achievement in schooling (Trent & Slade: 2001).

Sixty schools responded to an invitation to be part of the process. From both the literature review and the introductory questionnaire to schools it appeared that the issues and problems were being understood and treated more in terms of 'problem boys' who were not coping, rather than problems that boys more generally face while 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' in a variety of ways.

Despite the prevailing influence of a deficit model, staff in schools, through both their questionnaire responses and in subsequent discussions, expressed a general view that the incidence of problems involving boys is widespread and increasing. Furthermore, they believed that this is happening in ways that indicate a growing disaffection on the part of a broad range of boys, not all of whom fit the stereotypical boy 'at risk'. The schools, for example, drew attention both to an increasing number of 'very bright' boys who have become 'problem boys', and to an increasing number of boys in general who simply 'don't care about the consequences', either of their behaviour or their lack of interest in school work or achievement.

Following the school responses, we set up a process whereby we could canvas the views of a range of boys, both those considered as 'problems' or 'at risk' and those who appeared neither to have, or be, problems in education. At schools where the population allowed it, three groups of ten boys were chosen, including one group each of Year 9 and Year 11 boys and one mixed group of Year 9 and 11 boys, chosen by the school as 'boys at risk', either academically or in terms of behaviour. In small rural schools frequently the entire cohort took part. All in all, we spoke to 1800 boys.

Much of what follows and the issues that are raised in this paper follow from reflection on and analysis of the data gained in the exercise.

The authors of the SSABSA study had commented:

“One of the strongest messages was that students in senior schools should be treated with respect and as adults and people, not as children; their opinions should be valued; they should be given more freedom, they are not small

children straight from kindy!’ As one student remarked, “Just teachers need to change. They act as if they have so much authority. Teachers should know how to relate to students in our age group. Some teachers make you feel like dirt.”

(SSABSA:1999:108)

Our study produced the same responses:

- Most boys don’t value school; it’s more about getting credentials than learning, and these don’t operate usefully as short-term motives. Apart from the social life, school for most boys is considered to be an unwanted means to an end that starts out being too distant and becomes increasingly unachievable.
- School work is boring, repetitive and irrelevant.

This was a repeated lament.

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)

We do real easy stuff ... we’ve done it all before ... it’s heaps boring; it’s 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 it’s just sheets [work sheets] . (Year 9)

- School doesn’t offer the courses that most boys want to do; largely courses and coursework that ‘get you ready for a job’.

This further compounds the paradoxical dilemma of education for boys, 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’.

So Why the Differences – What are the cultural, ethical and value underpinnings?

In schools more than in any other institution in society there is an opportunity to examine cultural difference and varying value systems. Sadly often we fail to recognise that these differences exist or give them legitimacy.

I would submit that for many of the boys, the school transmits a culture which has little changed in 40 years, with learning being conducted as their parents might have found it. This lack of change is despite the fact that this is a different generation, learning differently, knowing different things and above all, having new values and attitudes. Such a shift between cohorts is not new, but the differences are quite stark, particularly given where the decision-makers are located in the scheme of things.

A summary of some of the characteristics which might be seen as distinguishing across the generations is presented succinctly by Andrew Fuller (2001). What Fuller indicates and what is becoming apparent is that the cultural worlds of students and their teachers and schools are in many cases far apart, generally by at least two generations. The assumptions which underlie understanding of learning, social groupings and value systems therefore need to be explored, explained and negotiated. This is particularly so for many students whose beliefs in their own adulthood lead them to see themselves as equals in the educational process, which is more often the rhetoric than the reality in schooling systems.

Differences between the Generations

Depression years	many have left the workforce, manufacturing, involved in parenting
Baby Boomer	optimism & hope of post-war years, strongly represented in leadership positions
Gen X -	Me generation, keep options open
Click & Go	baby boomlets, born with a mouse in their hands

<i>Depression / war years</i>	<i>Baby Boomer</i>	<i>Gen X</i>	<i>Click & Go</i>
Born 1927-45	1946-64	1965-83	1984-2002
Age 2001 56-74	37-55	18-35	0-16
Age 2010 65-83	46-64	27-45	8-26
Work hard	Work hard	Work hard	Good grades
Play safe	Play hard	if it doesn't interfere with play	Compete but play dumb
Save money	Worry about money	Use credit	Save money
Narrow options, high availability	More options, high expectations	Vast options, low satisfaction	Vast options, low availability
Being seen to do the right thing	Should I really like it – what will others think?	I like it & I don't care what you think	Who are you anyway? You're old
Buy a decent house	Buy the best house you can.	Reclaim the inner city.	I like living at home.
Strong work ethic	Money/principles.	Principles/ satisfaction	Cats, dogs & rats.
Independent but conventional.	Care deeply what others think.	Don't care what others think.	Don't care.
Motivated by duty, obligation and honour.	Motivated by, idealism then materialism.	Motivated by image.	Motivated by immediate outcomes.

Source: Andrew Fuller, 2001

Those teachers who can breach or at least understand the cultural divide, and understand their own values are those who are considered by the boys to be good teachers. Sadly, they are not always valued by their peers.

Good teachers change everything

The experience of good teachers creates a paradoxical dilemma: good teaching is less present than desired, but is demonstrably better for everyone. 'Teaching' appeared to be synonymous with all that happens – the boys did not separate out school climate, organisation, curriculum matters and classroom interactions. The compounding impact of this, and the other paradoxes they face, seem to produce stress (both acute and chronic) and a rational commitment to objective despair, which may help to explain the growing incidence of a broad range of self-destructive and often anti-social practices.

The boys have been clear, constructive and detailed in defining more than 60 constituting features of 'good teaching' but, in most schools, less than 10% of their teachers were thought to meet criteria that includes:

- 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 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.

Teachers who are 'groovy', 'easy' or 'slack' are not considered 'good teachers'.

Generally, the boys want to achieve and they believe that a good teacher can make this possible.

From the views expressed it is apparent that 'good teachers' are, professionally and personally, taking risks, listening, responding, respecting and valuing their students more than the rules, the policies, career pathways, and the reputation of the school. Paradoxically, they are considered the best teachers, with whom all of the boys say they learn more, muck-up less, work harder, improve their marks and want to stay on at school. Ironically, the quiet non-compliance that characterizes the description of these teachers seems to make them the valued role models, and perhaps mentors, that is popularly thought to follow from compliance.

He breaks the rules of the school but he doesn't break his own. (Year 11)

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)

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)

Furthermore, in their discussion about 'good teachers' it is evident that these people display a genuine, practical commitment to the democratization and liberalization of the young. In doing so, they are effectively resolving a nagging paradox: 'school is preparing us for our future, right? But school is way out of date'. Good teachers, it seems, are giving these boys reason to believe that this paradox is resolvable, and in doing so, they are providing them with reasons to believe in themselves, in their own judgement and in their future; they not only feel better, they also feel vindicated and genuinely optimistic.

Due largely to their experience with 'good teachers', all but a small number of the boys consistently, emphatically and despairingly talked about their retention and achievement problems primarily in terms of 'bad teachers' who are given too much power.

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)

The work of John Edwards provides poignant insights into the negative effects of ineffective teaching and learning practices by highlighting the typical 'teacher-talk-dominated' classroom experiences of many students who are differentially attentive in what he calls 'the sea of blah' (Edwards, 2000).

The teacher stands at the front of the room and blahs all over the place-blah, blah, blah, blah. blah. The sea of blah fills the room and the students bob up again for air, and then down again. The gulps are somewhat random. So students spend their days gulping from the sea of blah.

For every one delivered lesson or lecture using the sea of blah technique, each listener takes home a different lesson. The reason is that when you come back from your mental tangent, all that I have been saying is gone.

(Edwards: 2000)

The repetition, the boredom and the feeling of powerlessness often lead to resistance, which produces sanctions and leaves the boys feeling that they have been treated unfairly, which in turn can undermine their ability to deal with the issues of school and the wider society.

Creating Resilience

Allied with the need to recognise and reward teachers who are seen as 'good' in the eyes of the students, is the real importance of listening. Above all, students told us 'nobody's listening'.

The claim that the adult world is not listening and doesn't really care is perhaps the most fundamental of the factors the boys have identified in this study. It appears throughout their discussions, often dismissively, sometimes aggressively, but always with a mix of frustration and disappointment. It appears that this, along with the other factors that they have identified, becomes an important issue during the first year in secondary school, after which it just gets worse.

The early years, are talked about as 'the good times' when boys say they 'liked school'. They say that they '*got on better with the teacher*' largely because, having one teacher all day, they got to know each other, and the teachers didn't '*full stress out at ya all the time*'. One of the strengths of the middle-schooling movement is that there is a greater chance of fewer teachers getting to know students better.

It is generally agreed that the problems begin during Year 6, and just get worse until the boys either 'get out' or work out how to 'survive' to the end of Year 12. They believe that they have no effective way of improving the quality of their school experience, largely because it is controlled by an adult world that they believe is not listening and doesn't really care.

You'll go to say yur 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)

Listening (real listening) is also perceived as a question of fairness. Those who really listen are seen to be good teachers, but they are viewed as being in the minority. Not listening takes a variety of forms.

There are those who take the view and say so, that boys are lower in the social hierarchy and that others are empowered to make decisions for them. This group demand conformity and compliance.

There are those who don't listen because they have seen it all before and are confident in their rightness. Often these are seen as deciding something because of a boys' reputation, or his brother's reputation.

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

The largest group are the 'but' group. These are adults who purport to listen but always have a form of rebuttal, either directly by immediately disagreeing or they agree but dismiss what has been said.

*Yes I agree, BUT school rules say.....
I hear you BUT there isn't time in a crowded curriculum.....*

Listening is not something that comes easily in this society and, in fact, may well have become rarer in a pressured world. However, listening means that students in general, and boys in particular, need an environment where they can take risks without feeling pre-judged, explore ideas and interactions without feeling discarded or ignored, and

learn to understand what sanctions exist and why. For this generation in particular, 'because I say so', or even 'because it is a rule', only assist in ensuring that students' self esteem is dented and that their ability to negotiate, choose and be part of a society is diminished. As we listen to them we need to listen to ourselves and understand what messages we send.

If we really want to educate for the 21st Century , we and they need to at least understand the dichotomies which confront us all. It behoves us, therefore, to look at

- the messages from the school;
- the messages from the classroom;
- the messages of the rhetoric;
- the messages of the curriculum;
- the messages from the wider society.

If we can provide the links, the support and the energy so that our young can confidently take part in whatever society they shape for the future, we will have put the right pieces in the right places in the jigsaw and created a beautiful picture.

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