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18 Griffins Lane
Kempsey, 2440
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The Chairman
House of Representatives
Education and Workplace Relations Committee

Dr Brendan Nelson,

I have been a classroom teacher for 20 years, teaching in the west of NSW. During that time I have begun to question the apparent lack of success for boys in our schools.

In recent years I have held a position as an Itinerant Support Teacher - Behaviour in Dubbo District which enabled me to work with teaching staff in a wide variety of schools in the western areas of NSW. Boys were referred to this service at a rate of over 9:1 that of girls, and the events leading to their referral were most often quite different.

In 1994 I joined a district task force surveying western area schools regarding their appraisal of this issue, any direct actions and/or policies developed in these schools and gathering information and resources for schools.

Simultaneously my wife Jenni Griffiths had been developing an interest in multiple intelligences and the accelerated learning area generally. We began to mesh information developing practical classroom strategies aimed at encouraging boys learning and managing their behaviour.

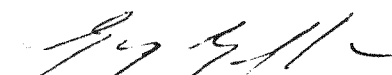
In 1994/5 the District hosted several training and development sessions focused on boys in our schools culminating in a Boys Education conference in Dubbo with over 150 teachers from the western areas of NSW attending. Workshops ranged over gifted and talented, boys learning, behaviour issues, bullying, social skills, vocational programs, aboriginal issues, remedial work, motivating underachievers, whole school issues and primary school and infants concerns.


From this conference there were many requests for 'in-school' support, but boys education as an issue was embraced by the 'gender equity' group and schools did not receive the support that they had sought.

My wife and I have privately continued our work in boys education since this time and we have presented workshops focusing on boys learning and classroom management at conferences hosted by University of Newcastle, private and public school groups in New South Wales and Queensland, and recently for the NSW Department of Education and Training Country Areas Program on the south coast of NSW. Unfortunately we have not been able to meet all requests for assistance as we are both fully employed by the NSW Department of Education and Training.

In 1999 my family moved to Kempsey in northern NSW where my wife accepted the position of Principal of East Kempsey Public School and I have accepted the position of Head Teacher Support at Westport HS in 2000. We are classroom practitioners, and this submission focuses on that area of the boys education issue.

I look forward to discussing any issues you feel relevant in this submission.


Greg Griffiths

Handed over as requested to follow up email of
27.7.00 

Strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

NSW schools that I have been involved with have addressed the difficulties of boys succeeding on a school by school, case by case basis. With the absence of any clear direction from NSW Department of Education and Training and a well established 'gender equity' network which has not assisted boys, many schools have addressed the issue in isolation, relying on the endeavours of individuals or groups of teachers to stimulate their peers to provide alternative measures, gaining information through spasmodic and often inefficient methods and regularly having to justify these efforts. Consequently many schools' actions have been on a minimum disruption basis within the existing school framework.

On occasion the NSW Department of Education and Training have produced or supported kits targeting specific issues, some of which address concerns often raised about boys behaviour and achievement, and some of these kits have been distributed to schools. Rarely has there been supporting staff development, allowance for training or administration time for their implementation. Many of these kits have involved valuable research and consideration of issues.

Schools seem to have seen boys' education as being made up of five components, and have addressed these components in the form of programs aimed at the issue quite directly while keeping the school's core structure intact. Thus boys' education has in some schools been seen as another "add on"; in some it has been the responsibility of staff teaching an identified group; in some it has involved staff and community evaluating whole school policy; in some it has addressed academic concerns in terms of literacy; and for some targeted groups of boys in terms of curricula, but there has not been an overall review of the relevance of schools and the structures of our schools, and whether this is at the heart of the matter.

Some of these programs have been quite successful within their terms of reference, and some have involved staff, community and students in meaningful interaction. In some schools more than one area has been addressed - some simultaneously, some not - but most often as distinct and separate issues and programs.

The five components:

a. Disciplinary processes: Some schools have identified the issue as one where there are more boys than girls on detention, in the disciplinary processes, being suspended or being referred to behaviour services. These schools have tended to focus on discipline with steps such as reviewing their disciplinary codes - in NSW there has been a concerted movement towards Choice Theory as a means of encouraging students to take responsibility for their own actions. With boys being the largest consumers of disciplinary processes it would seem to be accented towards this group. There have been some astounding successes. There have been some that have not succeeded as well. There are many reasons for the variation: speed of implementation; quality of implementation; clientele; support within school and community; understanding of the processes being implemented.

A second point on this would be the lack of resources in schools to positively influence students. Most schools have disciplinary policies and resources, but where many of these students are challenging school norms is where they differ from their home environments or socially accepted behaviours. Schools have resources to discipline students who have difficulty complying (ie we can tell them what not to do) but there do not appear to be the same resources to positively demonstrate correct procedures. (ie telling them what to do) This process is often seen in schools as being time and resource indulgent and discipline codes are seen as more cost effective methods of arriving at the conclusion desired.

b. Knowledge based approaches: Some schools have identified the issue as one of gender and questioned whether their students have sufficient knowledge of their development and the issues this brings with it as they are moving through their schools. These schools have addressed the issue through PD/ H/ PE type programs where gender construction and adolescent issues are raised and studied. There have been some outstanding successes and some that have been less than successful. The variation can be explained through consideration of quality of implementation and longevity; relevance to the student body; mode of delivery and school setting issues.

c. Skill training: Some schools have identified that their boys may be lacking in conflict resolution skills, verbal articulation, general social skills. These schools have addressed the issue through social skill sessions, often as a "one off" or year by year session. eg Year 7 introductory camp; Year 10/11 leadership group. There has been some reported success. However, without considerable follow through, monitoring and maintenance of the skills developed, school wide acceptance of the issues and training and a culture where these skills are accepted and preferred the longer term success rate is questionable.

d. Individual personal development: Some schools have identified the particular individuals who have been causing most concern (through a variety of issues - eg behaviour, academia, social interaction) and developed programs to assist these students. These have often taken the form of 'Skillstreaming', 'Anger Taming', 'Talk sense to yourself', 'Stop Think Do' or many of the programs commercially available addressing these skills with small groups. There have been some successes, but these are very time consuming and resource consuming programs. Schools have difficulty funding this sort of intervention for a small group for prolonged periods (and short interventions are not successful in the longer term) and if they are able to afford the time and resources there are many other legitimate claims.

e. Academic success: Some schools and in recent times the NSW Department of Education and Training have identified academic success as a core issue and in recent years there has been a movement addressing literacy aiming at boys, and students with behaviour difficulties. Reading Recovery, and a myriad of school based learning and remediation programs have been run to improve reading levels of targeted students, often with considerable success. Whether this success transfers to other areas may still be being assessed, and whether this addresses some of the issues for boys behaviour may be questionable. Some students may be acting out when they are not experiencing success but boys behaviours such as risk taking, testing the rules and not wanting to be seen as successful if that breaks from the group are not being catered for and continue to cause concern.

These programs and type of intervention do not address the structure of education as we are offering it and are made to fit within the existing structure of individual schools. Perhaps akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the 'Titanic'. They are generally initiated reactively when behaviours have caused concern within the community. There are most often directed at a target group within the school smaller than the male population. They are often made with considerable concern from 'gender equity' groups, budget restrictions that impede their success and time constraints especially in high schools where curriculum content and indicative hours rule.

Program success in one school need not translate into success in other schools. Individual teachers, relationships between staff and students, school tone, delivery mode, timing for students, issues to be addressed as well as many other considerations can affect outcomes.

What can we do?

As teachers our focus is the classroom. There will be many responses from theorists and researchers with time and resources to make submissions embracing broad educational and sociological issues. My wife and I are classroom practitioners with an interest in boys' achievement and our focus is at the classroom level. This submission will focus on pedagogy rather than the boys. Or how we can best work with boys.

teacher training

From a classroom perspective, adequate training and on-going training of teachers to meet the increasingly difficult issues faced in classrooms is desperately important. Whilst there have been major changes in society over recent years, changes in curricula, changes in expectations of students and staff, changes in responsibilities for teachers and schools and changes in societal attitude toward schools and teachers there has been little training to support teachers to cope with additional pressures and meet changing expectations.

This is not suggesting that teacher training is the core issue of the boys education discussion nor should it be the focus, but at the base of our education process is the classroom. Teachers with awareness of student learning and armed with adequate behaviour management techniques can have a positive impact on every student in their classroom.

i) behaviour management

Primary and infants schooling has a pattern of classroom teachers who look after a particular group for most of the year. Students become familiar with the teacher and can appreciate their individual traits just as the teacher becomes familiar with their charges and develops programs for each individual within the group. This structure allows a great deal of flexibility within the constraints of the school and personnel. It seems appropriate at this age level too for students to have an individual to identify with as a single classroom teacher.

As students progress through primary school there may be increased time with specialist teachers for content or skills and release for the classroom teacher. Again this seems an appropriate structure as students become more familiar with working with different people and adjust gradually to different teachers. However, the continuity of the classroom teacher as responsible for the bulk of teaching time and maintenance of the class identity is also important.

Unfortunately, in primary and infants schools where I have worked, behaviour management as a whole has not been adequately addressed in teacher training or in training and development once a position has been attained. This lack of training is all too often reflected in classrooms. There also appears to be little concern in teacher training to adequately address gender differences in behaviour and methods to manage this in the classroom. (eg Boys are particularly visual in their learning yet many classroom teachers and schools do not use this to keep their rules before the students. So that classroom interventions that could be handled by simple referral to an 'independent' arbiter - the clearly written, understood and seen classroom rule - escalate to verbal interchange and beyond. This simple application can assist all students).

In secondary schools, this situation is exacerbated as teachers have less face to face time with each student group, students being older and more willing to assert themselves, a concentration on content and a culture in high schools of 'keeping the class quiet'. With different constraints to the primary classroom, similarly inadequately trained secondary teachers are expected to prepare students for external exams, the workplace and society in general. Behaviour management takes up much of the secondary teacher's time and energy but there appears to be little support in teacher training and less awareness that boys' and girls' behaviours might be different or that management techniques might vary.

This is an area in which I have been working for some time and have worked with primary and secondary staff to develop protocols and processes appropriate for boys in classrooms that teaching staff feel comfortable with and when implemented have had a distinct impact on classrooms within existing structures.

ii) learning

Probably more importantly teachers are rarely adequately trained in understanding how students learn and differences in preferred learning styles; how the behaviours boys and girls exhibit reflect their preferred learning styles; how their learning and our assessment of students can be affected by teachers not being aware of different learning styles and the impact of gender on these; and how to develop teaching programs to cater for varying learning styles and gender.

An example may be male and female students exhibiting similar verbal linguistic preference. The girls would probably exhibit better ideational fluency, have better verbal memory, have quick verbal responses under pressure, use longer sentences, have a better vocabulary, verbalise thoughts and feelings, use intonation to express ideas and take poetic licence, talk more often about relationships and people and read fiction. While the boys with a similar learning style will tend to write and speak in shorter sentences, ask more questions of their teachers, talk more about sport and politics, read to follow instructions rather than listening to follow, use vocabulary competitively and will read more non-fiction. So that their preferred learning can be similar but is not demonstrated in the same way, it is affected by their gender.

In our schools, students with this sort of preferred learning style might be expected to focus on the language area of our curricula. At the completion of their schooling an HSC result is obtained. For these hypothetic students the relative outcome is weighted against one of them.

This example is reflected across classrooms every day. Students' preferred learning styles and responses are affected by their gender and its construction. Teacher training does not prepare classroom practitioners to identify or cater for this and boys in particular are being adversely affected in their learning and teachers' assessment of their progress. Teacher training in this area would benefit all students' learning and enable staff to understand their students learning processes more readily which can only assist both students and teachers.

This is an area my wife Jenni Griffiths has worked in extensively. Presentations at various conferences have resulted in many requests from teachers and executive of schools for further information and training. With teachers more aware of the impact of gender on preferred learning and with support on how to plan for learning, classrooms could be more enjoyable for both boys and girls.