

The Machismo™ Project

Empowering boys and engaging them back into learning and their community.

Marie-Anne Maakrun

Interventions aimed at reducing negative behaviours in adolescents are more successful when these strategies do not narrowly categorise youth behaviours. This recommendation was made in 1986 at the National Invitational Conference on Health Futures of Adolescents and has since been adopted as a *top priority* by the Scientific and Technical Advisory Group to the Adolescent Health Section of the World Health Organisation.

(Report on National Invitational Conference on the Futures of Adolescent Health.JAHC.1988)

Yet fifteen years later, we are still witnessing the domination of narrowly defined categorical programs, on agendas for the education of boys - 'Boys and literacy', 'Boys vs. Girls', 'Boys and violence', 'Boys and risk taking' etc. Resources and funding continually misallocated in response to these outcries.

Time is well overdue to stop categorising our approaches to gender issues for boys and begin to look at fresh approaches.

The Machismo project is such an approach. The project examines and questions boys' *environments* – both external (school, family and community) as well as internal (feelings of self-esteem and worth).

“Of the constellation of forces that influence adolescent health-risk behavior, the most fundamental are the social contexts in which adolescents are embedded; the family and the school contexts are among the most critical.”

(Resnick.M. et al. Protecting Adolescents from Harm. JAMA.1997)

We cannot doubt that there is a crisis amongst adolescent boys in Australia. The horrendous rates of suicide, as well as the numbers engaging in high risk behaviors such as drug use and binge drinking, illustrate this well. Many suggestions have been offered as to the cause, with general agreement regarding some factors - the changing nature of masculine roles, the "image crisis facing men" and the lack of appropriate role models for many young men.

The aim of the Machismo project is to improve these environments by coordinating them towards existing goals. It critically examines and accounts for factors that hinder environmental enhancement and is being developed to provide workable and sustainable solutions.

Machismo acknowledges the crucial impact of the *school environment* on individuals. Life-long learning plays a vital role in the development of their self-esteem with much research pointing to the level of adolescent self-esteem and later impacts in life.

© Machismo.2000

It is a commonly held and misunderstood belief, that boys' self-esteem is not the issue, as boys are boisterous, rowdy and full of confidence. Low self-esteem seen as an issue primarily effecting girls. On the contrary, this issue effects many of the boys in our schools and is not hard to find.

They are the boys who are extremely quiet in the classroom or who seek attention by being loud and disruptive in class. They are the ones who truant school or sport afternoons, who display anti-social behaviors outside of school, or experiment with drugs. They are the ones who have poor relationships with their teachers, parents and peers, or involve themselves in crime. Those who have poor literacy rates, or may suffer eating disorders, smoke, or be prone to anxiety or depression. The ones who find it hard to get employment or hold a steady job. They are the young men who turn eventually to suicide.

Machismo attempts to provide all boys with non-aggressive tools for self-expression, which promote *achievement*, *recognition* and thus *motivation* whilst they are at school. It is designed to break down stereotypical attitudes towards them, thus providing a healthy way for boys to develop their positive self-image.

The word *Machismo* was chosen to challenge the negative image of men we witness promoted within society – men as abusers, criminals, or drunks – who need to use physical force to solve their problems.

Within the Latin American culture, Machismo is seen as male dominance and control over others, particularly women. Instead, the project is *reclaiming* the word by promoting male *self-empowerment* through *social reconstruction*. Within a safe learning environment, boys are taught to *value themselves and others*, thus helping to protect themselves and others from risk and harm.

In most high school, the valued areas of achievement for boys are either academic or sporting. Yet it is a reality for many boys that they will not excel academically nor excel in a sporting activity. This leaves the majority of students feeling unfulfilled by schooling. We then watch as they become disruptive in class, bully others, truant, become aggressive...etc.

Add to this the normal difficulties of adolescence, compounded by social expectations, gender differences, negative media images, peer pressure and the like, and it is painfully apparent that the development of healthy self-esteem in boys becomes a formidable task. A task traditionally delegated by society to our schools.

Yet if we examine many school climates we see them curriculum driven, marked by continual adaptations to social and political changes, escalating community expectations, teacher workload intensification, low staff morale and limited job satisfaction. Human resource shortages reflect a deteriorating climate, which is witnessing an increasing exodus of quality teachers from the system, unmatched by the ability to recruit quality graduates into the profession.

Effective long-term education reform however is an issue that boys today cannot wait for. The Machismo project acknowledges the crucial role of school climate and its impact on boys' education. It's a model designed around accommodating this climate.

Issues of self-esteem and social skills effect the whole community and **prevention involves the whole community** – individuals, families, community groups, schools and government services.

Machismo is based around the formation of *collaborative community partnerships* between schools and their communities. Through its various approaches, Machismo networks resources and organisations, so that communities are empowered to address their own youth issues effectively and efficiently.

The needs of all stakeholders with an interest in youth issues are then better met.

Local area health services, youth workers, local government, businesses, Rotary, PCYC and Red Cross are just some organisations which have come together to combine their expertise, helping to sustain and strengthen the project.

Through some of this networking, Machismo has given boys the chance to create in-school radio broadcasts, improve their schools' physical environment, prepare breakfast for other students, develop their creative talents, showcase them through performances and perform community services.

Issues of self-esteem and social skills are addressed in a practical and self-sufficient manner; *guided by role models* and supported by a *school-home-community-based network*.

The project develops to suit the culture and needs of that community, adding to its sustainability.

This approach while innovative, is in accord with the principles of the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986); building healthy public policy, strengthening community action, developing personal skills and creating supportive environments.

A critical success factor of the Machismo model, is its ability to *incorporate existing practice and procedures*. Unlike other models, it does not simply become yet another concept that creates more work and responsibility for those who implement it.

The development of this project began in 1999, at James Cook Boys' High School in NSW. Its initial concept began as an arts-based program aimed to increase the self-esteem of boys, by exposing them to workshops and performances run by male artists. The outcomes witnessed over a relatively short time gave rise to the potential further development of the project and its possibilities of engaging boys back into learning.

After coming to the attention of Premier Carr, an inter-departmental Steering Committee was created to support the further development of a Machismo Pilot Program in 2000. This committee includes representatives from the Department of Education and Training, Attorney General's Department, Health Department, Premier's Department and the Office of the Children and Young People.

The Pilot Program is currently being expanded into 5 districts around NSW; St. George (James Cook Boys High School), Granville (Granville Boys High School), Campbelltown (Picton High School), Newcastle (Tomaree Education Centre) and Deniliquin (Barham High School). Independent evaluations will be conducted by the completion of the pilot in January 2001.