



# THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF BOYS STRATEGIES FOR BOYS' EDUCATION

## SCHOOL STRATEGY PAPER

**Caution:**

We must be careful not to encourage gender dualism. We should be seeking to encourage the notion of gender interdependence. Many of the strategies in this document are not gender specific.

# THE NEEDS OF BOYS

## Rationale

Education should always be concerned with the needs of the individual and in developing each individual to achieve his/her potential. However, matters of gender have implications for learning, and consequently, for teachers.

Since its introduction in 1987, the NSW Department of Education and Training document, Strategies for Girls' Education, has been relatively successful in addressing the specific learning needs of girls. It is apparent that boys also have gender specific needs that must be addressed.

One unforeseen effect of the strategies for girls has been to condemn boys to the role of being the inhibitors to the learning of girls. This has had a negative impact on the self-concept of boys throughout their school years.

Little work has been done to address the physiological learning patterns based on gender. Some research studies show differences in the male and female brain, which affect learning.

The reality of the classroom is that, in almost all families, boys are brought up and treated differently to girls. This impacts upon their learning styles, self-concept and social relationships. The socialization of boys has profound implications for the education of boys.

At Hurstville Boys' High School it is necessary to address gender issues in terms of the specific learning needs of boys, masculinity and attitudes toward females.

It is the aim of this document to address the needs of boys in a single sex, multicultural high school. However, the strategies presented are relevant to other educational settings.

## Educational Concerns

An examination of statistical and anecdotal evidence reveals several areas where boys are presenting as being of concern.

- Boys are more likely to have reading / learning difficulties identified in K – 4
- There are significantly more boys in IM (intellectually mild) classes in high school
- There are significantly more boys in schools who are identified as behavior disordered
- Boys dominate the < 20% UAI range
- Boys are being outperformed in the great majority of subjects in the NSW HSC
- Boys are often identified as the cause of learning problems for girls giving rise to negative attitudes to boys in schools
- Boys are more likely to experience problems relating to low self-esteem
- Boys are more likely to be suspended from school
- Boys are more likely to have attendance problems

## Social Concerns

Boys are more likely to:

- Drown (2 : 1)
- Suicide (4: 1)
- Die in a road accident (3 : 1)

Men are more likely to:

- Die from lung cancer (2 : 1)
- Die from heart disease (3 : 1)
- Go to to prison (9 : 1)
- Become a paraplegic (5 : 1)
- Die at a younger age than females (75 years males, 82 years females).

## LITERACY

Boys are identified, when compared with girls, as having a reading disabilities ratio of 10: 1.

Researchers have attributed this to:

- Maturation / biological / environmental factors which influence the ways in which boys process information and, therefore, learn.
- The influence of female teachers in the early years of schooling who often treat boys in more negative ways and structure classes in such a way as to alienate some boys. However, it may be those male teachers in K --3 would also treat boys in a similar way.
- Passive learning models (sit quietly, listen and write) fit the traditional female learning stereotype more closely than the traditional male learning stereotype.
- There is a greater congruence of traditional sex / school roles for girls than for boys.
- Reading is consistently regarded, by boys, as a 'feminine activity', resulting in boys being generally less motivated readers.

### Strategies For Reading

- Ensure that there are appropriate male and female reading role models
- Use active learning strategies
- Make appropriate use of computer technology
- Relate reading to the concept of vocational preparation and life-long learning
- Relate reading to self-esteem raising strategies
- Encourage proficiency in the first language of NESB students
- Encourage parents, through school support programs, to increase their proficiency so that they do not become alienated from their child's learning because of language
- Develop a whole-school literacy policy based upon functional grammar and text-type approaches

## **CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS**

- Traditional sex-role stereotypes and traditional teaching methods tend to reinforce each other. In spite of more than a decade of action sex-role stereotyping is still the norm.
- Australian society has a history of sex-role stereotyping, which is only gradually showing signs of change.
- Australia's diverse ethnic mix includes significant numbers of young people who have been raised within the parameters of specific cultural sex-role stereotypes.
- When children attend school they are expected to act in the appropriate student role. The success of the student in engaging in effective learning in the school setting will depend upon his/her cultural and family background and the organization of the school learning environment.
- Traditional school learning models based on passive learning are still the norm in many schools. These models emphasize obedience, conformity and passive learning (reading and listening). Such models favour females who also fit in with the traditional female sex-role stereotype (ie passive, obedient, dependant) rather than those males who fit in with the traditional male stereotype (active, kinesthetic learning).
- The continuance of traditional learning models is reinforced by the nature of the HSC examination, which tends to favour passive learning models.
- In Australian society boys tend to receive only a limited time in male bonding activities with older males (this time is often measured in minutes per day rather than hours per day)
- For some students there is a conflict between their social / cultural role and their school role. They may receive a double message; be quiet and conforming at school but be aggressive, active and independent outside of school. For some boys this causes stress at school and results in dissatisfaction, lower achievement and poor self-esteem.
- Parents often reinforce the stereotypical role through their expectations of their children. The expectation of boys to be inclined towards mathematics, sciences technology and sport become self-fulfilling through parental resourcing, emotional reaction and 'advice'.

### **Strategies To Overcome Cultural Stereotyping**

- Teaching staffs need to be aware of, and respond to, the cultural influences affecting their children. There should also be a commitment to expose students to alternatives.
- Appropriate male and female role models must be provided in the school environment to reduce the effects of stereotypical images e.g. male readers, males in welfare roles, males as K – 6 and pre-school teachers.
- Learning experiences must cover all learning styles and move away from totally traditional instruction methods which reinforce sex-role stereotypes and perpetuate the educational disadvantage of boys.
- Parents need to be aware of the school directions in areas of gender specific education and should have input into the development of those directions.
- There should be a greater use of cooperative learning techniques to encourage cooperation rather than competition. This will also assist in the development of appropriate social skills.
- The use of drama as a method of developing appropriate responses to social situations.
- Teachers must model appropriate behaviours at all times.
- Racial stereotyping must be avoided and actively discouraged.

## MASCULINITY

Boys develop their concepts of masculine behaviour as a result of a number of influences including; the family, cultural background, media, peers and significant role models.

As society has changed and issues of sexism and gender have become more topical, boys have been receiving mixed messages about appropriate masculine behaviour. These messages often result in confusion, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and acting out behaviours.

It is not, and cannot, be the role of the teacher to fundamentally change masculine behaviour patterns. However, it is important that teachers emphasize (and sometimes demand) appropriate masculine behaviour, discourage inappropriate behavior and to understand the reasons for particular patterns of behaviour.

It is a simple task to list the various forms of inappropriate male behaviour E.g. anger, physical aggression, rebellion, spitting, farting, burping, verbal abuse, obscene language, repression of feelings, attention-seeking lying, sexual harassment etc etc. It is a more difficult task to understand the behaviour and to effectively deal with it in a school setting.

Some of the messages behind certain behaviours may be:

Fighting: - I am better than you. I am more important than you are. My image is more important than my safety. Power is strength. Power makes me right.

Posing: - My image is more important than the truth. Being accepted is more important to me than who is I am. Getting attention is more important than relationships. I am not acceptable as I really am.

Put-downs: - I am better than you are. It's not OK to make mistakes. My image is more important than your feelings. Being different is not acceptable.

Some male stereotypes that need to be challenged include;

- Boys must be aggressive to prove their superiority
- Boys should not show emotion or express feelings
- Boys are not as caring as girls
- Males should dominate females
- Boys should only be interested in male pursuits
- Boys should be tough and athletic
- Boys must succeed at all costs
- Boys must keep their problems to themselves, as communication is a sign of weakness.

To influence the behaviour of boys and to understand the reasons behind specific behaviour patterns it is necessary to understand the social construction of behaviour in terms of the dominant cultural form of masculinity in the school / region/ society. It is useful to reflect on the forces causing the behaviour before responding to the behaviour.

Individual behaviour patterns at any time are influenced by **social needs** (emotional affirmation, physical assertiveness, sexual expression, recognition, intellectual fulfillment), **external restraints** (rules, peers, authority figures, parents), **external support** (awards/rewards, peers, parents, teachers, policies) and **role models** ('winners', sport stars, dominant teachers, social leaders)

The difficulty that teachers have in responding to unacceptable behaviour patterns is that each student is affected by different influences and the teacher is dealing with up to 30 students at once. This often results in the teacher reverting to control/domination teacher centred activities.

## **Strategies**

- Increase the level of teacher social skills training so that teachers are able to understand behaviour patterns rather than simply responding to behaviours
- Provide students with personal development in understanding their values and behaviour responses
- Provide access to appropriate adult role models who emphasize learning, cooperation and empathy E.g. male readers, male welfare personnel, female authority figures, male / female teams.
- Teachers must be prepared to work in ways other than confrontational power plays that reinforce the concept of control through power. Teachers must be able to reflect on their own behaviour and the messages they are sending to students.
- Bullying, harassment and name-calling must consistently be treated as unacceptable forms of behaviour at all times
- Non-violence should be introduced into classroom teaching in all subject areas at appropriate times, in addition to Personal Development lessons that specifically target issues such as violence and homophobia.

## **SEXISM**

Sexist behaviour is a real issue in schools and has the potential to be even more of an issue in boys' schools. The very nature of boys' schools is sexist. The boys are influenced by a variety of social and cultural pressures that may lead to the development of sexist attitudes. It is essential that the school is aware of sexist behaviours, understands the reasons for such behaviour and is willing to implement strategies to limit the extent of such unacceptable behaviour.

Many boys do not understand that some of their attitudes and behaviours are likely to cause offence to others. Many boys come from backgrounds where sexist attitudes are well entrenched in daily life. Apart from everyday behaviour, the issue of deliberate sexual harassment needs to be addressed.

### **Strategies**

- Identification of unacceptable sex-based practices
- Awareness raising of students and staff as to what are considered to be unacceptable practices in the school environment.
- Develop proactive measures to encourage the development of acceptable practices
- Consciously develop appropriate male and female role models performing a variety of school tasks in a variety of ways
- Ensure that school activities as seen, as far as possible, as gender neutral.
- Bring about change through example and encouragement rather than the imposition of rules
- Allow boys opportunities to discuss issues relating to sexist behaviour
- Encourage boys to participate in a wider range of activities E.g. reading, welfare, music, drama, life skills etc
- Ensure that homophobia is confronted and not just swept aside.



## SELF – ESTEEM

Issues of self-esteem have long been recognized as important factors in the development of positive learning conditions for students. There is a recognized relationship between student self concept and student achievement. This relationship is identified as early as Year 1. Longitudinal studies have shown that students identified as having low self concept do not learn to read as well as students with high self concept. The correlation between self-concept and reading levels was high than that for IQ and reading levels. This relationship was particularly strong with boys and set up a pattern of persisting learning disability. By the time boys reach adolescence they are affected by hormonal changes, social pressures and the development of self-doubt which may result in a feeling of hopelessness (or helplessness)

Classroom teachers cannot hope to alter patterns that are part of the fabric of society, but they must;

- Be aware of the importance of self concept to learning
- Be aware of the effect that the teacher has on a student's self concept
- Be willing to develop strategies that create a positive learning environment through the boosting of self-esteem.

Because our society is sending conflicting messages to boys with regard to their role and value to society the issue of self-esteem is fundamental in their personal growth and learning.

Classroom teachers should acknowledge that;

- It is possible for teachers to affect change in a student's self concept
- Positive and permanent change in an individual's self concept is a slow process
- A stimulating and cooperative classroom can assist a child with poor self concept

### Strategies

- Create an environment that avoids the notion of failure
- Accept student contributions to learning activities without judgement
- Maintain a 'you can do it' attitude
- Do not assume the 'font of all knowledge' teacher role as the usual delivery method in class
- Build a personal relationship with each student
- Cultivate a sense of humour, and use it readily
- Avoid confrontation with individual students in front of other students
- Avoid 'killer' statements such as 'you can't'
- Avoid ultimatums
- Encourage student responsibility in individual and group learning
- Provide the inspiration for learning in a positive climate
- Make special efforts to engage 'quiet' students in esteem raising activities
- Refer individual students for specialist counselling when you feel that they have major social / interpersonal problems. The classroom teacher is not a social worker / counsellor but is a point of initial contact and referral for students with major problems
- Identify students who are using bullying and aggression as compensation for low self-esteem and develop support strategies which include referral
- Make use of visitors with similar backgrounds to those of the students who have been successful in life.



24 July 2000

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations  
Inquiry into the Education of Boys  
Committee Secretariat  
Parliament of Australia  
House of Representatives  
Canberra

Dear Committee Members

Attached is the documentation used at Hurstville Boys' High School when examining the special educational and social needs of boys. This document should be of interest to your committee as it relates to some of the work done at the school to address the needs of boys.

The school is located in the southern suburbs of Sydney and has a current enrolment of 650 students. The students come from over 40 national backgrounds and are representative of a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

The school's work in attempting to meet the needs of boys has reinforced the belief that;

- Fathers need to be involved in reading with boys at pre-school ages
- The female / male teacher imbalance is affecting boys' attitudes to education and learning
- Teaching should be promoted as a career opportunity for males (especially K – 6)
- Measures should be taken to prevent the exclusion of boys from educational activities because of their sex and perceived associated behavior
- Teacher pre-service and inservice training should be upgraded to include skills relating to the identification and response to the reasons behind inappropriate behaviour patterns
- There should be active policies to promote positive male role models across all socio-economic groups so that learning and education is seen as worthwhile for boys.

I would be happy to have contact with members of the committee and am willing to extend an invitation to members of the committee to visit the school and to speak with staff and students.

Yours sincerely

Bob Ramsey  
Principal

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