LISTENING TO THE BOYS: A submission to the Inquiry into the education of boys

DR MALCOLM SLADE

Education research and training consultant

http://www.MalcolmSlade.com
Malcolm.Slade@flinders.edu.au

This submission in based on views expressed in my recent book, *Listening to the Boys*[1] (Slade 2002). The work follows from several years spent gathering the views of students, teachers and parents in more than 100 schools around Australia. In particular, it summarizes the views shared with me in focus group discussions in a study involving 1800 Year 9 to 11 boys and 50 girls from 60 secondary schools, balanced across all sectors. Their discussions were focused on the issues and problems that they believe explain the apparent decline in rates of achievement and retention for boys, and what they think should be done to improve their educational performance and outcomes. Although they retained this focus throughout their discussions, basing their views on their individual experiences in education, the result is a broad, detailed and systematic critique of their educational offering.

WHAT THE BOYS ARE SAYING - THE KEY FACTORS

Their central concern has been **that the adult world is not *'really listening'*, is not *'really interested'*, and does not *'really care'*.** If they did, adults wouldn't say *'yes, but …'*, or *'you don't understand'*.

The failure of the adult world, which in schools amounts to teachers, to genuinely listen is seen as a display of inconsistency that weakens their integrity, threatens their credibility, and erodes the basis for effective relationships, namely, the basis of trust and mutual respect. In schools, it erodes the basis for effective educative relationships between teachers and students. Without this basis, it is thought that teachers resort to repeated declarations of their status, credentials, years on the job, or age in years, as reasons why they should be trusted and given due respect. Most teachers, it is thought, rely largely on more direct authoritarian mechanisms, together with threats of humiliation and the power to covertly, if not overtly, influence grades and overall outcomes.

From what the boys have said, the most immediate challenge in education is to genuinely listen; to put our fears, interests, preferences, habits, traditions and all other obstructions and limitations aside, and just listen in ways that constitute genuine listening.

Other key factors raised in their discussions include the following:

1. **Most boys see little or no value in going to school, except for the social life**.

---

[1] For more information about *Listening to the Boys*, including purchasing details, see www.MalcolmSlade.com or email Malcolm.Slade@flinders.edu.au

2. **Most girls get better deal at school, but so do some boys.** Students who find it easy or necessary to comply and conform get treated better. It just happens that most of them are girls.

Whether they are male or female, teachers favour the students they prefer, namely, those who quietly do what they are told to do, the way they are told to do it, and who get the work done without complaint and without raising doubts about its value, relevance or any other aspect of the tasks they are set. In other words, there is general agreement among boys and girls that despite the rhetorical celebration of difference in general, and of its full expression and development through individuality, creativity, self-motivation and self-awareness, the school environment is not one that genuinely accepts difference or facilitates mobility and diversity. Although this amounts to a fundamental contradiction, those elements of the adult world who are seen to shape and direct the school environment, mostly teachers, are thought to display no genuine interest in its resolution, preferring to maintain control and to support the particular set of differences that they accept or that the school declares acceptable or normal. In this sense, most students believe that apart from discouraging diversity and penalizes the expression of difference, the school environment rewards conformity and compliance, thereby encouraging the kind of surreptitious behaviour that, while forging close alliances between students, erodes the basis of trust and mutual respect between students and teachers and makes dishonesty systematic and endemic.

The choice to conform and comply is not discussed in terms of right or wrong. It is seen as a pragmatic, strategic choice; a means to an end. While some can maintain the strategy, others cannot. At present, it seems that many more boys than girls find themselves unable to sustain this strategy, with an increasing number choosing to resist without regard for the consequences, most of which inevitably lead to lower academic achievement and non-completion. Furthermore, there seems to be an increasing number, again mostly boys, who are losing interest in the notion that consequences in general as factors that might be considered when making behaviour choices inside or outside of school.

4. **Schoolwork is boring, repetitive and irrelevant;** school is more about getting credentials than learning and doing useful things; school credentials are inadequate as long term goals and offer nothing in the way of short term rewards.

Students who are able to tolerate boredom, repetition and irrelevance, and remain focused on the completion of Year 12 as a sufficient reason to work hard in the short term, are said to be given greater encouragement and are more likely to gain the credentials.

5. **Most boys neglect or reject homework.**

The notion of compulsory attendance is opposed at any age. A lot of time at school is thought to be wasted and a lot of the work that might be done at school is set as homework. For most students, homework is too intrusive, destructive and ultimately unachievable without sacrificing more valued aspects of their lives, including family life, use of information and communication technologies (unrestricted), part time work, playing sport, music, socializing and resting. For many, homework is simply not done or not done to the best of their ability, whether as an act of resistance or necessity. But by choosing to foster their achievements outside of school it is thought that schoolwork must be sacrificed. Given the expanding availability of products, activities and opportunities outside of school, few have difficulty in making this choice, and many see it as one of the few choices that they are free to make. Some argue that their educative gains are made outside of school, and that they could do more if they were free to do so. Often they understand these to be the kind of gains that the rhetoric of schooling supports as goals and claims to be achieving in the classroom.

6. **Years 8, 9 and 10 waste too much time.** Year 10 is usually called the *'bludge'* year. Some say that this is encouraged by the schools. Others say it is the consequence of the schools' intense focus on Year 11 and 12 teaching. The Year 11 workload is said to be excessive and insensitive to the needs of young people, and to their development in the other aspects of their lives. Many believe that the excessive workload is deliberately used by the schools to *'get rid of those who can't do it'* so that achievement levels in Year 12 are higher.

7. **School pushes boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation**. For many, it is a process that they find too hard to stop.

   During the last decade, along with declining rates of achievement and retention, Australian schools have seen a marked increase in behavioural problems involving boys, and in the numbers of boys suspended or expelled from school. Although students believe that the motivation for these behavioural responses is commonly felt by girls and boys, it is thought that most girls and some boys are more successful at avoiding the spiral of disaffection that begins during Year 9 and moves from disinterest and dissatisfaction to disaffection. Those who are unable to find and maintain the reasons, the mechanisms and the help to avoid its compounding influence find their behaviour, achievement and level of commitment in decline and their expectations being shaped more by circumstances than by their abilities, interests and passions.

   The expression of disaffection may take many forms, ranging from resentment expressed through anger and retaliation, or less noticeably, in responses like depression, eating disorders, drug dependence and quiet withdrawal. Although the reasons are manifold, students believe that the problem stems from the boring, repetitive and irrelevant nature of the educational offering, the culturally out of date and inconsistent school environment, demanding compliance and conformity, but offering little more than the credentials that are awarded to those who stay on to complete Year 12. Primarily, the spiral of disaffection stems from the intensely paradoxical conditions of their lives and their sense of disempowerment at being confronted by paradoxes that they cannot resolve and that appear to be unresolvable, and their shared conviction that adult world is not really listening.

8. **School presents too many contradictions; too many debilitating paradoxes**.

   • School expects adult behaviour but doesn't deliver an adult environment.

   • School pushes the rhetoric of education, like fairness, respect, individuality, creativity, self-motivation and the importance of rights, responsibilities, freedom, difference and flexibility, but produces the opposite in practice.

   • School stresses the importance of making careful choices, but it offers no real choices at all.

   • School pretends that it cares, but it displays a preference to get boys out of education.

   • School claims to be about preparing young people for adult life, but their increasing involvement in adult life gets in the way of school; culturally celebrated achievements and rites of passage into adult life, like sport, getting a driver's licence, owning a car, maintaining a part time job, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, establishing an adult identity, social life and sexual relationships, and defending their cultural identity and integrity, are all negative influences on school achievement and on the opportunity and preparedness of boys to stay at school.

9. **There are too many *'bad teachers'* who either create or exacerbate their problems, largely because they are culturally inconsistent and out of date.**

Despite the average age of teachers being around 47 years in 2001, and rising, students show greater concern for the cultural age that they display in the school environment, than for their age in years. The most troublesome of the many paradoxes of education is that *'good teachers'* change everything for the better, but there are not enough *'good teachers'* and there is no choice. Despite being asked to accept competition as the culturally justified instrument of motivation and selection, and to recognize the market place as the ultimate arbiter of ability and achievement, students find themselves unable to choose their teachers or to effectively influence their selection or training. Many students see themselves, directly or indirectly, as fee paying clients who, at best, may choose their school, but very little within it. Many express the desire to buy the individual components of their education, seeing schools as one aspect of the market place, and the current offering to be one that is out of date, culturally inconsistent, and far too inflexible.

10. **School is focused on preserving the *status-quo*, which makes it an environment that is culturally out of date and paradigmatically inflexible.** It remains detached from the real world, distant from the rest of their lives, and neither convincingly forward looking, nor plausibly concerned with the need to prepare them for a place within the emerging society of the twenty-first century.

Understanding these to be the key factors, most boys see current strategies and programs, aimed at improving their educational performance and outcome, more as attempts to preserve and strengthen the *status-quo*. In schools where programs intended to address the declining achievement and retention of boys are known to be in place, the boys either failed to discuss these programs, or they described them as not genuine, inappropriate, misdirected or too restricted. Many of the staff involved have spoken in similar ways, some less cautiously than others.

The various responses of boys to current strategies are profoundly useful in the sense that the reasoning they use to support these responses provides a clear statement of where they place the strategic emphasis when we do listen, and when they choose to trust us enough to openly express their views. Current strategies emphasize policies, programs, guidelines, accountability and ultimately the perceived need for control and certainty. The boys emphasize people, mostly teachers and always those who they describe as *'bad teachers'* largely because of their lack of commitment to flexibility and self-referential consistency.

In several schools, for example, programs directed at dealing with boys' issues in education were described as *'wanky'*, as *'a bit of a bludge'*, or simply ignored completely. Importantly, these strategies were considered narrow, simplistic, patronizing and insincere in their conception and application. Although the boys associate individual teachers with these initiatives, their strongest criticism is directed at *'bad teachers'* collectively; those who are seen as insincere people. The boys believe that these teachers hypocritically create problems for boys in education and then pretend that they want to do something about them. In doing so, these teachers make it look like the problem lies solely with boys; that boys are either lacking the will or the skill to be contented participants in school life, or that they are simply not well-suited to academic tasks, in the sense that they lack the ability.

More generally, the boys uniformly reject all approaches that are either aimed at fixing up the boys, or employ the assumption that they are all the same and can be treated in the same way by strategies and programs directed at dealing with boys' issues. Whether the boys' conclusions are right or wrong, their logic is straightforward. They believe that people who use these approaches are at best ill-informed or misinformed because they don't genuinely listen. If they did, they would necessarily do things differently or be able to adequately explain why they are not. Many boys take this logic further, concluding that people who approach the problem in this way, are not genuinely listening to themselves either; to their culture, professional rhetoric, the experience of their own lives or to the logic of their own thinking.

Their rejection of these approaches is consistent with the boys' comments about *'good teachers'*. Where programs for boys are successful, they are seen by boys to be the outcome of *'good teachers'* and good teaching; of people who listen to their views, show them trust and respect, who take the risk of being involved and flexible in a broad range of ways.

From the views expressed or supported in their discussions, all of the boys have doubts about the all too familiar rhetoric of education; about, for example, the commitment to difference, free and creative expression, individuality, integrity and respect, whether as respect for others, respect for self, or respect for the school. Perhaps more to the point, they believe this rhetoric to be no more genuine than the people who use it in the classrooms, at assemblies, in newsletters, in parent interviews, or during one of the many *'interviews'* or *'lectures on behaviour'*.

Furthermore, the boys seem intent upon avoiding, discarding, or just muddying, the traditional, stereotypic distinctions that continue to shape, direct and justify strategy choices in education. From their perspective, although people are all the same in some respects, we are decidedly not all the same all the time, and we are not all the same in all respects. With varying degrees of consistency, the boys view themselves, girls, teachers and all of the issues in this way.

'A GOOD TEACHER CHANGES EVERYTHING'

Not surprisingly, the boys' strategic emphasis is upon achieving appropriate flexibility; providing a flexible learning environment in which they feel free to investigate the dynamic diversity that constitutes themselves and the world around them. They see their problems to be the result of direct and indirect, as well as overt and covert, pressure from *'bad teachers'* to comply and conform to their idea of appropriate behaviour, important knowledge, the 'correct' way, suitable goals, being successful, being male, having good self-esteem, and much more. Although this makes resistance and retaliation both logically and strategically necessary, it is also what makes it clear that this, for the boys themselves, is not their first preference. Clearly, their first preference is to engage with *'good teachers'*.

A key strategy will be to ensure that there are more *'good teachers'* and that the work and value of *'good teachers'* is understood, recognized and encouraged from the top, down. This might be done in a range of ways, but at least the following ways must be included.

1. The development of a more detailed understanding of what students, as clients, believe to be the defining features of *'good teachers'*. This could be done in a range of ways that might usefully include a more specific examination of the focus group data of boys in this study, along with data collected from an equally large number of girls, using the same method.

2. Recognition and encouragement for teachers who are already considered, by students, to be *'good teachers'*.

3. The provision of appropriate tertiary training and professional development.

4. Removal of the institutional obstructions that prevent teachers being *'good teachers'*.

5. The provision of a far more flexibly structured educational offering, that is globally, technologically and culturally up to date and self-referentially consistent; enabling teachers to cater for a local and global market of individual students, with similar and yet particularly different and rapidly changing learning needs and interests; a market that many teachers may already understand better than any other group; a market of individual students who are increasingly seeing themselves as capable of making their own choices, and who understand appropriate education as a process that would necessarily involve help in the making of these choices and in the correction of inevitable mistakes; a market that is already demanding that the dominant twentieth century concept, practice and expectations of 'schooling' and 'education' are replaced by an unending and fully integrated process of life long learning, interconnected over time and throughout all aspects of our lives.

WHAT THE TEACHERS AND PARENTS ARE SAYING

Taking the boys' views and their reasoning beyond the limitations of their experience has been an important part of the chosen method for this research. Discussing their views with teachers, parents, researchers, academics, bureaucrats and other groups with an interest in boys' education, has been particularly important. These discussions took place with individual teachers in schools, with formal and informal gatherings of staff after school, and with staff and parents in the evenings. They have also included research and professional development seminars, and a large number of responses, in the form of telephone conversations, letters and emails arising from publications and media coverage to date. Many of those who became involved in this way strongly believe that their views are not being heard, that their experience of education is not suitably reflected in the research writings, that the current policies and practices of education are not keeping up with rapidly changing contemporary needs and interests, nor are they addressing the needs of the future. Many believe that the current educational offering in schools is more out of date and culturally inappropriate than it is bad, wrong, at fault or to blame. Their view, it seems, is that we can no more expect our educational needs to be met by schools, as we have known them in the past, than we can expect the energy demands of the future to be met by the burning of fossil fuels, or the needs of a diverse global community to be met by the dominance of one cultural framework or one way of life.

Indeed, the prevailing view appears to be that it is time for a major paradigm shift in education, and necessarily one that is matched by a similar shift in all areas that shape and direct the needs, expectations and provision of education. Common to all of these views is the expressed conclusion that the educational offering in our schools ought not be of 'this' or 'that' particular kind, but that it be suitably flexible to allow all kinds to flourish, in their own way, and for the full prospects of life long learning to be realizable to all people at all ages.

Although this aspect of the research is by no means complete, several observations are worth noting as a basis for further research.

1. It is evident that the boys' concern about the lack of genuine listening, in its broadest sense, is a fundamental concern shared by others involved in education. Parents and teachers present two clear examples.

   • Many parents complain that schools and the educational demands placed on their children, operate against the interests of the overall well-being of both the children and the family, but that nobody genuinely listens to their concerns. They argue that the family is systematically excluded from the school environment and yet family life is dominated by its influence, and the demands it places on children. They talk of avenues or processes of involvement with the school that might result in genuine listening, but that these not only fail to be effective, they are ineffective in ways that appropriate their initial concerns by appearing to be dealing with them, or to have already dealt with them. The source of the problem remains unchanged. Often, they argue, the problems compound when the demands of schools and schooling add irresolvable tensions to families that are already struggling to deal with those they already have, or those that their children introduce in their attempts to deal with the troublesome world of peers, popular culture, and the science of extinction that surrounds them. Some parents believe that the spiral of disaffection that is evident in the school experience of their children, is one that might pull whole families into its vortex, or one that might join up with others at home. The outcomes are interconnecting pathways to despair, compounding stress and an overwhelming desire, on the part of parents, to resist, retaliate or simply withdraw.

   • Many teachers complain that nobody is listening to their concerns, one of which is that they are burdened with boring, repetitive and irrelevant tasks that obstruct the

development of useful learning environments and the creation of productive educative relationships with students. They see these as tasks that are imposed on them by those empowered to do so, but who remain distant from the point of application. In discussions with teachers they often talk about the many contradictory demands they face, over which they have little or no control. They talk of feeling *'locked'* into circumstances that make the task of teaching difficult and often impossible, and which cast them as the kind of people they believe they are not. The outcome is a debilitating, objective despair, not unlike that which is faced by many boys, and resulting from a similar conviction that what must be done cannot be done because of the nature of the phenomena involved. Changing the phenomena is seen to be impossible, largely because they believe that they are not empowered to do so. Their commitment to cultural paradox, both in their own lives, and through their role as advocates of a culture that is bedevilled by the pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual inconsistencies that it fails to address, is strong and this compounds the problem. Being unable to fault their reasoning, and being unfamiliar with the kind of reasoning that might direct them towards appropriate resolutions, they find themselves faced with a cluster of related stressors that they cannot remove from their lives and an allostatic load that they cannot correct. It is increasingly clear that 'isolation and lack of control in the work environment' are two key causes of allostatic load, resulting in poor performance and chronic health problems (McEwen 1998:177).

Like the boys and the parents, most teachers firmly believe that nobody genuinely listens to their concerns; that nobody really cares, and that the only plausible way to resolve the problem is to leave it behind. Some, it seems, believe that this can be done at the end of each day, or by just *'turning off'*. Others talk of finding another career or taking early retirement. Clearly, the impact of objective despair on teachers, and its subsequent impact on the outcomes of students, needs further research, preferably using a methodological approach that is similar to the one used in this study.

2. It is also apparent that despite their diversity, teachers and parents, more than other adult groups I have encountered in discussions about this work, have been receptive and responsive to the views of the boys, and to the broader task of critically and self-reflectively listening to themselves, their culture and the changing nature of the world around them. In other words, despite the boys' concerns that too few teachers genuinely listen, it is apparent that many teachers display a preparedness to do so, and perhaps more so than other groups involved in shaping and directing schools and their educative offerings. However, the point here is more about the apparent lack of preparedness to genuinely listen on the part of groups other than parents and teachers. My own observations of representatives of the bureaucracy and academia, for example, in relation to their responses to this research, support the view of many teachers that a proportionately greater number within these groups appear not to be genuinely listening.

Most teachers, with whom I have had discussions, have displayed a strong interest in what the boys have had to say, particularly about the kind of people that boys believe are *'good teachers'*. They have supported the criteria of good teaching that the boys have used, particularly the general claim that it is largely a matter of personality or character. They understand this to be about the kind of personality traits or characteristics that make it easier to be culturally up to date, and to establish effective educative relationships. They would like to believe that they are all capable of being these kinds of people. They also accept the claim, made by the boys, that this would create an educational environment that would be better for all. Although they find the low percentage of teachers, identified by the boys as *'good teachers'*, to be disappointing, they are not surprised. They are similarly not surprised to find that more teachers both support and identify with the *'good teacher'* characteristics than is

suggested by the boys' estimates (10-30%). Apart from inadequate training, most teachers believe that professional risks and institutional obstructions stand before them in their efforts to be these kinds of people; the kind that they believe they can be, and the kind that the boys say teachers often become, when they are away from the school.

Like the boys, it seems that many teachers, young teachers in particular, see the value of tertiary training to be largely one of getting the credentials that make it possible for them to start work and only thereby to really start learning. A lot of what passes for subsequent professional development is seen in much the same way. Indeed the apparent similarities between boys and teachers, in regard to the factors they identify as those that inhibit their interest and performance in institutional education, is quite striking.

3. Although teachers in schools are a diverse group, many display pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual interests in moving beyond the dominant philosophical commitment to fragmentation and certainty. Those who chose to engage in discussion on these matters, especially those who are also described by the boys as *'good teachers'*, appear to be strongly committed to the task of teaching and to the ongoing review of good teaching practice. Nonetheless, it appears that these are also people who are committed to the development of a pragmatically, theoretically and spiritually consistent cultural, philosophical basis for what the boys have called *'character'* or *'personality'*. Unlike the boys, they talk of these as having both personal and professional dimensions. However, like the boys, they talk about the need to deal with different dimensions of character or personality as inseparable aspects of the lives and reasoning of real people. Some argue that the more these dimensions are separated the more the integrity of both are compromised.

In discussions of this kind, it is clear that these people are far less committed to the kind of reasoning that relies heavily on the general fallacies that are used to support legitimatory reasoning, or what might also be called back-door reasoning; the kind that starts with a preferred conclusion and constructs an argument in its support, relying largely on plausibility as the criterion of its adequacy. The most common of these fallacies is the fallacy of separation; the view that what is separable in thought is separate in reality. The practice of ignoring the interconnectedness of all aspects of reality, in preference for reified, and more readily ordered and controlled, analytic abstractions is widespread, and appears to be largely unchallenged in education. However, by putting this practice aside in our reasoning about this aspect of the dominant reasoning, we find that these analytic abstractions are, in actuality, interconnected aspects of reality themselves, and that their reified use is mistaken, as much about these particular abstractions as about abstraction itself.

We are similarly wrong in our use of two associated assumptions:

• that the dominance of this mistaken reasoning is not also its undoing; and

• that resistance by those who are both disaffected and disempowered is not a reaction against mistaken reasoning of this kind.

The teachers who engaged in these discussions clearly place a great deal of value on personal, professional and cultural integrity. Given that integrity, along with many other concepts, like trust and respect, is used to explain aspects of human life that make little theoretical or practical sense when thought about in terms other than interconnection, this in itself is an indication that they are less reliant on the fallacy of separation, and more likely to make choices that are more broadly and contextually informed. They appear, for example, to be less focused on career ambitions and less prepared to ignore the interests of others, especially students, and to neglect the needs of the future, in their students. They show far less commitment to the task of *'climbing the greasy pole'* to status, power and the luxury of

having others do the less glamorous tasks. Many of these teachers quite clearly prefer to remain classroom teachers, not because they lack leadership skills, ambition or the ability to do otherwise. They simply have a preference to teach and to be involved with students. They understand the most important task in education to be that of building relationships of interconnection with their students, upon which they might establish trust and mutual respect, rather than relying on authoritarian structures and practices supported by self-referentially inconsistent reasoning. They argue that the most valuable leadership in education is the kind that is offered from the side. In doing so, they seem to recognize that hierarchies of command, as mechanisms of control and direction, in a cultural context that encourages flexibility and the expression of difference, are antiquated divisive mechanisms that engender resentment and the desire for retaliation.

Indeed, it might easily be shown that by examining the reasoning used by these teachers, in talking about their own role in education, we might find the philosophical basis that supports and explains the commonality the boys have found in the broad diversity of people they have chosen to call *'good teachers'*. It is this philosophical basis that might best explain why the boys uniformly and emphatically turn to character or personality, as the sole determinant of a *'good teacher'*. It might also explain why the boys are describing uniform characteristics or personality traits in people whose actual characters or personalities are as diverse as their age in years, appearance, interests, expertise, teaching practice and experience.

BUT WHAT CONSTITUTES A *'GOOD TEACHER'*?

It seems that *'good teachers'* are people who manage the broad spectrum of human nature in very different ways but for similar philosophical reasons, whether these are clear to them as philosophical reasons or not.

- *'Good teachers'* build upon integrity and involvement, rather than narrowly conceived interests and detachment.

- *'Good teachers'* concern themselves with the need to think in terms of interconnectedness and relativity, rather than about separate things, having particular connections and maintaining discrete differences.

- They remain self-referentially consistent, particularly in their commitment to the task of consistently applying their cultural logic, its insights and discoveries, in whatever form these are known.

- They inform their involvement in the lives of others by the use of this cultural logic, rather than relying on policies and the structural advantage that empowers them to demand and enforce compliance and conformity.

- They apply the philosophical rhetoric of education, rather than merely declaring it as an achievement. They do this by demonstrating the universal diversity of identity, knowledge, truth and value, rather than declaring and enforcing the universality of preferred expressions of identity, particular kinds of knowledge, and the particular truths or values that support the dominance of established norms, rules, traditions, conventions and practices.

- *'Good teachers'* remain close enough to others to be genuinely listening, and committed enough to take on, and to manage, the personal and professional risks that are necessarily attached to being genuine.

- *'Good teachers'* accept the philosophical, cultural challenge to pursue wisdom, in the sense in which I define in Chapter 2 of *Listening to the Boys*.

Examining the reasoning used by these teachers, and by the boys in their discussions about *'good teachers'*, we might understand why they appear to be people who:

- remain largely detached from, and perhaps disinterested in, the more self-interested distractions of achieving status and power;

- show less interest in defending current policies and practices, and far less confidence in the value of policy directives as mechanisms for achieving appropriate outcomes in schools;

- show less interest in the dictates of fashionable theorizing;

- are more genuinely optimistic about global, technological and cultural changes; and

- are less commitment to dated assumptions about work and workplace relations, for example, assumptions that:

- inform the dominant viewpoint that uniform and regulated institutional structures and processes are the most effective and efficient way to maintain an educated population; and

- professional security and the guarantee of paid work for teachers, can only be achieved through the preservation of twentieth century styled salaried positions in hierarchically structured institutions, like schools and universities.

Importantly, these teachers are the most condemning of their tertiary training, and of most of what has been offered to them in the form of professional development. From their position in the classroom, alongside the students of the contemporary world, many believe that their own education was philosophically inadequate and out of date, even for the world and the institutions of their time, and for the people from whom it was delivered.

By genuinely listening to the boys, it becomes compellingly clear that research directed at establishing a better understanding of the philosophical phenomena identified in these observations is necessary and urgent for two reasons.

1. The boy's relationship with *'good teachers'* is key to a cluster of strategies that might usefully deal with their concerns, and a broad range of issues and problems in education.

2. The way that *'good teachers'* are meeting the cultural, philosophical challenge of their time is the key to understanding what this means and how it might be achieved by all teachers.

Along with the boys in this study, many teachers have suggested that discussions involving groups of teachers should be conducted independently, and in a way that is methodologically similar to the way that the views of boys have been sought in this research. It seems that boys and teachers alike see research of this kind to be useful in gathering and presenting their views, and facilitating their cultural expectation of an ongoing participation in the decision making process, but in a way that makes them feel that it is safe to do so. The boys have quite explicitly identified the focus group discussions, the summary of their views and the reporting back process, to be an example of *'really listening'*. It is significant that this research was done within the schools but remained independent, and that it involved someone from outside of the school. The boys treated the researcher as an impartial scribe. For the staff, the researcher was a colleague who was listening to boys in a way that many found difficult or impossible to achieve without taking the risks that they didn't feel comfortable to take.

Most boys wanted to see the research process continue. In doing so, they saw themselves to be identifying both the problem and the solution. The research model is one that might usefully and regularly be applied in all schools on a range of issues. For most participants, it was an example of genuine democratic process, and was cited by several boys as the sort of thing that they had hoped would be the outcome of their efforts *'on the SRC* [Student Representative Council]*'*. Sadly, it was not. Most of all, from the views expressed by the boys, and many of the coordinating teachers, the research method has turned out to be a model of effective listening and research, the value of which was intentionally as much in the process as it was in the product.

THE CHALLENGE IS TO ACCEPT DIFFERENCE AND FACILITATE DIVERSITY

Although the boys would like to see their educational offering changed, they remain unclear and uncertain about many of the particularities. They seem aware that from boy to boy particular preferences would differ, and that, both individually and generally, preferences would differ over time. Their solution to this problem, as with most others, is to have more flexibility in their educational offering; more flexibility in the way individuals integrate education and all other aspects of their lives; more flexibility in their choice of teachers, topics and due dates for work, as well as the mode of delivery, format and timing of assessment and the method and value of accreditation. In this respect, the boys are clearly forward looking and their expectations more in tune with the transformation of Australian life that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century; driven largely by those who were young in the 1960s and 1970s.

Most boys are also in tune with the direction of current change and their cultural commitment to democratization and liberalization. Although varyingly and with less detailed knowledge than most of them would like, they are also aware of other major developments that impact on their lives, the most obvious of which are information technology and globalization.

Although they know more about information technology than they do about globalization, many have negative attitudes to the way that it appears in their school lives, and some express fears that sound a lot like those of the adult world. Few are clear about the opportunities that this emerging technology offers for new ways of working, learning, thinking and interacting on a global scale. It is clear that they think about it, but it seems that the more visionary aspects of their thoughts remain more subdued than might reasonably be expected from people their age. While they incessantly express concerns about the general lack of flexibility, and how this creates and compounds a broad range of problems, they say surprisingly little about information technology and its potential to be the most liberating technology we have known. From their discussions, it is clear that they see its potential, and although varyingly, boys see themselves to be involved in the enjoyment and discovery of this potential, but mostly at home. Its role as a liberating influence is not countenanced as one that is likely to develop at school, largely because the full use of the technology not only facilitates flexibility, it assumes a bold and broad commitment to its necessity and its cultural suitability.

Some boys talk of taking courses on compact discs or on the internet as the way by which they might avoid clashes with teachers they don't like, or who don't like them. Some see these developments as a way of having virtual schools that avoid the spatial and temporal constraints of institutional environments that demand the compulsory attendance of large numbers of students at the same time. They see existing schools becoming hubs or centres where educational resources are gathered; as meeting places for socializing, sport, and the kind of tuition that extends from virtual learning, employing face to face contact, group work, or the use of facilities like laboratories or theatres.

Some boys see virtual schooling, courses on compact discs and other innovations of this kind as ways of making it possible for them to arrange their lives so that they foster and fulfil their varied interests, rather than making these compete. Importantly, some see virtual schools as global schools; global supermarkets of information and educational exchange, that know no limits and remain largely inclusive and unrestricted, at least in the sense of being free from the restrictions inherent in the cumbersome, costly and constraining practices of institutions that are fixed in space and time, and fixed at a cultural time that may well have already passed.

Globalization, for most boys, remains the great unknown. For many, it is vaguely defined; a cloud that hangs over their future. Once again, when the impact of globalization appears in their discussions, it carries with it a very adult, negative, fear-laden expectation that it will be more destructive than constructive; taking opportunities away rather than creating them, depriving them of their freedom rather than enhancing it, and threatening their well-being rather than facilitating their flourishing. They show a keenness to consider new and somewhat global paradigms of production, education, communication, social organization, recreation, family life

and other major aspects of their future lives. Nonetheless, they are decidedly lacking in the conceptual language, and visionary images that might make this a consideration that had grown out of their own time, rather than out of the more puzzled, anxiety ridden decades that closed the twentieth century, bringing an end to a way of life that found its justification in ideas more suited to the nineteenth century.

If the discussions of the boys reflect the classrooms and the courses that constitute their formal education, it would seem that these urgently need a large injection of imagination and charismatic, impassioned leadership. This should not be the policy driven kind, that effectively imposes more of the same from above. Nor should it be the fanciful kind that is thought by many to be something they might get from training schools focusing on leadership, teamwork and positive thinking. Instead, it should be more like the kind that built a Microsoft empire and created a world that was barely imaginable at the time, other than in the minds of those who refused to be distracted by a quest for academic credentials, and who defied the vested interests of a time-locked academic world; one that continues to defend its power to award credentials to the compliant, but denies its responsibility to confront, inspire and lead.

Throughout all of their discussions, on all of the issues and problems, the boys have recognized and emphasized the universal need for flexibility. For most boys, rightly or wrongly, school is an organization that is primarily rigid and largely authoritarian and custodial in function and purpose. For them, this is largely because *'bad teachers'* make it that way. It is not, they say, about learning, and it is not about developing the knowledge and skills of individual students. It restricts mobility, represses individuality and obstructs the expression and development of individual differences. Teachers are understood to be people who might either support this function and purpose, or they might not. The *'good teachers'* do not, and it is in their classrooms that real learning takes place, and the boys' expectation and measure of real learning is defined. One of the most repeated and repeatedly emphasized features of *'good teachers'* is their flexibility. So strong is the boys' support for these people, and so successful is their co-operation, that institutional inflexibility itself begins to be less of a problem. The fact that a particular subject, or piece of work within a subject, for example, is directly compulsory because of institutional requirements, or indirectly compulsory because of employers' preferences, is far less of a problem for boys than the way that compulsion is interpreted and administered by individual teachers. Whether these compulsory components are seen to be good or bad, and whether they have good or bad outcomes, has more to do with the teacher and what happens in the classroom, than with the material itself or the compulsion itself.

GOOD TEACHERS AND GOOD SCHOOLS ARE MATTERS OF CULTURAL LOGIC

When boys argue that *'good teachers'* and good schools are culturally up to date, there are two general claims embedded in their reasoning, neither of which they articulate as well as they would like, but both of which are experientially and intuitively clear in their lives.

1. These are people and places that are culturally consistent in the sense that they reflect the fundamental assumptions and beliefs of their culture and its pragmatic, theoretical and spiritual strengths. Furthermore, they apply these assumptions in their own lives, they teach others how to do the same, and they demonstrate how to resolve their cultural paradox rather than compound its debilitating impact by choosing one of the many forms of despair driven denial.

2. These are people and places that are culturally in tune, in that they build on the strengths of their culture. They are informed and inspired by its practical and theoretical achievements and its spirit. Most of all, these are people and places that thrive on the self-reflectively critical and consistent application of their cultural logic. In other words, these are people and places whose ideas, beliefs and preferences, whether they are supported by tradition, training,

policy or popular opinion, or not, never allow them to ignore or deny the logic that gave them life and the prospect of passing it on in a better form.

Central to these claims by the boys, are images of people and places that are rigorously and knowingly flexible for philosophically, culturally driven reasons. These images may be understood by many in the adult world to be those of naivety or youthful optimism. Nonetheless, it appears that for most boys they are images that are real to some degree, but by no means real enough. They are also images that have been realized to some degree, in their own lives, or in the lives of the people around them. But again, these are images that are not realized nearly enough and not by nearly enough people.

Like any other social group in the history of Western society, the boys who have experienced flexibility where there is normally restraint, and trust and mutual respect where there is normally authoritarianism, immediately shift the goal posts to the point where the exception becomes a universal expectation and the norm becomes the focus of resistance and resentment.

Interestingly, many boys have shown a troubled awareness of an inconsistency in their preference for flexibility. Having argued that more flexibility would solve problems for boys in education, they acknowledge that they engage in the practice of paying out others, largely because they are circumstantially different, or different by choice. When this inconsistency is raised in their discussions it clearly troubles them. They seem to want to justify some sort of conformity, and to claim that this is relatively harmless. Although it is not clear, it appears that what troubles them most is that they are philosophically unable to resolve this inconsistency. They are clearly philosophically alert, hence their preoccupying concern about inconsistency as the most significant feature of the issues and problems that plague their educational experience. Furthermore, their sensitivity to the impact of inconsistency on their lives, as distinct from truth and falsity, and their keen sense of its fundamental value as an indicator of reliability and credibility, shows that they are actively philosophizing in systematic ways. It is also clearly evident from their discomfort, when trying to argue points of this kind, that their lack of training in these areas and their lack of skill and practice at open and verbal philosophizing within their educational experience, is a source of major frustration and great disappointment. They seem particularly frustrated by their inability to confront the dominant mode of philosophizing and the dominant philosophical assumptions that support it, but not always knowingly and rarely coherently.

For most boys, rightly or wrongly, literacy and numeracy skills have little inherent value. Many who have well developed skills don't appear to value them a great deal more than those who don't. This is largely because their value is measured by the extent to which they can use these skills to *'do things'* that they want to do, or feel the need to do. Philosophizing is clearly a predominant urge among the boys, and the girls, in this study. Arguably, it is their strongest urge. Although it cannot be stopped, it can be used and developed in ways that deal with the needs and interests of all who are involved.

There is a strong case for the *'doing'* of philosophy (better thought of as culturally self-reflective philosophizing) in schools:

• not only because boys are already doing it and will not be stopped, even by the processes of institutionalized education;

• not only for its capacity to resolve cultural paradox and lift the debilitating weight of despair off their young lives;

• not only for its value as an expression and development of cultural identity and the human spirit of rationalization;

• not only because of its value as an instrument for achieving the conjunction of global interdependence and cultural pluralism;

- not only because by getting our philosophy right we might usefully deal with our survival crisis; but also
- because of its potential to create a thirst for knowledge; to give sense and purpose to the currently devalued offer of literacy and the broad range of knowledge and skills that, for many boys, remain pointless.

The butterfly effect of philosophizing has the potential to solve large problems with minimal input and to avoid problems that have not yet struck. Of course, philosophizing can also have the Ghandi effect of creating a kind of resolve in the unempowered that can neither be distracted nor weakened by displays of what they see as ignorance and inconsistency on the part of those who ought to know better. Of course, the strategy with the most potential, is the one that brings these two effects together. It demands little more than genuinely, openly and explicitly philosophizing with them, but in ways that resolve inconsistencies and the tensions that they generate.

The boys would clearly like to know how to deal with the many problems, inconsistencies and tensions they identify in their lives and their experience of education. They would like to know how, within their cultural logic, culturally driven inconsistencies might be resolved without having to surrender their passion to pursue their cultural ideals. In education, they might look to their teachers for this kind of cultural knowledge and for the wisdom and leadership that is displayed and measured by the way it is used. But who might the teacher look to for this kind of knowledge and for an understanding of cultural wisdom and how it might be established? Who might the teacher look to for an understanding of how this wisdom is measured and sought out by students, who reasonably look to teachers for philosophical leadership, if only because of the position they occupy in the classroom and the philosophically intense role they play in the lives of students and the life of the community?

Meanwhile, the boys remain concerned, but largely undeterred, by their own inconsistencies, the problems they create, and the sense in which these make their expressed concerns seem self-contradictory. In context, these are not seen, by the boys themselves, to be sufficient to weaken the logic and justice of their claim for flexibility. Most of all, it is not sufficient to weaken the sense of vindication that follows from their experience with *'good teachers'*. For them, cultural consistency in the form of flexibility can and should be a universal characteristic of all aspects of education and the dominant characteristic of educational environments. The pressing need for more flexibility in schooling is the highest priority for all boys. As such, it is the test of its cultural integrity and the ultimate test of its immediate and long term value.

Clearly, we are at a cultural turning point. The boys, and the girls too it seems, are prepared for the changes, more so than the adult world that surrounds them, and that has lead them to this point. There is, however, little to be gained in detailing the kinds of structures and practices that might be put in place in a bid to turn this cultural corner. Without the illumination of philosophical commitment, it is a world that cannot be seen, no matter how much detail is given to the image. Nonetheless, it is an urgently needed commitment. The need and the direction is clear from our sciences, the logic of our culture and the voices of the young. The first steps, necessarily, are that we listen intently and genuinely to all three.

In general terms, the boys believe that success at school is more a measure of the preparedness to comply and conform and to work well in an environment where, one way or another, they are fundamentally *'forced'* to do so. This explains the general view that, apart from the social life and the odd *'good teacher'*, school is largely considered a waste of time; one that must be endured in order to get a chance to do something, preferably a paid job, that is useful, offers clear, regular rewards, and from which they might learn something of value. Once again, they must live with a paradoxical dilemma that appears in many forms:

(a) that they must *'waste time'* in order to get a chance to *'do something'* that is not a waste of time;

(b) that they must do *'useless things'* in order to qualify to do *'useful things'*;

(c) that they must forego individual and cultural integrity; and

(d) that they must give up being creative, self-motivating, self-directing, and so on, in order to get the kind of credentials that qualify them for a job in which their progress, and the rewards it offers, will be commensurate with the extent to which they are creative, self-motivating, self-directing, and so on.

From what the boys are saying, whatever national goals of schooling and recurrent education we have set, the national goal we have reached is that of mass disinterest, disaffection and a growing rejection not only of schooling, but of organized learning. As an outcome of the current educational offering, this rejection grows annually and is restrained only by the direct and indirect compulsion that boys feel to attend school and to take away with them the credentials that give it purpose. Although the boys accept the compelling influence of necessity, they believe strongly that compulsion itself neither makes them learn nor does it provide them with a reason to want to learn, to be creative, imaginative, inventive, optimistic or inspired. Where these human passions exist in the boys, they too often exist in spite of the institutionalized educational environment in which they feel they are imprisoned; sentenced for a term that is far beyond what is fair, even for the crime of being young, unskilled, unsure, and inclined to trust those who send them to these institutions and who profess their irreplaceable importance to their future lives.

In terms of their negative attitude to organized learning, and the impact that this is likely to have on their participation in educational programs at some other time, the achievers are largely at one with the boys who appear to be doing badly. Together, they have neither the expectation nor the desire to continue their education beyond the point of getting a job, whether this be with or without tertiary qualifications. For most boys, their school experience seems to have firmly established a negative and necessary association between formal learning and what they understand as an institutionalized, unpleasant waste of time, dealing with matters having no obvious relevance to their lives and their perceived needs and interests, and demanding the kind of personal sacrifice and general disempowerment that makes the hazy promise of long term rewards simply and ultimately *'not enough'* for most of them.

REFERENCES

McEwen, B. 1998a, 'Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators', *New England Journal of Medicine* 338:171-179.

Slade, M. 2001, 'Listening to the Boys', *The Boys in Schools Bulletin*, 4(1):10-18. [Online] Available at: http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fac/boys/

Slade, M. 2002, *Listening to the Boys*, Shannon Research Press, Adelaide. [Available at http://www.MalcolmSlade.com or by email to Malcolm.Slade@flinders.edu.au]