

Submission to the Federal Government Inquiry into the Education of  
Boys

St Brendan's College, Yeppoon, Queensland

*Introduction*

St. Brendan's College is a catholic school for boys from years 8 to 12 located in Yeppoon on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland. The college caters for day and residential students and was founded by the Congregation of Christian Brothers in 1940. St. Brendan's is owned by the Congregation of Christian Brothers and operated by Edmund Rice Education Services located in Brisbane. St. Brendan's is one of ten schools operated by Edmund Rice Education Services in Queensland.

*School Background*

The college population in 2000 is 675 students of whom 420 are residential students with the balance being day students. St. Brendan's draws its students from a wide area. Day students come from Rockhampton, 42kms from the college and the Capricorn Coast area. Residential students come primarily from the Central Queensland region though students enrol from Papua Nuiguini, Torres Strait Islands and Cape York, as well as several students from the Northern Territory and Northern New South Wales. Because of the need of some families for residential education, some students come from Brisbane and surrounding districts.

The college is set on 60 acres of bushland on the outskirts of the small town of Yeppoon.

Students enrol at St. Brendan's for a variety of reasons. For students from country properties and regional towns, the acquisition of a good education, with opportunities for productive employment is generally stated by parents as the major reason for their son's enrolment. However, societal issues, especially family breakdown and adolescent problems can be the reason for student enrolment. The college has the policy of enrolling students who have been excluded from other schools as part of its vision of providing education for those considered poor and marginalised. Families are encouraged to enrol their sons at the college and all measures are taken to ensure that financial hardship is not a reason for removing students from the college.

In the past two years, there has been an increase in students of indigenous background from 18 in 1998 to 46 this year. Of these students, the majority come from Aboriginal and Island Communities and are enrolled in the

college by their families to distance themselves from the problems facing these communities, problems already widely documented and need not be elaborated on in this document. These students in particular are often at risk when arriving at the college because of differences in social and cultural expectations.

### *Culture*

One would be foolish to assume that because St. Brendan's is a boys' school then its population is a homogenous one. Backgrounds in terms of racial identification, family background, areas of interest and expectations are sometimes problematic. Students have a need for a sense of belonging and this manifests itself in a variety of ways. Sport gives students a sense of identity. Students are encouraged to involve themselves in all sports, particularly team sports to develop this sense of identity.

As well as being involved in sport, students are offered opportunities to involve themselves in the number of cultural activities, college musical, music tour and drama activities give students opportunities to develop their cultural interests. Community service is encouraged to give students experience in belonging to the community even though they may originate from other regions

As part of a boarding community, residential students have a culture that sets them apart from the local students so there has been a concerted effort to involve all students in weekend activities. Community service has a positive impact in this area.

Our country background gives scope for continuing links in pastoral areas. Boys are able to bring their cattle to school in preparation for the shows in the area. The College Rodeo further reinforces this link with students being given the opportunity to participate in "risky" activities in a controlled situation while enabling boys from cities to experience country activities.

### *Pastoral Care*

St Brendan's has a reputation for providing excellent Pastoral Care for its students. The Pastoral system revolves around the House system organised by four, soon to be five, House Deans. On entry to the college, a student is placed in a house, and within this house, into a Pastoral Care group. He remains with this group, consisting of 12 to 15 boys and a carer, usually a teacher but sometimes, another significant adult from the school, until he leaves the college in Year 12. Students are arranged vertically in these groups to help break down the barriers between the year levels. Because the Pastoral Carer has a long term relationship with the students in the group, there develops a mentor relationship which gives students another person with whom to relate and one who takes an active interest in the student's long term welfare.

Another way the college uses to socialise the younger students is through the “Big Brother” programme. Each Year 8 student is paired with a Year 12 student for orientation activities and ongoing support in Year 8. These activities are both structured and unstructured and give students a sense of belonging and an understanding of the college. Stress is placed on the importance of developing positive relationships in Pastoral Care and has had, in the experience of long standing college staff, a positive effect by helping minimise the incidents of bullying. These positive relationships work to support the college's bullying strategies that are articulated in documents such as the Student Diary

Behaviour Management is carried out in the Pastoral Care context with House Deans, Learning Support teachers, College Counsellor, Pastoral care teachers being involved in being supportive to students in need of special attention. This is part of the college's commitment to the document on Edmund Rice Education which is the touchstone for the college's authenticity as a Catholic school in the Christian Brothers' tradition.

As a Catholic school, St Brendan's has a focus on the faith development of our students. As a result of the large boarding population, faith formation in both planned and ad hoc situations plays an important part in every day life and is an integral aspect of the socialisation of the students. Development of spirituality within the Catholic tradition is seen as integral to enabling students to find meaning in their lives.

### *Faith and Formation*

As a Catholic college, St Brendan's has a clear mandate to follow the Catholic tradition, to do what is right, to live by our values, and to look to the needs of others. Faith and formation are reflected in the following areas.

The classroom, Religious Education program provides the foundational knowledge of the Christian faith tradition. Through the enthusiasm of committed teachers the Religious Education Program has been instrumental in building the foundations of our hope. In 1999 we continued to review the program to provide a more student-centred approach. This year also saw the introduction of the Board subject Study of Religion. Study of Religion provided a strong academic program for the students who chose it.

Our College's commitment to prayer and liturgy expresses our desire to enrich our lived experience through reflection and helps to reinforce a sense of belonging to a community. With changes to the structure of the morning routine, morning prayer became the focus of gathering each day in the chapel. Pastoral Care groups and their teachers put a great deal of effort

into creating meaningful prayer that enthused and enriched, and at times challenged the community.

Weekly liturgies on Sunday nights were characterised by student involvement. St Brendan's maintained its tradition of singing well at liturgical celebrations. It is encouraging that students participate so well in song and are not afraid to give their full voice to the celebration. Many visitors to our community expressed surprise and amazement at the way our students confidently participated in the Mass.

Throughout the year the college celebrates many special liturgies including: the Combined Schools' Opening Mass, the Senior Leaders Commitment Mass, Ash Wednesday, the Easter Paraliturg, Edmund Rice Day, Speech Weekend Mass and the Valedictory Mass. On each occasion a meaningful experience through the use of music and drama gives the students an opportunity for different experiences

### *SACRAMENTAL PROGRAM*

Many students find that a sense of belonging is heightened through receiving the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation & Eucharist. This step is not one that is taken lightly and students are given time and intensive preparation for these rituals. In 1999, 8 students received these sacraments.

### *RETREAT PROGRAM*

The Retreat Program is an integral part of our College's commitment to developing the whole person. Through exposing students to different experiences in a variety of settings students come to realise their giftedness and appreciate the presence of God in themselves and others. These retreats are designed to cater for the developmental stages for the students and range from group activities outdoors to more reflective retreats as the students mature.

The program begins in year 8 with a camp early in the school year. This camp is designed to encourage bonding between students just entering the college. Activities take place in an outdoor setting where students experience camping, canoeing and other outside activities. In Year 9 students join in another outdoors activity, a three day bushwalk with the intention of giving the students experience in a challenging outdoor environment.

Year 10 retreats contrast in that they focus on the need for reflection on themselves and their relationships with others. Students spend time with staff in small groups reflecting upon their growth and issues relating to their physical and emotional development.

Early in Term 3, Year 11 students participate in the Community Service Program. The program was designed to give students an understanding of the needs of people in the wider community, with a special focus on the

elderly. As a key element in their faith and formation, students gain an appreciation of the social reality of Christianity and the need to be involved in the community.

In this week, students visited agencies for the care of the elderly. These included Bethany, Leinster Place, Morrison Park, North Rockhampton Nursing Home, Eventide, McAuley Place (Rockhampton), Gracemere Gardens (Gracemere), Sunset Lodge (Emu Park), Yeppoon Hospital Nursing Home and the Adventist Retirement Village (Yeppoon). Other students visited the Blue Nurses in Yeppoon and Rockhampton. In the evenings, students reflected upon the experiences of their day and shared their reflections and experiences with the whole group. At the end of the week, residents of the various Nursing Homes were invited to St Brendan's to enjoy a luncheon and concert hosted by the Year 11's.

### *Indigenous Students*

At St. Brendan's, we have had an increase in boys from indigenous families looking for opportunities to be gained by being in a residential school with access to a wide range of educational opportunities. Unfortunately, many of these students have been disadvantaged through family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and in some cases, physical and sexual abuse and because of issues facing indigenous people in Australia today and when they arrive at the College they need special attention in order to succeed. As part of our commitment to these boys, we have begun developing a programme of academic and residential support; this is in its embryonic stage but will develop further over the next three years.

The College has been well served by a weekly visit from the Indigenous Support Officer from Rockhampton however, with the numbers of students increasing from 18 in 1998 to 46 in 2000, we decided to employ a teacher's assistant with the role of supporting and mentoring new indigenous students. With the appointment of Dennis Conlon to this position, indigenous students now have an adult with the time to help them settle into college life. As well as his classroom support responsibilities, Dennis ensures that new students have timetables explained, uniforms and equipment organised and the like.

Each new student is assessed by teachers from the Learning Support Department led by Brenda Barry and the student's level of need determined. From this assessment, comes an individual learning programme used to support students in the classroom situation. Learning support teachers and assistants monitor these students closely and tutoring through the ATAS scheme is used if necessary. Volunteer readers come to assist with reading. Students are encouraged to be part of activities that take place in the local community. Boys attend Tertiary Awareness Courses, join in the ATSIC camp for the Rockhampton area and any other appropriate activity is given priority. At the boys' request, we set up a boxing ring, where the boys train

weekly under the guidance of Stan Alberts from Rockhampton CEO; NAIDOC week mass and march are also attended with enthusiasm.

We are acutely aware that much needs to be done to combat racist ideas and attitudes. Each year we invite Aboriginal performers to showcase their talents to the whole school and to provide positive role models. This year we were visited by Herb Wharton, writer and storyteller, who worked with students in classroom and in small groups to develop their writing skills. Herb will return later this year at Rodeo time to run a workshop for interested students. Herb is very popular with the all boys because of his country background. In October, Taryn Drummond, who will perform Aboriginal and Island songs and dances, will visit us.

Community members from the local area are encouraged to visit the school and in Careers Week this year, we will focus on successful indigenous people to further students' experience.

Subject Co-ordinators have made inclusive as well as indigenous perspectives a priority in the academic area. Units of work and resources, especially library resources are a priority and teachers are encouraged to use these resources frequently. Within our faith community, we are continually acknowledging her need for reconciliation with all Australians; the RE department in particular addresses the issue of Social Justice at all levels.

By far the biggest issue faced by indigenous students is the difference in cultural attitudes, expectations and the problem of "fitting in" while maintaining their cultural identity. Behavioural difficulties often arise in supporting the kids while ensuring that learning and teaching is not put at risk. House Deans and teachers are supportive. We are developing strategies for students who are having difficulty in settling to classroom routine. This term, we will trial Distance Education for one particular student who is not ready to return to the classroom. This is one idea we are working on and have commenced planning for a transition place where students can work on their problems in a smaller and perhaps less overwhelming environment. It is our plan to have this transition house implemented by 2002.

At St Brendan's we are committed to giving all students a chance to succeed, especially those poor and marginalised such as our indigenous students and we are continually renewing and reviewing the ways in which we work towards this aim.

### *Learning Support*

In the process of enrolment at the college, students and their parents are interviewed and learning needs and behaviour management issues are discussed. Within the first term of enrolment, students are assessed by the classroom teacher in a formal and

informal way and if necessary referred to the Learning support teacher who, with the teachers, House Dean and Deputy Principal, decides on the appropriate course of action. This will include monitoring by pastoral care personnel and the development of an Individual Learning Plan for the student. This may involve small group work, working individually or changing to a more appropriate subject.

The number of student requiring some intensive individual learning support is growing and has required the increase in both teaching and support staff. In 2000, the college has 2 qualified Learning support teachers and five support assistants working with students in all areas of the curriculum.

One of the challenges faced by teachers is to make learning appropriate and meaningful for students at all stages of their development and we are continuing to critique our teaching to make this a likely outcome.

### *Integration: A Middle School Initiative*

Early in 1998, moves to make change to the delivery of the curriculum in Year 8 were discussed. After committee meetings over two years, the decision to implement a process of integrating subject areas was made. In essence, Year 8 students would remain in groups, organised on House lines, with contact to a limited number of teachers. In 2000, this process was begun. Evaluation of this project is underway and following this evaluation, decisions about continuing integration into 2001 for both Years 8 and 9 will than be made.

The purpose of integration is to improve both student learning and curriculum and at present, this initiative is delivering these objectives. Anecdotal evidence seems to reveal at the very least, a good understanding by teachers of the students' academic needs.

Through the process of translating theory into practice, teachers across the school are endeavouring to make meaningful the learning experiences of our students through providing a safe and comfortable classroom environment. The following sections of this submission demonstrate ways in which we are addressing the specific educational, social and cultural needs of the boys in our care.

### **STRATEGIES USED TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF BOYS AND LITERACY**

St. Brendan's College is a secondary boarding college for boys from diverse backgrounds. Boarding students do not have access to another library for research or leisure needs. Taking this into consideration, it has been of paramount importance that the students of the college are provided with up-to-date resources that cater for their educational and recreational needs. The library at St. Brendan's College has focused on providing students with a range of reading materials that will encourage a love of reading. Some of the strategies undertaken to encourage this are as follows: -

1. Communication with students to ascertain the type of literature they prefer. Information gained from surveys and conversations, has resulted in the selection of novels focusing predominantly on the following genres. Science fiction/fantasy stories; Thriller/horror stories; Mystery and Detective stories; Australian stories; War stories; Adventure stories; Teenage and relationship stories; Western stories, Ghost stories, Humorous stories, Animal stories and Short stories. It is important to casually discuss student likes and dislikes in an informal manner. Another strategy to encourage reading by students is to state the “unsuitability of the novel for their interest”. This strategy has proven to be a ‘sure winner’ in the past. Boys also like to read books in a ‘series’. St. Brendan’s College library provides students with a number of complete series at different reading levels to fulfil this purpose and encourage students to follow this path.
2. The organization of fiction alphabetically into themes with genre stickers on the spine. This has proven to be extremely beneficial particularly for the younger students (Year 8). It should be stated that some of our students might not have had access to a library at all because of their isolation and learning via School of the Air. Additionally, we have a number of New Guinea, Thursday Island and Aboriginal students at the College whose literacy needs we must endeavour to address and challenge. These students may be overwhelmed by the size of the collection and reluctant or unable to select a novel, which is of interest to them. By organizing the fiction area alphabetically within genre areas, the increase in novels being borrowed has greatly increased. By asking a student, “What type of novel do you like to read?” they can be directed to the area (for example, science fiction/fantasy) where they will be able to peruse the shelves housing novels of that genre.
3. Providing shelving that allows students to reach the top shelves easily. It is important to provide shelving that allows small year 8 students to reach the top shelves easily. It is envisaged that next year, purchasing additional shelving will enable the collection to be divided into senior and junior fiction. Shelving which allows a display shelf to be added will be purchased as it is acknowledged that attractive covers also encourage boys to pick- up a book and read it.
4. Non-fiction. Boys enjoy reading true stories and magazines and newspapers. Students at St. Brendan’s College enjoy reading biographical and Australian historical stories. They also enjoy true crime and war stories focusing on the personal accounts of crimes and battles. A broad range of non-fiction books aimed at meeting the



students' interest are available at St. Brendan's College. Provincial newspapers and a selection of magazines are purchased so students can keep up-to-date with current affairs locally and internationally.

5. Recognize that boys like to discuss what they are reading. Boys like to discuss non-fiction in groups and also read in groups. The provision of an area that encourages groups to easily gather together is important.
6. Display loose covers on noticeboard outside and in 'New Book' area of the library. A 'New Book' area displays newly purchased non-fiction and fiction books at the rear of the library. Non-fiction books are rotated weekly and novels every fortnight. This ensures that students are kept aware of what is being purchased for their use and enjoyment. Rarely do students leave the library without finding a book that fulfils their educational or recreational needs.
7. Providing a friendly environment where students feel welcome to browse the shelves and ask staff for assistance when necessary. A friendly and welcoming atmosphere is necessary to encourage students to utilise the library facilities to their advantage.
8. Provide books at different reading and interest levels. (For example, Tin Tin and Asterix, Goosebumps, picture books). It is not uncommon to see Year 12 students reading Asterix and Tin Tin books or to have a student in year 9 and 10 reading senior fiction. Students should be allowed to be challenged or to read below their reading level if they so desire.

9. Selection of fiction and non-fiction resources. Resources are selected by reading reviews, specialist professional journals, publishers' materials and requests and recommendations from students themselves. The selection process is undertaken with the various interests and reading levels of the students in mind.
  
10. Co-operatively liaise with Learning Support and the English Department. Attendance at conferences, discussion with other professionals and reading professional journals. Consultation and communication with the English and Learning Support departments is imperative to ensure that a holistic approach to the provision of a successful literacy programme is undertaken in the College. Attendance at conferences (SLAQ, COTLIBS, Books and Boys: Reading and Writing - 2000) where discussion with other professionals can be undertaken is essential to keeping informed on strategies which can be implemented to encourage students to read.
  
11. Talking books to assist reluctant and slow readers. We have purchased a number of Talking Books for adolescents, which complement the library and English Department resources. Three Walkmans with headphones are available for students to borrow. CD players are available for student use in the library.

### *VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS.*

The essence of the Performing and Visual Arts submission questions the validity of populist theories as a 'quick fix' method for achieving more positive educational, social and cultural experiences for boys. The binary divisiveness of these theories that rely on:

- i) a singular notion of masculinity
- ii) an androgynous model of agentic versus communal learning

reinforces rather than challenges institutionalised constructs of boys learning styles concomitant with the underlying assumption that boys within a school cultural are an homogenous group. This is especially of concern in a boys' boarding school environment.

### *VISUAL ARTS : MIDDLE SCHOOL*

- Extended thinking based activities
- Reflective tasks
  - emotional responses to artworks, subject matter, colour etc
  - reading into artworks (ie beyond immediate visual information)
  - response to stimulus (text based and personal response) – music,

- literature,
  - visual,
  - media,
  - cultural,
  - social
- Self reflection as part of daily tasks (ie why have you done that, used those colours, that image, what do you think of when you see this? etc).
- Teacher directed text based research in Junior school leads to self motivated research for major themes in Senior art
  - Appreciation of the “aesthetic” through art appraisal tasks (reflective, multi-concept) in order to:
    1. Appraise and make a judgement of the artwork of others and,
    2. Apply the appraisal and judgement process to their own artworks eg. To move from initial ideas and development through to choice of media and final product in order to produce an artwork which best reflects the concept. This is best achieved by:
      - Group seating arrangements (sharing of ideas, being able to see and touch other artworks and observe other students working, communicating)
      - Collaborative dynamics of teacher-student working relationships (hands-on learning)
      - Encouragement of informal discussion within focus of learning context
      - Acknowledgement of the experiences of the individual as significant and valuable
      - Inclusiveness of multicultural perspectives and celebration of these through visual media
  - Emphasis on communication as an acknowledgement of the importance of boys developing interpersonal skills in order to contribute positively in the wider community and in their personal relationships

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS:

- Inclusion of technology and the acknowledgment that technology is best used through multi-concept interpersonal, extended activities.
- Business and our technological age require:
  - Team workers
  - Flexible people
  - Lateral thinkers
 who are comfortable with handling many concepts.

Boys won't be best served by learning which is over-structured and teacher-centered. Visual and Performing Arts offer boys a great opportunity to explore and develop these skills in a supportive environment.

## DRAMA

The following commentary has been included in this submission to inform the committee of some current thinking in relation to theories pertaining to the learning styles of boys concomitant with discussion of the learning styles of girls. The author of this work, as part of her Masters studies, applied this theoretical context to participant observation research in the Senior Drama classroom.

### GENDERED EXPERIENCES IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM

A great deal has been written about constructs of gender and their significance in relation to learning within educational circles. Much popular culture material is available that purports to know about gender identity and displays a penchant for discussing masculinity through backlash discourse where males are victims of women, economics, politics, education, media, themselves (unwittingly) and cultural redefinitions of contemporary life. The current 'What about the boys?' diatribe is not the focus of this literature commentary because the author does not perceive the boys to be a disadvantaged group. However, this debate does hold significance to this work in the sense that the popularity of stories about boys where:

. . . boys are represented as losing out in both educational and social contexts, as a new super-breed of girls and women take control of schools, of jobs, of relationships, and their bodies.

(Gilbert and Gilbert 1998,p4)

has impacted on current debate. Specifically, there is a school of thought that has risen from these populist notion of boys as victims, and has gained ground within educational circles. Evidenced is a strong reliance on images of masculinity that hark back to romantic images of ancient societies exclusively bound in male rites and rituals that somehow exemplify what has been lost for modern males - their 'emotional' essence. Steven Buddulph (1994), one of Australia's leading 'experts on men's issues', claims that modern man's search for his collective essential being can be found if ". . . we look at older cultures we (will) see immense and focused efforts going into the raising of boys - rituals, teachings and process which have only feeble equivalents in our criteria for boys and schooling. For if we could identify an essence in masculinity, we would clearly be in a better position to develop curricula and learning experiences which would connect with it. (p31)

Matters, Pitman and Gray (1997), prominent educationalist in secondary education in Queensland, base their theory of learning styles on the assumption that they have been able to identify that 'essence of masculinity' within a process of learning context - that is, what schools, via their curriculums, should offer boys so that they can "... know what is expected of them by society ..." (p7) Apparently *in the past* there was no confusion:

... the boys of the past generally had no trouble in trouncing their female counterparts in mathematics and science at least, and in advancing western civilization generally as an afterthought. (1997,p8)

So, in order to realign the cultural, political and economic wheels of masculine fortune, schools must “ ... reassess relative priorities ...” (p7) without fearing they might discover that “ ... the point at which girls obtained equality in secondary education has been well and truly passed.” (p7) Would an apology be in order? To whom? Should the boys be apologized to and compensated for lack of rightful opportunity? Or should the girls be apologized to for having given them, for too long, false hopes? It depends how relative priorities are defined, and what they are relative to.

Matters, Pitman and Gray’s collective understanding of the ‘essence of masculinity’ – in the educational context – and identification of learning experiences that enable boys to find their essential selves is linked to concepts of masculinity and femininity that they refer to as “ ... ‘agency’ and ‘communion’ ...” (p13). These androgenous terms supposedly allow educationalists to see where previously invisible learning style patterns existed but were inextricably caught up in “ ... ‘mind pictures’ associated with the words *masculine* and *feminine*.” (p13) Matters, Pitman and Gray clearly support the androgenous model of learning styles as the most useful way of enabling the majority of students, both female and male, to achieve their potential:

Clearly, ... androgenous theory allows students of both sexes to develop both their agentic and communal skills and exploit their preferred learning style. (p14)

Accordingly the small percentage of girls who are agentic learners would be “ ... contending with perceptions that they are not operating in a manner true to their sex.” And the even smaller percentage of boys who are communal learners would be <sup>1</sup> “ ... under pressure to mask their behaviours if they are to avoid what can often be a devastating attack on their socially defined masculinity.” (p14)

The authors claim that because of culturally established gender stereotypes, an androgenous theory of learning skills needs to be accepted by educationalists as the source of difference. However, whilst propounding this model, they are openly colluding with social constructs of binary, gendered identities and potentially marginalise the experiences of both girls and boys. Like Biddulph, they too rely on essentialist notions of difference between males and females where masculinity and femininity are each singular by definition and experience.

Many factors influence and impact on the learning styles of individuals. Class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education level of parent(s) are to name a few. Matters, Pitman and Gray pay lip-service to these but do not explore their importance at all. They maintain that androgenous learning methodology can be imposed on the individual where “ ... a boy or a girl (is) a *student* first, a boy or girl second.” (p9) A

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Agentic’ and ‘communal’ learning styles can be linked to a Meyer-Brigg framework which identifies thinkers as agentic and feelers as communal. Boys are afforded agentic skills (69%) and girls are feelers (61%). These figures were displayed at a seminar the researcher attended run by Dr. Gray. There were no sources cited for these figures nor the model.

primary factor that they fail to acknowledge in this debate is the institutional practice of schools themselves. Wayne Martino (1997) in his discussion of learning styles states succinctly:

The processes by which students become gendered in schools through curriculum, teaching and disciplinary practices and technologies, for instance, are an important consideration in a discussion of learning difficulties, and of problems boys and girls experience in their participation or lack of participation in particular subjects which have become feminised and masculinised fields of learning ... (p126)

Martino highlights two factors in relation to how students learn:

- the culture of the school determined through curriculum and educational ethos.
- The polarization of subjects into masculinised and feminised content, contexts and praxis.

Current outcries about the feminisation of curriculum in secondary schools is linked to educational backlash rhetoric and fuelled by populist diatribe from 'experts' such as Steve Biddulph and popular press journalists such as Bettina Arndt as well as academics in the field of education such as Matters, Pitman and Gray. The latter claim:

... secondary schools have been feminised at a much faster rate than the surrounding society; the preparation for a masculine world has become distinctly feminine. (1994,p9)

Subjects have been defined as masculine or feminine with Maths/Science predictably in the right corner and English/Humanities in the left corner. According to the views of the above assemblage, this is the indisputable natural order.

Martino (1994), in contrast, locates his argument within the belief that the gender system which " ... regulates and structures knowledge ..." (p124) in schools works to ensure that hegemonic masculinity is produced and sustained and " ... limits students' capacity for learning" (p123). Martino believes that the dominant hegemonic masculinity that frames the curriculum in secondary schools has its origins in a public-private dichotomy that reflected the social and economic values of the industrial revolution where daughters were to be educated to become domestics in the service of or companions to men, who were to be educated for capitalist careers. Subsequently certain attributes were assigned to specific subjects which reflected binary understanding of knowledge types particular to gender. These distinctions enabled the siting of constructs of masculine values of rationality and individual competitiveness to the public arena and the constructs of feminine values such as family and relationships to the private domain. According to Martino, this history has impacted on choices that girls and boys make when choosing subjects and how those choices influence learning styles:

The gender regime ... of the curriculum clearly has the capacity to influence patterns of learning and the motivational dynamics for girls and boys depending on students' differential training as gendered subjects. (1994,p130)

Martino cites English as an example where boys tend to undervalue and hence underperform because it is viewed as a feminised subject by the boys. Drama too is viewed as feminised. This attitude is compounded by the institutional values that perpetuate the process of educating girls and boys as 'gendered subjects', thus ensuring the maintenance of the binary structure of curriculum and outcomes, and opportunities for the students beyond secondary education.

Martino encourages educators to look for ways to deconstruct this masculine regime and binary structuring. He asks "Is it possible to develop practices through which alternative versions of masculinity and femininity can be produced outside of an oppositional framework" and insists that this is necessary " ... in order to address some of the learning difficulties which both boys and girls experience within the current system ..." (p132) Martino identifies the differences in learning styles between girls and boys as subject/curriculum based where "... particular subjects are perceived as gender-inflected and, hence, as requiring specific capacities which are sex-appropriate." (p134)

The education system itself defines and regulates learning styles through a binary identification of what are considered to be appropriate masculine and feminine attributes. This division is culture-bound and historically linked to oppressive notions of masculinity and femininity. The dominant masculine hegemony oppresses boys in the classroom because of the very limited and singular definition of what maleness is, both in the public and private domains. The dominant masculine hegemony oppresses girls in the classroom because institutional regimes of practice perpetuate oppositional definitions of masculine and feminine attributes. These in turn become interchangeable terms for male and female learning styles within a binary structuring of the curriculum.

It is essential then, according to Martino, that researchers, educationalists, teachers, look for ways to focus on the institutionalised views of masculinity and femininity so that " ... what becomes possible is a mapping out of the limits and possibilities of an alternative set of practices designed to improve the educational outcomes of both girls and boys." (p141)

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I have been teaching Senior Drama in a Catholic boys' boarding school for a number of years. Senior Drama is known as a "shared subject" where girls from the nearby Catholic girls' school study the subject on the Christian Brothers' School campus.

According to the Senior Drama syllabus (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies), in the fourth semester, Year 12 students embark on a whole group Extended Study where they explore and create text that reflects upon drama contexts studied throughout the two years of the course.

In 1997, as in previous years, the focus of my class' Extended Study was labelled Reality and Illusion, a topic that lent itself to the tenets of drama movements studied throughout the course. Students studied plays, performed extracts and created their own dramatic expression that challenged or reflected societal notions of insanity. At the end of the semester, when assessments were completed and students results were ranked according to academic achievement, (as classroom teachers are required to do in Queensland), the gap between girls' and boys' final outcomes was evident. The boys had fared poorly, the girls ranked at the higher end of the scale in both the practical and written components of the course.

From a professional perspective, I was keen to know why the content of the students' work gave the impression that there had existed two separate classes taught by two teachers with very different teaching styles and learning focuses. I was interested in two imperatives - the ways girls and boys learn and the factors that impact on their learning.

As a feminist teacher, it was important to me that these issues be explored within an environment where I had observed the dynamics between male and female students to be divergent from those I had observed in co-educational schools. I wanted to explore what factors influenced the students' relationships with each other as I perceived them in the Senior Drama classroom. I wanted to explore the influence of the dominant masculine hegemony that is intrinsic to the culture of the school I teach in (an Order-owned boys' boarding school) upon the learning experiences of both male and female students. I wanted to know if it did matter. I wanted to know what impact it had on learning outcomes for the individual. I especially wanted to know how effectively the girls, who are visitors to the school campus, negotiated this distinctive culture.

As a feminist teacher, I also wanted to observe my own teaching practice and address my own concern that perhaps in my classroom activities and teacher directed focuses I might have been reinforcing stereotypical notions of male and female thought and action rather than empowering my students to challenge and deconstruct them, to find different ways of interpreting and communicating new meanings.

As a feminist researcher, I chose to adopt a mixture of research methods appropriate to qualitative feminist methodology:

- (i) action research incorporating ethnographic research where I acted as a participant observer
- (ii) content analysis of a broad range of written texts which enabled me to understand how feminist scholarship and drama practices intercommunicate.

The groups targeted were my Year 12 Drama classes. The two classes consisted of approximately equal numbers of girls and boys. Both classes had been studying Drama in a shared subject arrangement since the beginning of Year 11. The research took place in the second semester of Year 12.

My critical practice methods in the classroom took the following dramatic forms:

- improvisation work



- tableau and collage representation
- text (play) study
- play readings
- dialogues as an extension of key lines in plays
- impromptu debating
- newspaper article analysis
- short story reading
- film versions of plays
- exploration of acting method and characterisation
- character hot-seating
- teacher in role scenarios
- student-devised scripts
- presentation of play extracts

Each activity related to the focus of the research—gendered experiences. Each text reflected that theme, as did all other working material.

As a way of recording student activities and responses it was my intention to keep a diary of daily experiences and to observe gendered behaviour in class in relation to text, context, and possibly learning styles. This journal, along with the students' assessment work – presentation of scripted text and student-devised scripts – would be the window through which I could observe and analyse student learning styles and meet the aims of my research.

The observations I made regarding what I perceived to be differing learning styles of girls and boys in the drama classroom as evidenced through the students' self-devised dramatic expressions needed to be placed within a context – social, political and gendered.

Concomitant with my concerns about the students creating and making meaning out of the dramatic experience was an evaluation of my own teaching practice. In keeping with the methodologies for teaching drama, I worked to encourage students to explore ideas across a broad spectrum of dramatic forms. What I had seen in too many instances was the obvious display of gender specific role-play, character relationships, images and attitudes.

With this in mind I looked towards encouraging the students to challenge the metanarrative and explore the narratives of diversity. As a group (teacher as participant observer) we could ask questions of narratives of the plays studied such as - What are the gender values implicit in the text? What is the playwright's intention? How is it achieved? Are these values the same as the students? Are these values accommodatory of the individual, the personal self? Are these values being imposed on the readers of the text? Can the text offer up resistance to dominant hegemony? Can the narrative survive critical deconstruction? Are marginal voices accommodated by the text? What are the sexual politics of the text? Is the text about empowerment or about power?

If that were the context of my research, what would the classroom application be? The nature of the subject called for active participation on the part of students and

teacher. The nature of the subject also called on interactive participation on the part of students and teacher. Herein lay a dilemma in application of my research. I perceive the main aim of drama teaching to be one of encouraging students to be actively involved in exploration of ideas through dramatic form, content and context. I was concerned that the classroom dynamics of the shared-subject class could impinge upon the successful application of this premise. Toril Moi (1985) explains that male value systems are structured with “ ... an emphasis on property, self-identify, self-aggrandisement and arrogant dominance ...” (p110)

The masculine values of the school community imbue in the boys a strong sense of resentment of the girls. They resent the girls’ presence on the school campus (an issue of property), they resent the girls’ self-confidence and assertiveness (an issue of masculine self-identity and ego), they resent the girls’ intolerance of their perceived immaturity (an issue of self-aggrandisement) and they resent the girls’ challenges to their verbal innuendo and payouts (an issue of arrogant dominance). This resentment manifests itself particularly in classroom activities such as improvisation work where students are required to work on an idea within a limited timeframe. Wayne Martino (1997) discusses the influence of the institutional practices of schools on curriculum directions and subject gendering. The masculinist traditions that have historically determined the culture of the school where I teach, have a significant impact on the ways that the boys learn. I would venture to say much more so than the subjects they must do or choose to do, especially at Senior level. Not only has the cultural shift of the industrial revolution and its accompanying division of public and private binary systems along gender lines influenced education opportunities and choices for students, the manipulative power of patriarchal systems extends its talons through other powerful institutional forces such as the Church. This in itself could be the focus of a research project, however, in relation to my work, it was important to acknowledge school ethos along with institutional practices in discussion of learning styles.

With this in mind, it is important to reflect upon Wayne Martino’s (1997) concern about whether it is possible to develop teaching practices whereby alternative versions of masculinity and femininity can be explored “... outside of an oppositional framework” (p132) Helen Nicholson (1995a), in her discussion of gender in the drama classroom, linked with the influential significance of communities, questions the beliefs of drama practitioners such as David Hornbrook (1989) who sees drama in the classroom as a cultural practice where communities ‘... *tell us who we are* ...’ (1995,p29). Nicholson challenges this notion, stating that through acceptance of this tenet “... we risk sustaining and recreating the very structures of power which oppress those who exist outside their boundaries’ (1995a,p30). Nicholson suggests it is essential to ‘... disrupt from within and to engage in an emancipatory project which enables resistance to ... metanarratives’. (ibid) The significance of Nicholson’s statements in relation to my own research was that embracing Nicholson’s praxis would allow me to:

- challenge notions of sameness (the community consensus)
- challenge gender stereotypes (masculine and feminine fantasies)
- explore the willingness of the students to accommodate difference (the dominant masculinist hegemony)

- explore the context and content of textual resources with a view to critical deconstruction

To best characterise my lessons with my Senior Drama classes, it is appropriate to describe classroom activities as method and outcomes. The 'method' was the way the students and I worked in class through the activities that I had initiated or through the direction a lesson would take. The 'outcomes' were the students' own creative expressions through both individual student-devised script writing and group presentations of extracts from relevant plays. The formative activities of the 'method', as listed previously were the precursors to the students' individual dramatic statements. I hoped that through employing a variety of structured, semi-structured and spontaneous drama activities the students' attitudes would show up clearly as what they believed rather than as conventional, stereotypical male and female behaviour. Ritual and symbol became a focus of a number of teacher-in-role improvisations, spontaneous improvisations and polished improvisations (where students had time to plan in advance). Discussions evolved out of these activities centred on issues of exclusion through gendered ways of understanding ritual and symbol and the sometimes symbiotic nature of exclusion, not only of the other sex but same sex associations. Students found accommodating difference difficult, their education over twelve years as 'gendered subjects' was apparent. However, the boys did not see themselves as having made a decision that challenged the institutionalised construction of their gendered capacities through choosing Senior Drama as an elective (a 'feminised' subject, that unlike English, they were not forced to study). Reasons for choosing the subject varied though, and they certainly were not an homogeneous group.

One concern from a teaching perspective was the possibility of being met with resistance, especially from boys whose attitudes, as described earlier, could have inhibited the enjoyment of studying gendered relations and identities. Resistance came from two boys in one class. This manifested itself through verbal innuendo and withdrawal tactics. The rest of the group attempted to dissipate their negativity but decided it to be a lost cause as the semester progressed. Knowing both boys as well as I did, I was aware that they were both representatives of a significant aspect of the school's culture that defies sporting prowess on the football field. This is an empirical statement though and I cannot substantiate a link between the masculinist social practices of the institution and limited capacity to learn for some male students.

As the semester moved on, and we involved ourselves in numerous activities of the type mentioned previously, assessment dates started to loom. Focused work on text became necessary. The plays we studied suited the theme and provided the students with opportunities to explore gender stereotypes (masculine and feminine fantasies) through a concrete medium. We worked with two plays Cosi by Louis Nowra and A Property of the Clan by Nick Enright. Both plays, in very different ways, challenge the ways males and females see each other, and place that focus in the broader context of community values. Cosi takes a light-hearted look at heterosexual relationships (amongst issues relating to sanity and insanity) through numerous symbols of sexist attitudes and subtle ironies. A Property of the Clan however, explores darker issues. Nick Enright described his play as one where "... the

principle theme ... is an exploration of male sexuality, male sexual violence – adolescent male sexual violence – and the way in which young men connect with young women and the other women in their lives.” (1977,interview). Masculine ritual is a significant indicator of sexual prowess. Enright chooses to deconstruct rather than edify or satirise these ‘rites of passage’.

Working with these texts we again utilized structured, semi-structured and spontaneous improvisational activities to explore issues and attitudes associated with male and female relationships. Some expressive formats included analysis of character objectives and narrative super-objectives through hot seat role-play and writing of monologues exploring character emotions and gendered ways of communication. We also selected lines from the plays and explored ideas through spontaneous dialogue and short improvisations.

We considered and explored the questions mentioned earlier in relation to play narratives and playwrights’ intentions through discussion and dramatic expression. We looked at alternative ways of negotiating gender issues through interpretation of the script and the medium itself, through different theatre styles. For instance, Nick Enright (1996) focuses on gender issues as an outcome of an incident of rape and murder rather than the incident itself. Discussion centred on the utilization of Brechtian theatre techniques that would allow performers to challenge representations of the female body whereby the audience (spectators) would be able to confront the issue of youth male violence rather than seeing the female as a victim or an object. Elaine Aston (1995) suggests the technique of under-display where “... in performance contexts, which construct the female body on display, the body is instead hidden.” (p95) We explored how Enright had constructed his script in such a way to allow for alternative representations.

When considering the structuring of the students own scripts we looked at ways of representing gender through, for instance, conventional and unconventional ways of communicating meaning such as puppetry, mask or the incorporation of a play-within-a-play; over-statement through parody of clothing such as huge shoulder pads or oversized ties, characters being trapped inside clothing; signifiers of ritual and the use of gesture as challenges to stereotypes.

Student responses in the classroom were insightful, succinct and challenging of gendered ways of seeing each other and themselves. However, when as a response to this extensive work the students set about writing their own scripted dramatic expression that asked them to reflect, through dramatic discourse, dominant ideas about masculinity and femininity, their creativity displayed few examples of individuality or divergence from stereotyped images, characters, dialogue, action and situations.

Parties were the primary setting for students’ scripts, especially the boys. This may have been a reflection of A Property of the Clan, but it could also have been a reflection of boarding school boys’ attitudes towards confinement and fantasies about social and sexual freedom. Some boys focused on the act of violence and deprivation of liberty of females but rather than challenge them they embraced them.

Some boys' scripts relied heavily on stereotypical notions of characters and action where no thought was given to relationships between characters and their positions within the text; dialogue reflected limited appreciation of how female characters would speak to and relate to each other, content displayed no understanding of the elements of dramatic expression.

The sexual politics of other boys' scripts were generally banal and predictable, as indicated in script titles such as "Masculinity Versus Femininity", and the portrayal of female characters as victims or resembling expectations of gender identity as expressed in one boy's script:

Principal I'm disappointed with you three, you were beginning to show leadership and good role models. ...You have committed sexual assault (sic) and ruined a fine young girl's reputation...

The reproduction of dominant cultural understanding of female identity was also indicated through appearance (costume), ideas (dialogue) and behaviour (narrow versions of experience). Only one boy's script expressed a sensitive portrayal of gender relationships which were expressed rather than impersonated and the characters and dialogue were more than mere vehicles for attitude.

The girls' scripts tended to reflect views of males as predators without conscience, with complete power over the female characters.

Some girls' scripts displayed a willingness to portray the issue rather than the action but still stereotyped females as the unwitting victims, especially 'good' girls who inevitably suffered severe or fatal injuries. Two girls incorporated symbolic images in their scripts, such as females with paper bags over their head or use of colour in relation to gender, and critiqued male ritual through Brechtian performance techniques thus enabling each character to remain outside their character's emotions and experiences.

I must stress that through my reading of the text and sub-text of the students' own dramatic expressions I am not suggesting that student responses are indicative of a singular, unchanging understanding of gendered relationships. However, I am proposing that my students have not successfully or adequately, despite their general enthusiasm, challenged or disrupted realist conventions of performance and staging nor cast females and males in contrast to or conflict with conventional gendered stereotypes. The female character remains an object of desire or loathing and her position within the hegemonic narrative is neither ameliorated nor emancipated. The male character reflects the dominant gender ideology of our culture.

Angela McRobbie (1991), raises two significant points in her discussion of feminist research:

- (i) For me teaching and research are not separate spheres. I am continually learning from my students in the same way as I hope they learn from me.  
(p73)

- (ii) Both research and teaching ...their movement and development is continually reflective and dialectic, continually strung out between texts, talk and action. (ibid)

Throughout the semester I felt quite buoyed by the experience of the research and the opportunity that focus provided me with within the classroom, in the dynamics of my relationship with my students, in the challenge of finding, creating and articulating new or different ways of exploring gender relations within the Drama classroom. I have learnt from my students the ways they think about gender issues, what they think about themselves as individuals and about each other, and how they experience the dominant masculine hegemony. Even though the 'outcomes' were not as empowering for them as I had hoped, I feel that they as individuals probably took away some different perspectives on or perceptions of gendered experiences. With respect to Wayne Martino's question about making a difference from outside an oppositional framework, I think it is a task worth the challenge. With respect to my own teaching, the experience has been both reflective and dialectic. Shulamit Reinharz (1992), in her discussion of feminist action research discusses Patti Lather's premise that feminist research can only be called feminist when it is linked to action.

In her [Patti Lather] view, feminist action research must be orientated to social and individual change because feminism represents a repudiation of the status quo (p175).

How effective this research project was in terms of striving to repudiate the status quo is open to conjecture. It would be problematic to explore the particularities of my own teaching practice in this discussion paper. The culture of a school, the availability of and access to resources, the practicalities of the drama teaching space, timetable constraints along with the breadth of one's own professional vision must all be factored into the self-reflexive process thus individualising the identification of best practice. From a personal perspective, as a feminist teacher engaging in feminist action research, I no longer see myself as a pretender to the discipline of Drama but as a practitioner whose understanding of and appreciation of feminist theory and drama practice, where they meet and enlighten each other, has been greatly enhanced and rewarded.

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### *Concluding Remarks*

St Brendan's college is in a unique position because of its distinctive nature as a large boarding school set outside the metropolitan area. We are in the distinct position of being able to influence the lives of students for 24 hours of the day 40 weeks of the year. Students become socialized both by the programmes that are in place as well as the incidental development of our distinctive culture. Probably on the biggest issues facing boys is to be able to develop a sense of belonging to a group. At St Brendan's we recognize this and have developed a whole school approach in order to do this. It is important to be acutely aware that the changing nature of society is problematic for boys as well as girls and it is incumbent upon educators to critique society and to provide education through explicit and implicit means to ensure this takes place. This will facilitate the development of well rounded positive individuals who can make a contribution to the further improvement of Australian society.

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