

BLUE GUM SCHOOL

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House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Employment, Education & Workplace Relations

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

We would like to offer some preliminary observations & reflections -

1. BLUE GUM'S HISTORY

In 1998, we opened an Early Learning Centre in Canberra (effectively an extended-hours Pre-School Class for 3-5 year olds). Strong pressure from parents who wanted their children to continue in this style of education, led to us opening a second class, a Transition Class for 4-6 year olds, this year. We are now finalising the documentation for School Registration so that we can move into the formal school years with our new model of education.

2. BLUE GUM'S EXPERIENCE WITH BOYS

Of particular interest to this Inquiry, will be our observation (confirmed by outside academic and educators, as well as parents and students), that our model of education works extremely well with boys (and with girls), particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills.

3. KEY STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES

The most radical obvious difference starts with our structure - our People Structure & our Time Structure.

- **PEOPLE STRUCTURE**

We have ‘flattened’ our management structure and **focused our resources on the classroom**. We operate as a not-for-profit company, with specific professional expertise on our Board of Management - lawyer, accountant, financial adviser, external educator. The Executive Director is responsible for the overall day-to-day management. Each Class of 22-25 students operates as a self-contained module, with an experienced teacher as Class Director working alongside and mentoring a beginning teacher (Assistant Class Director). They are assisted by one or more Class Assistants.

This structure offers a desirable/supportive environment for all staff, as well as a much higher staff:student ratio than is the norm.

While we believe strongly that we must be **accountable to parents**, and welcome parent feedback, input and evaluation of our programs, we are NOT a parent-run body. Our various experiences of parent-run schools cautioned strongly against this model. Instead, the teaching staff take responsibility for the education program; and other specialised professionals advise the Executive Director on other responsibilities e.g. financial matters.

This **People Structure** is an essential pre-requisite for implementing our model of education. The students spend the bulk of their day in a physical environment and an educational program that encourages them to work in small groups. Not only does this small group structure reflect the trend now emerging in the workplace, it also provides the optimum learning environment for all students, particularly for language and social development. The teaching team ‘model’ this way of working for the students, and the students learn how to work in a team.

A team player is a cliched expression (similar to motherhood) - everyone thinks it’s great and noble, but rarely are resources targeted and invested in its achievement - either you have it or you don’t. Indeed schools traditionally have rejected this team model, rewarding instead the individual star performer. Students are traditionally punished for working with other students to find the

solutions to problems - it has to be all their own work! When schools do allow or even encourage students to work on projects in small groups, scant attention is paid to the process - it's the outcome that counts.

While many teachers extol the virtues of working in small groups, most students will recount disastrous experiences of working with other students. The small group structure is blamed, rather than students' lack of expertise in working this way. As with any skill, it needs to be analysed as well as practised successfully, if it is to improve.

- **TIME STRUCTURE**

At present, Blue Gum operates 8.30am-5.30pm, 50 weeks per year. We have core times (e.g. 9am-3pm each day, and based on school terms), when we expect students to attend. However, we offer families the option of extending their child's school day, and/or attending during school holidays (part-time or full-time).

This **Time Structure** caters for differing family needs and students needs. It recognises the realities of workplace demands on parents, as well as students needs for stability and continuity (rather than a succession of 'care' arrangements).

4. BLUE GUM'S APPROACH

At Blue Gum, students are invited to **negotiate learning choices**. The teaching staff take responsibility for monitoring and ensuring that each student covers the 8 Key Learning Areas. However, the methods of achieving this end may vary from student to student. Teaching staff observe closely students' personal interests and activities as well as their response to external stimuli - from teaching staff and the broader community. Students have a standing invitation to nominate activities/interests they would like to explore in more detail. Staff facilitate this exploration, encouraging other students to become involved, for as long as the investigation is meaningful, stimulating and informative. Different students may choose to follow-up different aspects. Their

discoveries, and their progress, are brought back to the whole group for sharing and for discussion. Even students who have not been involved will be expected to hone their listening skills and their questioning skills, and offer constructive feedback.

As there will always be several investigations proceeding at any one time, more than one teaching staff member is needed for this approach to work successfully - to observe, document, challenge, extend and complicate students' thinking, as well as assist them to explore their ideas through various media e.g. clay, woodwork, drama, painting, screen printing etc, and to test out their theories through experimentation ...

5. GENDER DIFFERENCES

As a general rule, it has been our observation that, left to their own devices, **boys will focus on physical interaction while girls focus on social interaction**, from a very early age. For instance, we have noticed that if you present a visual image to a group of children, aged 3-5 years, and ask them to pick out items of significance, boys will seek to physically indicate the item (e.g. get up and put their finger on the item on the page), while girls will happily sit and indicate their choice using words. This is consistent with our observation that boys often need active encouragement to use language instead of a physical response e.g. when they are unhappy with another child or they want something another child has.

Our observations also reveal gender-related patterns in the way students choose more 'passive' or 'desk' activities e.g. reading, writing, creative/art/craft etc. In traditional classrooms, these activities are offered at the start of the day, based on the assumption that students will be fresh and most receptive to 'the basics'. The activities are then packed away. Because we offer students access to these activities across the whole day, we have noticed that many boys will generate towards these activities later in the session or later in the day, after they have satisfied their need for more physical activities. So, yet again, the structure imposed can have enormous implications for students' learning opportunities, and pose access and equity issues for boys.

6. IMPACT OF EARLY INTERVENTION

Importantly, though, we have found that if you start working with children from around 3 years of age, on their language and negotiation skills, boys' socialisation skills improve rapidly. However, to be successful, any program must acknowledge the physicality of boys i.e. their need to expend physical energy. **This is where our emphasis on small group work has such significance for boys.**

If boys are left to 'free play', they often move towards interacting physically, often in a large group, and often at a pace that becomes more and more frenetic. This physical expression can be intimidating for other children e.g. many girls and quieter boys. Yet a bystander watching the large group activity will say that the children are freely choosing to be involved and quite happy with the rough and tumble - "boys will be boys". However, our feedback from parents of boys involved in such play is that their child later complains that they are fearful, or that another child has hurt them or that they don't like it. Interestingly, often the children complaining are those who have initiated the activities.

It is our belief that large group physical activities with young children only work well when there are agreed rules and/or an adult in charge of them.

Hence our preference for small group activity (though we also spend time each day setting up and managing constructive whole/large group activities, so that students learn how to operate in this environment as well - an environment that most students will have to deal with, most of the time, in most schools). Within a small group, say 2-4 children, each child usually feels comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions, so that they can negotiate effectively and can find a niche within the group where they can contribute. As a result, children learn at an early age how to manage their own behaviour and the other members of their group, so that conflicts requiring adult/outside intervention are minimal.

By contrast, in a large group, loud/noisy children become even louder/noisier, while quiet children tend to withdraw. Conflicts and inappropriate behaviour can quickly escalate out of control in a large group, because individual children feel powerless to negotiate with or manage the whole group.

It has been our experience with children working in small groups, that their language skills rapidly develop (because they are immersed in a language-rich environment that actively promotes verbal interaction), as do their socialisation skills. In fact, the maturity displayed in students' theorising and negotiated interaction regularly surprises adults visiting Blue Gum.

7. CONCRETE MATERIALS + PHYSICAL INTERACTION + SENSE OF PURPOSE

Our approach to Literacy and Numeracy, as well as the other KLAs, is firmly imbedded in concrete and meaningful physical activity. For instance, our 3 and 4 year olds regularly engage in 'hands-on' activities such as Woodwork and Pottery, using real tools and developing real skills. It is this **physical interaction with materials** that is important for all young children, but essential for so many young boys. A 'stencil' might be used for diagnostic testing, but otherwise is meaningless as a learning activity for young children. Students must be able to transfer learning to new situations and a variety of situations for it to have value.

At Blue Gum, the Arts have an important role as a language of expression across and throughout the Key Learning Areas - they provide a means by which students can express their thoughts and ideas and test out their theories, and share their findings with their peers. Because the Arts are so physical and 'hands-on', they are a natural vehicle for boys' learning. Yet, far too often, they are perceived as a soft option, for students who are not academically inclined. And the mass-produced scissors-and-paste art/craft activities often presented to pre-schoolers rarely rate on the choice list for young boys. Instead, the only solution offered for "boys' disruptive behaviour" is to channel them into sports activities. Certainly, physical education is a Key Learning Area that can benefit all children, but it is no panacea for the problem areas in boys' education. Boys (and girls) have a right to develop all aspects of their being - not just their physical prowess.

Recently, our young Transition Class students (17 boys, 5 girls; 4 & 5 year olds) moved from an interest in treasure maps to mapping in general - from mapping their route to school on published maps and self-constructed maps, through to mapping our route to the public library and to mapping the stars and beyond. Their enthusiasm has been

boundless, with students (unprompted) insisting the TV be turned off at home so that the whole family can work with them on their maps. They have written stories about their maps, and devised instructions and directions for others to follow, so that writing has been a natural 'ingredient'. The students have a real need for literacy. They refer to themselves as "cartographers" because they know that the maps they are creating are real ones.

We support the view that *Data isn't information until it has been collected, collated and organised. Information isn't knowledge until it is absorbed and comprehended. And knowledge isn't understanding or wisdom until it is associated with life experience and given perspective.* (Stuart Fist, *The Australian* newspaper, 17 November 1998)

8. DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Before our program is written off as just another 'private school' venture catering for advantaged middle-class children, let me add the following observations. Yes, we offer a program that is resource-rich - a sensory-rich environment, rich in staff who are rich in their range of interests etc. But many of our resources have been recycled or scavenged at low cost from Trash'n'Treasure, garage sales, friends etc.

Our program is genuinely open to all children, regardless of their socio-economic background. We are achieving **remarkable results with children 'at risk'** referred to us by Barnardos, Family Services etc. These children are not just 'allowed' into the program; staff work with them (and their families) intensively so that they can function effectively in a 'normal' environment AND be accepted by the other children (an area that is often overlooked when disadvantaged children are mainstreamed). We constantly talk with all our students about making choices. Small group learning also empowers disadvantaged and 'at risk' children by giving them a level of control and choice that they often don't have in their home lives.

We believe our strategies are offering 'at risk' children the opportunity to experience more life choices, so that they have a genuine choice in how they respond to the challenges they face in life.

Because we treat children as Competent, Capable, Creative, Responsible, Resourceful and Resilient, we find that they invariably rise to this expectation and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The high levels of alienation, violence, and self-destructive behaviour among young males are well-documented. If we are serious about tackling social issues such as our unacceptably high youth suicide rate, then qualities such as resilience need to be targeted as a top priority in early childhood, when children are establishing life-long patterns of behaviour.

9. SIZE IS IMPORTANT

One of the reasons our program is so effective is because of our small size - all of our 10 staff know all of our 70 children in our 2 classrooms. It is interesting to note that the ACT Government (and presumably other State Governments) continue to amalgamate schools on the grounds of increased offerings and economic efficiencies. Yet in America, there is a strong ground-swell in favour of smaller schools (which is increasingly being supported by Government funding). The benefits of small schools, e.g. reduced violence, more flexible and responsive educational programs and structures, are now being acknowledged. (refer to Coalition of Essential Schools).

10. NO GOVERNMENT INCENTIVE TO DEVELOP NEW MODELS

Unfortunately, the Australian Federal Government offers no incentive for new models of schooling. The most recent changes in the method of funding new non-Government schools simply allocates funds according to the socio-economic mix of parents (as determined by Census districts - which in the ACT is a totally inappropriate methodology, as the Department's modelling proved). The assumption is that all schools [should] operate the same way, so that the only variable in the funding allocation is whether parents are rich or poor. The traditional STRUCTURE of schooling is locked in (e.g. hours of operation, teacher:student ratios).

As noted earlier, the structure of schooling is the first thing we must change if we are going to make a difference in the lives of boys e.g. by acknowledging and valuing

their physicality; and by working intensively on their literacy needs, communication skills and socialisation skills from an early age (ideally 3 years of age onwards).

We are very keen to continue with the outstanding new model of schooling that we have started (our results are ripe for documentation). It would be wonderful if there could be some form of incentive to encourage schools, such as ourselves, to trial new structures and new ways of working with students. At present, far too much of our energy is being dissipated in trying to fit our square Blue Gum structure into the round funding hole! Yet it is our very differences that make our program work so well with boys (and girls).

Where do we go from here?

Yours sincerely

Maureen Hartung
Executive Director

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