

Declining rates of achievement and retention

Perceptions of Adolescent Males

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Executive Summary

The focus of this research has been to identify and summarise the views of adolescent males about their educational experience, about the issues and problems that explain the apparent decline in their rates of achievement and retention, and about what might be done to improve outcomes.

The research summarises the views of 1800 adolescent males, one-third of whom were identified as 'at risk of not completing year 12', in Years 9 to 11, drawn from 60 secondary schools in South Australia. The schools were drawn from State, Catholic and Independent sectors and were located in rural and urban sites. The views expressed are clear and largely uniform across the schools, year levels and levels of achievement.

It is evident from the literature review undertaken as part of this study, the media and current strategies, that the issues and problems are being understood separately and more in terms of 'problem boys' who are not coping, than problems that boys more generally face while trying to fulfil their learning needs.

Several popularly held views that the problems start in the primary years, and that the issues are reducible to matters of gender difference, gender equity or literacy and numeracy, were not supported as might have been expected from the literature, but are part of a complex response to decisions to remain at school. Issues about masculinity which often were important for teachers and academics did not feature at all, with occasionally some irritation being expressed by the boys about others defining "what they [the boys] ought to be."

The process produced a range of factors influencing decisions about retention and achievement, emphasising the following:

1. The adult world is not listening, or not 'genuinely listening'.
2. Most boys don't value school; it's more about getting credentials than learning, and these don't operate usefully as short term motives to do the work.
3. Most girls get treated better, but so do boys who find it easy or necessary to comply and conform, and who quietly get the work done.
4. School work is boring, repetitive and irrelevant.
5. School doesn't offer the courses that most boys want to do, namely courses and coursework that prepare them for employment.
6. Most boys neglect or reject homework because it is too intrusive, destructive and ultimately unachievable without sacrificing more valued aspects of their lives.
7. Years 8, 9 and 10 waste too much time. The Year 11 workload is excessive.
8. School pushes most boys into a downward spiral of disaffection, resistance, resentment, anger and retaliation that, for many, is just too hard to stop.
9. School poses too many contradictions and debilitating paradoxes:
 - School expects adult behaviour but doesn't deliver an adult environment.

- School pushes the rhetoric of education (e.g. fairness, respect, flexibility, a celebration of difference, etc.) but produces the opposite in practice.
 - School is about getting most boys out of education.
 - School is about preparing youth for adult life, but adult life gets in the into adult life (e.g. sport, driver's licence, owning a car, part time work, providing for their own needs, helping to run a household, establishing an adult identity, social life and sexual relationships) are negative influences on school achievement and on the preparedness of boys to stay at school.
10. The primary factor, and the most troublesome paradox for boys, is that there are too many unsuitable teachers who either create or exacerbate their problems. Good teachers change everything but there are not enough good teachers.
 11. For most boys, school is focused on preserving the status-quo, which makes it 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.

The experience of good teachers creates a paradoxical dilemma: good teaching is less present than desired, but is demonstrably better for everyone. "Teaching" appeared to be synonymous with all that happens – the boys did not separate out of school climate, organisation, curriculum matters and classroom interactions. The compounding impact of this, and the other paradoxes they face, seem to produce stress (both acute and chronic) and a rational, albeit culturally relative, commitment to objective despair, which may condition, and may help to explain, the growing incidence of a broad range of self-destructive and often anti-social practices.

Although most Year 9 boys say they would like to finish Year 12, many have given up on secondary schooling before they reach Year 11. Apart from 'hanging on' they see themselves pursuing one of three options; employment (preferably an apprenticeship), TAFE, or a senior college. These appear to offer the chance to pursue more relevant, interesting work, with realisable goals and rewards, in a more up to date adult environment and away from unsuitable teachers.

In order to see whether trends continued post school, the retention and achievement rates of 1st year students at Flinders University were examined. These results show that boys

Clearly, there is a need for teachers, teacher training, curriculum, school organisation and all other aspects of schooling, genuinely to recognize students as young adults, preparing to live in the world of the twenty first century. To the boys it appears that the gap between schooling and their other lives is huge and growing and many opt for other lives, despite recognising the cost.

Further research is needed to establish what optimal learning environments which lead to boys achievement and retention are and how "good teaching" might be measured.

The Challenges and Issues

In summary, the issues which emerged which need further consideration were:-

A need for professional development of teachers, focussing on "good teaching", as described by the boys.

A need for systemic change in schooling which brings schooling closer to the “outside world” for adolescent males.

Research into the nature of adult learning environments, how they can be constructed and supported and their relation to senior school models.

A focus in pre-service teacher education on understanding the lifestyles, views and aspirations of adolescent males and how these impact on schooling, retention and achievement.

The relationship between years 8, 9, 10 and years 11 and 12.

An urgent need to create a culture, curriculum and assessment practices which meet the educational goals of adolescent males and females and the society, without seeing the issues as adversarial, competitive or comparative.
