

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Introduction

The *Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys – Strategies for Schools and Teachers* research project was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to investigate how systemic factors impact on the educational performance and outcomes of boys and how these can be addressed in the school context. The commissioning of the study was prompted by contemporary concerns about boys' schooling.

This report draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to look at the relative importance of family, school and community environments, peer culture, student-teacher relationships and teacher classroom practices, in order to examine the behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of boys' educational engagement. Research conducted for the project included a survey of 641 boys and girls, combined with extensive interviews and focus groups from 19 schools across Australia.

The research has contributed to a greater understanding of how these influences affect the educational experiences and achievement of boys and girls from different socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Of particular interest are the differences in educational attitudes, expectations and post-school aspirations of students from different backgrounds and how they impact on educational outcomes. The objective of the project was to identify key points for intervention to address the issues identified from the research and to determine which strategies are effective in producing enhanced academic and social outcomes for all students.

2 Methodology

The project involved an extensive literature review and research in 19 primary and secondary schools across four Australian states – New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. This sample included government and non-government schools, Catholic and independent, large schools and small schools, single-sex and co-educational schools, and schools in large cities and provincial centres. Selected schools were from a range of SES communities. Data collection involved the following methods:

- classroom and playground observations;
- in-depth interviews with principals, deputy principals, counsellors, heads of departments, teachers and parents;
- in-depth interviews with students in final year of primary school and in the second or penultimate year of high school;
- focus group interviews with single-sex groups of students;
- focus group interviews with teachers;

- surveys of teachers' and students' attitudes; and
- a literature review of relevant texts.

3 Outline of the report

This report on the research represents the culmination and synthesis of the case study and survey analyses across the 19 schools that were selected for this study. Many schools were chosen either because they had implemented particular programs to address the social and/or educational needs of boys or had gained a reputation for doing so. Several schools were also chosen because they were known to have produced improved educational outcomes for both boys and girls. Some schools had no specific gender based programs, but focused instead on challenging classroom practices and curricula. The research was conducted over a period of eight months.

The report begins by outlining observations from the case study analysis, including a description of the range of approaches adopted in various schools and issues relating to student performance. The report then presents the findings from the research, examining the various factors from the project brief, including family influence, out-of-school environment, extra-curricula activities, school environment, student/teacher relationships, peer group issues and the influence of gender concepts. The relationships between a range of factors are then examined, including the influence of SES. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications for schools, covering both general approaches and more specific strategies which schools may adopt to address educational attainment.

4 Key Findings

The research indicates that there are indeed problems for some boys in terms of their engagement and involvement in schooling. However, this report emphasises the need to go beyond viewing boys as a homogenous group. The research also found that *good teaching* and *teacher threshold knowledges* impact significantly on positive learning experiences for both boys and girls. In summary, the research revealed a number of important findings:

- The quality of pedagogies experienced by students was a significant determinant in the educational experiences of both boys and girls;
- There were significant differences between the genders in peer group influences, with some boys indicating that they were subject to more negative peer pressures and were more likely to adopt anti-school attitudes and more limited subject choices;
- Girls and boys as groups had significantly different extra-curricula activities, with many girls favouring more sociable pursuits and many boys preferring to socialise via specific activities, such as sport and technological games;

- Boys were generally identified by teachers as being more disruptive than girls, this perhaps led to a phenomena that was suggested by a few students and teachers that boys were treated more harshly than girls for the same offence;
- More boys than girls admitted to bullying other students, although the difference was small; and
- Girls were more likely to be supported in their academic work by their peers and reported more interest in reading books than boys.

The following issues were identified from the research conducted in schools, grouped according to the themes from the project brief.

4.1 Family influence and out-of-school environment

Generally girls and boys report very similar levels of family interest in their education. However, some qualitative evidence suggests that ethnicity, gender and SES backgrounds can interact in some cases to cause negative outcomes from education.

Both genders report having positive parental support for reading books. However, both genders generally report that mothers are more likely to read to children than fathers. A small number of teachers suggested that the negative attitudes towards learning of some fathers had a detrimental effect on some boys.

4.2 Extra-curricula activities

There are significant differences between many boys' and girls' extra-curricular activities:

- social factors appeared to be more influential for girls (eg. talking or socialising with friends), while common sporting and technological interests such as computer and video games were more influential for boys when interacting with their peers;
- of particular interest is that girls were more likely to report studying with their peers and they were generally more supportive of academic pursuits; and
- girls showed more interest in reading books and discussing them.

4.3 School environment and culture

Students generally thought that their schools had a stronger focus on academic rather than sporting or cultural pursuits.

The report found some evidence that schools' expectations of their students were somewhat self-fulfilling. Some schools that rejected the 'deficit model' of

looking at the SES background of their students appeared to be quite successful in achieving positive results for their students.

The benefits of single-sex classes in co-educational schools were unclear; the quality of teaching practices appeared more important than the gender composition of the classroom. However, there was some support from both girls and boys for single-sex classes.

Gender of the teacher

The gender of the teacher did not emerge as a significant factor in determining positive learning outcomes for students. The issue was more whether there was evidence or not of productive teaching practices. When students talked about their idea of the ideal teacher, they stressed the significance of the type of person the teacher was and their teaching styles, rather than the gender of the teacher. Students saw the gender of the teacher as only significant in relation to being able to talk to them about personal problems, with some boys and some girls saying that they would prefer to talk to a teacher of the same sex about personal matters.

4.4 Student/teacher relationships

Secondary school boys were more likely to report disrupting class for attention than girls (29% of secondary boys admitted to disruptive behaviour compared with 12.3% of secondary girls), although there was no significant gender difference amongst primary students on this issue.

Generally teachers did not express a strong preference for teaching boys or girls. Some male and some female teachers agreed that boys' behavioural difficulties could partially be attributed to a lack of positive male role models. There was no significant difference between male and female teachers' views on this.

There appeared to be more compatibility between stereotypically female behaviour and the conception of the ideal student than between the latter and stereotypical male behaviour. The research also seemed to indicate that boys' behaviour was more difficult to control, that is, that boys 'played up' more in class than girls. The first imperative of some teachers when teaching boys appears to be 'controlling' rather than teaching them. While it was generally found that boys were as a whole more disruptive, there was a suggestion from a few teachers, parents and students that boys were treated more harshly than girls for the same offence.

However, what appeared to be the most significant factors for boys in relation to their engagement with schooling were the nature of the relationship established between the teacher and students and the quality of the pedagogies. The ideal pedagogies were akin to those described below as 'productive pedagogies' –

pedagogies that are intellectually demanding, connected to students' lives and worlds with purchase beyond the classroom, socially supportive and encouraging of risk-taking (in the positive sense) and which recognise and engage with difference between students.

4.5 Peer groups

A marked difference between boys and girls was in the nature of peer group activities. This manifested in strong, potentially negative peer group pressures on many boys, which could contribute to negative attitudes towards schoolwork.

The peer group was a contributing factor in influencing many boys to adopt a strong anti-school culture. Boys in most of the Case Study Schools were perceived as presenting more difficulties for schools in terms of their behaviours than girls. Across all Case Study Schools there was evidence of boys' disruptive behaviour being understood in terms of 'acting cool' and at times as a protest against school values and school work.

For many boys across the Case Study Schools it was not cool to be seen to be working hard and this was related to peer group pressures. While this led to the 'cool' students having a particular kind of power base and engaging in harassing behaviours directed at the 'nerds', the research revealed a need for more nuanced analyses of the social dynamics operating within peer groups. Some students were able to negotiate being 'cool', while maintaining a commitment to achieving well at school. The ability to do this related to the kinds of activities that they engaged in at school, such as sport, as well as to their social skills in terms of relating to their peers. The culture of the school was also significant here, as was the SES location of the student body.

Boys' peer group pressures seemed to be very strong in limiting the possibilities for many boys in relation to subject choices, academic performance and behaviour. This did not appear to be so much the case for girls, who generally valued school more highly and tended to support one another in their learning.

Bullying

The majority of both boys and girls disagreed with the proposition that they bully other students. However, slightly more boys were likely to agree than girls, 29.9% of boys compared with 22.4% of girls.

There was no difference between the genders in concern over bullying. However, boys were more worried about being bullied by other boys, whereas girls were equally worried about being bullied by boys and girls.

In relation to teacher attitudes to bullying, both male and by female teachers thought boys were responsible for most bullying at school. However, this belief

was held more strongly by male teachers than female teachers. Both male and female teachers believed bullying has negative academic consequences.

Homophobia

Homophobia also emerged as a problem across many of the Case Study Schools. Homophobic put-downs were often used to insult those boys who were identified as not conforming to dominant and stereotyped ways of being male, including in some schools those boys with pro-academic attitudes. The use of homophobic put-downs, such as ‘poofter’ and ‘faggot’, did not appear to be necessarily linked to issues of sexuality, but was rather about not conforming to a mainstream way of being a boy. This highlights that homophobia is often about the ‘policing’ of what is perceived to be acceptable or suitable male behaviour. Thus it can be argued homophobia affects all boys and not just those who might identify as non-heterosexual. None of the schools in the research appeared to be very effective in addressing homophobia.

4.6 Influence of gender concepts on attitudes and behaviour

Attitudes and engagement with schooling were influenced by boys’ conceptions of what was ‘acceptable’ masculine behaviour. In general, boys exhibited more negative attitudes and behaviours than girls towards school, the opposite sex and even each other. The views of some boys as to what was acceptable masculine behaviour were linked to the anti-school behaviours of many boys and to the harassment of girls. Some girls expressed a preference for all girls’ classes because this meant a better learning environment.

Although the survey research found that girls had higher aspirations than boys, this difference was not significant. There were no significant gender differences in students’ perceptions of their own ability. Boys were more likely than girls to think that English is a difficult subject and that English is a subject better suited for girls. More boys than girls agreed with the proposition that mathematics is an easier subject than English because there is less writing, although in general students disagreed with this proposition. Boys were more likely than girls to agree with the proposition that they would work harder if they could use computers more. Boys were also more likely to think that they knew more about computers than their teachers.

Boys were constrained in their subject choices, perhaps more so than what girls were. Evidence from many of the Case Study Schools indicated that acceptable masculine behaviours were a central factor in boys’ selections of subjects. This phenomenon worked across SES categories, except in the middle SES, all boys’ school which ‘forced’ subject choices in the post-compulsory years.

The whole idea of being ‘cool’ also had particular gender effects that were linked to exhibiting desirable ways of being a boy or a girl. This social dynamic of

gender was tied to gaining a particular status and position at the top of the social ladder. This in turn had consequences for all students in terms of their experiences of schooling.

4.7 The various inter-relationships between a range of factors

The survey results revealed that students with parents who scored highly on the joint SES scale tended to have higher aspirations and self-rating of ability than students with parents who scored lower on the SES scale. The relationship was particularly strong for aspirations. Students from lower SES backgrounds were more likely to report disrupting class for attention. Students from lower SES backgrounds were less likely to report finding English to be a relevant subject.

These results support the general view that students from low SES families are more likely to be 'at risk'. However, this may be more related to family priorities and capacity to support the education of their children, than to SES status on its own. Parents may not have the skills or cultural capital to assist their children with their schooling. The SES environment of the school also influences the amount of resources that the school has available to invest in student learning.

Factors other than SES were also influential. For example, some educators who worked with Indigenous children were unconcerned with gender issues in education because they felt the educational disadvantage that Indigenous students suffered far outweighed any difference between girls and boys. In one school, there was some evidence that the increase in the numbers of Asian-Australian boys had broadened the attitudes as to what was 'acceptable' masculine behaviour. The principal of the school indicated that the presence of these boys complemented the school's attempt to value academic performance, sport and extra-curricula activities equally.

5 Implications for schools

The findings have confirmed that there are indeed gender-related issues in schools. However, the issue of boys in education is a complex one, requiring a multi-faceted approach. The research has strongly supported the need to move beyond a 'tips for teachers' approach in addressing the educational needs of boys. What is required is the bringing together of sophisticated research-based knowledge with deep knowledge of the best teaching practices.

While strategies such as peer support and mentoring initiatives - as well as cross-age tutoring and 'buddy' reading programs - have the potential to lead to improved educational outcomes for both boys and girls, these strategies would benefit from being developed within the context of a professional learning community in the school.

Such a community needs to be committed to a focus on good teaching practices as the lynch pin to educational reform, together with critical reflection on teaching practice, enhancing specific teacher knowledge about gender concepts and subject-specific curriculum, and the development of school-based gender equity policies. A comprehensive approach to boys' education at the school level could incorporate action research to provide an understanding of the issues impacting on boys and girls at the local level, utilising appropriate pedagogy and assessment and developing a whole school policy on gender.

5.1 'Which boys/which girls' approaches

Based on the data from both students and staff, the analysis highlights that there are complexities and multiple dimensions to the impact of schooling and outside of school influences on students. It is simplistic to reduce the issues involved with boys' education to an understanding of boys as being essentially different from girls in their approach to learning. The research emphasised that a 'which boys/which girls' approach to the problem of addressing the educational and social needs of students is most productive.

Many of these approaches recognised the differences amongst and between groups of students, regardless of gender, and developed policies and practices to meet the needs of these different groups of boys and girls. Well thought through and well researched gender programs that seek to address boys' issues within an equity framework benefit both boys and girls. This process is assisted by schools developing the capacity to collect their own local data on academic and social outcomes and to disaggregate it as a step towards effective professional interventions.

By adopting this approach we can generate a better understanding of the influences that impact on certain groups of boys and girls which produce particular forms of disadvantage and effects on their learning. In short, one of the major findings of the research points to the very significant role of productive pedagogies, combined with whole school reform, in terms of enhancing the educational and social outcomes for both boys and girls across SES location. Such pedagogies recognise the differences amongst and between girls and boys and align pedagogies with assessment practices and the purposes of the curriculum.

Systematic longitudinal data collection is necessary to developing relevant and effective policies and strategies over time. The same is the case for individual schools. The data also needs to be broken down to present the complexity of the picture. Such disaggregation is central to the adoption of a 'which girls/which boys?' approach. While schools are now replete with data, systematic longitudinal data sets do not appear to be common. Also, schools often do not seem to have the capacity to disaggregate and analyse these data in ways that

would assist the development of effective strategies to address the educational needs of both boys and girls. Analysis and discussion of such data are central elements of an effective teacher professional learning community. Such data collection and analysis at both system and school levels need to be linked to policy at both levels.

5.2 The importance of the teacher and their classroom practices

Teachers and their practices are central to good outcomes for students. The influence and role of teacher knowledges, values and pedagogies, combined with the influence of school environment in terms of developing professional learning communities, emerge as important influences in terms of their impact on the educational outcomes of all students.

Students liked those teachers who were firm, friendly, made learning fun, related well to their students, made the work interesting and had a sound knowledge of their subject. Such teachers felt a real sense of responsibility for their students' learning and also a sense of efficacy in achieving desirable outcomes. Good schools seemed to have similar senses of responsibility and efficacy within their cultures.

From our qualitative and quantitative research, the following themes emerged as important in students' conceptions of the ideal teacher:

- A 'caring' attitude and spending time with students;
- A commitment to teaching;
- A sense of responsibility to students (eg. returning assessments promptly);
- A teacher who makes the work interesting and relevant;
- A relationship of mutual respect;
- Taking an interest in the students' lives beyond the classroom;
- Connecting the curriculum to the world of the student;
- Recognising and supporting difference amongst students;
- Ability to control the classroom, balanced with fairness and enjoyment;
- A broad knowledge base.

The alignment of high quality teaching practices (referred to in the report as 'productive pedagogies'), with assessment practices and curriculum purposes is crucial to the achievement of best outcomes for both boys and girls.

5.3 Productive pedagogies

We refer to high quality teaching practices as 'productive pedagogies'. Productive pedagogies are considered necessary for producing improved and more equitable outcomes for all students, and are characterised by:

- a high degree of intellectual quality

- high levels of connectedness in terms of curriculum content and its application to the students' lives outside of school;
- supportive classroom environments where students feel valued and are encouraged to take risks in their learning; and
- a strong recognition and celebration of difference.

The research suggested that improving outcomes for boys would be better addressed by a comprehensive approach based on these productive pedagogies. More simplistic strategies or approaches based on under-theorised tips for teachers or common sense assumptions about the way boys are or learn did not always lead to improved educational outcomes for all boys and can have the disadvantage of sometimes treating boys and girls as homogeneous groups. Productive pedagogies, based on effective and broad teacher threshold knowledges, proved to be an informed and effective approach that had a positive impact on improving educational outcomes for all students. Professional development around teacher threshold knowledges is an important strategy so that the educational needs of boys can be better addressed. The research suggests that productive pedagogies are particularly important for disengaged boys.

5.4 Teacher threshold knowledges

Productive pedagogies need to be underpinned by appropriate teacher threshold knowledges, which are necessary to execute such pedagogies. These are:

- subject discipline knowledge;
- knowledge of student development;
- understanding of the purposes of schooling; and
- knowledge of gender concepts and their impact on students' attitudes and learning.

More research is required to ascertain the required teacher threshold knowledges (about disciplines, gender) necessary to complement productive pedagogies.

5.5 Teacher professional learning communities

Schools need to become learning organisations, through the creation of teacher professional learning communities within schools. This is linked to creating a school culture and structure that enhances the spread of good pedagogies, and critical reflection on teaching practice in light of informed research and knowledge of educational policy. This leads to the alignment of high quality curriculum with pedagogies and assessment practices in classrooms. Schools with effective teacher professional learning communities, which focus on the relationship between on-going teacher learning and enhanced student learning, appear to achieve the best outcomes for both boys and girls.

Such a learning community is also important in evaluating through action research and in other ways the efficacy of strategies adopted to address the educational needs of boys.

The research also points to the need for the provision of professional development forums for teachers that would entail teachers engaging with soundly theorised and researched accounts of the influences impacting on the educational outcomes of both boys and girls. This is better than ‘gut feelings’ on what is best for boys. This would involve discussion on factors influencing boys’ and girls’ educational participation, engagement and outcomes, which move beyond seeing boys’ behaviours as predetermined by either culture or biology.

The professional development requirements are to build individual teacher capacity, as well as school organisational capacity. The former is important, because as with much other research, this project has confirmed the overwhelming significance of individual teachers in addressing effectively the educational needs of all students. School organisational capacity building would see professional development geared towards considerations of issues within specific schools and the implementation and evaluation of strategies established to address these issues.

5.6 Fostering effective school cultures

The research showed that school environment and culture, as determined by the specific role of teachers and their teaching practices and relationships with students, were major influences on students’ learning and attitudes towards school work.

The research indicated that effective school environments need to support the following:

- whole school culture that explicitly values student engagement with a broad range of curricular and extra-curricular activities;
- the creation of safe and supportive classroom and school environments for all boys and all girls to achieve good academic and social outcomes from school;
- a recognition that SES factors are related to boys’ attitudes to school and the academic curriculum. However, good pedagogies aligned with appropriate assessment practices and curriculum purposes can to some extent ameliorate negative SES effects and enhance positive ones;
- a school culture that can mediate negative effects of certain peer group cultures and traditional and narrow gender identities.

5.7 Single-sex versus co-educational settings

Schools through their learning communities need to be able to evaluate the strategies they put in place to address gender-based issues, including single-sex classes. There needs to be a culture of constructive criticism and openness within schools with the capacity to jettison strategies that do not work.

The research has confirmed the significance of teacher threshold knowledges about the effects of the construction of gender on the schooling experiences of both boys and girls. The research has also demonstrated the need to combine such research-based knowledges with productive pedagogies. This is imperative. Many of the Case Study Schools tended to focus on the implementation of particular strategies to address the educational needs of boys without the requisite critical reflection on the nature of the pedagogies operating and their potential effects. For example, gender-based classes or single-sex approaches to schooling do not necessarily lead to enhanced educational outcomes for boys. The research in the Case Study Schools would tend to support the conclusion that single-sex classes in and of themselves do not necessarily provide better educational or social outcomes for boys, but could potentially have some benefit if implemented with a sophisticated understanding of the issues involved.

Structural reform in the absence of productive pedagogies and requisite teacher threshold knowledges about gender runs the risk of maintaining and even reinforcing particular orientations to learning considered to be the domain of either boys or girls. Moreover, there is the danger that certain gender stereotypes or beliefs about boys' or girls' behaviour can be reinforced, as can be the view that girls and boys are homogeneous groups. Hence, the perceived similarities amongst boys as a group and amongst girls as a group are often what drive the curriculum and the pedagogies, rather than taking the opportunity to explore diversity across the categories. Such reform can be a way of critically reflecting on the constraints and limitations imposed by confining members of one gender to a particular social and learning orientation.

6 Conclusion

Overall, the research indicates that there are problems for some boys in terms of their engagement and involvement in schooling and that gender was clearly a factor impacting on their experiences and educational outcomes. The report examines the various ways in which boys view and express themselves and how this impacts on their engagement with school. This analysis is directed towards identifying appropriate points for policy intervention and strategies which schools can adopt to address issues from the research. Certain 'common sense' or 'taken for granted' beliefs about the way boys behave and learn informed and drove many of the programs designed to address their educational needs in schools. The research also confirmed that boys and schooling is indeed an issue around which opinion and practice are divided. This was reflected across the different

strategies adopted by the 19 schools, but also at times in disagreements within the schools about appropriate strategies.

The research has demonstrated that we need to recognise diversity amongst the category of boys when considering boys and schooling. Furthermore, we also need to ensure that such a focus does not lead to a neglect of girls. Schools which adopted programs and policies which had a ‘which boys/which girls?’ approach appeared to be most successful for all students. These approaches recognise that there are several background factors beyond gender affecting students’ outcomes, factors such as SES, Indigeneity and geographic status.

Overall, the research report stresses the need for a focus in schools on high quality pedagogies in an attempt to address the educational and social needs of both boys and girls. At this stage, the research suggests that good pedagogies work with all students and that teachers’ classroom practices are the central educational variable in achieving good academic and social outcomes for all students. Further research is required to ascertain the optimum teacher threshold knowledges to complement such pedagogies and to ‘complexify’ the pedagogical model to take account of student differences, including gender. While the research did reveal that boys were experiencing and creating certain problems at school, particularly with regards to the influence of the peer group, bullying and anti-school attitudes, there were dimensions to their behaviour that cannot be reduced to their innate capacities as certain types of boys, but are best explained as the social construction of masculinity.

A supportive school culture is also necessary to complement quality classroom practices. Such a culture needs to be supportive of all boys and all girls and to work to counter the negative features of hierarchies of value established within student playground cultures. Furthermore, schools need to establish learning communities where good classroom practices and issues of gender become part of the ongoing and substantive professional conversations within the school.

The way forward for schools, it is argued, is to create professional learning communities for staff which are committed to the provision of enhancing teacher threshold knowledges and broader understandings about the impact and effects of gender concepts, family, school and community environment, peer culture, student-teacher relationships on both boys’ and girls’ attitudes, expectations and engagement with schooling. These threshold knowledges then need to underpin good teaching practices and their alignment with demanding curriculum and assessment practices. The construction of gender also needs to be a focus of some curriculum areas in the school. The research has clearly demonstrated how the attitudes of some boys as to what is acceptable or ‘cool’ behaviours often frame boys’ negatives attitudes to schooling, academic work, and to extra-curricular activities.

To reiterate, more research is required to enhance our understandings of the

requisite teacher threshold knowledges about gender, which need to underpin appropriate classroom practices, including pedagogies and assessment. On-going teacher research about the issues is another element of effective teacher professional learning communities found in the successful schools in this research.

.